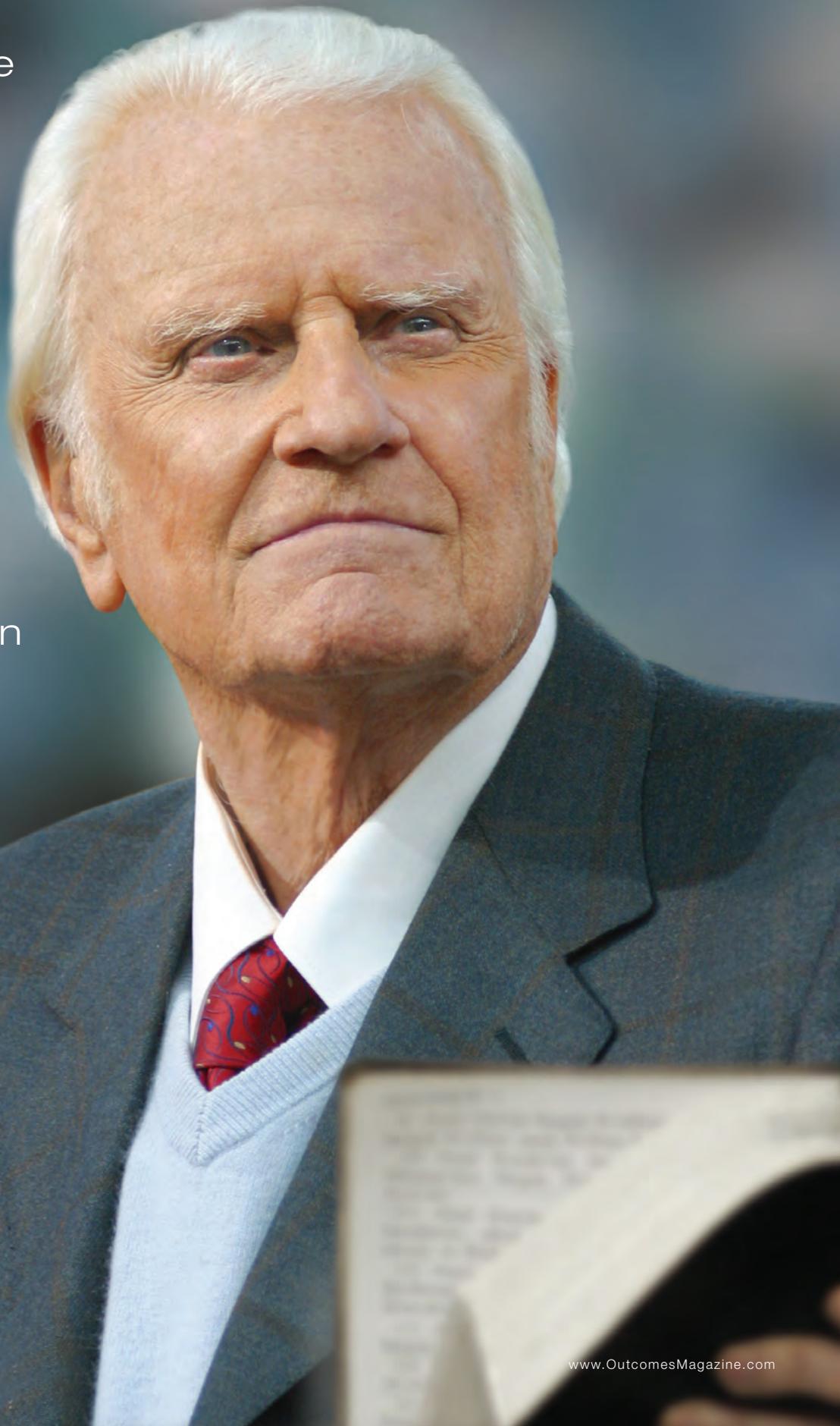


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# Billy Graham's LEADERSHIP

## Humble availability to God

By A. Larry Ross

**IN A WORLD WHERE SOCIAL MEDIA ENABLES** individuals to selectively polish and present the narratives of their lives as a sequence of successes, it is easy to forget the innumerable failures that must be buffed out of sight. Human memory is revisionist by nature, and never more so than when it comes to commemorating the lives of the greatest among us.

As we look back at the life and career of the evangelist Billy Graham, who will turn 96 next November, it is tempting — perhaps even appropriate — to elevate the evangelist's achievements to the feats of a modern-day saint.

And yet, the lives of great leaders demonstrate that one's overall achievements are as much, if not more so, the measure of disappointments. Indeed, many have argued that failure provokes success's single most integral quality: humility.

"It has always seemed strange to me," author John Steinbeck writes in *Cannery Row* (Bantam Books, 1978) that the "things we admire in men, kindness and generosity, openness, honesty, understanding and feeling, are the concomitants of failure ... And those traits we detest, sharpness, greed, acquisitiveness, meanness, egotism and self-interest, are the traits of success. And while men admire the quality of the first they love the produce of the second."

In their book, *The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham* (Zondervan, 2008), authors Harold Myra and Marshall Shelley addressed failure in the context of leadership. "In the sweaty arena of leadership, failures and gaffes are inevitable," they wrote. "A slip of the tongue, the wrong person hired for a key position, a regrettable decision — Billy experienced all of these and more. He knew how to take the heat and admit mistakes.

"In all cases, whatever his spiritual depth and intensity, Billy still had to deal with his emotions," Myra and Shelley added. "His response was at the opposite pole of either bitterness or revenge. He turned to the Bible's admonitions to love and forgive."

