

PROFILES IN FAITH

Bill Bright (1921-2003)

Founder of Campus Crusade for Christ

by Charles W. Colson



Last month (July 2003) in Orlando, Florida, thousands of Christians from across the country gathered for a memorial service for Dr. Bill Bright. At the same time, across the country and indeed around the world, millions of believers mourned the loss of one of the greatest Christian leaders of the 20th century.

I suspect there are very few Christians who have not had contact with Bright or know of his extraordinary work in building Campus Crusade, one of the largest evangelistic outreaches in history. Crusade has 6,500 staff members and untold thousands of volunteers sharing the gospel. The Jesus film alone has done more than any single evangelistic effort to reach billions of lost people on every continent in the world.

All of this because a man and woman, Bill and Vonette, were called by God, heard that call, obeyed, and never let their faith weaken for a moment. I've dealt with Bill Bright over the last 28 years and never once heard a discouraging word spoken by him. Never once have I heard his vision dimmed or his ardor cooled. Never once has he done anything other than talk about the greatness of God and reaching the whole world for Christ. He was a visionary in the mold of John Wesley who saw the entire world as his parish.

Visionary is indeed the word that perhaps best defines Bill Bright—and accounts in large measure for his extraordinary gifts of leadership. When Bill started Campus Crusade, he had one goal firmly in mind: to reach the whole world for Christ. Everything he did over the years was targeted toward that goal, to fulfill the Great Commission in his lifetime.

I used to talk with Bill about his great dreams and visions, and his response was always the same, "Chuck, we serve a great God. Why should we ask Him to do less than great things?" It mattered not that there were obstacles in his path or that the culture seemed to be deteriorating even as he steadfastly, and with that trademark grin on his face, proclaimed the gospel. It mattered not that others were saying something couldn't be done. Bill Bright was born to be a leader. A leader always encourages others to follow. If he had a discouraging thought in his mind, I never heard it. He was utterly convinced that he was in the center of God's

will, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and that he was to see great goals and inspire others to follow him. Indeed they did.

There was another characteristic that marks great leaders and was surely evident in Bill Bright's life—courage. Some years ago I created something of a theological dust-up by joining a group called Evangelicals and Catholics Together, which published a joint statement. It was an effort to achieve greater cooperation among brothers and sisters in Christ and to defend Christian truth in the world.

Some beloved brethren took sharp issue with the statement, starting what turned out to be a very vigorous debate within the Evangelical world. It in fact reached a fevered pitch when some of the distressed leaders gathered together for a summit meeting and invited me to meet with them. I looked around for allies and found very few. Jim Packer signed on because he had helped me with some of the suggested language in the statement. The only other Christian leader who stepped forward was Bill Bright. "If you're under fire," he said to me once, "I will stand with you as your brother."

At the meeting, which was, I confess, a grueling session for most of us, Bright spoke up several times. While everyone else around the table was dealing with theological profundities, Bright got straight to the point. "I am here because I think this statement will help us evangelize the lost. All around the world we're leading Catholics to Christ and I look for any opportunity to work across the confessional lines. I don't want to get to heaven some day and have to stand before the Lord and explain to him why I didn't seize an opportunity to spread the gospel."

Bill Bright made the one argument at that meeting that no one could disagree with. It was the telling point. Were we helping to fulfill the Great Commission or not? Bright's formulations were direct, simple, to the point, biblical.

A vision that draws people to rise above themselves, to do greater things than they think they're able to do, along with the courage to carry that out, are marks of a truly great leader. I told seminarians at a chapel service at Gordon Conwell Seminary that they should emulate

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Bill Bright. Watching that man and following him would be worth more than reading dozens of books on leadership.

But the qualities of Bill Bright—an indomitable spirit, courage, and trust in the Lord—marked not only his life but his death. Countless books have been written about how to live the Christian life, about discipleship, about being obedient every day in our service to the Lord, indeed about the meaning of life itself. Philosophers have wrestled with the questions about life's meaning throughout the course of human history. But very few people talk about how to die well—or the meaning of death. It is in this regard that Bill Bright has made a singular contribution for he not only lived well, he died well.

Over two years ago, Bill was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis. It is one of the most dreaded of diseases. Basically, the lungs simply lose their elasticity and unless a person's heart gives out or some other organ fails, death is by suffocation, slow suffocation. Doctors tell me that there is no more difficult way to die.

I met with Bill a couple of years ago in his apartment in Orlando. His spirit was upbeat and strong. He said he was ready to join the Lord, to live is Christ, to die is gain. I saw no hint of despair or discouragement in Bill Bright, even as he was facing his own death—and likely a very hard one. There was just one moment when I told him about Bill Simon who died of the same thing but before he reached the final stages had a heart attack and mercifully was ushered into heaven. That was the only time I saw Bill waver in the slightest when he said, "That would be good." But then he immediately talked about the Lord's will being done.

The Lord wasn't merciful to Bill in the sense that some other organ like the heart failed. Bill died the most difficult death in human terms; his lungs simply stopped providing oxygen to his system, and he slowly suffocated.

But Bill never despaired. His wife, Vonette, might have seen moments of distress and anguish, maybe even those questions everybody raises, "why me," but certainly every visitor, myself included, came away with the same reaction. It was uncanny—indeed supernatural—that Bill Bright maintained his incredibly buoyant spirit for every breath he breathed in the 2½ years he battled the disease. I talked to him just a week before he died. We had a wonderful phone conversation. I called in order to lift his spirits; but he lifted mine. He told me that these two years had been the most productive of his ministry, that he'd been able to write more, direct more things, launch more initiatives than ever before. And he kept praising God even as he was on oxygen, gasping for breath.

