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## Bill Bright's Four Spiritual Laws and Their Place in the History and Trajectory of Evangelical Soteriology

by Sean McGeever

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the trajectory and norms of evangelical soteriology and evangelistic ministry established by early evangelicals Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley and later pattern set by Bill Bright's *Four Spiritual Laws*. It examines how terms such as conversion, regeneration, the new birth, and being born again were used in evangelical literature and how they were understood. It further looks at the practices of Campus Crusade for Christ and its focus on decisions, looking at the results of the Berkeley Blitz, Explo '74 in South Korea, and the Here's Life campaigns around the world. It concludes by identifying five key areas in which the approach and practices of Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ differs from that of early evangelicals.

**Keywords:** Evangelicalism, soteriology, conversion, sinner's prayer, decisionism, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Bill Bright, Campus Crusade for Christ.

### Introduction

Evangelicals believe that God regenerates sinners to be born again through the experience of conversion. Conversion has generally been understood by evangelicals as an instantaneous work of God. Evangelical conversion theology began in the evangelical revivals in America and Britain in the 1730s.<sup>1</sup> Evangelical ministries such as Cru, formerly known as Campus Crusade for Christ, have continued to prioritize conversion as the focal point of their ministries. This article argues that the trajectory and norms of evangelical soteriology and evangelistic ministry established by the early evangelicals Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley varies from the later pattern set by Bill Bright's Four Spiritual Laws in at least five ways.<sup>2</sup>

1. For an introduction to the history, theology, and practices related to conversion, see the work of Gordon T. Smith: Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion and Authentic Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001); Gordon T. Smith, "Conversion and Redemption," in *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

2. Evangelicalism, and American evangelicalism, has never been a homogeneous unit; various

## **A Primer on Evangelical Conversion and Soteriology**

Two theological concepts among evangelicals are critical to the understanding of evangelical conversion: conversion and regeneration. Evangelicals generally believe that they can experience—and usually should be cognizant of—the exact moment of their conversion; this is often described theologically as instantaneous conversion. Regeneration, conversely, is not something that a person can perceive or experience directly. Many early evangelical conversion narratives abound with lengthy passionate retellings of stories which climax with the moment of instantaneous conversion.<sup>3</sup> What we do not find in these narratives is the primary claim that a person knew of their regeneration directly. Awareness of regeneration was a secondary claim based upon the experience of instantaneous conversion.<sup>4</sup> Evangelical soteriology separates the active experience of conversion from the passive experience of regeneration. This distinction is critical for evangelical soteriology due to the evangelical insistence on the supernatural characteristic of regeneration.

Conversion and regeneration emerge in evangelical literature alongside two other related terms: the “new birth,” and being “born again.” The grammar of the terms associates them with conversion and regeneration. To be “born again” implies a passivity since it is difficult to understand logically how one could “birth oneself.” The “new birth” fits easier in an experiential sense; hence, one could say: “I experienced the new birth.” These terms do not map as easily to the active and passive sense that conversion and regeneration often do.

Evangelicals employ each of these terms (conversion, regeneration, the new birth, and being born again) in a variety of overlapping ways. Each of the terms has a semantic domain meaning a change or beginning. However, care must be taken to understand how any given author, group, and era utilize these terms, especially the source and telos of each.

Evangelicals believe that each person needs to be converted in order to secure a place in heaven. It is not surprising, then, that an essential commitment of evangelicals is for persistent evangelism and hopes for continuous revival. The

eras, sub-groups, and key figures require individual attention. See: Thomas S. Kidd, *Who Is an Evangelical? The History of a Movement in Crisis* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2019); David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 2004); Timothy Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, eds. Daniel J. Treier and Timothy Larsen. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–16; Michael A. G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart, eds., *The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities* (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2008).

3. For examples among early evangelicals, see D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

4. David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 32–33.

ministries of Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, examined below, are a testament to the impulse of evangelicals for conversion.<sup>5</sup>

They believed eternal destinies depended upon a conversion experience. Later in the eighteenth century, it became more common for evangelicals to accept variations in the awareness of the “suddenness” of conversion. The experience of conversion in its well-known form could be pinpointed to a day or hour; yet other conversion accounts were more drawn out. Others attested to all the marks of genuine Christianity without any recollection of a conversion moment at all. Evangelicals varied in their acceptance of these differences, but their acceptance can be understood as a variation in *experience* and not variation in the way that the Spirit of God worked graciously and instantaneously through regeneration—which is what altered the objective salvific status of an individual. For evangelicals, a person was either regenerated by the supernatural grace of God or they were not regenerated, there was no variation on this binary objective status.<sup>6</sup>

Early evangelicals inherited a Puritan morphology of conversion that encompassed a series of events that often occurred over weeks, months, or years.<sup>7</sup> Early evangelicals began to emphasize the key moment in conversion as the moment of instantaneous conversion—most infamously known in John Wesley’s Aldersgate moment when his heart was “strangely warmed” on May 24, 1738. Over time, and partly due to pastoral experience, evangelicals became less convinced of the synchronization of the instantaneous conversion experience and regeneration, though they retained much of the broader morphology of the conversion experience. Then, in the mid-nineteenth century, evangelicals began to abridge the established understanding of the conversion experience and, instead, focused only on instantaneous conversion—often simply calling this “conversion.” Subsequent evangelists focused on the “experience” of instantaneous conversion and linked it directly to regeneration. Many evangelists began focusing on conversion as a “decision” and developed techniques to bring people to a “decision” quickly and efficiently—as we will see below. One primary modern example of this is Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ.

5. George Whitefield is an important figure in the discussion of early evangelicalism alongside Wesley and Edwards but, due to space, could not be included in this study. For more information about Whitefield’s view of conversion and soteriology more broadly, see: Sean McGeever, *Born Again: The Evangelical Theology of Conversion in John Wesley and George Whitefield* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020); Sean McGeever, “The Theology of Conversion in John Wesley and George Whitefield,” in *Wesley and Whitefield*, ed. Ian J Maddock (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017).

6. For conversion among Christian fundamentalists, see Sean McGeever, “Conversion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christian Fundamentalism*, eds. David Ceri Jones and Andrew Atherstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Forthcoming).

7. Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2013), 66–71, 91.

