

Getting

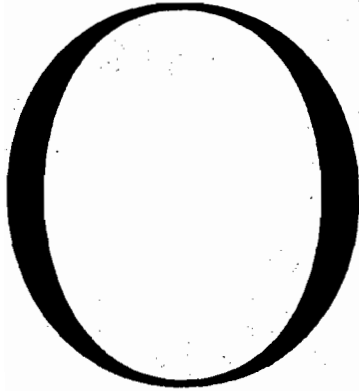


Religion



My long-lost years as a teenage evangelical.
By Mark Lilla

A CIRCLE BROKEN Mark Lilla playing the guitar and
singing with a group
of his Christian brethren in 1973.



ne morning this past June I found myself sitting in a coffee shop across from Rockefeller Center, teaching an astonished friend how to sing the old gospel hymn "How Great Thou Art." We had just come from a press conference for the Greater New York Billy Graham Crusade, which we were going to attend that weekend in Queens. My friend, who grew up in Brooklyn and once attended a yeshiva, was looking forward to this as an anthropological expedi-

tion. He thought of me as a secular Manhattan writer, like himself, which I suppose I am. He hadn't quite understood that for me our little trip would also be a kind of homecoming.

For seven years of my adolescence and early adulthood, I was an evangelical. Mine was not the white-bread Christianity of Billy Graham, though I used to watch his crusades on television and admired him. And it had nothing to do with the climate-controlled devotion of today's megachurches. It was a 70's thing: my faith was passionate, a little bit frightening, demanding in a Kierkegaardian way, fueled by music, Scripture, glossolalia, faith-healings, revivals, fellowship, sin and rumors of sin.

It was also peripatetic. I was brought up Roman Catholic in a blue-collar Detroit suburb whose flat, monotonous subdivisions were hastily constructed in the early 60's, far from the ethnic neighborhoods and parishes of my parents' youth. The post-Vatican II church played no significant role in our lives, and the people we worshiped with were strangers. At the age of 13, I decided I was an atheist. But the following year, on a lark, I attended a Christian rock concert at my high-school auditorium, and on the way out was given a colloquial translation of the New Testament. Like most Catholics back then, and perhaps even now, I had never held a Bible in my hands. I began to read it the moment I got home, and didn't stop until breakfast the next morning. When I staggered into the kitchen, my father asked, "What happened to you?" I said I didn't know.

Within a few months, I considered myself "saved" and could be seen with a group of unkempt Jesus freaks carrying a heavy wooden cross down 12 Mile Road on a Saturday afternoon. I didn't last long with the freaks, though. Their hearts were torn between God and the Grateful Dead, while mine was infused with something my mind wanted to understand. So I got a haircut and joined a more conservative, Bible-based Pentecostal prayer group led by a self-taught ex-con who worked as a hospital maintenance man. This group was my substitute family throughout high school in the early 70's. I spent most nights with them, at prayer meetings, or guitar practice, or just sitting around on the shag carpeting of their living rooms, Bibles open on our laps. Ours was a rolling theological seminar devoted to interpreting the biblical message, and an open psychotherapy session where we helped each other adjust to being born again. For our lives were wholly new — of that we were convinced. The old self had died and a new one had taken its place (Colossians 3:9-10).

Conversion stories are slippery things. "I once was lost, but now am found" — that's never the whole story, and it's usually not the end of the story. It wasn't for me. My new life as an evangelical Christian ended almost as abruptly as it had begun, and was followed by other rebirths that took me to college, to graduate school, to journalism, to stints living in Europe, and now to middle age as a professor. But then, what is the "whole story," and what does it mean to tell it, even to yourself? For 25

years I have been pondering that question. When my writer friend invited me to hear Billy Graham, I decided it was time to try answering it.

