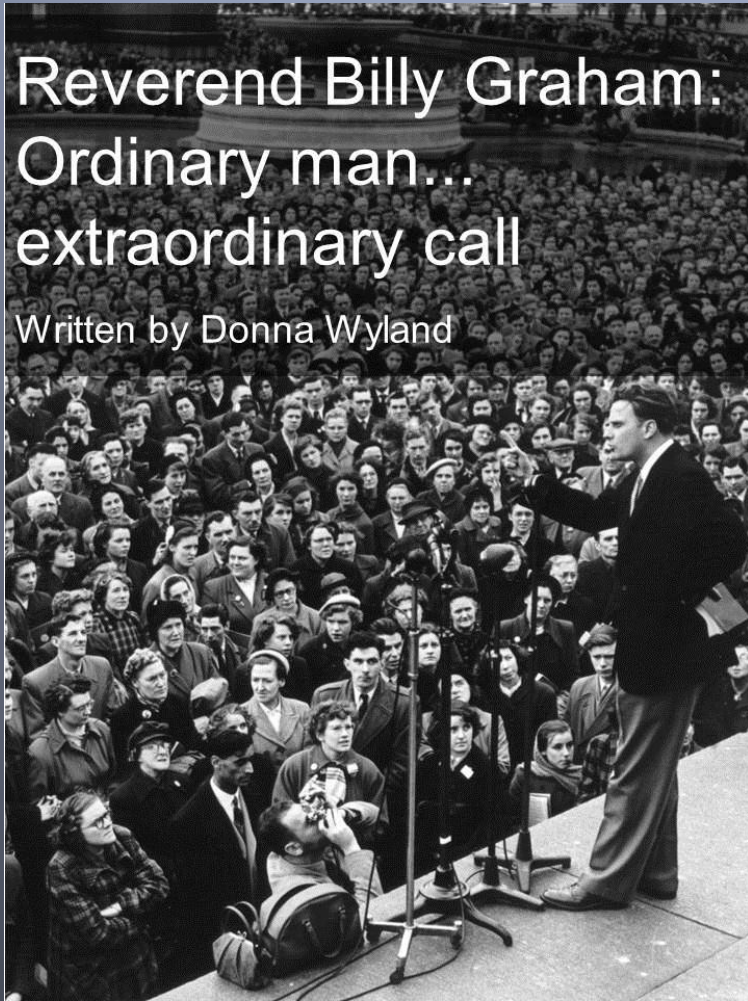


Reverend Billy Graham:  
Ordinary man...  
extraordinary call

Written by Donna Wyland



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## About the author

This biography of the evangelist, Reverend Billy Graham has been researched and written by Donna Wyland. Donna has copiously researched Billy Graham's life to gather as much information as she could to write a complete biography of Billy Graham. Her research included visiting the Billy Graham Library in Charlotte, North Carolina. There is so much information about Billy Graham that is interesting, unusual, and often exciting to read, so it has proved challenging to write a succinct biography of Billy's life.

Donna is a freelance writer and children's book author who believes in the power of prayer and in God's goodness. She lives in the United States where she spends non-writing time memorizing scripture, playing with her grandson, and drinking Starbuck's vanilla lattes.

## Chapter 1 - Billy, the Boy

Christened William Franklin Graham, Jr., Billy was born on November 7, 1918 in a small town outside of Charlotte, North Carolina, USA, and grew up on the family dairy farm. Reared in Scottish Presbyterian heritage, his family believed in strict observance of moral values, but took time to laugh at his father's many jokes.

The Grahams instilled a strong work ethic into their children. Often their Big Ben alarm clock woke them at 2:30 a.m. to work the farm. Billy's job was to milk twenty cows every morning and afternoon, as well as shovel warm manure and refill feed troughs with fresh hay from the barn.

Once, while visiting an aunt, all the children were ordered to spend time reading the Bible. After about ten minutes, Billy declared, "I just read a whole book in the Bible." (Little did his aunt realize that Billy had discovered the Epistle of Jude, the shortest book in the New Testament!)

