

BILLY GRAHAM

In 1955 I was 13 when my grandfather took me by coach into Glasgow to hear Billy Graham. Granddad was a staunch Brethren preacher; I went to the local Church of Scotland kirk where the minister was an excellent Bible-based preacher. Both my grandparents were I know praying for my visit to the Kelvin Hall: both my parents were strong Christians, and we knew many missionaries I had met in Brasil, where I was born.

I had been already to Hampden Park to football matches with an enormous crowd, and to the circus at Kelvin Hall; but this was quite different! The initial worship with George Beverly Shea and the choir was for me pretty much normal, apart from the scale. I knew from the newspapers that many had condemned Dr Graham for what they termed 'emotional manipulation', but I certainly didn't feel manipulated. What I found very striking was that when Dr Graham spoke, he was very clear, direct and straightforward. In a no-frills talk, he simply outlined the Christian gospel of the need for repentance, the details of the crucifixion and what was happening to offer us God's forgiveness, the facts of the resurrection, and the importance of accepting Jesus as Saviour and Lord. I thought I was already a Christian; but I heard I was not, until I made a clear act of commitment. Thus when he said, as he always did, 'I'm asking you to get up out of your seat, and quietly and silently to come forward to the stage to make that commitment now,' I began to feel a deep compulsion to do that. People were already moving forward in large numbers; after a bit of a struggle I knew I had to go: I believed all he had said; it was clear I had never made a proper commitment before; so a bit self-consciously I got up and went.

After 60 years, looking back now I know it was quite simply the most important thing I have ever done. My life otherwise would have been very different: for a start I might never have met and married Gill! I've never regretted doing it; on the contrary, I'm profoundly grateful.

That year Dr Graham spoke to some 2.5 million Scots, including filling Hampden with 90,000 people. The response from the official Church of Scotland was at best lukewarm; but the statistics don't lie: church attendance in Glasgow in 1960 was still 50% higher than in 1954, and many Scots clergy were deeply affected.

Later I heard that when Dr Graham came to England a few years later, representatives from the Church of England met his ship in the channel to try to dissuade him from coming; after talking with him for some time, they instead gave him their whole-hearted support. On that visit, apart from further record crowds, he also had a private tea with the Queen; she was very deeply moved, and that meeting confirmed her in much of her public witness ever since, especially in her Christmas broadcasts.

I can think of no other person in my lifetime who has had a greater impact for good on the population of this country.