IT IS A SHORT walk from the No. 7 subway line stop to the center of Corona Park, where the crusade is being held. Along the way we see people collecting socks, which those attending have been asked to bring for donation to the city's homeless shelters. There are thousands of pairs, mainly white, all new, bulging out of cardboard boxes strewn across our path. Beyond the boxes, there are men and women distributing tracts, newsletters, church advertisements and crude theological leaflets. The largest contingent is a squad of granola-Christians wearing Birkenstocks and happy grins, reminding me of the Jesus freaks I once knew. When I approach I learn they belong to "Twelve Tribes: The Commonwealth of Israel," which has 25 Christian communities in North America and satellites in Germany, Britain, Spain, France, Australia and Latin America. I take an instant liking to them and wonder idly whether the Graham organization might consider giving them socks too.

Just before we enter the main site, the atmosphere changes. Metal police barriers have been laid out on either side of the walkway to create small pens, not unlike in a zoo. Most are empty, but in a few there are protesters, who are being kept away from Graham, from the crowd and, presumably, from one another. They are livid about being caged up like this and spend most of their time arguing with the cops, who explain and re-explain why they aren't allowed closer to the event. They are holding up placards that read "Graham Leads to Hell," "God Hates Fag Enablers" and, more creatively, "Billy Is a Lying Whore."

The "God Hates Fag Enablers" team is well known to the Graham organization. They come from the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kan., whose pastor, the Rev. Fred Phelps, devotes his Christian ministry to fighting a war against "the modern militant homosexual movement." Throughout the year he sends out groups of freshly washed kids to picket gay-pride parades, "funerals of impenitent sodomites, like Matthew Shepard," and "enablers" like Billy Graham. While Graham deems homosexual acts sinful, he also preaches compassion for gays and lesbians, which is why Phelps has made him a target. Phelps is a homegrown Calvinist who celebrates the vengeful acts of a wrathful God: AIDS, the attacks of 9/11, the killing of American troops in Iraq, the London suicide bombings and, most recently, Hurricane Katrina. The texts posted on the church's Web site could have been drawn from the apocalyptic literature of 16th-century Germany: "Face it, America! You have become a fag-filled nation of flag worshippers and necromancers. Your only terrorist is the Lord your God! He fights against you personally."

Pastor Phelps's troops are handsome, their placards professionally printed. The man in the neighboring cage, who holds up the shakily lettered "Graham Leads to Hell" sign, is old-school. He has come all the way from A True Church, in Lake Hughes, Calif. His flier also affirms that "God Hates," "True Believers Hate" and "God Causes All, Even Sin," but he doesn't seem particularly worked up about homosexuals. His anger is directed at false prophets who preach ecumenical understanding for other faiths and water down the Gospel message. The flier has a long list of errant messengers, including many of the most popular evangelicals of our time: James Dobson, T.D. Jakes, Rick Warren and, of course, Billy Graham. The competition.

Mr. True Church is one of those energetic types you find in every evangelical church and prayer group: the amateur scholar. I was surrounded by them in my teens and eventually became one myself. Ours was not a bookish home, and no one in my family had graduated from college. My father took a desk job in the Air Force during the Korean War, directly after high school, and after his discharge began working for a small machine-tool company that supplied the auto industry. He stayed there until his retirement. My mother, who grew up on a farm during the Great Depression, did enroll in college after graduating from high school, but dropped out in her first year and became a registered nurse. None of my friends' parents completed college, either.

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But the thirst for knowledge isn't limited to those who attend the right schools. (Nor, I was to learn, is it universal among them.) The caricature of American evangelicals as incurious and indifferent to learning is false. Visit any Christian bookstore and you will see that they are gluttons for learning — of a certain kind. They belong to Bible-study groups; they buy works of scriptural interpretation; they sit through tedious courses on cassette, CD or DVD; they take notes during sermons and highlight passages in their Bibles. If anything, it is their thirst for knowledge that undoes them. Like so many Americans, they know little about history, science, secular literature or, unless they are immigrants, foreign cultures. Yet their thirst for answers to the most urgent moral and existential questions is overwhelming. So they grab for the only glass in the room: God's revealed Word.

