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“‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’ Reprised:  
Billy Graham and the Los Angeles Crusade of 1949”

In the fall of 1949, near the end of his Los Angeles Crusade, Billy Graham walked onto the platform of the “Canvas Cathedral”—named so for its reported distinction as the largest tent ever erected for a revival—and confessed to his audience, “I’ve never stood before an audience in greater fear and trembling and yet absolute dependence upon the Holy Spirit as I now stand.” It must have been difficult for his listeners to understand precisely why he was gripped by such “fear and trembling” since he gave no immediate explanation for his unease. Instead, he began describing “a cold, blistery day” in New England in the 1740s, when “an aging man stepped to the platform before a congregation of people” during “a semblance of revival” in which “revival fires were spreading very much as they are at the present time in America.” Graham continued with his portrait of the First Great Awakening with laudatory discussion of the intellectual and ministerial pedigrees of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield. Finally, after several minutes of such introductory comments, he announced the reason for his trepidation: he planned to preach Edwards’s famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”<sup>1</sup>

Graham’s long-winded preface to the sermon was both a moment of homiletic tact and obfuscation. On the one hand, preachers often rely on stories to set a mood for a

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<sup>1</sup> Billy Graham, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Tape T234, Collection 26, Billy Graham Center Archives (BGCA), Wheaton, Illinois. My analysis of Graham’s delivery of the sermon drew upon a transcript of the audio recording provided by Kenneth Minkema, Executive Director, and Caleb Maskell, Associate Director, of The Jonathan Edwards Center, Yale University. The page numbers referenced correspond to the pagination of the Edwards Center document which is online at <http://edwards.yale.edu/graham>. Hereafter, I will cite the transcript as follows: BG, “Sinners.”

particular sermon. On the other hand, his lengthy introduction evaded the fact that his audience would not hear his words but those of a long-dead preacher. With the text in hand, he declared that he would “do as he [Edwards] did. He stepped to the platform, and with gestures he preached, but he read every word of it. It’s a very brief sermon, it’s not too long. I’m going to read it, and extemporize part of it...” Clearly, Graham was uncomfortable and unsure of how exactly to proceed and thus left himself the freedom to both read and extemporize. Graham quickly sidestepped this clumsy moment, booming his hope that the “Holy Ghost” would, as it had in Edwards’s day, “move again tonight in 1949 and shake us out of our lethargy as Christians and convict sinners that we might come to repentance.”<sup>2</sup>

What should be made of Graham’s decision to preach “Sinners”? Few answers have been offered and those who have considered this pregnant moment of evangelical history have explained it away in purely pragmatic terms. As Graham’s biographer William Martin contends, after eight weeks of crusading, an exhausted Graham preached “Sinners” simply because he had run out of sermons.<sup>3</sup> The theory is a plausible one. Graham had preached 65 sermons in 72 days—more than a year’s worth of preaching by any average minister.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the content of “Sinners” was surely not absent from Graham’s mind when he selected it for that fall day in 1949. Although it may have been a convenient text, both for

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<sup>2</sup> BG, “Sinners,” 2.

<sup>3</sup> William Martin, *A Prophet With Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991) 118; see also, Patricia Cornwell, *Ruth, A Portrait: The Story of Ruth Bell Graham* (New York: Doubleday, 1983; reprint 1997) 107. Cornwell reports that the sermon was a “disaster.” But it is unclear just how disastrous it was; the only direct recollection of Mrs. Graham that Cornwell reproduces is that her husband learned never to “replace the Bible with another text.” It is also difficult to judge the audience’s reception of the sermon from the audio recording, but disaster does not immediately come to mind. Murmurs of assent and “Amen” can be heard throughout, although these seemed to increase at moments when Graham extemporized.

<sup>4</sup> “Tent Revival Ends After Eight Weeks,” *Los Angeles Times*, 21 November 1949, 20.

its availability and for its renown within American culture,<sup>5</sup> it was also a sermon compatible with Graham's evangelical mission and identity. Since the age of sixteen, Graham had been reared in the evangelical tradition of Dwight Moody and Billy Sunday and therefore had a singular concern with bringing sinners to Christ. Although Edwards's Calvinism cannot be conflated with Graham's evangelicalism, few sermons were more suited for the work of an evangelist than Edwards's "Sinners." Graham twice stressed this very compatibility in his introductory remarks, hoping it would "convict sinners" and drive them toward repentance as it had in the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Graham's recitation of sinners was, then, as much a theological choice as it was a pragmatic one. Indeed, his delivery of the sermon, complete with his extemporaneous comments, illustrated three core aspects of his theology of sin that would follow him in his later evangelical campaigns. First, his decision to preach the sermon marked him, even as early as 1949, as an evangelist gravely concerned about human sin. Second, his extemporaneous indictment of the sins of the "Sunset Strip" and the "gambling den" illustrated his tendency toward moralistic definitions of sin. Third, his altar call at the conclusion of the sermon exhibited his triumphal view of Christ's power to conquer sin.

