

The making of Jesus: An evangelist and an unhappy producer

by [John Dart](#) in the [June 6, 2001](#) issue

Oklahoma-raised Bill Bright came to Los Angeles in 1944 and started a business selling candies, fruits and jams. He was drawn to the large First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood and there came under the considerable influence of Christian educator Henrietta Mears. Her circle of friends included the men who founded Fuller Seminary in 1947 and a youthful Billy Graham, who shot to national fame during his eight-week L.A. tent crusade in 1949. Bright would start on his own path toward evangelistic prominence in a more modest way in 1951 when he began Campus Crusade for Christ on the UCLA campus.

Five years earlier, however, Bright was uncertain about his business, his career, his faith commitment and the alluring power of Hollywood. He went east in 1946 to study at Princeton Seminary, and an enamored starlet tagged along. With his thin mustache and dark hair, the young William R. Bright strikingly resembled Clark Gable, at least in his photos. Yet needing to tend his candy business in L.A., he returned a year later to enroll in the first class of Fuller seminarians in Pasadena. He also kept in touch with Vonette Zachary, the young Oklahoma woman who reminded him of actress Diana Lynn. Joining him in Hollywood, Zachary married Bright at the end of 1948, several months after Mears guided her to faith in Jesus.

A number of actors, song writers and film professionals attended First Presbyterian of Hollywood or were part of the Hollywood Christian Group meeting at Mears's Beverly Hills home. In his autobiography, *Just As I Am*, Graham recalls speaking in 1949 to Mears's group, which attracted the likes of Connie Haines and Jane Russell. "I was inspired especially by the testimony of actress Colleen Townsend, who had a contract with Twentieth Century-Fox and whose picture had just been on the cover of *Life* magazine," Graham wrote. Townsend later married Louis Evans Jr., son of Hollywood Presbyterian's senior pastor.

Heeding the Mears directive to think big, both Bright and Graham dreamed in the late 1940s of using motion pictures to spread the gospel. Bright even approached several producers (including Cecil B. De Mille, who had directed the silent *King of Kings* in 1927), but without success. Graham had better luck. His quick rise to celebrity enabled him to launch World Wide Pictures in 1952, which eventually had some success with movies such as *The Restless One*, *The Hiding Place* and *Joni*.

Bright was also seized with the idea of evangelizing on college campuses. Graham and others advised him to go ahead, so Bright quit Fuller Seminary and abandoned his goal of becoming an ordained minister. He started well by targeting a popular UCLA sorority, but his ministry was close to collapsing after he and his wife lost their rented place near campus. Mears came to the rescue, according to longtime Hollywood Presbyterian member Anna Kerr. Mears's sister had recently died, and Mears needed companions to live with. She bought a mansion on Sunset Boulevard near UCLA for herself and Bill and Vonette Bright.

Soon the campus ministry blossomed. Campus Crusade spread to dozens of other U.S. campuses. By 1968 it had workers in 32 countries. About 80,000 people attended its Explo '72 gathering in Dallas, and more than 300,000 attended Explo '74 in South Korea.

Campus Crusade was in the middle of a national media campaign in 1976, promoting the slogan "I Found It!" on billboards, bumper stickers and lapel buttons, when an unexpected opportunity arose to realize Bright's longtime goal of making an evangelistic movie. Knocking on Bright's door at Campus Crusade headquarters in Arrowhead Springs, California, was producer John Heyman.

Heyman headed a London-based artists agency which represented Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton and Michael Caine, among other film stars. Heyman also had begun to co-finance major movies such as *Chinatown*, *The Odessa File*, *The Rocky Horror Show* and *Marathon Man*. His World Productions films won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival in 1971 and 1972.

Heyman, whose Jewish family left Germany for England before Adolf Hitler took power, had a grandiose plan of his own: to put all the Hebrew and Christian scriptures on film. His Genesis Project had already filmed verse-by-verse 22 chapters of Genesis and the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke for what he called the *New Media Bible*. The series of 15-minute films, in which the actors' words in Hebrew

and Aramaic are muted under a voiceover narration in English, were designed for educational purposes. “People tend to know what their preacher says the Bible says, or what Billy Graham says the Bible says,” Heyman said in later years, “but few have ever read it sufficiently to know what it really says.”

But the New York-based Genesis Project, founded in 1974, was a costly one. It was unlikely to make a profit or even survive unless church folks began to see the value of a cinematic version of the Bible.

