

## Tent Revivals

Jeannette and I moved to Camano Island, Washington about 75 miles north of Seattle in 2006 to be near our three daughters and their children who had moved to the Northwest several years before. I told all our kids that when our family finally reached the West Coast after migrating across the country from Illinois to Colorado to Northern California to Southern California, they would probably spread northward along the Coast as they left home instead of crossing the Pacific to Hawaii or beyond. My prediction came true when my youngest daughter, Laura, moved to northern Washington, and the rest of our family, except for our son, Daniel, followed a few years later.

We found a wonderful church called Camano Chapel only a short distance from our new home on Camano Island. This church has an interesting history because it was commissioned in 1962 by none other than Billy Graham during his visit to Seattle for a one-day crusade at the Seattle World's Fair.

Billy Graham had become known as a powerful evangelist after the style of Billy Sunday. His evangelistic ministry really took off in 1949 at an eight-week crusade he held in Los Angeles. Over 350,000 people attended the LA Crusade, as it was later called, and 6,000 were saved.

The Crusade was unique in several ways, especially for the large tent which was erected in downtown LA, to accommodate the large crowds. The singing by large choirs and a massive audience led by Cliff Barrows, the solos sung by George Beverly Shea in his deep, bass voice, and the dramatic evangelistic preaching by a fresh, young preacher with a sophisticated, yet distinctive, North Carolina voice, drew people from all over Southern California.

Many Christian friends I've met along the West Coast refer to the Billy Graham Crusades as the beginning of their walk with the Lord. They or members of their family were either saved at the Crusade or worked as volunteers. I'm convinced that Billy Graham had more influence on the religious climate of Southern California than any other person except, possibly, Father Junipero Serra, who established a chain of Catholic missions up the California Coast.

When Dr. Graham visited Camano Chapel, over 2,000 people attended the dedication to hear him speak. Billie Graham's charge to the rededicated church that day must have really motivated the people because the church grew from one of the smallest Village Missions churches in 1962 to become the largest by 2018.

Tent revivals were a common method of outreach for many evangelical churches in American in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to expand their witness beyond the four walls of their church buildings. Methodists, Baptists, and Pentecostal groups would hold camp meetings or tent revivals in the summer, sometimes for several weeks. By the late '60s tent revivals were beginning to go out of style and bible conferences and summer camps became more popular.

The picture shown at the bottom of this article is a reenactment of the old tent revival meetings. If you look carefully at the picture you will notice Bill and Gloria Gaither in front of a large choir. The choir is composed of many well-known singers from a bygone era. Bill and Gloria have brought large numbers of gospel singers and quartets together over the past twenty years to celebrate "Home Comings". In this case they were celebrating the old tent revival meetings.

But, before tent revival meetings went out of style completely, my church while I was in high school, Pacific Baptist, near St. Louis, Missouri, held an old-fashioned tent revival meeting in the field across the street from our church. A regional evangelist was invited to speak for a week in the summer of 1961. I was saved during this revival meeting after graduation from high school but before leaving for college.

The Holy Spirit had been working on me because I knew I hadn't yet made a clear cut decision to accept God's free gift of salvation through Christ's death on the cross and obey Him as my Lord. For eight years I had known I hadn't been truly saved when I "Walked the aisle" at First Baptist Church in Marfa, Texas when ten years old.

Children raised in Southern Baptist Churches are encouraged to "Ask the Lord into your heart" sometime between five and twelve years of age. Calls for people to "Come forward and accept the Lord" are made at almost every church service. There are even more "Altar calls" and "Dedication services" in Sunday Schools, Vacation Bible Schools and summer camps.

Most other denominations have catechism classes or special sessions with the pastor or priest where doctrine or church membership are dealt with. When the pastor or priest thinks you are mature enough, you have done reasonably well on the catechism quizzes, or you have quit asking questions, you are then confirmed in a church by some type of recognition ceremony. However, the youth in Baptist churches are pretty much left on their own to wrestle with the "Little prayer wheel turning in your heart" to know when you're ready to get saved and be baptized.