This revealing moment of Graham's career was, however, almost lost to history. Prior to his delivery of the sermon, Graham had considered ending the revival after three weeks due to poor attendance brought on partly by unusually cold weather. Instead, the weather warmed—which Graham and his evangelistic team thought Providential—and, almost simultaneously, reporters descended on the "Canvas Cathedral," providing much

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<sup>5</sup> I thank Kenneth Minkema, Executive Director of the Jonathan Edwards Center, for pointing out that Perry Miller's biography of Jonathan Edwards was published in 1949 and reviewed widely, something that may have drawn Graham to the sermon. See, Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: William Sloane, 1949); "The Sense of the Heart," *Time*, 26 December 1949, 54-55.

<sup>6</sup> BG, "Sinners," 1, 2.

needed publicity. The newspaper coverage was, however, less mysterious than the sudden change in the weather. In a now legendary moment, an approving William Randolph Hearst instructed his editors to “puff Graham.”<sup>7</sup>

This potent combination of sun and spin energized the crusade for five additional weeks and provided the opportunity for Graham to preach “Sinners.” Empty seats were no longer a problem. The “Canvas Cathedral” filled to its 6,000 capacity for each service, with many more listening from the aisles and from outside on the street. By the fifth week, 160,000 had attended services, and the *Daily News* of Los Angeles carried an advertisement announcing “Billy Graham’s 5<sup>th</sup> Sin-Smashing Week!” The following week not much had changed as Graham entered the “6<sup>th</sup> Great Sin-Smashing Week” of the crusade.<sup>8</sup> In the seventh and eighth weeks, the national media published stories about the revival fires that had ignited out west. For its part, *Life* presciently observed: “A New Evangelist Arises.”<sup>9</sup> When the sawdust settled, Graham had preached to a total audience of approximately 350,000. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, 3,000 of those converted, while 3,000 more either “re-consecrated their lives” or had come “back to Christ” as the *Times* put it, “weeping forgiveness for their sins.”<sup>10</sup>

“Sin-smashing” hardly compared with Edwards’s careful prose and New England Calvinism. But Graham was no less concerned than his eighteenth-century counterpart about warning the unrepentant and unconverted of their precarious situation before

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<sup>7</sup> William Martin, *A Prophet With Honor*, 116.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy C. Haskin, “Spiritual Awakening in California,” *Moody Monthly*, January 1950, 328-329; “Greater L.A.’s Greatest Revival Continues!” *Daily News*, 26 October 1949, 1 November 1949, collection 360, reel 1, BGCA; See also Martin, *A Prophet With Honor*, 113-118.

<sup>9</sup> “A New Evangelist Arises,” *Life*, 21 November 1949, 97-98, 100; “Sickle for the Harvest,” *Time*, 14 November 1949, 46.

<sup>10</sup> Mel Larson, “Tasting Revival—at Los Angeles,” in *Revival in our Time* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen Press, 1950) 13, 17; “Tent Revival Ends After Eight Weeks,” *Los Angeles Times*, 21 November 1949, 20.

God.<sup>11</sup> Graham, moreover, was no false advertiser. The crowds who flocked to hear Graham preach got an earful of sin. While the theme for the revival, “Christ for the Crisis,” covered a lot of territory including the atomic crisis, the “Red” crisis, the crisis of the home, and the crisis of America’s moral standards, the unifying theme of these crises was sin. For Graham, sin caused these problems and consequently the answer to any one of them was “Christ.” Graham’s recitation of “Sinners” was, then, thematically consistent with the dozens of sermons he had already delivered in Los Angeles.<sup>12</sup>

Graham’s extemporizing, of course, insured such consistency. He read just over half of the sermon and frequently interrupted Edwards’s text with his own commentary. Yet, despite these edits and additions, he offered no radical departure from Edwards’s central theme: that nothing but the “pleasure” and “restraint” of God saved unconverted sinners from hell at every moment. The concordance of Graham’s interpolations with the original extended to several sub-themes of “Sinners” as well. For instance, Graham merely re-emphasized Edwards’s stern discussion of human mortality, his warnings against human arrogance, his damnation of the morally calculated life, and his cautions about religious complacency.<sup>13</sup>

This basic accord notwithstanding, at several points in the sermon Graham softened Edwards’s strict Calvinism. He reminded his listeners of the mercy and restraint of God more frequently than did Edwards, and twice he tellingly substituted the word “mercy” for “arbitrary” in describing God’s will. Graham also invoked the intercession of

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<sup>11</sup> George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003) 219-226.