## **Part 1: Campus Crusade's "Decisions"**

Bill Bright founded Campus Crusade for Christ in 1951 at the University of California, Los Angeles.<sup>8</sup> Bright was a businessman who, in 1945, became a Christian through the ministry of Henrietta Mears and devoted himself to evangelism. Bright went off to Princeton Seminary for a short time to prepare for vocational ministry. There he recruited people to "gospel bomb" Princeton University, placing cellophane-wrapped texts on every table and desk they could find; he repeated these tactics upon his return to Los Angeles.<sup>9</sup> In the spring of 1951, Bright wrote, "I suddenly had the overwhelming impression that the Lord had unfolded a scroll of instructions of what I was to do with my life."<sup>10</sup> He began recruiting leaders to form a nationwide ministry to college students. He withdrew from his new school, Fuller Seminary, and called the ministry "Campus Crusade for Christ."

Within the first few months of the ministry, Bright reported two hundred fifty conversions among college students.<sup>11</sup> Bright's incredible passion and drive also propelled the ministry to grow while his sales and business background shaped his tactics. Bright told staff to read Frank Bettger's *How I Raised Myself from Failure to Success in Selling* in order to mine it for insights for evangelistic tactics.<sup>12</sup>

### **Campus Crusade's Primary Tool for Decisions: The Four Spiritual Laws**

Bright hired a sales consultant named Bob Ringer to speak to Campus Crusade staff in 1957 who taught them the importance of a repeatable sales pitch. Ringer highlighted a famous minister who "always said basically the same thing; no matter the problem."<sup>13</sup> At first, Bright thought this tactic was "repugnant and offensive" before he finally concluded, "My friend was right. I had been sharing basically the same thing with everyone, without realizing it."<sup>14</sup> That afternoon Bright wrote "God's Plan for Your Life," a twenty-minute presentation of the claims of Christ and how to know him personally. Bright told every staff member to memorize it. Bright later recalled, "Because of this one presentation alone, our ministry was multiplied a hundredfold during the next year."<sup>15</sup> Not long after introducing "God's Plan for Your Life," Bright came to believe that "a much shorter version of the gospel" was needed

8. Campus Crusade for Christ changed their organization's name to Cru in 2011.

9. John G. Turner, *Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ: The Renewal of Evangelicalism in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 24, 34.

10. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 38.

11. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 49.

12. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 49.

13. Bill Bright, *Come Help Change the World* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1970), 43.

14. Bright, *Come Help Change the World*, 44.

15. Bright, *Come Help Change the World*, 44.



and thus condensed the talk to four points by 1959.<sup>16</sup> Staff shared this condensed four-point appeal via written notes on paper and napkins for several years. In 1965, a businessman named Gus Yeager compiled the information into a booklet and added a sinner's prayer at the end. Yeager showed it to Bright—he loved it.<sup>17</sup> This publication became the tract *Have Your Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?* Cru states that this booklet has been translated into more than 200 languages with more than 2.5 billion copies distributed worldwide.<sup>18</sup>

### **Bill Bright's Focus on Decisions**

Bill Bright believed that the collection of reliable reports and statistics was a matter of financial stewardship to their donors.<sup>19</sup> Staff members, thus, were required to file regular reports “on the fruitfulness of their ministries.”<sup>20</sup> Staff members had to document “fifteen follow-up appointments and fifteen evangelistic appointments each week, with a hundred decisions a year, or else you were put on probation.”<sup>21</sup> Bill Bright's authorized biographer wrote, “Bill aimed high ... and kept score.”<sup>22</sup>

Campus Crusade determined that an “indicated decision” was when an individual signed their name to a form.<sup>23</sup> For Bright, “this was no marketing contest; this was eternal business.”<sup>24</sup> For Campus Crusade, signing a form indicated a “decision for Christ” and was understood as being synonymous in their literature and communication for converting to Christianity and becoming a Christian. One biographer of Bright wrote, “Many people regard the Four Spiritual Laws (or principles if laws seem offensive) as a vehicle for ‘instant salvation,’ almost as easy as buying a hamburger at McDonald's. Bill is convinced that salvation is to be found easily, because it is rooted entirely in God's grace not in human effort, in works.”<sup>25</sup> For Bright, since God's invisible grace comes easily and provides “instant salvation,” this, he believed, could be indicated simply by signing a form—and forms were easily counted.

Shortly after Crusade published *The Four Spiritual Laws*, staff undertook a focused week-long campaign on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley

16. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 59.

17. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 100.

18. See <https://www.cru.org/us/en/about.html>.

19. Michael Richardson, *Amazing Faith: The Authorized Biography of Bill Bright, Founder of Campus Crusade for Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 219.

20. Richardson, *Amazing Faith*, 220.

21. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 133.

22. Richardson, *Amazing Faith*, 219.

23. Richardson, *Amazing Faith*, 221.

24. Richardson, *Amazing Faith*, 221.

25. Richard Quebedeaux, *I Found It! The Story of Bill Bright and Campus Crusade* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 179.

called the “Berkeley Blitz.” The progressive student-base, including campus Christians, were highly critical of the campaign. A Christian leader at Berkeley said, “I don’t like Christ to be ‘sold’ the way you would sell encyclopedias.... [Crusade] approached people as customers not as people.”<sup>26</sup> Crusade had Billy Graham conclude the week with a rally at the school. Crusade reported that more than seven hundred students and faculty members received Christ. Peter Gillquist, a Crusade staff person at Berkeley, said, “We know of only two [students] who really followed through.”<sup>27</sup> Many of the Crusade staff involved with the Berkeley Blitz were discouraged with the results. Gillquist explained, “We called ourselves an arm of the church ... but we were amputated. We had no real connection to it. We said, ‘We’ve got to be church. We can’t just go out and be hit men for Christ, with no sense of follow-through or permanence or historicity.’”<sup>28</sup> Several key Crusade leaders who participated in the Berkeley Blitz left the organization to begin working in the local church. The following year, the majority of Crusade’s top leaders resigned after being dissatisfied with Bright’s leadership.<sup>29</sup> Later that year, Bright removed the requirement for staff to make fifteen appointments a week with non-Christians.<sup>30</sup>

Several years later, effectiveness seemed to be improving statistically for Crusade. They launched a campaign in South Korea in 1974 they called *Explo ’74*. Bright called it a “miracle among the masses” that he claimed “help[ed] in part to spur the growth of the Korean church from 3 million in 1974 to 7 million in 1978.”<sup>31</sup> During one afternoon of meetings in this campaign, Crusade recorded “274,000 indicated decisions for Christ.”<sup>32</sup> Two years later, Crusade undertook their largest endeavor yet, which they called the “Here’s Life campaign.” The disappointing results for the American Here’s Life campaign will be discussed below, but, following the success of the campaign in South Korea, Crusade’s international campaigns reported astonishing results. The 1976 Here’s Life campaign in Kerala, India claimed 1.85 million “decisions for Christ” out of a population of 22 million people.<sup>33</sup> This led Bright to announce to donors, “[we] are convinced that, for every dollar we raise, we can expect at least one person to receive Christ.”<sup>34</sup> The following year, in November 1977, Bright held a Washington press conference to announce a \$1 billion fund-raising drive.<sup>35</sup> Between 1978 and 1979, Crusade reported that a campaign in

26. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 125.

