A Tale of Two Evangelists

Billy Graham & Chuck Templeton

When you have Him you have all,
but you have also lost all when you lose Him.
Stay with Christ, although your eyes do not see Him
and your reason does not grasp Him.
—Martin Luther

The Billy Graham Center in Wheaton, Illinois, features a Rotunda of Witnesses—a circular room with large fabric banners hanging from the wall, depicting nine great saints of Christian history. Each banner features a quote. One of those banners particularly caught my attention—the one depicting Martin Luther, with the above quote imprinted on the bottom.

I recently visited the Billy Graham Center. As I browsed through the museum, I was conscious of that quote from Luther as I glanced over many of the thousands of photos and newspaper clippings of Graham and his developing ministry over the past half century. One particular photo caught my eye. It is a picture of Graham and three other young men in front of an airplane, taken as they were about to leave
O’Hare airport for London. One of the men in the picture is Charles “Chuck” Templeton. To the museum’s casual visitor, this photo would not have stood out. But I had just finished reading Templeton’s autobiography, *Farewell to God*. I felt the irony of the situation: I see Templeton and his fellow evangelists saying farewell to their supporters and homeland on their way to proclaim the word of God; and I read of Templeton’s bidding farewell to God in his book. I wondered whether the book was in the museum library or whether the museum curator had any plans to include an update on Templeton.

The stories of Billy and Chuck illustrate the mystery of belief and unbelief. From a human perspective, no logical explanations for this mystery can be discerned, although the disciplines of psychology and sociology offer us theories. There are no easy answers to the question of why one person finds believing as natural as breathing and another person finds belief an intellectual and emotional struggle that in the end is not worth the effort. There has been speculation by some that there may be a gene that gives a person a predisposition to believe, that belief is shaped by *nature*. Others would suggest that *nurture* plays a key role, that environment and family influences are the most important elements. I thought of this nature-nurture dichotomy as I watched *Larry King Live* on CNN. Franklin Graham and Ann Graham Lotz were featured. They share a strong family resemblance to their father—in their looks, their mannerisms, their tone of voice, and even their respective callings. Both spoke of their unflagging belief in Jesus as “the way, the truth and the life,” a belief tied to a fervent commitment to spread that message, reminiscent of their father’s zeal for evangelism. Is there something in the Graham family’s genes? Is it home environment and upbringing? Is it a combination of both?

Whether dependent on nature or nurture, the capacity to believe appears to be greater in some individuals than in others, and sometimes one individual is judgmental of the other: the one who easily believes often sees rebellion and obstinacy as the obstacles to belief, while the one who has difficulty believing often sees superficial thinking and “intellectual suicide” as the easy road to belief. The fact is that
both judgments can be right. But for the purpose of this study, neither accusation is helpful—though the burden of fairness lies with the believer who is obligated to reach out with concern and understanding to the one who has walked away.

That people who struggle with doubts or walk away from faith are rebellious or dishonest simply does not correspond with the testimonies. Yet these charges persist. A typical response was offered in a student paper recently submitted in one of my classes. The student wrote, “I believe that the intellectual struggles are not the basis for their loss of faith. They are simply the masks or excuses that they need to rationalize their unbelief. . . . As long as they have these excuses, they have a crutch to keep them from dealing with the real issue of having to come before a holy God.”

Most people who are walking away from faith are not put in the position of making excuses. The process often spans years, and by the time they disclose their so-called excuses, they already consider themselves unbelievers. Coming “before a holy God” is not an easily defined concept, and it lends itself to subjectivity. So it is of little help to insist that the one who has intellectual struggles is really masking an unwillingness to “come before a holy God.” Who can judge that but God alone?

The story of Chuck Templeton speaks to these issues. In his book, he identifies himself as “an agnostic—not an atheist, not a theist, not a skeptic, and certainly not indifferent.”1 The book, besides being personal, offers a standard catalog of arguments against the Bible, Christianity and religious belief in general. The first section is titled “The God Myth.” The section on Jesus is titled “The God Men Created.” His positions are not subtle or disguised, and they are radically different than they were the night he met Billy.

It was in the spring of 1945. They were backstage in a jam-packed stadium in Chicago. The war was over. The nation was eager to move on and leave the past behind. The focus was on the future—the youthful generation on whom the mantle of this military-industrial giant would fall. Two men in their late twenties met for the first time as
Walking Away from Faith

they talked and prayed and planned for the big event of the evening. When the moment arrived, they walked onto the stage. The vast sea of young faces awaiting them was full of electricity and expectancy. It was a Youth for Christ rally. As Billy was being introduced to speak, he leaned over and whispered, “Pray for me, Chuck, I’m scared to death.”