<sup>12</sup> See for example, BG, “We Need Revival,” “The Home God Honors,” “How to be Filled with the Spirit,” “Prepare to Meet Thy God,” “The Resurrection of Jesus Christ,” and “Judgment,” in *Revival in our Time*, 69-80, 89-166; BG, “Sin,” Tape T211, Collection 26, sermon delivered, 20 October 1949, BGCA; BG, “The Greatest Sin a Man Can Commit,” Tape T188, Collection 26, sermon delivered, 29 September 1949, BGCA; “That Old Time Religion Goes Modern,” *Daily News*, 30 September 1949, 3, collection 360, reel 1, BGCA.

<sup>13</sup> BG, “Sinners,” 7-10.

Jesus Christ earlier and more often than Edwards, an unsurprising change given Graham's evangelical heritage but nonetheless significant. His emphasis on Christ narrowed the distance between Edwards's radically transcendent God and Graham's Los Angeles congregation.<sup>14</sup> These changes clearly added greater reassurances to the sermon on the point of God's judgment and made it more palatable to Graham's mid-twentieth-century audience. Yet they hardly changed the overall tone of "Sinners," especially since Graham read more than he extemporized and thus preserved much of Edwards's firmer hand on sin and judgment.

If Graham's reassurances were ultimately inconsequential to the larger theme of the sermon, his moral gloss on behavioral sins, although brief, was an important departure from the original text. At a point where Edwards commented upon the "torments of hell" that resided in "the very nature of carnal men," Graham decried the sins of "the people on the Sunset Strip" and of "the people in the gambling dens of iniquity tonight in Los Angeles."<sup>15</sup> Whereas Edwards was in this passage more alert to sin as a state of being, Graham remarked upon particular sins, such as those of the Sunset Strip—likely a reference to sex and alcohol—and those of the gambling den.

This moralistic tendency was a signature aspect of Graham's ministry. Both at the Los Angeles Crusade and in his subsequent campaigns and books he often discussed sin as a matter of bad behavior rather than as a constitutive aspect of human character. Sex and alcohol were some of his favorite targets for his diatribes against particular "sins." For example, sex—which Graham called "America's greatest sin" in 1955—threatened "the very structure of our society!" Evidence of licentiousness was everywhere. The

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<sup>14</sup> For the omission of "arbitrary" see, BG, "Sinners," 5, 10. Edwards first mentions "Christ" on page 8. Kenneth Minkema deserves credit for highlighting this difference between Graham's discussion of Christ and Edwards's.

<sup>15</sup> BG, "Sinners," 6.

“outward signs of inward impurity” included “the shifty eye” and the “lewd stare.”<sup>16</sup>

Such alarmist comments became less frequent as Graham matured theologically, though he never completely eliminated such hyperbole from his sermons and books. As late as 1965, for example, he warned that immorality would be the undoing of western civilization, observing that the decadent “moral binge” of mid-century superseded even the excesses of pagan Rome.<sup>17</sup>

Graham’s admittedly embellished denunciations of the poor state of American morality masked his concern for the larger problem of concupiscence, the theological term for the sin of unlimited desire. Graham, to be sure, did not provide a full account of this deeper interpretation of desire in 1949. But as his career advanced into the next decade he developed this aspect of his theology of sin. For Graham, the void present among Christians and non-Christians who lacked a personal relationship with Jesus Christ drove them to “search for something” that might give life meaning, peace, and happiness. This search sent humans in all directions, and many Americans, Graham asserted, preferred the “altars of appetite and desire” to the wisdom of God. The outcome of these searches was always the same: emptiness and misery.

Graham did not, however, indict worldly pleasures as such, but the flagrant abuse of pleasure. For example, even sex was not sinful in itself, but rather it was the misuse of sex that concerned Graham.<sup>18</sup> His emphasis on such particular sins likewise veiled his insistence that “right living” had nothing to do with salvation. Although he often appeared to preach a gospel of good behavior, Graham insisted throughout his career, just as Edwards had done in his warning against the morally calculated life, that that no one

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<sup>16</sup> On sex, see BG, *The 7 Deadly Sins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1955) chapter 4.