27. William C. Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 94.

28. Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 94.

29. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 132.

30. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 134.

31. Quebedeaux, *I Found It!* 40.

32. Quebedeaux, *I Found It!* 39.

33. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 175.

34. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 175.

35. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 176.

Columbia yielded 2.6 million “decisions to accept Christ as Savior and Lord.”<sup>36</sup> For the year of 1980, Crusade communicated that their Asian ministries achieved 11 million decisions for Christ.<sup>37</sup>

By 1999, Crusade reported that they had ministered in 181 countries representing 99.2 percent of the world’s population, and in the previous year alone, had 54.5 million “salvation decisions for Christ” where a trained Crusade member was physically present to counsel the person who had experienced Crusade’s gospel proclamation.<sup>38</sup> Overall, between Crusade’s founding in 1951 and 1999, they reported 4.5 billion “exposures to the gospel.”<sup>39</sup> When asked about these numbers in an interview for his authorized biography, Bright said, “We have been so very conservative.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Campus Crusade’s Reflection on the Results of Decisions**

Bill Bright was very optimistic about his 1976 Here’s Life campaign in America. He maintained that the campaign “will very likely determine the destiny of our nation and the future course of history,” with the goal being, “to introduce at least 25,000,000 people to Christ before the end [of the event].” If the event failed, Bright said, “we will experience another thousand years of dark ages.”<sup>41</sup> As this section will discuss, by the standards of his own goal, the event did fail. The final assessment of the campaign yielded 536,824 “decisions” for Christ.

As a part of the Here’s Life campaign in 1976, Crusade retained C. Peter Wagner’s Fuller Evangelistic Association Department of Church Growth to determine if their campaign helped churches grow. Crusade reported that the 1976 campaign engaged 6.5 million people personally, and that 536,824 people had “expressed a desire to receive Christ as their Savior.”<sup>42</sup> Wagner’s examination focused on six test cities where Crusade had felt that their work had been effective. Cities where Crusade felt that their work had been ineffective were not included in his study. In these “successful” six cities, 178 churches were contacted. These campaigns reported “26,535 gospel presentations, 4,106 decisions for Christ, 526 in Bible studies led by church members, and 125 new church members.”<sup>43</sup> The year before the campaign the combined church membership of these churches grew by 12%. In the year of the

36. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 180.

37. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 180.

38. Richardson, *Amazing Faith*, 220.

39. Richardson, *Amazing Faith*, 220.

40. Richardson, *Amazing Faith*, 221.

41. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 160.

42. C. Peter Wagner, “Who Found It? Did the Here’s Life America Blitz Work?” *Eternity*, September 1977, 16.

43. Wagner, “Who Found It?” 16.



Here's Life campaign their collective church membership grew by 7%; this equates to a 5% drop in church growth from the previous year.<sup>44</sup>

Wagner's article includes an anecdote by James F. Engle, director of the Billy Graham Program in Communication at Wheaton Graduate School. Engle formed a group to study the impact of the Here's Life campaign in Chicago. Crusade provided Engle a list of people who "prayed to receive Christ over the telephone."<sup>45</sup> Engle's group reached out to two hundred of these people. The study found that only fifty-five of the names and contact details were correct. Of these people, seventeen refused to cooperate with the interview. Engle wrote, "One does not expect this response from an excited new convert."<sup>46</sup> Of the remaining thirty-eight people, all but three claimed to be Christian prior to the phone call with Campus Crusade. None of the thirty-eight people who responded participated in follow-up Bible studies Crusade offered. Another anecdote by a Baptist pastor expressed concerns not only about the low response but the negative impact among those who did not respond. He asked, "how many people were turned against Christ and will be closed toward all other milder or more realistic evangelistic efforts in the coming years?" He believed Crusade's presentations "so oversimplifies the meaning of the gospel that the kind of Christians it produces, as far as I can see, are really hardly Christians at all in terms of conviction, relationships, or awareness of the world and God's plan of history. I am very disturbed about things like Here's Life and am petrified that such movements like this may arise again in the coming years."<sup>47</sup>

Wagner concluded his article by noting that "Campus Crusade leaders are not interested in perpetuating ineffective evangelistic methodologies," and that he was optimistic about their potential response to the ineffectiveness of the Here's Life campaign had on church growth.

Bill Bright and Campus Crusade committed to an evangelistic approach that, by their own stated strategies and intentions, simplified the gospel into four simple statements and believed that repeating these to as many people as possible through short presentations fulfilled the task of evangelism. Their extreme focus on this task is evidenced by their record keeping of presentations and decisions. To their credit, for the 1976 Here's Life campaign in America, they hired an outside consultant to study the impact their campaign made in local churches. While Bright later explained, "Only the Lord knows who is making sincere commitments,"<sup>48</sup> Bright did not adjust his focus on presentations and decisions. This focus continues today. Cru's 2020

44. Wagner, "Who Found It?" 20.

45. Wagner, "Who Found It?" 14.

46. Wagner, "Who Found It?" 14.

47. Wagner, "Who Found It?" 18.

48. Richardson, *Amazing Faith*, 221.

and 2021 annual reports detailed the number of presentations and decisions—which happen to be dramatically lower than previous decades.<sup>49</sup>

Campus Crusade is not alone in their focus on presentations and decisions. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association has a similar aim and has reflected on the disconnect between mass evangelism, church growth, and genuine conversion. The Billy Graham Crusades between 1947 and 1987 reported 65,432,641 attendees and 2,201,460 “inquirers.”<sup>50</sup> The inquirers are divided into four categories: first-time decision for Christ, rededication of one’s life to Christ, assurance or restoration of one’s commitment to Christ, and reaffirmation of commitment. A random sampling of a two-year span showed that 47 percent of inquirers were first-time decisions.<sup>51</sup> Of those who made a first-time decision for Christ, 71 percent were already involved in a local church.<sup>52</sup> Graham told and retold his own decision-story of when he attended a revival meeting when he was fifteen years old and checked a box on a “conversion card”—though he also shared that the box he checked was to indicate his “recommitment” to Christ.<sup>53</sup> Graham adopted the word “decision” as a key focal point of his ministry—evidenced by his mass circulation periodical titled *Decision* (est. 1960) and his radio and television programs both titled *Hour of Decision*.<sup>54</sup> A careful analysis of the Billy Graham crusades is outside the scope of this paper, but their successes and challenges generally align with those experienced by Campus Crusade.