Chuck was a pastor and evangelist from Toronto; he became involved in youth ministry and then began working with Graham in Youth for Christ. They continued to work together even as their lives and ministries took them in different directions. Some months after that Chicago rally, they met with other Christian leaders to form Youth for Christ International. Chuck was selected to be one of the three vice presidents, and Graham was appointed evangelist-at-large. The new movement grew quickly, and when the team left from Chicago for Europe and the British Isles, reporters and photographers watched their every move. For three weeks they conducted nightly rallies. “No building was large enough to house the youngsters who flocked to the meetings.”

A Difference in Upbringing

Apart from their both having economically distressed backgrounds, the circumstances in which Billy and Chuck grew up were very different. Billy, a southern boy from Charlotte, North Carolina, was raised in a Christian home. Here God held the place of honor from the first day of his parents’ marriage. His father, Franklin Graham, proposed to his sweetheart, Morrow, in 1912, but it was not until the fall of 1916 that she was ready to tie the knot.

Before setting out for their five-day honeymoon in the mountains, she carefully tucked her Bible into her suitcase—“I just wouldn’t have felt like a clean person without my Bible with me.” On their wedding night, at last standing alone together in a bleak and sallow-lit hotel room, Franklin immediately had his bride kneel beside him on the worn linoleum and proceeded to conduct the two of them in an extended and slightly wavery prayer there by the side of the bed, “dedicating our marriage and our family to the Lord.”
Billy’s father had sensed God’s call to the ministry, though he did not follow that call in the public realm. But in the home, he took his Christian responsibilities very seriously. From the earliest Billy can remember, Bible study, prayer and family devotions were a central part of the Graham home:

He grew up . . . in a regimen of diligent pieties in his household; by the time he was ten, he had memorized all the 107 articles in the Shorter Catechism. “We had Bible reading and prayer right after supper, even before I cleaned up the kitchen,” says Mrs. Graham. “We all got down on our knees and prayed, yes we did, sometimes from twenty to thirty minutes. That was the main event of the day in our house.” . . . On Sundays, Billy was forbidden to read the comics in the newspaper, to play ball, to venture into the woods—the only diversions during that day being the perusal of Scripture and religious tracts, with Mrs. Graham collecting the children into the front room in the afternoon to sit together listening, on their radio console, to Charles Fuller’s Old-Fashioned Revival Hour.

Chuck’s family life was very different. He grew up in Toronto, with his parents and four siblings—until his father left, never to return, leaving the family impoverished and with no choice but to go “on relief.” These were difficult years, as he recalls:

There was one unforgettable twenty-four-hour period when there was nothing—not a morsel of food—in the house to eat. How often the six of us poised hushed and motionless, like animals freezing when a predator is near, until the bill-collector had gone from the front door. I can still see Mother at the kitchen table counting the coins kept in a china teapot, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.6

When we consider these two lives, we must consider the issue of fatherhood. In a recent book titled Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism, Paul Vitz argues that the father’s role in the child’s upbringing is closely tied to the child’s belief in God. After studying the lives of prominent atheists and theists, he concluded that such an individual’s “disappointment in and resentment of his own father
unconsciously justifies his rejection of God.” This is a reverse of Sigmund Freud’s concept of wish fulfillment—that belief in God is an illusion, “a projection of our own intense, unconscious desires.” Vitz uses Freud to explain atheism: “The irony is that he [Freud] inadvertently provides a powerful new way to understand an illusion as the psychological basis for rejecting God—that is, a projection theory of atheism.”

Vitz’s theory, like Freud’s, is certainly not foolproof; but when comparing the experiences of Billy and Chuck, Vitz’s theory fits, offering a possible interpretation of their spiritual journeys.

Apart from the obvious difference in their relationships with their fathers, the two young men had many things in common. They were both passionate about sports. Billy dreamed of being a baseball player—and was actually paid token amounts to play for a local team. Chuck’s first important job was that of a sports cartoonist for the Toronto Globe: “My weekly salary in dollars matched my age in years—eighteen.” But in other ways, their lives had gone in opposite directions. Billy, the “nonsmoking, nondrinking, churchgoing son of devout parents,” was converted at a revival meeting at the age of seventeen. After high school he enrolled at Bob Jones University and then transferred to Florida Bible Institute, where he trained to be a preacher.