A half-century ago, an American Christian seeking assistance could have turned to the popularizing works of serious religious thinkers like Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, John Courtney Murray, Thomas Merton, Jacques Maritain and even Martin Buber and Will Herberg. Those writers were steeped in philosophy and the theological traditions of their faiths, which they brought to bear on the vital spiritual concerns of ordinary believers — ethics, death, prayer, doubt and despair. But intellectual figures like these have disappeared from the American landscape and have been replaced by half-educated evangelical gurus who either publish vacant, cheery self-help books or are politically motivated. If an evangelical wants to satisfy his taste for truth today, it's strictly self-service.

And I can see now how this state of affairs breeds a narrow fanaticism. Until age 14, my own reading was pretty much limited to comic books, Mad Magazine, histories of the World Wars and the occasional Hardy Boys mystery. Then I discovered the strange new world of the Bible. That discovery might have led me to other books, but there was no one to guide me onto that path. So the Bible became my only portal into the realm of ideas — ideas about morality, justice, cosmology, psychology, eschatology, mortality. The Bible posed all the important questions, questions that were vaguely forming in my adolescent mind, but that now took on shape and contour. And, of course, it answered those questions.

All teenagers are dogmatists; a teenager with a Bible is simply a more intense teenager. I relished being a prophet without honor in my own homeroom. Not long after I was saved, I took an old sweatshirt and wrote "Property of Jesus" on it with permanent Magic Marker and wore it to class. I then asked a friend to make me a large leather cross, which I wore around my neck every day, just so people knew where I stood. I prowled the school halls with a leatherbound Scofield Reference Bible tucked under my arm, looking for victims. I even took on teachers, whose skepticism struck me as a sign of spiritual degeneracy. I disarmed them with a little Scripture, skewered them with the sharpened tip of my logical *modus ponens*, shaking their foundations and preparing them for salvation. I was doing them a favor.

And so I recognized the kids from Kansas with their signs, though I myself had been more like Mr. True Church. He cut a ridiculous figure, his fanny pack bulging with pens and scribbled notes; he was itching to display his homecooked learning. I felt obliged to engage him, for old times' sake, but we didn't get very far. He just kept repeating the same phrases. I pitied him. And I could tell he pitied me.

MY FIRST IMPRESSION on entering the crusade grounds is not a good one. Thousands of chairs are laid out by row and section, like so many phalanxes. There are television crews on risers and a separate press section with fold-out tables and wireless Internet access, peopled by tanned ladies and metrosexual peacocks staring at laptops. The stage is dominated by two video screens, each one large enough to stand out in Times Square. Between them are a podium, chairs for those speaking, a space for the performing bands and a piano; farther back is the choir, rising up on bleachers, 1,500-strong yet barely noticeable between the pixel machines. Further obscuring the view is a crane, on the end of which perches a television technician with camera. At the other end is a roadie who keeps his partner elevated and moves him about to create camera motion. Back and forth they zip on the aluminum seesaw, making it a virtual impossibility to see what is happening onstage. "Virtual" is the key term here.

The shock does me good, though, jarring up memories of the prayer meetings I used to attend. They were simple affairs. We would meet every Friday in a church recreation hall, put the folding chairs in concentric circles, fill the coffee maker, make Kool-Aid and tune our guitars. There were never more than 60 of us, sometimes only six. When it looked as if everyone had arrived, we would start singing, just to get the spiritual juices flowing. After a brief greeting by a male leader we would fall into silent prayer.

It would not stay silent long. Someone would exclaim, apropos of nothing at all, "Praise God!" Someone else would respond, "Glory!" Soon you heard "Amen!" and "Jesus!" ricocheting off the linoleum. The racket melted our Midwestern reticence and freed us to begin praying in tongues. The wave would start slowly, then catch, then swamp us as we chanted in an oddly harmonious musical babble. We were all on our feet, floating, gyrating, palms turned heavenward. And then, just as abruptly, the tongues would fade and we would collapse back into our chairs, falling into a mellow daze I would later learn to call postcoital.

