

"A Slave of Jesus Christ" - William Rohl "Bill" Bright (1921 -2003)

William R. Bright, known to his many friends as Bill, died on July 19, 2003, at his home in Orlando, Florida, at the age of 81. This leading evangelical was at the cutting edge of missions. He brought the Gospel outside the wall of the church buildings, and reached people on the street in an unprecedented way. He was purpose driven without being arrogant, a man of prayer with a great burden for the lost outside of Christ. Dr. Billy Graham said of Bright, "He carried a burden on his heart as few men that I've ever known, a burden for the evangelization of the world. He is a man whose sincerity and integrity and devotion to our Lord have been an inspiration and a blessing to me ever since the early days of my ministry."

Bright was born into a Methodist family in Coweta, Oklahoma, moved to southern California after graduating from Oklahoma's Northeastern State College. He founded Bright's California Confections, a specialty food company, which became a commercial and financial success. After his conversion he made a total commitment to Christ. Wherever he went he told the story: "When I was a young man, I made a contract with God. I literally wrote it out and signed my name at the bottom. It said: 'From this day forward, I am a slave of Jesus Christ.'" Bright's association with the Hollywood Presbyterian Church, and especially with the church's education director Henrietta Mears, altered the direction of his life. Mears was a gifted teacher, influential in the Sunday School movement and in development of Christian education materials. But perhaps most of all, she was a great encouragement to several young men, including Billy Graham and Bright. Wilbur M. Smith (1894 -1976), popular lecturer and a prolific author, once remarked that Mear's efforts amounted to the "most significant work among our nation's youth done by a woman in the twentieth century."

Bright attended Princeton Theological Seminary in 1946 but transferred to Fuller Seminary in Pasadena the following year in order to be closer to his business interests. He left Fuller in 1951 without graduating and soon thereafter sold his business and rented a house near the campus of the University of California, Los Angeles, in order to devote his energies to student evangelism. In that same year he and his wife, Vonette, founded Campus Crusade, their fledgling ministry to college students financed by their own funds. Their original goal was to "saturate" campuses across the United States. Their strategy was simply to preach the Gospel, gain converts, and train them to convert other people to Christ. Campus Crusade's first board of directors included Henrietta Mears, Billy Graham, Dawson Trotman (founder of the Navigators), and J.Edwin Orr. From the beginning, Campus Crusade demonstrated a commitment to aggressive evangelism. As Bright stated: "Aggressive evangelism is simply taking the initiative to share Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaving the results to God. We make it a special point that aggressive evangelism does not mean being offensive; it does mean taking the offensive. Everywhere we go, we tell everyone who will listen about Christ." Bright's work soon bore fruit.

Campus Crusade expanded to other colleges and universities, and eventually became an international organization.

In the early seventies Campus Crusade became a pioneer for contemporary Christian music. Bright was also the major force behind innovative outreach efforts. He developed a number of evangelistic tools, including the popular *Four Spiritual Laws* booklet used by legions of evangelicals throughout the world. He also was instrumental in organizing the mass evangelism campaign Key '73. Many evangelical congregations and organizations participated. The most visible representation of this initiative was a bumper sticker I FOUND IT emblazoned in black letters on a yellow background, distributed by the hundreds of thousands. It was intended as a conversation piece and, hence, an opportunity for evangelism.

Bright understood that the language of the 20th and 21st centuries was the mass media of film and television. He believed that this was the best way to communicate with many cultures. During his years as head of Campus Crusade, Bright expanded his ministry to include a film and video division. In 1979, with the help of a generous donation from Texas oil billionaire, Nelson Bunker Hunt, Campus Crusade produced a feature length film of Christ's life based on the Gospel of Luke. Since that time, the JESUS film has had incredible responses. Missionary teams in Asia and Africa throw up a sheet and put it on a home projector and show it. It has been viewed by more than a billion people in 200 countries. It also has become the most translated film in history, with versions produced in more than 800 languages and dialects to date. Its international distribution is buttressed by a domestic program to make video copies available to every American household.

In the 1970s Campus Crusade looked beyond college campuses towards the cities of the world. Beginning in North America, it sponsored the Here's Life campaign to saturate urban areas with the Gospel. This involved contacting people by telephone and sending counselors to visit those who responded to the Gospel presentation. Also, in 1987, Campus Crusade launched New Life 2000, an ambitious campaign to evangelize every person on earth by the year 2000. In his desire to reach as many people as possible with the Gospel, Bright traveled widely. He even led evangelistic efforts in the former Soviet Union. In 1996 he was publicly recognized for his contribution to the promotion of "religion" and was awarded the prestigious Templeton Prize.

Bright's ministries reflect the spirit of rugged individualism so prevalent in America. After World War II more and more "laymen" began to seek ministries outside the traditional boundaries of the church. A wave of parachurch organizations rolled across the United States. These organizations function strongly in an individualistic manner, concerned more for personal evangelism and private devotion than impacting the world with a holistic Biblical world and life view. They operate outside the direct authority of a local church. Often independent Christian leaders brook no opposition from within their own ranks. Bright was unabashedly autocratic in control of Campus Crusade. He warned staff members that, "this is not a democratic organization" and instructed them that any criticism of him or his surrogates would be construed as "evidence of disloyalty to Christ" and "shall be accepted as an act of resignation."

Some of Bright's critics call Campus Crusade the "McDonald's" of Christian organizations. They believe his approach to evangelism is shallow, simplistic, pietistic, and even other-worldly. Although he was a controversial figure, he was a man of impeccable integrity. One area in which Campus Crusade is rarely censured is its meticulous financial

accountability. All employees must raise the money for their own salaries, included Bill and Vonette Bright. It has enabled the organization to have some of the best efficiency rating of any independent parachurch mission. In 1993 *Money* magazine rated it as the "most efficient" religious organization in the Unites States.

In 2001 Bright stepped aside as the head of Campus Crusade in favour of Stephen Douglass, the organization's executive vice president. Near the end of his life, Bright told his family what he wanted engraved on his tombstone: "A Slave for Jesus." A remarkable epitaph for a remarkable man who was not only the founder of Campus Crusade, but also helped start and promote many other ministries. Whatever we may think of his mission methodology, he will be remembered as a man totally committed to his Saviour's Great Commission (Matt. 28: 29-20).

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