The 4am Prayer Meeting That Changed It All November 12, 2009

It was in 1949, that a young Billy Graham preached a tent revival in Los Angeles that launched him into a worldwide prominence. Since then he has preached to more than 210 million people in more than 185 countries. What is not known by most people is the role that a prayer meeting in the Rainbow Room of the Westminster Hotel in Winona Lake, Indiana, played in launching Graham’s stellar ministry. Fred Hartley, writing in his book “Everything by Prayer,” gives details. The book, published by Christian Publications Inc., is the biography of Armin Gesswein, a Lutheran minister who was a pastor, seminary professor, associate evangelist of the BGEA, and founder of the Minister’s Prayer Fellowship and the Revival Prayer Fellowship. He passed away March 14, 2001. Here is an edited version of Hartley’s account: “Of all the stories told that day (at Gesswein’s memorial service), perhaps the most gripping was the story of the prayer meeting that is said to have launched Billy Graham’s world-impacting evangelistic ministry.

It was three o’clock in the morning on Wednesday, July 13, 1949. Between forty and fifty young men were gathered in the Rainbow Room of the Westminster Hotel in Winona Lake, Indiana. They had been there for five hours praying. Evangelist Armin Gesswein of Southern California, who had been invited to conduct the prayer sessions, exhorted Billy, “If you are going to have prayer as part of your crusade, it has to be frontal not peripheral.” That is exactly how an all-night prayer meeting happened to be called in the midst of a busy week-long Youth for Christ convention.

The men had been alternating prayers with praise, verses of Scripture, and requests for more prayer. Things were beginning to warm up. Hearts were poured out before God. The tide was running high. Gesswein stood to his feet. “You know,” he said, “our brother Billy Graham is coming out to Los Angeles for a crusade this fall. Why don’t we just gather around this man and lay our hands on him and really pray for him? Let’s ask God for a fresh touch to anoint him for this work.”

When it was over and the men were still kneeling, Billy Graham opened his Bible to Joel 3:13 and with deep conviction read aloud the words, “Put in your sickle, for the harvest is ripe: come, get you down: for the press is full, and the vats overflow.”

Prayer went on in the Rainbow Room for another hour before the men retired. When it all happened a few months later in Los Angeles, the reporters were there and the harvest became front page news. But the newspapers did not report that night of prayer in the Rainbow Room.

Dr. Ted Engstrom reflected, “No one who was at that prayer meeting in Winona Lake in 1949 could have possibly forgotten it. It was one of the greatest nights that those of us present could ever remember. One aspect of it was the complete unanimity of the spirit. Practically all of the men present found places of significant leadership in evangelism in the days following.” On November 7, 1983, Billy Graham stood on the corner of Washington and Hill Streets in Los Angeles at the exact spot of his prior crusade to receive an award from Mayor Bradley as a marker was erected to commemorate the historic significance of what took place in 1949.

However, the launching of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association may not have come from the preaching tent at the Los Angeles Crusade in 1949 as many have assumed, but from the pre-Los Angeles Crusade prayer meeting in Winona Lake and the Los Angeles prayer tent. God keeps the books and when they are opened from the other side of eternity, we may be surprised to learn the invisible interplay between the private little prayer meetings and the great big public results.

Theconnectionlounge.wordpress.com