It was now time to witness. The spirit would move someone to rise. A mother might recount a child's misbehavior and how she had opened her Bible at random, finding the exact verse she needed to restore her calm and affection. Praise God. A shy man might reveal he had once been a drunkard, an addict or a philanderer, but that God had turned his life around. Amen. Occasionally someone would burst into tears, overwhelmed by some unspoken problem. We would then gather round to "lay hands" on him while he knelt. Those who couldn't touch him would touch those

who could, creating a mystical rugby scrum to protect his wounded soul. A palpable current of love passed through our hands and arms and backs until it reached its destination. To be on the receiving end of that current was to feel the strength of God's army standing foursquare against Satan and all his works. It was a power and comfort I was never to feel again.

I must have needed it. My parents did their best with the family, working hard for little money, rearing two kids they hoped would be accepted into college and survive the 60's and 70's unscathed. They meant well, but the only psychological tools at their disposal were discipline and guilt; expressions of affection, sympathy and forgiveness were rare. They were closed-in people like their parents, and their parents' parents, all the way up that deep, coastal shelf. At those Friday-night meetings I learned another way to be. I learned to bang on a guitar, to sing at the top of my voice, to admit my worries and failings and collapse into the arms of someone whose love I could trust, knowing it would never be withdrawn. All that seemed an enormous gift of God, and I wanted to thank him. It is not true, as the ancient Epicurean philosophers taught, that human beings only invent gods out of ignorance and fear. Sometimes, perhaps often, they seek the divine out of joy and gratitude for what seem like miracles.

There was no joy to be felt in Corona Park the night I was there. To my disappointment we never got around to singing "How Great Thou Art." Instead, two Christian pop bands opened for Graham, playing their own insipid music before the television cameras, as if they were recording an MTV video. When I pulled my eyes away from the visual vortex caused by the screens, I realized that no one was singing along with them; the crowd just watched and clapped. I wanted to shout out the joyful words of Moses: "The Lord is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation!" (Exodus 15:2). Or the exhortation of the prophet Isaiah: "Sing unto the Lord a new song, and his praise from the end of the earth!" (42:10). But this was not an evening for the God of Sinai and the Judean desert. Nor was it an evening for the song in every believer's heart to rise up and draw him lovingly into the mystical body of Christ. Tonight that body was plastered to its seats, each member gazing forward in private, rapt silence. Sixty thousand iPods would have had the same effect.

EVERY SO OFTEN, while watching sports on television, I see an evangelical in the crowd waving a homemade sign that simply reads "John 3:3." The reference is to a verse in the New Testament, and not just any verse. For evangelicals, it is the epicenter of the biblical message. The mere mention of it, on a bumper sticker or a cardboard sign waved in a stadium, is thought sufficient to work wonders, like a talisman. The verse occurs in the story of Nicodemus:

- 3:1 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:
- 2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.
- 3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . .
- 9 Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?
- 10 Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? . . .
- 16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (King James Version)



SING A NEW SONG Exuberant teenagers singing at the Billy Graham Crusade in Corona Park, Queens, in June.

I am unable to count the number of times as a teenager that I read these verses, meditated on them and heard them commented on by preachers and fellow worshipers. John 3:3, supplemented by John 3:16, was our entire summa theologiae. We knew the Old Testament stories and read the major prophets in our misanthropic moods. The lion's den story in the Book of Daniel cheered us, as did some of the Psalms (we ignored the pessimistic ones about feeling God's absence). The Sermon on the Mount made ritual appearances in homilies on love, as did Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians. But that was all trimming. The only biblical story that really mattered to us was the story of Nicodemus.

On the first night of the crusade, Billy Graham devoted his entire sermon to parsing these verses in John. Standing a few hundred yards from Shea Stadium, he began with the story of a ballplayer who hit a ninth-inning home run that should have won the game. As the player rounded the bases, the cheers of the crowd echoed in his ears, and as he approached home he saw his teammates waiting to congratulate him. But in his excitement he had forgotten to touch first base. He was called out, the inning was over, his team had lost.