Any examination of evangelism among evangelicals in the twentieth century, especially an examination of American evangelicalism and its far-reaching influence on world evangelicalism, requires attention to Campus Crusade for Christ and the Billy Graham crusades. Modern evangelical evangelism is largely defined by short gospel presentations and a call for an immediate decision as evidence that a person has been born again, converted, and—theologically speaking—regenerated. We will now examine if these norms have always been the case for evangelicals. In short, we will discover that conversion meant something quite different to early evangelicals than it did for modern evangelicals like Bill Bright.

49. See Cru annual reports from 2020 and 2021, accessed September 7, 2023, <https://www.cru.org/content/dam/cru/about/2020-cru-annual-report.pdf> and <https://www.cru.org/content/dam/cru/about/2021-annual-report.pdf>.

50. Robert O. Ferm and Caroline M. Whiting, *Billy Graham: Do the Conversions Last?* (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications, 1988), 20–21.

51. Ferm and Whiting, *Billy Graham*, 29.

52. Ferm and Whiting, *Billy Graham*, 102.

53. Grant Wacker, *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 6, 42.

54. Wacker, *America's Pastor*, 41–43, 63–67.

## **Part 2: Early Evangelicals and Decisions**

Modern evangelicals inherited their foundational understanding of conversion from the evangelical tradition. Early evangelicals did not invent Christian conversion but formulated their understanding from several sources, especially pietism and Puritanism. The early evangelical tradition began in the early eighteenth century and came to the fore most notably through the ministries of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Wesley, and John Wesley. Early evangelicals and modern evangelicals shared similar hopes and prayers for revival and conversion of the masses—but, as we will see, how they understood the concept of conversion differed considerably.

### **Jonathan Edwards's View of "Decisions"**

Jonathan Edwards is a key example and leader among early evangelicals.<sup>55</sup> To understand his view of conversion, we must recognize his Congregationalist polity. Congregationalism depends upon self-governance of the local congregation. Because of this, the question concerning who is a formal member of the congregation is a significant issue. Congregational churches in New England established the Cambridge Platform in 1648 to define the details of church government. Chapter 12 of this document discusses "Of Admission of Members into the Church."<sup>56</sup> A person became a formal member of the church when they had heard the gospel, responded with repentance and faith, had undergone baptism, were examined by church leaders, and could provide a "personal and public confession, and declaring of God's manner of working upon the soul."<sup>57</sup> It is this last portion, "declaring of God's manner of working upon the soul," which came to be known among Congregationalists as a conversion experience. Following their Puritan predecessors, the pattern of this testimony included several stages: first, an awakening to personal failure to adhere to God's commands; second, an awareness of person inability to ever adhere to God's commands leading to understand Christ as a person's only hope; third, the infusion of saving grace in which the person generally—but not always—can give account of when and where they experienced God's saving grace; and fourth, a lifelong struggle in this life for assurance because of ongoing sin.<sup>58</sup> As Puritan scholar Edmund Morgan wrote, "If the candidate [for membership] neglected any point, the elders or the members might question him about it."<sup>59</sup>

55. See: Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003).

56. Elders and Messengers of the New England Synod, *The Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline* (Boston: Perkins and Whipple, 1850), 68–71.

57. Elders and Messengers of the New England Synod, *The Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline*, 70.

58. Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 64–74, 91.

59. Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 91.

Jonathan Edwards's *Personal Narrative* aligned with the Puritan morphology of conversion he inherited. Edwards had been baptized, heard the gospel, and had been awakened and convicted by his sin. Finally, he wrote, "On January 12, [1723], I made a solemn dedication of myself to God, and wrote it down; giving up myself, and all that I had to God. . . . And solemnly vowed to take God for my whole portion and felicity."<sup>60</sup> This date, or perhaps the months shortly thereafter, are understood as Edwards's profession of conversion. Strangely, we have no record of when Edwards entered full church membership, though shortly later he was licensed to pastor a church.<sup>61</sup>

Church membership was a lively and controversial topic among New England Congregationalists, most notably due to the famous Half-Way Covenant. Fourteen years after New England Congregational leaders produced the Cambridge Platform, they agreed to the Half-Way Covenant. The Half-Way Covenant enabled church-going people in good standing with the church to baptize their children even if the parents could not provide the conversion testimony which the Cambridge Platform required. The Half-Way Covenant was a compromise that upheld the ideal of a professed and examined conversion testimony in the midst of a large swath of baptized church members who could not provide a conversion testimony.

Edwards observed the beginning of revival in his church in December 1734. Prior to the revival, his church had 620 communicant members—full church members who had provided their conversion testimony and were accepted by the leaders of the church.<sup>62</sup> Edwards reported that "more than 300 souls were savingly brought home to Christ in this town in the space of half a year."<sup>63</sup> These people had "presented themselves . . . to make an open explicit profession of Christianity . . . to the congregation."<sup>64</sup> Edwards described these events as conversion and was surprised by "the quickness of [God's] work, and the swift progress his Spirit has made in his operations on the hearts of many."<sup>65</sup> Edwards was happily overwhelmed by the number and speed with which people were testifying to their personal experiences of conversion. Much of Edwards's *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* published in 1737 documents these events and presents Edwards's careful and somewhat skeptical analysis of what happened—including his own questions about the genuineness of these conversions.

In the ensuing years a set of tragedies beset Edwards's church which seemed to overlap with the decay of the revival. George Whitefield arrived in Northampton in

60. Jonathan Edwards, *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn, Vol. 16, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1998), 796.