Heyman and Bright decided to seek backing for a feature film on Jesus that would be suitable for showing in theaters. Heyman hoped that the revenue would offset his investment and help publicize the Genesis Project. Bright saw an opportunity to make a pioneering evangelistic tool.

What developed from this joint venture was the movie *Jesus*, which may be the most-watched film ever made, and which continues to be used around the world in remote villages and massive evangelistic campaigns sponsored by Campus Crusade. But the collaboration has lately resulted in strife. Heyman, embittered over what he sees as unauthorized alterations of the film, filed suit this year asking a federal court to return all film rights to the Genesis Project and to himself.

In 1976 Paul Eshleman, who was directing the “I Found It!” campaign, left Campus Crusade to work with Heyman on the movie project. The men first took the proposal to studio heads in Hollywood, but to no avail. One executive said the concept was too dull. “How about if we give Jesus this good-looking sister, and have this interplay of how’s it like to have your brother on the cross?” the studio president said. Heyman’s response, Eshleman said, was along this line: “Look, we are not going to crap it up. For once, we are going to do it like the Bible said.”

Eventually, Bunker and Caroline Hunt, of oil and silver fortune, attended a seminar at Arrowhead Springs and were moved by Heyman’s talk of his love for the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Texas couple gave Campus Crusade a \$3 million guarantee toward making the film, Eshelman said, and about \$6 million was raised for the project altogether. Hundreds of Protestant and Catholic thinkers were polled for ideas on the script, and most endorsed the plan of sticking to one Gospel—Luke—rather than blending Gospel accounts, Eshleman said.

Upon returning to Israel for filming, however, they had to reshoot Genesis Project’s start on Luke because the actress who played Mary was no longer available. British

actor Brian Deacon was picked to portray Jesus, but all other actors in the movie were Yemenite Jews, “because their facial features have changed least over the past 2,000 years,” said Eshleman.

Released in the U.S by Warner Brothers, the two-hour *Jesus* opened in October 1979 in 250 western and southern cities. The few reviews were lukewarm. After a year’s run in U.S. moviehouses, promoted mostly by pastors, *Jesus* had been seen by some 4 million Americans. Showings on cable TV followed. “When the film did not recover its cost in theaters and on television, Bunker Hunt converted the debt to a contribution to Campus Crusade for Christ,” according to Heyman, who said the debt amounted to \$4 million.

Though *Jesus* was not a box-office hit, Campus Crusade had other things in store for the movie. As early as the spring of 1980, the ministry began dubbing the film’s sound track into other languages to take the cinematic *Jesus* abroad. The film was telecast in Hindi to 21 million viewers in India. The first small team of Campus Crusade staffers, headed by Eshleman, took the Tagalog version to the Philippines. By the end of 1980, the film ministry had 31 language versions of *Jesus*, exceeding the then record of 26 translations of *Gone with the Wind*.

More than two decades after its original release, Bright’s movie has become not only the most-translated film ever, but perhaps the most-viewed movie in history. As of April 1 this year, 4.04 billion people had seen *Jesus*, as reckoned by the statistics-minded Jesus Film Project, the Campus Crusade arm created for Eshleman in 1985. Films and videos in 654 languages were in hand at that point, and another 278 translations were under way. The project’s goal is to put *Jesus* into at least 1,154 tongues.

More than 1,000 mission agencies and denominations—nearly all of them theologically conservative—have employed the film. Roman Catholic, Nazarene and Salvation Army mission officials are among the latest signing agreements. Close to 140 million people have made “decisions for Christ” after seeing the film, which ends with a low-key “altar call” segment. Thomas Trask, the Assemblies of God top administrator, commends the film for its “clear salvation message,” and others see it as a way of telling about Jesus in a straightforward manner. “Nonthreatening; nonintrusive,” is how a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention describes the film.

Few, if any, mainline denominations utilize the film, partly because Campus Crusade officials prefer to work with theologically compatible partners. In addition, according to Jonathan J. Bonk, editor of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, some mainline mission agencies are uneasy about using a North American-made film featuring a white Jesus, or “cannot believe that the film is much more than a hokey piece of promotion . . . for Campus Crusade.”

Evangelical critics have similar reservations, said Bonk, as well as a concern about “whether a film, any film, can have the capacity to communicate the gospel without reference to local contexts.” Bonk added, however, that there is “a great danger of being unhealthily patronizing by ignoring what the viewers themselves have to say about the film.”