<sup>17</sup> BG, *World Aflame* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965; reprint New York: Pocket Books, 1967) 187.

<sup>18</sup> BG, *The 7 Deadly Sins*, 75.

earned, by behavior or otherwise, the blessing of God. As he definitively stated in his best selling *Peace With God* in 1953, Christians could not “worship, or moralize [their] way to God.”<sup>19</sup> These subtleties, though, were often lost amidst his own moral jeremiads and the prejudices of his many critics.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from Graham’s condemnation of the Sunset Strip, the second noteworthy departure from “Sinners” was his decision to stop preaching well short of Edwards’s original conclusion. In fact, Graham ended the sermon shy of the most famous passage of “Sinners.” Graham fell curiously silent where Edwards’s language became most vivid:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.<sup>21</sup>

If ever there was a ready-made conclusion for a revival sermon, this was it. And yet Graham let it be. Why? Graham was no stranger to graphic accounts of God’s displeasure with sinners. He had, for example, read an earlier God-fearing passage from Edwards that warned: “The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation don’t [sic] slumber, the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them, the flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet, and held over them, and the

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<sup>19</sup> BG, *Peace With God*, 91.

<sup>20</sup> For a useful summary of the misperceptions of Graham’s critics, see, Donald Meyer, “Billy Graham—and Success,” *The New Republic* 133, 22 August 1955, 8-10; For several other examples of Graham’s attention to the complexities of desire see, BG, *Peace With God* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1953; reprint Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1968) 1-8; BG, “How To Overcome Temptation,” *Hour of Decision* (Minneapolis, MN: The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1960) 3, collection 191, BGCA; Billy Graham, “How Wise Is Man?” *Hour of Decision* (Minneapolis, MN: The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1960) 7, collection 191, BGCA; BG, “Man Made Religion.” *Hour of Decision* (Minneapolis, MN: The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1961) 1-2, collection 191, BGCA.

<sup>21</sup> BG, “Sinners,” 13.

pit hath opened her mouth under them.”<sup>22</sup> Graham, moreover, had employed similar imagery in other sermons during the crusade. In one sermon on the resurrection he reminded that, “Those who reject Christ...will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone to spend eternity.” And in another on judgment, he painted a fearful picture of Jesus, describing the “fire coming from His eyes” and the “sword coming from His mouth.” These other firebrand sermons, according to a reporter from *Moody Monthly*, contributed to restless nights among audience members. Late-night decisions for Christ—perhaps motivated by nightmares provoked by these sermons—forced the Graham team to post a “swing shift” evangelist at the Canvas Cathedral to counsel these tormented souls.<sup>23</sup>

Graham’s abbreviated version of the sermon was most probably a function of time. He had preached for nearly an hour, and he may have sensed in his audience restlessness or weariness or both. In any event, Graham brought the sermon to a close and, as always, invited the audience members to accept Jesus Christ into their lives.

Graham’s altar call on that day in 1949 followed a simple formula. He reminded the audience of their sin and delivered the Gospel message that in Christ their sin would be washed away. In this instance, the first part of the invitation paralleled “Sinners”:  
“Ladies and gentlemen, tonight every single one of us is hanging over the pit of hell, and the only thing that keeps us from dropping in is the mercy of Almighty God.” But, he continued: “I am glad to tell you that the Lord Jesus Christ died on the Cross of Calvary and that God loves you with an everlasting love and the mercy of God is everlasting to everlasting.” Christ, continued Graham, “can cleanse you from sin, and you can be assured that you’re going to heaven.” Next, Graham cajoled his listeners by asking,

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<sup>22</sup> BG, “Sinners,” 5.

<sup>23</sup> BG, “The Resurrection of Jesus Christ,” in *Revival in Our Time*, 149-150; BG, “Judgment,” in *Revival in Our Time*, 161; Haskin, “Spiritual Awakening in California,” 328.