61. See Marden's discussion of this issue in George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 57.

62. Jonathan Edwards, *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen, Vol. 4, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1972), 157.

63. Edwards, *Great Awakening*, 158.

64. Edwards, *Great Awakening*, 157.

65. Edwards, *Great Awakening*, 159.

the fall of 1740, which rekindled the flame of revival in the church and inspired other ministers to begin their own evangelistic outreach. As revivalism spread in the area, questions about the genuineness of the revival and conversions reemerged. Edwards utilized his commencement speech at Yale in 1741 to discuss the *Distinguishing Marks* of the Spirit of God in which he simultaneously rejected the excesses of some revivalism while maintaining that God's Spirit often worked through revival. A repeated distinguishing mark of the Spirit for Edwards was that genuinely converted people should give evidence of their conversion not only through a verbal profession to their church, but also through visible discipleship and growth.

Edwards's Yale sermon did not quiet his critics and those who questioned the genuineness of revival and mass conversion, it only raised them. In late 1742, Edwards published his work *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*. This work was nearly four times the length of *Distinguishing Marks* and dealt more in depth with the practical and theological issues related to conversion and revival. Edwards warned that Christians should not judge the salvific state of their neighbor, but that the church could judge who could be a member of the "visible church." Edwards wrote, "Christians may openly distinguish such persons, in their speech and ordinary behavior, with a visible separation."<sup>66</sup> Edwards, thus, made an important distinction between the visible and invisible church in which the visible church includes people whom the church judges as meeting the requirements for church membership while the invisible church is only known to God.

Despite these distinctions, controversy continued and led Edwards in 1746 to publish *Religious Affections* provided twelve signs "of truly gracious and holy affections." These signs provided criteria to test the genuineness of the work of God in order to distinguish emotional fanaticism from false enthusiasm. Here, Edwards states that Scripture "do[es] plainly teach us that the state of others' souls toward God, cannot be known by us."<sup>67</sup>

Three years later, in February 1749, Edwards declared that he rejected the Half-Way Covenant and would only admit church members that could give a conversion testimony—reverting back to the standards of the Cambridge Platform. Later that year, he wrote his explanation in a publication of which its full title helps explain its contents: *An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God, Concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Complete Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church*.

This brief review of some of Edwards's history and writing on revival provides several important issues related to conversion and evangelical decisions. First, Edwards, in keeping with other early evangelicals and the historic teaching of the church, believed that people must be regenerated by God in order to be saved.

66. Edwards, *Great Awakening*, 480.

67. Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith, Vol. 2, The Works of Jonathan Edwards (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1959), 189.

Second, Edwards distinguished between the visible church and the invisible church as those people the church deems Christian and those people who are certain to be Christians—which is only known by God. Third, he believed that the human experience of conversion could occur quickly but was typically a longer process that included hearing the gospel, experiencing conviction and awaking of personal sin, undergoing a breakthrough moment of repentance and faith, and providing evidence of a changed life. Fourth, he believed that churches must insist upon examining individual's conversion testimonies in order to be a part of the visible church. Fifth, when Edwards reported the results of revival, he reported how many people formally joined the visible church. Edwards did not speculate on how many people joined the invisible church.

### **John Wesley's View of Decisions**

John Wesley, alongside Edwards and others, is another key early evangelical. Any thorough discussion about early evangelical conversion highlights what John Wesley experienced at about 8:45 PM on May 24, 1738, when his heart was “strangely warmed.” While scholars continue to debate Wesley's evolving self-understanding of what this moment meant for himself, all see it as a pivotal turning point which helped define early evangelical conversion theology and practice.<sup>68</sup> Wesley's understanding of conversion had been shaped over time by his upbringing in the Church of England with significant influences from nonconformist thought, the holy living tradition, Puritans, Eastern orthodoxy, and Moravian teaching.

When Wesley arrived at Aldersgate, he anticipated that he might experience a breakthrough moment in which he would experience instantaneous conversion to give him assurance of his regeneration and salvation. Prior to this era, Wesley thought that this moment might be fostered through various spiritual disciplines through the means of grace; the Puritans and others instilled this idea among those who sought a “conversion testimony” through the concept of preparationism. What Wesley and other early evangelicals introduced to the broader concept of conversion was that this moment was not a function of preparationism; instead, evangelicals believed that conversion was a powerful and often instantaneous experience of breakthrough that arrived through the gift of faith. Later evangelicals latched onto and isolated this momentary experience to orphan it from what Wesley and many other early evangelicals understood as one part of a broader process and context of conversion.

John Wesley's experience at Aldersgate is a far cry from being normative for the evangelistic approach of modern evangelicalism. By the time of Aldersgate, Wesley had been baptized, raised as the son of a pastor in a strong Christian household, and ordained and employed by the church. Wesley knew, shared, and taught the gospel;

68. Mark K. Olson, *Wesley and Aldersgate* (London: Routledge, 2020); Randy L. Maddox, *Aldersgate Reconsidered* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1990); McGeever, *Born Again*, 31–55.



he arguably had expressed his faith and repented more than most people will in their entire lives. Wesley's Aldersgate moment fits into a much larger and complex narrative that differed significantly even from the people whom he sought to evangelize.

Rather than identifying a normative model of conversion from Wesley's personal experience, we can learn more from what Wesley installed and perpetuated as, what would become, the largest early evangelical structure for outreach, conversion, and growth: the Methodist societies. At first, the Methodist societies were a natural extension of Wesley's earlier experiences leading the "Holy Club" at Oxford and what he learned from the Moravians. He began experimenting with structured small groups that occasionally met together in larger groups while he was in Georgia. It is essential to recognize that from the beginning these meetings were in addition to Sunday church services—the meetings and societies Wesley developed were *in addition* to the regular services and work of the respective churches to which people belonged.

Wesley authored the *Rules of the Band Societies* on December 25, 1738. These "bands" met weekly for discussion, as well as to confess their sins, temptations, deliverance, and secrets.<sup>69</sup> The third question for admission to this first iteration of Wesley's societies was, "Have you the witness of God's Spirit with your spirit that you are a child of God?"<sup>70</sup> Methodist scholar Tom Albin writes, "Before one entered a band, the individual had to experience justifying grace and saving faith."<sup>71</sup> In this regard, entrance into the early Methodist band paralleled the question the New England Congregational Cambridge Platform required of full church members: to be able to give an account of your experience of salvation.

