

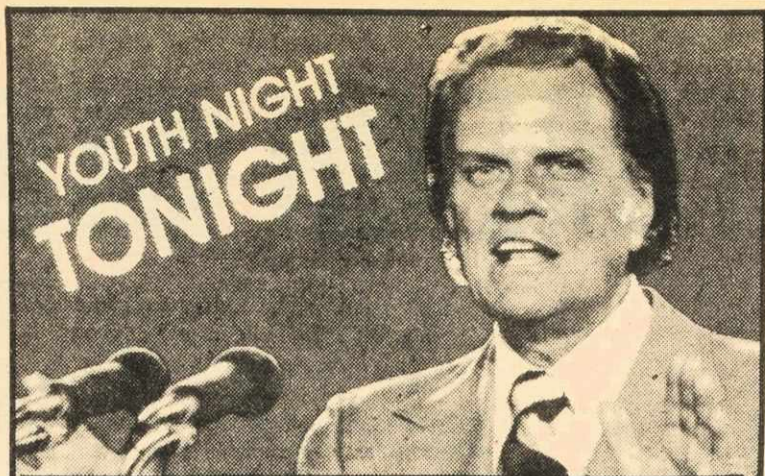
by Tom Regan

Going to a Billy Graham Crusade is a little bit like going to a 1950's cowboy and indian movie. You know who is going to win from the first moment you sit down, even though it's not always that way in real life.

I must admit that I went to the Crusade with mixed feelings. This particular kind of christianity has never rested too easily in my mind. The legions of "Sunny" Jim Bakkers, Oral Roberts and Rex Humbard have always turned me off with messages of 'repent and save' (and don't forget that donation). However, of all the above prototype, southern evangelist fire and brimstone preacher, Billy Graham offended me the least and it was with a sense of curiosity that I went to the Crusade.

The first thing that hit me was how showbiz religion has gone. Huge banks of television lights filled the rafters of the Metro Centre and a sound system that would be the envy of any top rock group was hung above us in silent glory. Television cameras and sound men scurried across the floor in preparation for the moment the crusade would begin. Programs were handed out as soon as you entered, along with an envelope that also served as a cheque for offerings if you so wished. The whole operation was run with the smoothness of a TV game show. I suppose the final touch was when I saw that the concession stands had been opened for the Crusade. I guess religion goes better with coke and a hot dog.

The showbusiness air was enforced even more by the choir master who also acted as M.C. for the whole event, and the fact that the choir



BILLY GRAHAM ATLANTIC CRUSADE

would applaud when any one of any importance enter the arena. 'Cliff', the choir master, had a voice and a manner that would make saccharine taste like bitters in comparison. He could sell used cars anytime, anywhere. His main job was to warm up the audience for the arrival of Graham.

Local dignitaries also got into the act and because it was the last night of the crusade, congratulations and thanks soon filled the arena.

However, the first twenty minutes was just leading up to the arrival of Graham. All throughout the crowd people tightly gripped bibles waiting for the arrival of the man they had waited so patiently to see. People in the back row searched the stage with binoculars for a peek at the great evangelist. Finally, after all the local messages were finished and the choir had sung a song or two, Graham came up to the podium.

Of all the good or bad things that might be said about Billy Graham, one thing strikes you more than any other. Graham is the best

speaker that I have ever heard. His whole presence fills the stage and from the first moment he starts to talk, the audience belongs to him. His voice rings out clear and strong like a bell, and his movements and gestures only reinforce the words he chooses to emphasize. One has the feeling that even though you are 500 feet from the stage he is talking only to you, even when he is talking to "the folks at home".

It is a strange and somewhat eerie experience to hear 10,000 people quieter than a dozen might be. Every word was hung on to like a lifeline and "amens" and "praise the lords" could be heard throughout the crowd. No politician could keep a crowd so spell-bound.

Graham spoke this night on the second coming. Using quotes from the bible and of all people John Paul II, Graham outlined how the last days were approaching and that tonight might be your last chance to come to the Lord. He told what the final days would be like and then asked

for those who wished to be born again to make their way down to the front of the arena for a special blessing and prayer.

Soon it was all over and the crowd began to quietly file out. People talked of the power of Graham's speaking manner and what good work he was doing. However, I felt more personally confused that when I had gone in and a dozen questions and thoughts whirled around inside me.