As a teen Billy attended his first Dr. Mordecai Fowler Ham evangelistic meeting expecting to see a good fight as some students at a local high school threatened to disrupt the meeting and maybe even harm Dr. Ham physically. Fortunately for Dr. Ham, no fight ensued that night. Soon after, Billy was convicted of his own sinfulness and rebellion.

Billy said he finally came to understand his need for a personal relationship with Jesus at Dr. Ham's meetings. He felt that the Graham family's consistent Bible reading, prayer, and church attendance was valuable; but he still felt empty inside, restless and resentful of all the work he was doing to earn his way to heaven.

Near his sixteenth birthday in 1934, Billy went forward at a Dr. Ham meeting and committed his life to Christ. After his conversion, Billy wanted to go to church as much as possible and admittedly even began to sing hymns while milking the cows.

Billy's heart was completely surrendered to Jesus Christ at that point, and the foundation was laid for his future ministry to people around the world.

## Chapter 2 – The “Call”

Billy was accepted into Bob Jones College and began attending classes September, 1936, though he found the College too strict and soon began to think about transferring to another school. Fortunately, in January of 1937 Billy became an official student at Florida Bible Institute (now Trinity College) where he was exposed to many different denominations through the people who rented rooms in the hotel complex on campus. It was there that Billy experienced the “unity of God’s people who sincerely held Jesus at the center of their hearts and lives.”

While still a student, Billy was first asked to preach as a last-minute request by Dr. John Minder, Dean of men at Florida Bible Institute. Billy only knew four “borrowed” sermons at the time, which he preached in eight minutes before returning to his seat; but after that experience, he had a feeling he was being called by God to preach the Gospel.

Paddling a canoe across the Hillsborough River to a little island near the Bible Institute, Billy practiced preaching to alligators, birds and trees honing his sermons in preparation of additional opportunities to preach. Still, he struggled to surrender his will to God’s. He wasn’t sure he was thrilled with the thought of preaching for the rest of his life.

One night in 1938, however, while taking one of many nighttime walks around the golf course, Billy got down on his knees at the edge of one of the greens, prostrated himself before the Lord, and prayed, “O God, if You want me to serve You, I will.”

From that night on, Billy’s life purpose was set.

## Chapter 3 – Preacher and President

One Sunday after preaching in February, 1939, Billy was ordained a Southern Baptist minister. Offering himself as a military chaplain during World War II, he was declined and advised to return to Wheaton College to finish his degree.

God's call on Billy's ministry life included:

1. First Youth for Christ (YFC) preacher at Chicago's first rally on May 27, 1944.
2. Youth For Christ National & International Organizer beginning January, 1945. (\* YFC was reportedly active in 300 American cities by the end of the first year.)
3. Preached at the first citywide Crusade in September, 1947 in Grand Rapids, Michigan.
4. At the age of 29, became Interim President of Northwestern Schools in Minneapolis just four years after graduating college himself.
5. Began The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) in 1950.

Though early Crusades were up and down, and some were even considered "flops," Billy contended that they could never know everything God was up to, though it was not evident to them, or to the world.

In addition to Crusades, Billy traveled through extreme guerrilla threats, with Grady Wilson and Bob Pierce (founder of World Vision) to Japan and Korea during the Korean War for two weeks under military supervision. While there, Billy preached the Gospel to G.I.'s, missionaries, and the Korean people, and encouraged wounded American soldiers at various hospitals near the front line.

At age 35, Billy preached his first international Crusade in London, England beginning March 1, 1954, and by the end had spoken to 2 million people, delivering seventy-two major addresses in twelve weeks at Harringay Arena. Thousands of decisions were made for Jesus Christ during that three month period.

Why were that Crusade, and many others, so successful? Billy and his Crusade team gave all the credit to God and to the hundreds of people praying faithfully, twenty-four hours a day, for each Crusade, months in advance.

Risking his life on planes and at various Crusade events in nearly a dozen African countries and in the Middle East, Billy preached from January to

March, 1960 in twenty-five cities and seventy-five villages with the consistent message, "...following Christ is the only way to lasting peace."

