

May 7th

Would you expect a great revival movement to rise up out of Hollywood? How about Coweta, Oklahoma (population 1318 in 1920). In 1921 a mother prayed over her yet unborn son, dedicating him to the Lord's service. It didn't seem to work. Little Billy showed little interest in spiritual things. His dad was a cattle rancher and he had six other brothers and sisters, full of Oklahoma orneriness. But **Bill Bright** (1921-2003) did go on to college and graduated from Northeastern Oklahoma State in 1943. Then he headed to Hollywood, California to make his fortune. There he founded a successful candy company.

After receiving repeated invitations Bright began attending meetings for college students and young professionals led by Dr. Henrietta Mears at Hollywood Presbyterian Church. After a particularly challenging teaching on finding happiness at the "center of God's will", Bill struggled. As he recalled, "As I returned to my apartment that night I realized that I was ready to give my life to God... I knelt down beside my bed that night and asked the questions that Dr. Mears had challenged us to pray, 'Who art Thou. And, what wilt Thou have me do?' It wasn't very profound theologically, but God knew my heart and He interpreted what was going on inside of me. Through my study, I now believed that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, that He died for my sin, and that, as Dr. Mears had shared with us, if I invited Him into my life as Savior and Lord, He would come in." Bright sold his candy company, married another young woman, Vonette Bright, who had also been evangelized by Mears, and entered Fuller Theological Seminary.

One night in 1951, Bill was studying for an exam and had a powerful vision of fulfilling the Great Commission by evangelizing college students. He lived one block from UCLA. He told his seminary professor, Dr. Wilbur Smith, about the vision. Smith was exuberant and shouted, "This is the will of God!" and the next day told Bright he had the name for this organization, 'Campus Crusade for Christ.' Bill and Vonette prayed and Bill decided that he needed to start immediately. He quit the seminary. Though they lived right next to UCLA, the college was considered a hotbed of communist sympathizers, as was Hollywood itself. But not everyone on campus was a radical. Within one month, Bright had 250 join his 'crusade'. Then he met another young man from North Carolina who wanted to go into the ministry. **Billy Graham** used the methods of an earlier preacher, Billy Sunday, to reach thousands, and Graham adopted the Crusade name for his effort. There were early struggles for Campus Crusade. Originally, Bright wanted to work with many churches but some did little to assimilate or follow-up new Christians. This can be typical with churches in college towns where students come and go, but established townspeople run the church somewhat oblivious of the students, who, of course don't contribute much money. Henrietta Mears contributed her Bel Air home and spoke numerous times at gatherings. Bill, the businessman, did arrangements and organization. Soon they were operating in several colleges, sometimes rubbing liberal college chaplains the wrong way with their soul-winning platform. They incorporated in 1953 and found a location for their headquarters on Westwood Blvd. In 1956, Bright wrote a 20-minute evangelistic presentation

called "God's Plan for Your Life", which set the tone for Campus Crusade's evangelism and discipleship program. Billy Graham was receiving invitations for His crusades from liberal pastors and Bright seemed to learn how to do evangelism in the midst of hostile college campuses. He wrote books, pamphlets, articles and Bible studies profusely. Vonette did much the same for college women. The organization grew enormously (2011: 25,000 missionaries in 191 countries).

This was Hollywood, no? And Bright had the idea for a film. In 1979 he produced the film *Jesus*. It was not much of a success. The LA Times slammed it as a "...dull Sunday-School treatment of the life of Christ." Yet critics acknowledged that it had meticulous attention to detail. Nonetheless, it began a trend for films, not by Hollywood, but by Christian organizations to share the story of Christ. It went on to be shown to four billion people subtitled in 650 languages by 2020. 121 million have become believers through Campus Crusade and *Jesus*. It is thought that the recent surge of Christianity in India is largely due to this film. *Jesus* lost \$2 million in 1979 and was declared a failure. But to be the movie that changed millions of lives, inspired Mel Gibson to do *Passion*, and a troupe of Christian actors to begin *The Chosen*? That is not failure.