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have that glorious peace and joy in your heart?” The answer was of course obvious. Graham promised his listeners that peace and joy could happen in “an instant...All you have to do is let Jesus in, right now where you sit.”<sup>24</sup>

This invitation to peace and joy which Graham repeated with little variation in later sermons provided much fodder for his critics. In the 1950s, these altar calls were interpreted as just another version of the reassurance preaching of the likes of Norman Vincent Peale. Like Peale, his detractors reasoned, Graham offered a peace-of-mind Gospel more intent on coddling believers than challenging them with God’s judgment of sin. Reinhold Niebuhr, the famed neo-orthodox theologian, was especially bothered by Graham’s theology of re-birth. In an editorial for *Life* during Graham’s New York City Crusade of 1957, he condescendingly referred to Graham’s view of conversion as “a bargain.”<sup>25</sup>

While Niebuhr may have judged too harshly, his critique was not unfounded. Graham sometimes undermined his own doctrine of sin with folksy rhetoric and poor analogies. At times, he sounded as though he believed Christians became progressively less sinful: “As the Christ-nature unfolds in your life, you will find that the old strivings, the old envyings, are more easily conquered.”<sup>26</sup> Even when he acknowledged the ongoing tension between sin and salvation in the Christian life, he could in the same breath offer breezy slogans that trivialized any of this complexity. For instance, although he argued in *Peace With God* that justification was an “act of God whereby He declares an ungodly

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<sup>24</sup> BG, “Sinners,” 12-13.

<sup>25</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Differing Views on Billy Graham,” *Life*, 1 July 1957, 92.

<sup>26</sup> BG, *The 7 Deadly Sins*, 51; see also, BG, *World Aflame*, 126.

man to be perfect while he is still ungodly,” he prefaced this insight somewhat cheaply, writing “By being justified is meant ‘just-as-if-I’d’ never sinned.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet even as early as 1949, Graham articulated his belief that sin haunted the Christian after new birth in Jesus. Four days into the crusade, he delivered the sermon, “Sin in the Life of the Believer.” It contained moralist diatribe, to be sure, but his stress on the ever-presence of sin, especially among believers, was an early indication that for Graham Christian conversion did not guarantee absence of struggle with sin. While this was just one of 65 sermons he preached in Los Angeles, it distinguished him, as did his preaching of “Sinners,” from the peace-of-mind Gospel of Peale and others.<sup>28</sup>

Graham’s simple assurance of the power of Christ, furthermore, served a purpose beyond placating price-conscious Protestants with a “bargain” faith as Niebuhr had argued. In fact, Graham’s “bargain” was not too different from Edwards’s own promises of happiness and new life in Christ. Near the end of “Sinners,” Edwards pledged:

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has flung the door of mercy wide open, and stands in the door calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God; many are daily coming from the east, west, north, and south; many that were very lately in the same miserable condition that you are in, are now in a happy state, with their hearts filled with love to him that has loved them and washed them from their sins in his own blood, and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God.<sup>29</sup>

Graham’s assurance of peace in Christ, like his predecessor’s, was typical of an evangelist. It was the simplified rhetoric of the preacher plainly communicating the

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<sup>27</sup> BG, *Peace With God*, 126-127.

<sup>28</sup> BG, “Sin in the Life of Believers,” Tape T187, Collection 26, sermon delivered, 28 September 1949, BGCA; For other examples on this theme from 1949 see, BG, “We Need Revival,” in *Revival in Our Time*, 74; BG, “Judgment,” in *Revival in Our Time*, 152, 154; Graham continued stressing the persistence of sin in the lives of believers in his later writings see, BG, *Peace With God*, 139-144, 163; BG, *World Aflame*, 140, 143, 144; BG, *My Answer* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960) 125, 137, 204.

<sup>29</sup> BG, “Sinners,” 18-19.

power of God through Jesus Christ to conquer sin. For Graham, this bare-bones message was intended not to instill peace of mind but to encourage, as the title of his first book suggested, *Peace With God*. Thus if Graham was sometimes guilty of sounding the peace-of-mind theme in his evangelism, it was because to him, as it had been for Edwards in the eighteenth century, the stakes were so high. The unconverted “hung over the pit of hell” while those reconciled to God walked through “the door of mercy” opened wide by Christ.

Ultimately, then, Graham’s delivery of “Sinners” was theologically suggestive and significant even if it was motivated by exhaustion and necessity. His faithful rendering of the two-hundred-year-old sermon demonstrated continuity, albeit far from seamless, with Jonathan Edwards’s theology of sin and judgment. Indeed, there was a fundamental accord between Edwards’s and Graham’s evangelicalism. Graham, like Edwards before him, preached “Sinners” in the midst of a revival and hoped to convict his audience of their sin and offer clemency through the grace of God in Jesus Christ.