Chuck had only a ninth-grade education, though he was wise to the world and lived a worldly life. But that all changed in a moment. He was transformed one night after he returned at 3:00 a.m. from a strip show that he describes as “a sleazy affair.” His mother was still awake, and she called to him.

She began to talk to me about God, and about how she longed to see me with the other children in church. . . . I felt shoddy, unclean. . . . As I went down the hall, I was forming the first fumbling words of a prayer in my mind. I knelt by my bed in the darkness. . . . I found myself—I don’t know how much later—my head in my hands, crouched small on the floor at the center of a vast, dark emptiness. Slowly, a weight began to lift. . . . I hardly dared breathe, fearing that I might alter or end the moment. And I heard myself whispering softly over and over again, “Thank you, Lord. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”
A Ministry Riddled with Doubt

At age nineteen, Chuck left his job at the Globe to enter the ministry. After reading some books and meeting with local pastors, he was ordained as a minister in the Church of the Nazarene. For the next three years he served as an itinerant evangelist, traveling across the continent from Ontario to California. While in Michigan, he spent some free time in a pastor’s library where, for the first time, he confronted books that challenged the Christian faith—books by Thomas Paine, François Marie Voltaire, Bertrand Russell and Robert Ingersoll. Their arguments so jolted his faith that he stopped preaching for several weeks. “The way back,” he writes, “was tortuous and slow.” Some time later, while preaching in an evangelistic campaign in Grand Rapids, he met Constance Orosco. “She was the singer and I was the evangelist. We were married six weeks later.”

After their marriage the Templetons made their home in Toronto, where they rented a twelve-hundred-seat church building and began holding services. There were twelve people—mostly relatives—present at the first Sunday service. Within six months, however, the church could no longer accommodate the crowds that turned out for the Sunday evening meetings. After a fire destroyed the church building, a larger facility was built, and the church’s growth continued in the years that followed. It was during this time that Chuck began working with Billy in Youth for Christ. But the doubts that haunted him earlier resurfaced. “Slowly, and much against my will for I could perceive the jeopardy in it, my reason had begun to challenge and sometimes to rebut the central beliefs of the Christian faith.”

Finally, after “frequent bouts of despair,” Chuck concluded that his doubts might be aggravated by his lack of theological education, so he decided to seek formal training. He applied to Princeton Seminary and, with his stellar Canadian connections, was admitted as a “special” student in a non-degree program. He resigned from his church in Toronto and began preparation for the fall term. Twice during that summer he spent time with Billy—one flying to be with him at his home in Montreat, North Carolina, and on a second occasion, meeting with
him in New York City, where they “spent the better part of two days closeted in a room in the Taft Hotel.” It was during this time, according to Chuck, that their “differences came to a head.”

In the course of the conversation I said, “But, Billy, it’s simply not possible any longer to believe, for instance, the biblical account of creation. The world wasn’t created over a period of days a few thousand years ago; it has evolved over millions of years. It’s not a matter of speculation; it’s demonstrable fact.”

“I don’t accept that,” Billy said. “And there are reputable scholars who don’t.”

“Who are these scholars?” I said. “Men in conservative Christian colleges.”

“Most of them, yes,” he said. “But that’s not the point. I believe the Genesis account of creation because it’s in the Bible. I’ve discovered something in my ministry: when I take the Bible literally, when I proclaim it as the Word of God, my preaching has power. When I stand on the platform and say, ‘God says,’ or ‘the Bible says,’ the Holy Spirit uses me. There are results. Wiser men than you and I have been arguing questions like this for centuries. I don’t have the time or the intellect to examine all sides of each theological dispute, so I’ve decided, once and for all, to stop questioning and accept the Bible as God’s Word.”

“But, Billy,” I protested, “you can’t do that. You don’t dare stop thinking about the most important question in life. Do it and you begin to die. It’s intellectual suicide.”

“I don’t know about anyone else,” he said, “but I’ve decided that that’s the path for me.”

It was not long after that encounter that Billy flew to Los Angeles to conduct an evangelistic campaign—just another campaign—but one that would make him a household name. Chuck was just another student—a “special student”—at Princeton Seminary.

Just prior to that campaign, “everything came to a climax” for Billy. It was a moonlit night, and he was at a retreat in the San Bernardino Mountains. He got down on his knees and prayed a prayer that would set the stage for his future ministry. Gripping a Bible, he prayed, “Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word—by faith. I’m going to
allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts, and I will believe this to be Your inspired Word.”