The largest Crusade audience in the history of Billy's ministry assembled at Yoido Plaza in Seoul, Korea in 1973. Even Billy was amazed as more than one million people gathered to hear his famous evangelistic messages. Since 1977, he has preached in virtually every country of the former Eastern bloc, including the former Soviet Union.

Though he tried to remain uninvolved in politics, Billy was befriended by several Presidents of the United States and was consulted by various international leaders at times when U.S. relations were strained. Around the world Billy was honored as a man of peace who walked close to God, and his wisdom and advice were held in high esteem.

## Chapter 4 - Husband and Father

Billy met and married Ruth McCue Bell, daughter of medical missionaries, Dr. and Mrs. L. Nelson Bell who lived and worked in a hospital compound in the eastern Chinese province of Northern Kiangsu. Billy described Ruth in college as petite, vivacious, smart, talented, witty, stylish, amiable, and unattached— all reasons he felt her worthy of him taking a month to summon the courage to ask her out on a date!

Billy and Ruth graduated from Wheaton College in Illinois in the same class in June, 1943 and married on Friday, August 13, 1943 in Gaither Chapel on the Presbyterian conference grounds in Montreat, North Carolina. Two years later, on September 21, 1945 they welcomed their first child into the world.

Though Billy traveled often, leaving Ruth to raise their children, he always felt that he had her unquestionable support. She was his closest confidante, and Billy credits Ruth's wise spiritual counsel as being the advice he valued most. In a letter from Scotland dated March, 1955 Billy wrote, "...Your advice is the only one that I really trust. You have no idea how often I have listened to your advice and it has been as if it were spoken from the Lord..."

Ruth passed away in 2007 leaving Billy, five children (three daughters and two sons,) 19 grandchildren, and numerous great-grandchildren. All five of Billy's and Ruth's children serve actively in various ministry capacities throughout the world.



## **Chapter 5 – The Many Facets of The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA)**

The BGEA, founded in 1950, owns and operates WorldWide Pictures, producing inspirational movies for the world at large. “The Portland Story” was the first of about two hundred films they’ve produced to date.

That same year, Billy was asked to preach on national radio with ABC (American Broadcasting Company.) Then, in 1954, “The Hour of Decision” radio program was extended to the NBC Network, bringing total U.S. coverage to 800 stations not including foreign and shortwave rights.

“My Answer,” a syndicated newspaper column dealing with practical problems from a Biblical perspective began shortly after the radio program with readership that quickly exceeded 20 million people.

Several years later, in October, 1953, Billy’s first major book, “Peace With God,” was published and became an immediate best seller. “How to be Born Again,” published in 1977, had the largest first printing in publishing history with 800,000 copies. It was decided early on that royalties from almost every book Billy wrote, totaling thirty-one to date, would be donated to various Christian organizations and ministries.

Always at work to reach as many people for Christ as possible, The BGEA began “Christianity Today Magazine” in October, 1956 with a commitment to “the trustworthiness of Scripture as the Word of God” with an intellectually positive approach to unite evangelical clergy, lay leaders, and students within and without large denominations.

Last, “Decision Magazine” was launched in November, 1960 to encourage “ordinary Christians in their witness and daily walk and to publish evangelistic messages and articles aimed at reaching the secular mind and winning the nonbeliever to Christ.” The magazine’s circulation tops 300,000 today and is available in English and German versions.

In 1973, The BGEA formed World Emergency Fund to “bring humanitarian aid to places facing natural disasters and other emergencies.” Working with local Christian organizations, they ensure food and medical supplies get where they are most needed.

Then in 1987, the Board of The BGEA approved the Billy Graham Training Center at The Cove in Asheville, North Carolina. Nestled among the mountains on 1,200 acres of trees, The Cove was designed to “encourage, refresh and empower believers who want to grow and deepen their faith.”

Today The Cove offers many seminars, leadership training sessions, and personal spiritual retreat opportunities.