Soon after I turned ten I responded to an especially enthusiastic altar call one morning during Sunday School. Many of my friends seemed to have suddenly "Gotten religion" and were headed *en mass* to pray with the teacher at the front of the class. I remember feeling left behind, because most of the chairs around me had become empty. I decided to join the group surrounding the teacher at the front of the class to "Ask Jesus into my heart."

Before I quite knew what had happened, I was prayed over, handed a card to fill out, and directed to show up next Sunday morning with a swimsuit and a towel to be baptised in front of the entire church congregation. The next Sunday was Easter, so it was an unusually special day when so many second graders all got baptized at the same time on Easter morning.

But, I knew I hadn't really understood what salvation was about or had truly been "saved". Southern Baptists believe the best way to reinforce the decision of a new believer is to get them active in ministry. At ten years of age I was quickly promoted to the job of collecting the offering in Sunday School and assisting the teacher to contact visitors my age by phone calls or visits. By the time I was in high school I was a teacher of a junior high Sunday School class. I remember meeting in the basement of the church near the furnace. It was a great place to talk about hell.

But, it became more and more difficult to say anything about my phony salvation decision because my parents, my pastor, my teachers, and friends all thought I was "Saved". After all, my parents were known and respected in the church and community to be committed Christians and I was a teacher in Sunday School. I even spoke from the pulpit in church one "Youth Sunday" during my senior year. I remember expounding on the evils of evolution.

When the tent revival meeting was held the summer before I left for college, I began to consider getting the issue of my salvation settled. It was a challenge because it would be an embarrassment to me and my family to admit I had been living a lie. But, then I found that my family had planned a vacation during the week of the revival. I couldn't go with them because I had a summer job which required me to stay home to earn money for college. This might be my chance to take a public stand for Christ without so much embarrassment.

So, during the week my family was away I attended the revival meetings trying to screw up enough courage to walk the aisle and declare my decision to accept Christ as my Savior. Every night of the meetings I would concentrate on what the Holy Spirit was telling me to do, but every time the invitation was given, I just couldn't "Pull the trigger"--it was just too embarrassing. I wasn't really listening to what the evangelist was saying because he wasn't that good a speaker anyway. I remember that I was just trying to get my act together.

Finally, on Saturday night, the last night of the revival meeting, I had had enough of the vacillating emotions, and decided to get it over with. When the last verse of "Have thine own way, Lord" was being sung, I finally went forward and admitted to the evangelist that I had not actually accepted the Lord years before and wanted to do so now.

No voices spoke from heaven or lightning bolts flashed across the sky, but I sensed relief from the guilt I had been carrying for living a lie for so many years. My decision was almost purely intellectual, not emotional. I knew who God was, I knew who Jesus was, and I knew what He expected of me. I simply agreed with the leading of the Holy Spirit and accepted Christ as my Savior and Lord.

When my family returned from vacation it was difficult to tell them about my decision. They questioned my publicly confessing a need for salvation and being baptized again. They had expressed doubts about my salvation experience at ten because they weren't sure I had understood well enough then what I was doing. And, here I was struggling again with my salvation. They probably felt that either they had failed me, or I was being too persnickety about my spiritual condition.

They also likely distrusted the evangelist for upsetting my spiritual "apple cart". However, my decision really had nothing to do with him, but was in

response to a long-lasting issue I needed to resolve. The external expression of my spiritual state for the previous eight years must have been very convincing to them. I demonstrated all the outward signs of being a healthy, growing Christian.

Parents have a difficult time helping a child learn to be saved. They feel responsible for leading the child to accept the Lord as Savior, but neither they nor anyone else can know what transpires in that relationship. The child must nurture his relationship with the Lord himself and ask the Lord to fix things if they aren't right.

Church services and tent revival meetings are used by God to convict people of their need to repent and accept His salvation. There are many ways people come to know the Lord, but as Romans 10:14 says, "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" The audible Word of God appears to be vitally important in transmitting the Gospel!