People and Places: Billy Sunday: 1862–1935

Randy Moore

**Figure 1.** Billy Sunday, the most popular evangelist of his era, used theatrical sermons to attack societal evils such as theatre, booze, and evolution.

*I don't believe the old bastard theory of evolution ... If you believe your great, great grand-daddy was a monkey, then you can take your daddy and go to hell with him.*
William A “Billy” Sunday (Figure 1) was born on November 19, 1862, near Ames, Iowa. In 1883, after spending his formative years at the Iowa Soldiers' Orphans' Home, Sunday began playing professional baseball with the Chicago White Stockings (later named the Chicago Cubs). Sunday was never a good hitter (he struck out his first 13 times at bat, and his lifetime batting average was .248), but he was a good fielder and an exceptional base-runner. Sunday could circle the bases in 13 seconds, and in 1891 he set a record by stealing 90 bases in 116 games. In 1888, Sunday was traded to the Pittsburgh Alleghenies (later renamed the Pittsburgh Pirates). After quitting baseball to become “Secretary of the Religious Department” at the Chicago YMCA, Sunday became a traveling revival preacher.

Sunday's sermons were acrobatic, theatrical, and often violent—he leaped from the piano, ran up and down the aisles, slid on the stage as if he were sliding into home, smashed chairs, and screamed from atop the pulpit. Although Sunday's critics considered him “the worst thing that ever happened to America,” branded him a hypocrite, and labeled his services “circus salvation,” Sunday's impassioned and unwavering world-saving message of civic cleanup, no-nonsense fire-and-brimstone, patriotism, and simplified “old-time religion” made him the most popular religious figure of his time. Sunday promised the greatest show around, and he delivered. During a 1907 revival, he even hired a former Barnum & Bailey “giant” to be an usher.

During his prime, Sunday's crusades were conducted in enormous, specially constructed tabernacles. For example, “The Glory Barn” for Sunday’s 1917 revival in New York City was 344 feet long and 247 feet wide with enough seats for almost 20 000 people; its construction required 400 000 feet of lumber and 250 barrels of nails. All of Sunday's expenses in New York were paid by his friend John D Rockefeller Jr, and Sunday collected a “love offering” of over $120 000 for his 10 weeks of work. Sunday donated it all to the YMCA and the Red Cross to help with the war effort.

During a typical crusade, Sunday preached two or three times per day, six days per week for three to eight weeks, and drew up to 40 000 people per day. For example, during his 1917 crusade in New York, conservative estimates projected that Sunday spoke to nearly a quarter of the city’s 5 000 000 residents. Sunday's production costs were high, as were his needs for volunteers—for example, his Boston revival in 1916 required 35 000 local people for ushers, choir members, security staff, and outreach workers. Sinclair Lewis's Elmer Gantry—in which an opportunist preacher takes money from the masses in exchange for promises of heaven—was loosely based on Sunday, and a poll conducted by The American Magazine in 1914 ranked Sunday the eighth-greatest man in America. Sunday was sought by celebrities such as William “Buffalo Bill” Cody, HJ Heinz, Woodrow Wilson, William Taft, Warren Harding, Herbert Hoover, and Cecil B DeMille, who described Sunday as “the only man who works harder than I do.” Although in baseball Sunday had been a minor star, in evangelism he was king.

Sunday, who idolized Dwight Moody, popularized revivalism; famous preachers such as Robert Schuller, Rex Humbard, Jim Bakker, Oral Roberts, Billy Graham, and Jimmy Swaggart emerged from Sunday's revivalist tradition. Sunday was a trustee of Bob Jones College, which gave him an honorary degree in 1935. Soon thereafter, Billy Graham—who had heard Sunday preach in North Carolina—enrolled at the conservative school.
Sunday crusaded against a variety of social ills, and especially against the evils of theater, dancing, gambling, and liquor. In 1915, Sunday teamed with William Jennings Bryan to lead a national campaign for temperance; in Philadelphia, Bryan and Sunday told a crowd of more than 25,000 that they were forming a 10,000-man “abstinence army” and declared the first Sunday in November “World Temperance Day”. Sunday’s famous “Booze Sermon” was printed in books and newspapers across the country, and resulted in Sunday’s receiving hundreds of death threats from anti-prohibition activists. Sunday saw the destructive powers of alcohol first-hand in baseball as well in his own family. His son George died in 1933 after falling from a high-rise apartment, son Billy Jr died in 1938 when he crashed his car into a telephone pole after an all-night party, and son Paul died in 1944 in a plane crash. Alcohol was involved in each accident.