**Education for Further Ministry**

While studying at Princeton, Chuck sought to resolve some of the doubts that he had been struggling with—not only through his studies, but also through spiritual disciplines. He fasted one day a week, and he spent time praying and meditating, especially at night when he would walk alone on a golf course near the seminary. He was seeking an experience of God that would somehow confirm his faith in the face of his intellectual doubts. Then it came without warning:

I was caught up in a transport. It seemed that the whole of creation, the trees, the skies, the very heavens, all of time and space and God Himself was weeping. I knew somehow that they were weeping for mankind: for our obduracy, our hatreds, our ten thousand cruelties, our love of war and violence. And at the heart of this eternal sorrow I saw the shadow of a cross, with a silhouetted figure on it . . . weeping.

After completing his studies at Princeton, Chuck was ordained by the Philadelphia Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. He then accepted a position with the National Council of Churches to conduct “preaching missions”—campaigns that appealed primarily to youth. *Time* magazine reported this appointment and compared Chuck and his modest salary to Billy and his bulging sacks of “love offerings.” To his credit, writes Chuck, Billy “immediately put himself on a salary.”

Chuck’s success as an evangelist did not by any means rival Billy’s. But his ministry was noteworthy enough to be covered by major newspapers and magazines. In a television series he was presented as a “young Canadian” who was “passing up the old hellfire-and-damnation oratorical fireworks” and replacing it with a contemporary “persuasive approach that presents religion as a commodity as necessary to life as salt,” setting “a new standard for mass evangelism.” During a two-week campaign in Evansville, Indiana, more than ninety thousand
people were in attendance. In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, the local paper described the final meeting as “the greatest crowd ever to gather in the history of Harrisburg.”

It might have been a heady time for him as he climbed in popularity and name recognition. But on his drive from Harrisburg to his home in New York, he told his wife that he had decided to leave the ministry. His old doubts would not go away. “I would cover them over with prayer and activity but soon there would be a wisp of smoke and a flicker of flame and then a firestorm of doubt.” He struggled with depression and with chest pain, which he believed was a result of the spiritual turmoil he was enduring. His departure from Christian ministry, however, was a slower process than he had anticipated. He was invited to head the Department of Evangelism for the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., and for the next three years he trained ministers, hosted a television program, wrote books and occasionally preached on Sundays.

Yet, his doubts continued and intensified, especially following an appointment with the captain of the Yale debating team. They discussed—and debated—the merits of Christianity, and after it was over Chuck was elated: “I’d beaten the captain of the Yale debating team.” But that experience finalized his decision to leave the ministry. He could no longer pretend to believe something that he did not: “There was no real choice. I could stay in the ministry and live a lie or I could make the break. My wife and I packed our few possessions in a rental trailer and started on the road back to Toronto where, nineteen years earlier, I had begun.”

No single issue had led Chuck to his gradual loss of faith, but the problem of pain and evil troubled him more than any other. If there was a moment that separated the time of his belief from the time of his unbelief, it was when he saw a photo in Life magazine of an African woman with a dead baby in her arms, “looking up to heaven with the most forlorn expression.” As he saw the desperation in her eyes, he asked himself, “Is it possible to believe that there is a loving or caring Creator when all this woman needed was rain?”
A Tale of Two Evangelists

As Chuck’s ministry ended, Billy’s celebrity status grew. Millions attended his crusades each year, and tens of thousands came forward when the invitation was given. Through the years they kept in touch, and in the early 1970s, when Billy was in Toronto, he spent an evening in the Templeton home. “The evening ended earlier than planned,” Chuck recalls. “We simply ran out of subjects of mutual interest.” After driving Billy back to his hotel, Chuck remembers feeling “a profound sense of sorrow.” Billy may have picked up on that feeling. Some years later when he was being interviewed for a book, Graham reflected on his friendship with Chuck:

I love Chuck to this very day. He’s one of the few men I have ever loved in my life. He and I had been so close. But then, all of a sudden, our paths were parting. He began to be a little cool to me then. I think . . . that Chuck felt sorry for me.21

After Chuck published *Farewell to God* in 1996, his health deteriorated. He disclosed to Lee Strobel in an interview that he had been suffering from Alzheimer’s disease for three years. Yet his mind was clear enough for him to discuss matters of belief and unbelief. He responded to Strobel’s concern that he might be worried about being wrong about God, especially considering his terminal illness. Chuck insisted that he was not. Why?