The first thing that bothered me about Graham was the quick call nature of his message. Like some massed produced product, salvation could be obtained that night. Our society seems to run on the principal of the faster, the better and this type of religion seems to fit in nicely in this mold. Sort of, "get religion tonight and still be on time to go to work in the morning." Religion to me is something that each man must find in his own way and more often than not, takes a whole lifetime to obtain. Religion cannot be presented on a silver platter if it is to be taken seriously.

Another disturbing idea was the thought that tonight might be your last chance. This seems to imply that if you aren't born again that very night you can pack your bags because it's much too late. One of the basic fundamental I believe in is that God is always open to any man any time. Salvation does not have a time clock. There is not a big time table in heaven that has a certain date by which you must be saved.

The guilt syndrome runs rampant here. It is the overwhelming aspect about the whole Crusade. The idea of guilt is one that dominates many churches' teachings, but I have never seen it used so efficiently or so profitably.

The idea of guilt also seems to be confused to me. Individual guilt was used heavily in order to obtain donations. The idea seemed to be that the more you gave the quicker you will go to heaven. One Crusade executive even got up and said that it would be a dishonour to God if the Crusade closed with deficit.

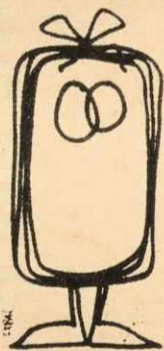
Yet Graham seemed to wipe this individual guilt away when he came on to speak. I honestly believe Graham believes in what he said. I give him a lot of credit for his honesty. However, he seemed to say that the terrible awful world was to blame and that we here tonight have a chance to beat the wrap." Then the rest of the world will be the ones to blame and not ourselves. It somehow reminded me of a fireside chat in heaven.

There are other things that bothered me. The overwhelming message to young people to obey their parents, no matter what the situation. The urge to conform to standards set by others (to me, religion is the one thing in this life that can truly make a person an individual). The showbiz aspect. Somehow it just didn't sit right.

I still don't know what to think of Billy Graham. I came away impressed with the man but unsure about his message. One cannot deny the fact he has helped millions of people. But I have to wonder if he has just put a bandage on a severed limb.

I guess the only real advice I could give to anyone about Graham is this. Listen to what he has to say carefully. However, be careful because the blind acceptance of one doctrine will only lead you from the darkness into the night.

What do You do with JESUS CHRIST ?



I'M TOO TIED-UP TO EVEN THINK ABOUT CHRIST.



I JUST DON'T KNOW WHAT TO THINK ABOUT CHRIST?

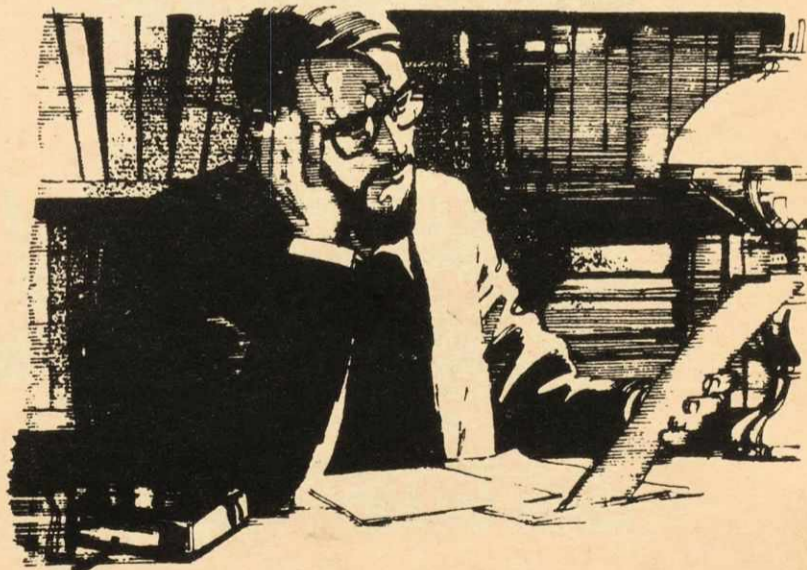
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Mr. Rae will be speaking at the Holiday Inn, 1980 Robie Street, on Friday, November 2, 8 p.m. Saturday, November 3, 8 p.m. Sunday, November 4, 11 a.m., 7 p.m.

These services are sponsored by Grace Reformed Presbyterian Church.

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