During his life as an evangelist, Billy preached at national and international Crusades beginning in 1947 in Grand Rapids, Michigan and ending in 1996 in Charlotte, North Carolina, reaching more than 215 million people in person and millions more through radio, television, film, and webcasts.

Quick to cite the tremendous team effort required to sustain his Crusade and supplemental speaking schedules, Billy recognized the blessing of many friends, staff, supporters and prayer warriors and acknowledged the vital role each of them played throughout his life and ministry.

Through numerous threats from people seeking to dissuade Billy from preaching, he entrusted his life and calling to God. His family was repeatedly threatened, as well, but God's protection remains strong to this day.

In Billy's autobiography, he shares a humorous story about a mentally unstable man that once knocked on the door of their Montreat home. When Ruth answered the door and he said, "I'm Jesus Christ," pregnant Ruth simply stated, "Well, why did you have to knock? Why didn't you just come in through the closed door?" Having no reply, he got back into his car and drove away.

## Chapter 6 – His Place in History

Few people, other than Presidents and Kings, can claim to have both a Library and an Archive Center established on behalf of their accomplishments. Billy Graham is one of those people.

The Billy Graham Center is located at Wheaton College in Illinois and was completed September, 1980. Many BGEA records and archives of a number of other evangelical missions, agencies and leaders from the past are displayed and stored there. The Center also houses a “specialized library on evangelism” with 200,000 items, one of the largest collections of its kind in the world.

The Billy Graham Library, located in Charlotte, North Carolina, encompasses 40,000 square feet that houses memorabilia from Billy’s many years of life and ministry. Opened in June, 2007, the Library highlights Crusades from around the world and offers Billy’s famous message of hope and faith in Jesus Christ through its six exhibits, four galleries, and two theaters. It is impossible not to hear the Gospel message when visiting the Library.

The Graham Family Home where Billy grew up has been lovingly restored and moved to the Library site as well, and Ruth’s grave presides over the entrance surrounded by beautiful flowers. Etched on her gravestone, visitors read, “END OF CONSTRUCTION. THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE.” Apparently Ruth once saw a similar sign along the road and it reminded her of God’s patient care in preparing her for Heaven.

Many personal items from Billy’s and Ruth’s past now reside at the Billy Graham Library. One particularly meaningful item on display is Billy’s “Decision Card” which he completed the day he accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. It is dated November 1, 1934 and includes Billy’s teenage signature.

## Chapter 7 – His Final Thoughts

As he reflects on his life, Billy is quoted as saying:

“Ruth says those of us who were off traveling missed the best part of our lives – enjoying the children as they grew. She is probably right...I now know that I came through those years much the poorer both psychologically and emotionally. I missed so much by not being home to see the children grow and develop.”

“I now warn young evangelists not to make the mistakes I did.”

When asked if Billy could live his ministry life over again, would he do anything different, he replied, “I would speak less and study more, and I would spend more time with my family...I would also spend more time in spiritual nurture, seeking to grow closer to God so I could become more like Christ...”

“About one thing I have absolutely no regrets, however,” Billy said, “and that is my commitment many years ago to accept God’s calling to serve Him as an evangelist of the Gospel of Christ.”

When Billy gets to Heaven, he says he’s going to ask God, “Why me, Lord? Why did You choose a farmboy from North Carolina to preach to so many people, to have such a wonderful team of associates, and to have a part in what You were doing in the latter half of the twentieth century?”

The answer seems obvious to those of us who have been blessed by more than sixty years of Billy’s evangelistic messages. Perhaps it is precisely because he was a farmboy with a tender heart toward God that he was the one called to preach God’s truth and grace to the world.

Today Billy still lives in the mountains of North Carolina where he reminisces about his walks alone on a little path above the house that he took in earlier days when he talked with God. Due to advancing age and health issues, Billy spends most of his time today reading the Bible, meditating, praying and looking forward to the day he is reunited with Ruth in Heaven.

Until then, his advice continues to be sought as people search for answers to today’s issues and hope for a better tomorrow.