Dallas pastor Pete Briscoe recently opined, "Our identity is not the work of our behavior, but of our worth in Christ ... [it's] not based on my roles, but on the revelation that I am a child of God; it's not what we can do for God, but what God can do through us."

The Apostle Paul put it this way, "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness, so that Christ's power may rest on me." (2 Cor. 12:9)

Over more than 32 years serving as principal media spokesperson for Billy Graham, on countless occasions I observed his reliance on that spiritual truth as a foundational precept for his ministry. It was less the evangelist's ability — as gifted and anointed as he is — than his availability to be used by the Lord and operate in his strength.

Graham, in the introduction to his memoirs, *Just As I Am* (HarperOne, 2007) asserted, "If anything has been accomplished through my life it has been solely God's doing, not mine."

The anecdotes of Billy Graham's humility abound. The years leading up to the advent of his national and worldwide ministry were fraught with setbacks of all stripes.

In his book *Great Souls: Six Who Changed a Century* (Lexington Books, 2002), author David Aikman shares that prior to enrolling at Wheaton College, Billy Graham had already transferred schools. The fundamentalist founder of the first institution he attended told him he would "throw [his] life away," if he left to study at an interdenominational Bible school, becoming at best "a poor Baptist preacher somewhere out in the sticks."

In *Just as I Am*, we learn that during Graham's first and only pastorate in suburban Chicago, the young minister experienced some modest success through membership growth. But as more speaking opportunities at youth rallies drew him away from his preaching duties, churchgoers began to grumble. One member even suggested that they should cut Graham's marginal \$40 a week salary if he were absent much more.

According to Aikman in *Great Souls*, just as Billy Graham was about to enter an Army chaplain-training program at Harvard Divinity School, he came down with the mumps. He was ill for more than two months, losing an enormous amount of weight and battling a life-threatening fever. Though an

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Army chaplaincy undoubtedly would have temporarily satiated Graham's wanderlust, he would not have been influenced by Youth For Christ (YFC) founder Torrey Johnson had he not fallen ill. As YFC's first employee, Graham began an itinerant evangelistic career that later matured into the stadium-sized crusades for which he became internationally famous.

One of the hallmarks of Billy Graham's preaching — what made his message so universally appealing — was the simplicity, authenticity and humility through which he consistently delivered the transformative gospel of God's redemptive love.

In *Just as I Am*, Graham admits that, despite all the places he's brought the gospel and the innumerable people he has touched, he still has regrets. "I would speak less and study more, and I would spend more time with my family," he writes.

Former crusade director Rick Marshall said that, at the height of his career, the evangelist "had extraordinary gifts. He had a presence; he was great with people; he had a wonderful personality and great skills as an orator. But there was a humility despite all of those outward appearances that you couldn't explain."

Marshall further observed that while Billy Graham recognized and appreciated his giftings, he had no desire to use them for self-promotion or personal gain. Instead, his visionary leadership became a catalyst to found and fund more than 30 separate entities, including seminaries and parachurch associations and organizations. But he never expressed interest in assuming an executive role. "He didn't even want the Billy Graham name in the name of the organization; that was not his idea," Marshall said.

Billy Graham's former special adviser, Dr. John Akers, opined that people in the public eye often sacrifice their authenticity — and ultimately that of the organizations they represent — to the lures of fame and fortune. Graham has been precociously aware of the pitfalls of such promises, humbling himself with the understanding that "whatever opportunities he had — those were God-given, and weren't things that he created," Akers said. "They were there because God had opened the door."

Dr. Ralph Bell noted that the greatest spiritual lesson he learned over decades working alongside Billy Graham as an associate evangelist was the importance of one's walk with the Lord.

"His whole source of strength and blessing in his life came out of his relationship, and consistent daily fellowship, with

the Lord," Dr. Bell said. "What you do when you're away from the spotlight and TV cameras and out of the public eye is who you really are. Mr. Graham was a man who walked with the Lord daily — that's who he really was; and out of that came all of the rest that we know about him."

With characteristic authenticity and transparency, Billy Graham has never failed to acknowledge who deserved the praise for his earthly achievements, always stressing that when he gets to heaven he is going to lay any awards and rewards received in this life at the feet of Jesus.

Graham also credits the impact of his crusades and ministry to those who supported and guided him. In past interviews, he nearly always deflected journalists' compliments of his achievements from himself, invoking the individuals and organizations that helped bring successful endeavors to pass.

The prophetic voice of moderation of Graham has influenced three generations. He has been referred to by others as "God's Ambassador," "Evangelist to the World," and "America's Pastor." After he is gone, God will have to raise up another. His son, Franklin — an evangelist in his own right — continues to provide administrative leadership and spiritual direction to the ministry bearing his father's name, as he has done since being appointed CEO in 2000.

Billy Graham believes his greatest impact was in convening several international world evangelism congresses, passing the baton to emerging evangelists — more than two-thirds of whom were from the developing world. He told the 10,000 delegates gathered in Amsterdam in 1986, "People often ask who my successor will be" and after pausing briefly, he added, "You are."

At the same time, in setting up the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA), founding Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and publications such as *Christianity Today* and *Decision*, to name a few, Billy Graham will leave behind a well-buttressed architecture for the future. His legacy demonstrates that, more often than not, great men and women do not seek power and prominence, but are called to it. ●

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**LARRY ROSS** is president of A. Larry Ross Communications, a Dallas-based public relations agency that provides crossover media liaison emanating from or targeted to the Christian market. He has served as principal media spokesperson for evangelist Billy Graham over one-half of the evangelist's public ministry spanning more than six decades. Learn more at ([alarryross.com](http://alarryross.com)).

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