After establishing the Methodist bands, Wesley decided that he needed to develop a group meeting designed for people who could not yet meet the "salvation" requirements of the band meeting. He wrote, "In the latter end of the year 1739 eight or ten persons came to me in London who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption." They desired, "that I would spend some time with them in prayer, and advise them how to flee from the wrath to come, which they saw continually hanging over their heads."<sup>72</sup> In turn, Wesley formed Methodist "classes" for those who "may the more easily [discern] whether they are indeed working out their own salvation."<sup>73</sup> Wesley provided only one requirement for admission into these societies, which was "a desire to flee from the wrath to

69. John Wesley, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies, Vol. 9, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 77–78.

70. Wesley, *Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, 77.

71. Thomas R. Albin, "'Inwardly Persuaded': Religion of the Heart in Early British Methodism," in *"Heart Religion" in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, ed. Richard B. Steele (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 47.

72. Wesley, *Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, 69.

73. Wesley, *Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, 69.

come, to be saved from their sins.”<sup>74</sup> Albin explains, “the class meeting furnished the setting for new Christians to live and act according to the gospel even before they had undergone the new experience of ‘New Birth’ [*emphasis original*].”<sup>75</sup> Notice that Albin separates the “new Christian” from the experience of the “new birth.” This separation might trouble modern evangelicals because some modern evangelicals collapse the concept of conversion into *only* a momentary, instantaneous experience. For Edwards, a conversion experience identified the visible church and provided further, but not certain, assurance of salvation. For Wesley, a conversion experience also provided further assurance of salvation, but it did not provide the ultimate line of demarcation between who was saved and not saved.

A few years later, Wesley’s Methodist Society Conference meeting discussed the questions, “Can we know one who is thus saved? What is a reasonable proof of it?” They agreed that without the “miraculous discernment of the spirits” it was impossible to know for certain if someone was genuinely saved; yet they determined three “best proofs” of salvation. These proofs required the person to display unblameable behavior, have a conversion testimony, and be observed for “two or three years” after the conversion testimony.<sup>76</sup>

The Methodist Societies began reporting their membership numbers to each other in their annual meetings in 1766.<sup>77</sup> What is important to observe is that these numbers represent a large umbrella of people who were at various stages of their spiritual journeys—some who were simply curious enough to attend a class meeting, others who attested to a conversion testimony, and others who were ministers and preachers within the society. What we do not see in the Methodist societies is any attempt to count “decisions.” Similarly, they did not count or report “conversions.”<sup>78</sup> The Methodist way was to evangelize the masses and to get respondents into weekly meetings where they settle down and work out salvation over time.

## Summary of Early Evangelicals and Decisions

Edwards and Wesley illustrate that early evangelicals upheld the reality of a momentary conversion experience which typically functioned as an important but small part of a much larger scheme of evangelism and conversion. The conversion experience provided greater, but not certain, assurance of salvation. For Edwards, a clear conversion experience enabled full membership within his church; for Wesley,

74. Wesley, *Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, 70.

75. Albin, “Inwardly Persuaded” 45.

76. John Wesley, *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of the Conference*, ed. Henry D. Rack, Vol. 10, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 132–33.

77. Wesley, *Methodist Societies: The Minutes of the Conference*, 306n28, 319.

78. Charles Wesley kept a collection of written conversion testimonies. See Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 130–33.

a clear conversion experience enabled a Methodist society member to transfer from the class meeting to the band meeting. The scope and theology of these issues went far beyond making and counting a one-time decision. Early evangelicals did not count decisions—that would be an invention of later evangelicals.

### **Part 3: Later Evangelicals and Decisions**

Space does not allow for a thorough discussion of how evangelicals adjusted their understanding of conversion so that it could be a thing that is counted through decision-making. But two key influences will help us bridge the gap from early evangelicals like Edwards and Wesley to modern evangelicals like Bill Bright: Charles Finney and the rise of evangelistic tracts in the nineteenth century.

#### **Charles Finney**

The plea for conversion continued after the first generation of early evangelicals. Charles Finney is noted among those in the mid-nineteenth century for his revivalist preaching for immediate conversions. He described conversion and regeneration in synonymous ways. Finney augmented the evangelical understanding of regeneration and thought it possible to ascribe regeneration to human initiative. At other times he described conversion and regeneration as a product of simultaneous human and divine interaction. Finney introduced, more than the other prominent evangelicals before him a higher capacity to humans to initiate and methodize their experience of conversion and regeneration than early evangelicals.

Finney believed that a minister could control the conversion and regeneration of a person. For him this process was scientific. He argued that revival “is a result we can logically expect from the right use of God-given means, as much as any other effect produced by applying tools and means.”<sup>79</sup> He added, “There is a long-held belief that the task of furthering Christianity is not governed by ordinary rules of cause and effect. ... No doctrine endangers the church more than this, and nothing is more absurd.”<sup>80</sup> To accomplish this cause-and-effect process of revival and conversion, Finney advocated for three “new measures:” anxious meetings, extended meetings, and the anxious seat.<sup>81</sup> These measures led to the mechanization of evangelical conversion.

79. Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revival*, ed. L.G. Parkhurst (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1988), 13.

80. Finney, *Lectures on Revival*, 14.

81. Finney, *Lectures on Revival*, 167.

## Evangelistic Tracts

The Religious Tract Society in England began producing short religious tracts in 1799. By 1849 they had distributed over 500 million tracts of five thousand separate titles and were shipping 20 million per year.<sup>82</sup> That year, they wrote that because of their activities, “sinners have been converted to God; Christians edified and comforted; backsliders mercifully restored; and numerous evils presented by timely admissions.”<sup>83</sup> Their most successful tract, *The Dairyman's Daughter*, sold over four million copies. In 1825, the American Tract Society was formed when the New York and New England Tract Societies, formed in 1812 and 1814, merged.<sup>84</sup> Historian Lincoln Mullen writes that, over time, these tract companies “codified and popularized the kind of conversion experience that Finney had described in his preaching.”<sup>85</sup> A common feature of these short publications was what came to be well-known as the “sinner's prayer.” Mullen writes, “The sinner's prayer made conversion more punctual; that is, it tended to collapse the process to one point.”<sup>86</sup> Finney provided theology and mechanization for immediate conversion which were perfectly suited for the short form nature of printed tracts.