And that story, Billy continued in his inimitable, comforting drawl, reminded him of Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a "professor," and, like all intellectuals, thought he had everything figured out. And, in fact, he had everything people normally want in life. He was respected, powerful and knowledgeable. But he didn't know the most-essential thing for any human being: that he must be born again. Nicodemus missed first base.

As banal as Billy's punch line is, I am reminded of its power. His sermons have never dwelt on the evils of the world, like the old-style preachers; nor has he presented Christianity as a success religion, like the younger ones today. His approach has been almost purely existential. His ideal listener is someone whose life hasn't gone too badly: no bouts with cancer, no rap sheet. Billy simply looks that person in the eye and says: I know what you know. That you aren't happy. You may have a decent job, a loving spouse, healthy children, a pension plan. You might even be a "professor" like Nicodemus. But there are moments when you sit out on your lawn and wonder, Why do I feel so empty inside? What does it all mean?

I know you feel this way, Billy says; I also know what you need. I'm not asking you to forsake father and mother, wife and children. I'm not even asking you to forsake your car and vacation home — not because those things are valuable, but because they are irrelevant. All I'm asking is that you hear Christ's simple invitation, that you accept him as your personal savior and start your life anew. So come forward, come forward now while the organ plays.

And they do. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association Web site reports that during the three-day New York crusade, more than 8,700 "inquirers" came forward, hoping to be born again.

But what does it mean, to be “born again”? When I was 14 I thought I knew. That first night I spent with the New Testament, curled up in bed, I was filled with many strange new notions, but the most alluring was the thought that I might, in American slang, “get a new life.” Having been reared in the Catholic Church, where conversion stories are frowned upon, the idea had never occurred to me. An escape hatch! At that age I was short, chunky, myopic, acned and unsuccessful with any girl I really wanted — in a word, average. So when I finally got to the Gospel of John, sometime near dawn, I underlined the story of Nicodemus and put a large exclamation point in the margin. I read it, though, in my own fashion. In my gloss, the Scripture did not literally state, “You must be born again,” which would have stiffened my antiauthoritarian adolescent spine. It read: “No matter who you are, no matter what your problems, escape is possible. You can be born again.” It was an invitation, not a command. A theologically weak reading, but a very American one.

Yet that can't be all. Yes, I hoped that redemption in the afterlife would mean self-transformation in this one. Already I wanted to start over, to be popular with my schoolmates, loved by my parents, healed of my acne scars. I wanted to be “other.” But, at some level, I also wanted to encounter an “other” — the “wholly other,” as the theologian Karl Barth called God. One thing Jesus seems to be telling Nicodemus is that he must recognize his own insufficiency — that he will have to turn his back on his autonomous, seemingly happy life and be reborn as a human being who understands his dependency on something greater. “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). That seems a radical challenge to our freedom, and it is. But one of the dirty little secrets about adolescence is that the young fear the very freedom they crave. They intuit the burden of autonomy and want, quite literally, to be “saved” from it. That is no doubt why, as researchers tell us, the average age of conversion is in the early teens. But the desire to escape is something we probably all want, at one time or another, and for some it is overwhelming enough to make them answer Billy's altar call. A holiday from the self — who could resist?

The evening ends shortly after the altar call. We have spent several hours in the company of America's most revered evangelist, yet none of the subjects associated with evangelicalism in the secular public mind have been mentioned. Not a word about abortion, homosexuality, activist judges, stem-cell research, prayer in school, Darwinism, home-schooling or Hollywood. I'm relieved, since my memory is that we never discussed politics in my prayer groups, even in the overcharged 70's. I know that evangelical America has been manipulated to political ends in recent decades, but I also know that politics is not what sustains it. There are deeper forces at work: the yearning for truth, for love and, more elusively, for rebirth.