Because I have spent a lifetime thinking about it. If this were a simplistic conclusion reached on a whim, that would be different. But it’s impossible for me—impossible—to believe that there is anything that could be described as a loving God who could allow what happens in our world daily.22

When Strobel asked whether he would like to believe, Chuck responded, “Of course! If I could, I would. I’m eighty-three years old. I’ve got Alzheimer’s. I’m dying, for goodness sake!”23

**Reflections on a Friendship**

Looking back over his friendship with Billy, Chuck made some interesting and telling observations:
I occasionally watch Billy in his televised campaigns. Forty years after our working together he is saying the same things, using the same phrases, following the same pattern. When he gives the invitation to come forward, the sequence, even the words, are the same. I turn off the set and am sometimes overtaken by sadness.

I think Billy is what he has to be. I disagree with him at almost every point in his views on God and Christianity and think that much of what he says in the pulpit is puerile, archaic nonsense. But there is no feigning in Billy Graham: he believes what he believes with an invincible innocence. He is the only mass-evangelist I would trust.

And I miss him.24

An Alternative Altar Call

Chuck’s response to Billy’s televised messages is not surprising. Most people who have walked away from their Christian beliefs would have a similar response—if, indeed, it were that charitable. But Billy’s message and invitation did not stir Chuck to return to his earlier faith. Is there a message, I ask myself, that might more directly resonate with those who struggle with doubts or those who have walked away? Billy is unquestionably America’s—and the world’s—premier evangelist, but his words are not always in a language that communicates effectively to the ones most troubled by unbelief.

There are other individuals, however, who call people back to faith—those whose words are easier for some to hear than are Billy’s words, those whose voices we need to hear at the beginning of this millennium. One such voice is that of the widely recognized sociologist of religion, Peter Berger. He, like Billy, challenges us with the words of Scripture—with the message of the cross that is as relevant today as it was in ancient times. But he also speaks to the one who is struggling with unbelief and the silence of God.

It was the message, the “word of the cross” preached by Paul, which struck both Jews and Gentiles as scandalous foolishness. . . . Paul’s “word of the cross,” of course, is the core of the Gospel: That God came into the world in the improbable figure of a small-town carpenter turned itinerant preacher, who was executed as a criminal, despised and
abandoned, dead and buried—and who then, in a moment that transformed the whole structure of reality, rose from the dead to become the mightiest power in the universe and the lord of all human destinies. . . . Paul’s scandalous proposition is that the weakness of God reveals His true power, including the power to triumph over sin and death.25

Berger goes on to suggest that through modern technology—and modernism generally—“precious” things have been lost. Here he is referring particularly to the wonder of the supernatural that is lost when science seeks to explain all phenomena in natural terms. He speaks of angels, reminding me of Graham’s book on the same subject that I read years ago:

Our ancestors didn’t know about particle physics, but they spoke with angels. . . . Are we, can we be so sure that the truths of modern physics necessarily imply the untruth of angels? I’m not sure at all; indeed, I’m strongly inclined to believe the opposite. In that case the Christian churches (and other religious institutions) would be paying a very high price for the “updating” of their tradition—the price being some precious truths that they were the last to hold onto.26

In his book A Far Glory, Berger titles his epilogue “The Burden of Silence,” drawing from Isaiah 21:11–12:

The oracle concerning Dumah [meaning “silence”]. One is calling to me from Se’ir, [where God appeared to Moses in flaming fire before his death (Deut. 33)] “Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?” The watchman says: “Morning comes, and also the night. If you will inquire, inquire; come back again.”

Berger sets this scene in our contemporary situation:

We too have our “watchmen” today. Some pretend to know what time it is in our night of waiting; but it invariably turns out to be the wrong time. Others, even worse, try to convince us that there is nothing to wait for, that the night in which we find ourselves is all there is, that in effect God’s morning will never come. We also have honest watchmen, like the one who made his rounds in long-ago Se’ir, who tell us that they do not know. Now as then, this is a discouraging reply. Our short text, though,
ends on a note of hope: come back and ask again, for the morning will come. The burden of God’s silence will be lifted and He will return once more in the dawn, “with flaming fire at his right hand,” in the “fullness of His glory.”

Berger’s invitation to believe is extended to those who, like Chuck, are troubled by the silence of God. The invitation is for those who struggle with unbelief and doubt, and the response is in the words of the predictable invitation hymn of the Billy Graham Crusades, “Just As I Am”:

Just as I am, tho tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!