The American Tract Society tract, *One Thing Needful*, illustrates these features. An 1818 sermon by the same name was authored by the Rev. George Burder of London and condensed in 1825 into a short four-page tract.<sup>87</sup> The tract takes the form of a conversation that ends with the enquirer asking, “All this is right; and I wish from my heart I were as you say. Pray tell me how I may become so?” The evangelist replies, “will you not now come to him, who though Lord of all worlds, has once died for sinners? O hesitate no longer. Say heartily, ‘I cannot live without God, without Christ, without hope.’ ‘Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.’”<sup>88</sup> This tract is just one example of many ATS tracts that, as Mullen explains, “insisted that sinners convert immediately.”<sup>89</sup>

82. Ian C. Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness: The Evangelical Impact on the Victorians* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 42.

83. Bradley, *Call to Seriousness*, 43.

84. John Wolffe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 169.

85. Lincoln A. Mullen, *The Chance of Salvation: A History of Conversion in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 33.

86. Mullen, *Chance of Salvation*, 35.

87. George Burder, *Village Sermons: Or Ninety One Discourses, on the Principal Doctrines of the Gospel: Intended for the Use of Families, Sunday Schools, Or Companies Assembled for Religious Instruction in Country Villages* (Philadelphia: W.W. Woodward, 1818), 254–61; American Tract Society, *The American Tract Society Documents, 1824-1925* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 381; American Tract Society, *Tracts of the American Tract Society: General Series* (New York: American Tract Society, 1825), 81–84.

88. American Tract Society, *Tracts of the American Tract Society: General Series*, page 4 of the tract, page 85 of the collection.

89. Mullen, *Chance of Salvation*, 41.

Finney and the evangelistic tract publishers were not without their critics, but their perceived success influenced the practice of evangelicals significantly. Dwight Lyman (D. L.) Moody was born at the height of Finney's revivals and began his ministry in Finney's final years. Moody built upon Finney's methods as he diligently advertised his campaigns, introduced an "inquirers room" where listeners could further inquire about salvation and make an "instant decision" to receive salvation,<sup>90</sup> and developed "decision cards" to capture the names and details of respondents (as well as provide details for local pastors to follow-up). At the turn of the twentieth century, revivalists further embraced evangelistic methodology that presumed a rapid evangelistic process and experience. Books and manuals on presenting the plan of salvation, instructions about how to "pray Jesus into your heart," standardized "sinners prayers," and evangelistic tracts including written prayers to receive salvation emerged with increasing frequency.<sup>91</sup> For example, in 1918, the Moody Bible Institute printed a tract with the title, "Important Election," across the top. Below this title was the question, "Will You Be Saved?" with three rows of responses: first, "God has voted: Yes;" second, "Satan has voted: No;" and, last, "A TIE! Your vote must decide the issue," accompanied by an open check box for the reader to respond, "yes" or "no."<sup>92</sup>

The mechanization of conversion through standardized evangelistic tactics continued from the turn of the twentieth century and met Bill Bright through the ministry of Henrietta Mears. Mears's maternal grandfather, William Wallace Everts, had been instrumental in founding Morgan Park Seminary in Chicago in 1863—one of the first students who attended the seminary was a young D. L. Moody.<sup>93</sup> Everts's daughter, Margaret, served as a Bible teacher in the church of noted fundamentalist William Bell Riley. Upon her death, Riley said of Mears's mother, "When she visited the homes of the poor, or talked with the convicted sinner, they alike understood that a messenger from the Holy One was at work for him."<sup>94</sup> At the age of nine, Mears stood before Riley and the deacon board of her church to share her faith in Christ and requested her baptism; two years later, she taught her first Sunday school class.<sup>95</sup> The leading historian of Mears wrote, "Since Mears grew to maturity under the ministry of Reverend William Bell Riley at First Baptist, Minneapolis, it is no surprise that his

90. Charles L. Thompson, *Times of Refreshing: A History of American Revivals from 1740 to 1877, with Their Philosophy and Methods*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Golden Censer Company, 1878), 384.

91. Paul Harrison Chitwood, *The Sinner's Prayer: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (PhD Diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001), 42–61.

92. George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 100; *The Christian Workers' Magazine* (Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1918), 493, 924. Thank you to Amber Thomas Reynolds for bringing this tract to my attention.

93. Earl O. Roe, *Dream Big: The Henrietta Mears Story* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), 47.

94. Roe, *Dream Big*, 55.

95. Arlin C. Migliazzo, "Progress of a Young Pilgrim: Henrietta Mears on the Northern Plains, 1890-1913," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 94, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2016): 25.

fundamentalist perspectives played a significant role in her spiritual development.”<sup>96</sup> Mears, thus, was “reared in fundamentalism,” which was known for its relentless focus on evangelism and “soul winning.”<sup>97</sup> In addition to stressing conversion, Bright inherited from Mears what she learned from the fundamentalist, Keswick, and Higher Life traditions—a notion of the post-conversion “surrender” to the Holy Spirit. This “second stage” of Christian life found its way into Bright’s continued discipleship emphasis of the “Spirit-filled life” while the concept of surrender often mirrored his understanding of genuine faith, including initial faith in God.<sup>98</sup> When Bright entered into Mears’s powerful ministry, he was formed by Mears’s evangelical conversionist beliefs stemming from Finney, Moody, as well as those of Riley.

#### **Part 4: Analysis of the Four Spiritual Laws and their Place in Evangelical Soteriology**

Conversionism is at the core of evangelical identity. Yet, this identity spans nearly three hundred years. The underlying soteriological cause of Christian conversion is regeneration, but evangelicals have not communicated their identity through the term regenerationism. Regeneration is an invisible work of God upon the unseen human soul. Conversion is a visible work of God experienced by the human body and soul. Evangelicals focus on the human experience of conversion rather than the invisible work of regeneration. The two are linked together but are not synonymous and not necessarily synchronized.<sup>99</sup> Early and modern evangelical belief about regeneration has changed very little. But from what we have seen above, early evangelicals, such as Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, and modern evangelicals, such as Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ, understand the human experience of conversion quite differently. To conclude, we will examine five categories in which Bill Bright’s ministry departs from that of early evangelicals.

