Excerpt

Bill J. Leonard, *A Sense of the Heart*.



## The Urban Evangelist: Billy Graham’s Conversion Plan

Urban evangelistic campaigns solidified the role of the professional evangelist, individuals without specific pastorates, who traveled from town totown holding revivals, often with a certain degree of celebrity. Across two centuries, their numbers included Dwight Lyman Moody, Reuben Archer Torrey, Billy Sunday, T. T. Martin, Oral Roberts, and Billy Graham. Carwardine concluded that the urban evangelist generally “was not concerned with long-term developments in the spiritual life of the church. His interest lay simply in promoting a revival in one expectant church after another,” an intentional effort to produce religious experiences, conversions that transformed the “lost” into the “saved.”

…The phenomenon known as the Second Great Awakening solidified revivalism as the evangelical Protestant mechanism for conversion, religious experience, and entry into Christian faith. Revivals and camp meetings representedthe early stages of later nineteenth- and twentieth-century evangelical “crusades” to bring salvation to the American multitude in outdoor stadiums, public arenas and local congregations. From Charles Finney to Billy Graham, specific “plans of salvation” charted the way to grace, opening the door to the church, Christian living, and salvation in this world and the next. Once-born Christians continued to come to faith through the nurture and sacraments of more traditional Christian communions. But even nurture presupposed a national Christian ethos by which each generation was inducted into faith by families that understood the importance of extending Christian identity, if not elaborate religious encounter, to their children. Amid the competition of American denominations and sects, clarity as to the nature of religious experience and the process for securing it remained significant if not essential. From conversionist communities of faith new movements developed, often with new salvific morphologies. Religious liberty and free will meant that “switching” from group to group became a decided possibility, as diverse and perhaps more esoteric religious experiences were made available.

Yet as effective a tool for mass conversions as revivalism might be, it highlighted

the continuing division between once- and twice-born Christians. The nurturing churches welcomed children into the world with “Christian nurture” in ways that meant those children might never know a time when they felt outside the grace of God. Evangelical churches talked the language of dramatic conversion, and many found their way to grace through such a spiritual catharsis. But they also nurtured children, some of whom also affirmed the once-born nature of their journey of faith. When doubts assailed, however, those who prayed the “sinner’s prayer” might have no more or less assurance of salvation than if they had simply received a consecrated wafer on their tongues.

The idea that a personal experience of divine grace is essential for those who claim Christian identity is a hallmark of evangelical theology. Most evangelical groups use traditional conversionist language in detailing the way of salvation. Closer examination, however, reveals considerable diversity of emphasis, intent, and theology of the nature and process of religious experience itself. Certain representative approaches involve processes that might be called 1) Plan conversionism, 2) Lordship conversionism, 3) Positive-Thinking conversionism, 4) Marketing conversionism, and 5) Propositional conversionism.

Plan conversionism is one of the best known and most popularly identifiable methods practiced among traditional Evangelicals. Traced through the revivalistic traditions of Charles G. Finney, D. L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham, by the late twentieth century it was popularized in James Kennedy’s book Evangelism Explosion and in conversion rubrics like the “Four Spiritual Laws” associated with Campus Crusade for Christ, or “the Romans Road to Salvation” used in many Baptist contexts. Through a step-by-step process sinners acknowledged their sinfulness and invited Jesus into their hearts, praying a short prayer by which conversion was secured.

Plan salvation involved a “sinners’ prayer” similar to that used by Moody and other urban evangelists. Seekers were asked to pray or repeat the following:

Dear heavenly father, I know that I am a sinner. Thank you for sending your

son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for my sins. I confess my sins to you

and turn from those sins. I open the door of my life and ask Jesus to come

in as my savior and Lord. I give everything that I am and everything that I

ever will be to you. Take control of my life and help me to be the kind of

person you want me to be. In Jesus name, Amen.

Theologically, Plan salvation reflected a highly individualized, largely Arminian approach to conversion with a strong emphasis on the immediacy of salvation through the exercise of individual free will. Through the plan, salvation is secured on demand, a potentially rapid strategy for entering into religious experience. Critics suggested that it is too easy, creating occasion for cheap grace and superficial faith.