These are powerful forces, and they can also lead a soul out of faith, as they eventually did with me. When my small group finally disbanded not long after I finished high school, some friends and I tried to start another one in a poor black Catholic parish in the burned-out center of Detroit, where I was then living and putting myself through college. But that group failed, too, so I made my way to Ann Arbor, Mich., which was then home to one of the largest Catholic Pentecostal groups in the country, the Word of God Community. Leaving Detroit, I felt I was going up to Jerusalem, never to return. It turned out to be a crushing disappointment. The community had hundreds of members, hierarchically organized, and the outside prayer meetings left me cold. The members also struck me as dogmatic, a little too eager to bring me into line doctrinally. After a few months I got myself into

a squabble with someone over Scripture, and sat down the next day to study the verses my adversary had marshaled against me. To my surprise, I concluded he was right about what the Bible said. But in my heart I also knew he had to be wrong about the doctrine at hand. Which meant — it was the first time the thought really penetrated my mind — that the Bible might be wrong. My face flushed and I closed the book. It was my first step out of the world of faith and toward the world I live in now.

THE SUBWAY TRIP back to Manhattan is long, and the crush of the crowd nearly unbearable. But the mood is, for the first time, festive. Clusters of tall girls in African dresses chatter away on cellphones, telling their friends about their evening. Korean groups break into hymns, some of them new to me. When we finally make it onto the train, my writer friend talks with a Mennonite family who drove in from Pennsylvania to see Billy for the first time. For them, this has been a museum visit; they have now “done” Billy Graham, the way tourists “do” the Louvre.

I find myself standing next to two clean-cut young men who are up from the Wharton School, spending the summer as interns on Wall Street. One of them is from Mississippi, where he attends a large but not megachurch. He says it has taken him some time to find churches he is comfortable with in Philadelphia and Manhattan, so he was eager to hear Billy Graham that Friday, and would be returning Saturday and Sunday. He asks where I attend church, and I say I don't. He is puzzled. “Has tonight got you thinking about your spiritual situation?” he asks, furrowing his brow. “Of course,” I answer, truthfully.

His friend is more interesting. It turns out he was born in Gdansk, which is where my father's family was originally from. We talk about Poland, and I learn that his parents immigrated just before 1989 and flew immediately to Florida. (“When Polish people leave Poland, Polish people go someplace warm,” he said.) They are apparently observant Catholics who brought him up within the church, but folk masses in air-conditioned churches amid the orange groves were not enough to give him their old-country faith. He says he had never thought much about religion, but when his friend from Mississippi suggested attending the crusade, he figured, Why not? I ask whether he went forward during the altar call, and to my surprise I learn he did. Why? “Because,” he says, shrugging, “what he was saying tonight made so much sense.”

I found it hard to conceal my bafflement, since Billy had not said much at all. You must be born again — that was it. I felt a professional lecture welling up in my throat about the history and psychology of religion. I wanted to expose him to the pastiche of the biblical text, the syncretic nature of Christian doctrine, the church's ambiguous role as incubator and stifler of human knowledge, the theological idiosyncrasy of American evangelicalism. I wanted to warn him against the anti-intellectualism of American religion today and the political abuses to which it is subject. I wanted to cast doubt on the step he was about to take, to help him see there are other ways to live, other ways to seek knowledge, love, perhaps even self-transformation. I wanted to convince him that his dignity depended on maintaining a free, skeptical attitude toward doctrine. I wanted . . . to save him.

I thought I was out of that business, but maybe not. It took years to acquire the education I missed as a young man, an education not only in books but in a certain comportment toward myself and the world around me. Doubt, like faith, has to be learned. It is a skill. But the curious thing about skepticism is that its adherents, ancient and modern, have so often been proselytizers. In reading them, I've often wanted to ask, “Why do you care?” Their skepticism offers no good answer to that question. And I don't have one for myself. When my daughter and I discuss her budding thoughts about the cosmos and morality, or when my students come to my office inspired or baffled by a book, something quickens within me. The Greeks spoke of eros, the Christians of agape and caritas. I don't know what to call it, I just know it is there. It is a kind of care. It is directed toward others, but also, perhaps, toward that young man lying on his bed, opening the Bible for the very first time. ■