First, we must consider the *context* of Christianization. When early evangelicals sought to convert people, the people that they evangelized were typically individuals who already considered themselves Christians. The early evangelical revivals in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland involved, by and large, people who had been baptized, raised in the church, and attended church with frequency. The early evangelical revivals in the American colonies succeeded among a similar group of people. A frequent sermon title and theme among early evangelicals was “The Almost Christian” that targeted people who thought they were Christians, but who

96. Arlin C. Migliazzo, “The Education of Henrietta Mears: A Fundamentalist in Transition,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 46, no. 2 (June 2011): 66.

97. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 19.

98. Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 76–85; Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 72–80; Turner, *Bill Bright*, 26, 38, 86–88.

99. McGeever, *Born Again*, 201–3.



were told that they were not because they had not been born again.<sup>100</sup> Bill Bright believed that his evangelistic audience was similar to those from hundreds of years earlier. He said, "I've found that most people already understand the Gospel. We've surveyed hundreds of thousands all over the world, but more in this country than any other, and we've found that men's hearts are already prepared. Pre-evangelism has already taken place. We're simply coming in to tell them how to make their commitments."<sup>101</sup> In locations where Campus Crusade staff encountered college students who were largely already Christianized, the approach of Crusade was likely to find greater success because this is exactly the audience that Bright had in mind for his ministry. When early Crusade staff encountered students that were less Christianized or counter-Christian, for example the student base at the Berkeley Blitz, the same approach found far less success.

Second, Bill Bright truncated the *content* of the gospel proclamation when compared to the gospel proclamation of earlier evangelicals. Bright believed that effective gospel proclamation should be brief; the content should be minimal and move quickly to challenging the recipient to make a "decision." Bright explained, "They understand Jesus Christ is the Son of God. They understand that He died for their sins. They understand that they need a Saviour. They understand many facts contained in the Scripture. But they don't know how to receive Christ." He continued, "The people who criticize us are hung up on the proposition that we still have to do the sowing, and the fertilizing and the watering and irrigating and harvesting ourselves ... it's harvest time today. And those who find fault in the Four Spiritual Laws and other so-called simplistic approaches are people who don't recognize where the masses are."<sup>102</sup> Bright believed that the "masses" already knew the content of several crucial aspects of the gospel: Jesus is God, I am a sinner, Jesus died for my sins, I need a savior, and a belief in the facts of Scripture. The focal point of Campus Crusade evangelism, *The Four Spiritual Laws*, assumed that the recipient was largely in agreement with these beliefs. Because of this, Bright's approach moved quickly beyond these issues in order to get to the content that Bright believed had not been presented, which was succinct content about how to make a decision for Christ.

Third, Bright believed that the *cadence* of conversion happened quickly. Because Bright assumed that most people were Christianized and in agreement with the foundational beliefs of evangelical Christianity, the beginning-to-end process of helping a person make a decision for Christ could happen within a short conversation.

100. The second sermon in John Wesley's widely distributed standard collection of sermons is titled "The Almost Christian." Sermons by this title in this era were commonplace; one of Whitefield's repeated sermons had the same title and theme. John Wesley, *Sermons*, ed. Albert C. Outler, Vol. 1, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 131; George Whitefield, *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield*, ed. John Gillies (London: Printed for Edward and Charles Dilly, 1771), 6:174ff.

101. "Door Interview: Bill Bright," *Wittenburg Door*, February-March 1977, 8.

102. "Door Interview: Bill Bright," *Wittenburg Door*, 8.

For Bright, what mattered was if *The Four Spiritual Laws* “worked.” And in his assessment, they did. His authorized biography stated that “despite the accusation that they are simplistic, Bill Bright feels that they’ve worked and that they’ve worked well. And for him, that’s the ultimate issue.”<sup>103</sup> The cadence of conversion is one of the largest departures by Bright from the approach of early evangelicals. Early evangelical sermons often concluded with a call for people to respond—for example, at least thirty-three of the fifty-nine standard sermons of Whitefield called for an immediate response to turn to Christ to be saved.<sup>104</sup> Yet, the call for this urgent response did not take the form of “making a decision” right there and then—the immediate human mechanization of conversion was invented by Charles Finney, refined further through “sinners prayer” evangelistic tract literature in Finney’s era, and this trajectory continued through the ministry of Bill Bright and Campus Crusade.

Fourth, because early evangelicals evangelized a Christianized people who were already culturally connected to a local church, the *centrality of the church* was assumed. Edwards’s revivals happened within his church. Wesley’s Methodist Societies supplemented the religious life of people who were connected to their local churches on Sundays and other times. Early Crusade staff left because the ministry’s “greatest struggle” was, as Turner explains, its “failure to motivate students to become involved in local churches. It was relatively easy for Crusade’s charismatic speakers to persuade a group of students to pray to ‘receive Christ,’ but it was more difficult to get even those who had made serious commitments to look beyond the local Campus Crusade chapter to the wider Christian world.”<sup>105</sup> As we have seen, Crusade dedicated attention to this issue when they commissioned a study of their 1976 Here’s Life America campaign and discovered that their campaign failed to cause people who made decisions to become new members in a local church. What we see, again, is that Bright’s approach was tailor-made for people who were already Christianized—it should not surprise us that his approach was much less effective with those who were not already connected to a church.

Fifth, early evangelicals did not count conversions in the same way that Bright counted decisions. It is difficult to understate how much Bright focused on the priority of counting decisions for Christ. He stated that if his 1976 Here’s Life America campaign did not cause 25 million Americans to make decisions for Christ before the end of the event, that America “will experience another thousand years of dark ages.”<sup>106</sup> As shown above, 536,824 people responded, 24.5 million less than Bright’s doomsday threshold. Early evangelicals would have found Bright’s concept of counting decisions strange. The numbers that Edwards reported in his accounts were the number of people who became full communicant church members. The

103. Quebedeaux, *I Found It!* 180.

104. McGeever, *Born Again*, 114–15.

105. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 134.

106. Turner, *Bill Bright*, 160.

numbers that Wesley reported in his conferences were the number of people who joined Methodist societies. The numbers that Whitefield reported were how many people attended his sermons. Early evangelicals placed little or no priority on counting conversions. The numbers they reported were additional church members, society members, or attendance at events.

Bill Bright's *The Four Spiritual Laws* serve as an artifact in the trajectory of the history of evangelical soteriology. Conversionism continues to be a central tenant of evangelicalism, yet what conversion means and how best to convert people has changed considerably since the era of early evangelicals.