Now of course the question that is on everyone's mind is why would God take someone who had given

over 50 years of his life to the most faithful ministry and allow him to die the most painful death? Good question. The answer I think is in something that a great radio preacher, Steve Brown, said years ago. Whenever a pagan gets cancer, God allows a Christian to get cancer so that the world will see the difference in how Christians deal with it. Bill Bright died a painful death, but he showed the whole world how Christians deal with suffering and death. It is a witness that will continue for generations should the Lord tarry. People will remember Bill not only as the great visionary leader who brought into being one of the great movements of our time, but as the man who finished the course well, who overcame suffering by his unrelenting faith in Christ.

Much will be remembered about Bill Bright. His integrity was never challenged once. His witness was exemplary. His were accomplishments momentous. Crusade today is one of the best run Christian organizations in the world, and it's his enduring legacy. Bill's life will continue to inspire Christians not only to live well but to die well.



Charles W. Colson served as Special Counsel to President Richard M. Nixon for four years before pleading guilty on Watergate-related charges and serving seven months of a one- to three-year sentence. Mr. Colson came to faith in Christ in the midst of these events, and, soon after his release in 1975, launched Prison Fellowship along with three friends. Today he continues to serve as Chairman of the Board of Prison Fellowship, one of the largest volunteer organizations in the world with nearly 50,000 volunteers serving the spiritual and practical needs of prisoners in 93 countries and working for judicial reform in the U.S. and many other countries.

Charles Colson is a syndicated columnist and has contributed articles to magazines and newspapers such as the Wall Street Journal, USA Today, the Washington Post and the Chicago Tribune. Born Again, Colson's first book, became an international bestseller. Since then, he has written 20 other books, the royalties of which he donates to Prison Fellowship. His other books include How Now Shall We Live, Justice That Restores, and his most recent, Being the Body.

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WILLIAM R. "BILL" BRIGHT October 19, 1921—July 19, 2003

Born near Coweta, Oklahoma, in 1921, Bill Bright attended a one-room schoolhouse until eighth grade. In high school and college he distinguished himself as an achiever in academics, student government, journalism, oratory, and debate, all of which would serve him well later in his life as head of the world's largest Christian ministry. It was in Coweta that Bright met his wife, the former Vonette Zachary. After graduating with honors from Oklahoma's Northeastern State University in 1944, Bright moved to Southern California and began a successful confections company. While studying at Princeton and Fuller Theological Seminaries in 1951, Bright said he was inspired to leave his budding business empire and embrace the scriptural command to "go and make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:19).

In 1951, Bill Bright and his wife Vonette pursued their passion for ministry by starting Campus Crusade for Christ at the University of California at Los Angeles. What began with college students grew into the largest international Christian ministry in the world, reaching beyond students to serve inner cities, the military, athletes, political and business leaders, the entertainment industries, and families. Campus Crusade currently has 26,000 staff members and 225,000 volunteers working in 191 countries.

Bright's unique blend of Christian commitment and communications insight was at the heart of his success. His *Four Spiritual Laws* booklet—a four-point outline written by Bright in 1956 on how to establish a personal relationship with Jesus—has been printed in some 200 languages. Although religious tracts have been published for centuries, Bright's booklet has become what is considered to be the most widely-disseminated religious booklet in history, with more than 2.5 billion booklets distributed to date.

In 1979, Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ introduced the *JESUS* film, a feature-length documentary on the life of Christ. Since its debut in U.S. theaters in 1979, it has been seen by more than 5.1 billion people in 234 countries and has become the most widely viewed as well as most widely translated film in history (more than 800 languages).

Bright effectively employed other communications vehicles over the years as well, including books (he authored more than 100 books and booklets), television and radio, the Internet, billboards, phone banks, movies, videos, and international training conferences reaching hundreds of millions.

In 1972, he organized a week-long stadium event in Dallas for 85,000 youths, officially known as EXPLOR '72, but dubbed by the press as the "Religious Woodstock." Campus Crusade's 1974 EXPLOR '74 in Korea drew nightly crowds of up to 1.5 million persons. Six years later, crowds from 2 million to almost 3 million attended the Here's Life Korea World Evangelism Crusade.

Bright is considered a major catalyst for the modern-day resurgence of the disciplines of fasting and prayer in the Christian church. Since 1994, Campus Crusade for Christ has sponsored seven fasting and prayer events, drawing tens of thousands of Christians throughout the world to join together via satellite and the Internet. In 1996 Bright was presented with the prestigious Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, for his work with fasting and prayer. Worth more than \$1 million, the Templeton Prize is the world's largest financial annual award. Bright donated all of his prize money to causes promoting the spiritual benefits of fasting and prayer.

In 2000, Bright received the first Lifetime Achievement Award from his alma mater, Northeastern State University. In that same year, Bright and his wife were given the Lifetime Inspiration Award from Religious Heritage of America Foundation. Additionally, he received the Lifetime Achievement Award from both the National Association of Evangelicals and the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. In 2002, Dr. Bright was inducted into the National Religious Broadcasters Hall of Fame.

Bright also co-founded, with Dr. James Davis, the Global Pastors Network, an Internet-based training center (www.globalpastorsnetwork.org), designed to equip pastors and ministers worldwide with interactive resources, events, and networking opportunities.

Bill died July 19, 2003, in Orlando, from complications related to pulmonary fibrosis, a degenerative disease of the lungs. He was 81. Bill Bright is survived by his wife of 54 years, Vonette, his son Zachary, who is pastor of Divine Savior Presbyterian Church in California, his son Bradley, who is on staff with Campus Crusade, and four grandchildren.

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