Sunday was proudly anti-intellectual, often proclaiming that when research and scholarship say one thing and the Bible says another, “scholarship can go to hell.” Sunday, who never graduated from high school, flaunted his lack of theological education; “I know no more about theology than a jackrabbit does about ping pong.”

Sunday saved many of his most venomous attacks for evolution, linking it with prostitution, eugenics, and crime in the early 1900s. Sunday rejected evolution, claiming that it was for “godless bastards and godless losers”. Like most other fundamentalists, Sunday believed that the teaching of evolution poisoned minds, destroyed faith, perverted education, and destroyed society. Always a proponent of a masculine, vengeful God (“I have no interest in a God who does not smite”), Sunday’s calls for a moral purge often included prayers for the slaughter of atheist evolutionists. As he did with many of his enemies who Sunday claimed were not “pure 100% American,” Sunday promised his followers that Charles Darwin was spending eternity in hell’s flames.

In June 1925, Bryan asked Sunday to come to Dayton, Tennessee, to testify in the Scopes Trial. Sunday was also invited to Dayton by Walter White, Dayton’s superintendent of schools. Sunday declined, but urged Bryan to equate evolution with atheism, and remind people that a person can’t simultaneously be an evolutionist and a Christian. Sunday closed his response to Bryan by noting that “All the believing world is back of you in your defense of God and the Bible.”

Sunday also generated scandal. For example, he was accused of plagiarizing several writers (including agnostic Robert Ingersoll), accepting money from businesses to help subvert labor strikes, and raking in enormous amounts of money from his followers. Indeed, between 1907 and 1918, Sunday earned $1,139,315 from his crusades’ “love offerings,” and even more from the sales of Bibles, photographs, postcards, books, sermons, and other materials he sold in his tabernacles. Sunday and his wife Helen (who was also his business manager) wore the finest clothes, sported fur coats, and traveled in private Pullman cars. Sunday may not have lived up to the demands he made of others; when he died, archivists found jazz records and brandy snifters in his home. Just as Lewis’s Elmer Gantry plagiarized Ingersoll and drank booze while preaching the virtues of abstinence, Sunday may have also enjoyed an occasional drink.

During his remarkable career, Sunday conducted more than 300 revivals and preached to more than 100 million people (without the aid of radio or microphones); no person in
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history has spoken directly to so many people. However, in his later years, Sunday was increasingly viewed as a relic and his appeal began to fade. Like many other fundamentalist leaders who opposed evolution, Sunday did not distance himself from groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (Figure 2), and critics denounced his doctrine as materialistic, perverted, and plagiarized. America had changed, but Sunday had not. Sunday campaigned hard for the re-election of his friend Herbert Hoover in 1932, but Hoover lost. Sunday also became more extreme, claiming at one point that he would “stand [his enemies] up before a firing squad.” Crowds dwindled, forcing Sunday to make increasingly desperate pleas for money: “Don’t let me hear any coins fall into those buckets; I want to hear the rustle of paper.”

![Ku Klux Klan poster](image)

**Figure 2.** The Ku Klux Klan is a militant white-supremacy group that supported, and was supported by, several prominent antievolution crusaders in the 1920s. This advertisement appeared in the Winston-Salem Journal (North Carolina) during one of Billy Sunday’s crusades in the early 1920s.

Sunday preached his last sermon on October 27, 1935, at First Methodist Church in Mishawaka, Indiana. After suffering a heart attack, Sunday died in Chicago at the home of his brother-in-law on November 5, 1935, just two weeks shy of his 73rd birthday. Sunday’s death was marked by memorial services across the country; his wife Helen even got a telegram of condolences from President Franklin Roosevelt, whose policies Billy had denounced. More than 3500 mourners attended Sunday’s funeral at Chicago’s Moody Church, and his pallbearers included former US District Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis (1866–1944), who was professional baseball’s first commissioner. The most prominent floral arrangement at Sunday’s funeral was from the Chicago Cubs.

Billy Sunday is buried beside his wife along the eastern edge of Forest Home Cemetery in Forest Park, Illinois. Sunday rests beneath an inscription similar to the one that adorns the tombstone of fellow antievolution crusader William Jennings Bryan, “I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course. I have kept the faith.”
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