Eshleman addressed the issue of whether the film itself is patronizing in a speech in January at the Overseas Ministries Study Center, in New Haven, Connecticut, where Bonk is director. “Many people today still live in a first-century culture,” he said. “They fish and farm for a living. Many wear sandals; a wealthy man is someone who owns an ox-cart. The illustrations used by Jesus are extremely relevant.”

A shorter (83-minute) video of the Heyman-produced film has been circulating widely in America for the past decade. The impetus for this version came partly from pastors like Jack Hayford of the 10,000-member Church on the Way in Van Nuys, California. He said most of his congregants invited friends into their homes to show the video around 1990 and recorded hundreds of “first-time decisions for Christ.”

The San Bernardino-based Jesus Video Project, begun in 1992, invites church groups to buy huge quantities of the videos for under \$5 each and give them away, usually through the mail. An Alabama campaign mailed 1.8 million copies, and a similar campaign is planned for South Carolina this summer. Smaller mail blitzes have already hit southern Vermont, the Salem area of Oregon, and central Illinois, among other locales. When videos arrived in mailboxes of heavily Jewish Palm Beach, Florida, in May 2000, however, some public backlash arose.

But the biggest push by Campus Crusade is to use the film to reach all corners of the world. The Orlando headquarters of Campus Crusade handles studio chores of dubbing and reproducing new versions, while the Jesus Film Project directed by Eshleman, operating out of San Clemente, California, manages the foreign distribution. In an interview, Eshleman pointed to a chart illustrating the growing

annual donations to the project—from \$1.3 million in 1986 to \$51.4 million in 2000. “Most of the money that comes in goes for more work” on translations and dissemination, he said.

Asked if Heyman receives any residuals from the film or other payments, Eshleman said, “No.” In the beginning, he said, “we hoped the film would make enough money so that if it paid back all the investors, then the profits would be divided between the Genesis Project to make more films and Campus Crusade to distribute the feature film. It made some money, but it never recouped the \$6 million investment.” As for Heyman, “he’s had some disappointments that we haven’t promoted the whole Bible project as much as we have been promoting the film,” Eshleman said. He emphasized that Campus Crusade’s mission of getting “the message of Christ to everybody” took priority: “I think [Heyman] hoped that we would have gone on in the lucrative markets of the world to get the Genesis films and the Gospel of Luke out as teaching tools. And it’s hard to do both.”

What Eshleman did not mention in that early April interview was that Heyman had, without fanfare, filed a suit on February 15 against him and Campus Crusade, alleging breach of contract. Heyman told me of the lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in New York when I contacted him in May. The suit centers on Heyman’s charges that a shortened version of the film released in the winter of 1999-2000 as *The Story of Jesus for Children* “contains a substantial amount of unauthorized additional and substitute footage, all of which deviates from the Gospel of Luke,” including the retelling of the parable of the rich man. As of April 1, more than 462,000 children’s videos were in circulation.

Heyman’s suit said he agreed to a Campus Crusade request in 1998 for permission to release a short version of the two-hour film to accommodate youngsters’ shorter attention span. But he contended he did not agree to changes that were introduced. Since he remains in the film’s credits as producer, Heyman said his business reputation has been severely damaged. The court was asked to order Campus Crusade to turn over any revenue earned by the children’s video, to award damages and, finally, to restore all film rights to the Genesis Project.

The Campus Crusade attorney, Dennis Kasper of Los Angeles, said his organization does not believe there is “any merit to the allegations” and will continue to distribute the films in the meantime. Disappointed that the suit was filed, Kasper added, “In the past Campus Crusade and Genesis Project have been able to resolve

their differences over the film through negotiation.”

Indeed, Heyman’s suit noted that the Jesus Film Project received certain distribution rights to *Jesus* in the past, and that Heyman consented in 1991 to a shorter video version. But the editing of the children’s video, he contended, resulted “in an inauthentic and historically inaccurate version of the life of Jesus.”

A Campus Crusade newsletter describing the new, 62-minute video said six child actors were filmed to insert those scenes into the video. “Their conversations, observations and interpretations [are] seamlessly woven throughout segments of the original *Jesus* film,” the newsletter said. They meet to discuss what they’ve heard from Jesus. “At the end of the video, two children explain how to take the initial step of trusting Jesus for forgiveness and a new life with God.” Young viewers are told they may say “yes,” “no,” or “I’m not ready yet.”

In interviews by e-mail, Heyman, now 68, said, “I personally doubt that Eshleman and I will be able to sort things out—wounds caused by backstabbing do not heal quickly, and the abuse of scripture perpetrated by [Campus Crusade] is an ongoing affront to the Word.”

Meanwhile, his own Bible-filming project has long been stalled, Heyman confirmed. “Having lost \$22 million, we could not continue,” he wrote. The Genesis Project sells two videos (\$59.95 each) on its Web site (www.genesisnewmediabible.com)—the same films produced in the 1970s on the opening chapters of Genesis and the Gospel of Luke. Eight posters, with scenes from the *Jesus* film and a biblical verse, sell for \$16 apiece.

While agreeing that Campus Crusade had no obligation to pay film royalties to him, Heyman said ruefully: “Had [Campus Crusade] paid a one-cent royalty for everyone they claim to have led to Christ by showing the *Jesus* film, we would have been able to translate Acts of the Apostles onto film and we would have had a much more ‘Christian’ world than we do—but they did not and so we could not.”

Currently chairman of the World Group of Companies, including World Productions, the British producer has continued to invest in more proven sources of revenue. After the *Jesus* film, Heyman helped finance *Grease*, *Home Alone*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Awakenings*, the first of the Star Trek movies, and others. In April this year, said Heyman, “World Productions, Britain’s leading producer of drama, was awarded the British Academy of Film and Television Arts’ Special Achievement Award for

consistently high standards of programming and for the encouragement of new talent.”

Eshleman’s book, *I Just Saw Jesus*, indicates that Heyman converted to Christianity in 1977 after many discussions with Bright. But asked about his religion today, the producer said, “I am a Jew, born and bred, and my wife and children are Jewish too.” He said his effort to film the Bible was not a religious venture but “an examination of our roots.”

An attempt to interview Bill Bright did not succeed. The 79-year-old Bright has limited his public appearances and interviews because of pulmonary fibrosis, a debilitating condition that doctors confirmed in October and say give him only a few more years to live. Bright announced last summer that Steve Douglass, a close executive in the ministry, will succeed him as president of Campus Crusade on August 1.

Bright will leave an evangelistic empire based in Orlando, Florida, that now has 24,000 full-time staff and 553,000 volunteers worldwide as well as nearly 70 niche groups for athletes, prisoners, business executives, inner-city residents and others. Bright was the 1996 winner of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, with the *Jesus* film counted as one of his principal achievements. This year the National Association of Evangelicals presented him, in absentia, with a lifetime achievement award.

If Heyman’s suit puts the brakes on part of Campus Crusade’s film distribution, or shuts it down, such a scenario might not disturb Bright greatly. Speaking in general about his ministry, he has said, “We play games with God when we think we own anything. At best, we’re stewards.”

Despite his long fascination with filmmaking, Bright has been critical of the entertainment industry. In 1988, amid a widespread religious protest against director Martin Scorsese’s film rendition of Nikos Kazantzakis’s novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Bright offered to raise donations to reimburse Universal Pictures for its monetary investment—reportedly as high as \$10 million—if the studio would turn over all copies of the film for them to be destroyed. He said he anticipated that “concerned individuals across America” would contribute to cover Universal’s costs. Lew Wasserman, chairman of Universal’s parent company, MCA, declined, backed by other studio executives in saying that freedom of expression

was at stake.

By 1998, Bright had a mellower view of Hollywood. It may have helped that his *Jesus* film has reached unprecedented audiences while *Last Temptation* has been largely forgotten. Furthermore, the highly rated CBS program *Touched by an Angel* and the DreamWorks animated film *Prince of Egypt* have demonstrated a friendlier attitude by studios toward religious and family themes. Along with sending a mailing to 30,000 churches encouraging a more positive approach to Hollywood, Bright formed a leadership committee of Protestant clergy that met with studio executives to extend an olive branch.

Regarding Bright's initiative, *Movieguide* publisher Ted Baehr said, "I think it says to Hollywood that they can make a film like *Joan of Arc* or *Prince of Egypt* and expect more communication and cooperation from the church." Baehr, who arranged Bright's meetings with studio heads, annually stages the largest film award show for moral and religious content. Though unwilling to criticize Southern Baptists for their Disney boycott on gay issues, Bright was quoted as saying, "I think working together we can accomplish a lot more than if we assume adversarial roles."