

Bosworth Matters

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What F.F. Bosworth Wrote About Billy Sunday

He noted 'falling' phenomenon that
was common among Pentecostals

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Evangelist Billy Sunday
(1862 - 1935)

*"There were ... many cases of individuals who fainted during [Billy] Sunday's sermons." -
- William G. McLaughlin*

Introduction

This blog post is a snippet of research taken from my doctoral thesis on F.F. Bosworth. It presents a brief analysis of Bosworth's comments about Billy Sunday's 1916 evangelistic campaign in Kansas City. Bosworth mentioned the campaign in a Letter to the Editor that was published in the June 24, 1916 issue of *The Weekly Evangel*, forerunner of the *Pentecostal Evangel*. Stories about people fainting and falling in Sunday's meetings have been reported in a number of newspapers and books. Bosworth saw the 1916 report in the *Kansas City Times* as evidence of a move of God. But was it really a move of God? Were the people really falling under the power of the Holy Spirit? Did they experience (or witness) the same phenomenon as seen in Pentecostal meetings?

I suggest that while the "falling" in the Kansas City meeting *might* have been inspired by the Spirit, it is also likely that it was due to other factors, such as temperatures, large crowds, shock or even hysteria. That said, it should be noted that while my argument is supported by a number of reports, this post is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment on the topic. It is merely a report I discovered in my research on Bosworth.

Bosworth revival meetings in Dallas

In 1916, F.F. Bosworth wrote a letter to *The Weekly Evangel* in which he clarified the status of a revival at the First Assembly of God Church in Dallas, Texas, where he served as pastor. While making the case for his position, he included a postscript that seem to praise the work of Evangelist Billy Sunday, the baseball player turned preacher. Bosworth cited reports of people falling in Sunday's meetings, and he seemed to suggest God was blessing the evangelist.

The incident involving Bosworth's letter started in the summer of 1916 when *The Weekly Evangel* (10 June 1916) published his letter on the continued success of the revival meetings he was holding at his church. However, to Bosworth's disappointment, the magazine used a headline that suggested the revival had waned and was starting again. In the June 24, 1916 issue, Bosworth offered a correction:

In the heading you say "The Power of God Again Falling In Dallas," etc., this sounds as though we had not been having a revival here all the time, which is not true, for we have been pitching our tent in new places and going from one campaign into another all the time since the revival started here four or five years ago, and sinners are always being saved and filled with the Spirit the year around.

Sunday revival meetings in Kansas City

In the same issue of the magazine, Bosworth wrote about Sunday, who was holding revival meetings where people reportedly fell unconscious during his preaching. Sunday was neither

Pentecostal nor a practitioner of faith healing. He was essentially a fundamentalist/evangelical revivalist. Bosworth wrote:

... I have been rejoicing over the wonderful results of the Billy Sunday campaigns. I quote a few statements from the "Kansas City Times" of June 10th, women young and old, began dropping from their seats to the sawdust floor, in all 168 during both services, thirty-nine in the afternoon and 120 at night, and a few uncounted ones. Several lay unconscious the greater part of the afternoon. The preacher asked the audience to pay no heed but to listen and reflect.

Again, Kansas City Times, May 22nd, 1916. In the men's meeting, hearers dropped from their seats as the evangelist pictured graphically "The Wages of Sin." Twenty-one of the men who heard it fell from their seats unconscious. Men fell here and there in all parts of the big building. This was also reported in the Sunday School Times.

It is interesting to see what Bosworth cited in his remarks. The newspaper reported 58,000 people attended Sunday's meetings on one day and that 643 of them converted. Yet, Bosworth, for some reason, focused on people dropping and falling, an element of the meetings that was obviously dramatic and sensational.

Bosworth's claim of 'wonderful results'

Bosworth's quote from the May 22, 1916 paper appeared as a subhead under the main headline:

SUNDAY WARNS: 21 FAINT
POWERFUL VICE SERMON YESTERDAY
SENT LISTENERS TO HOSPITALS.

The June 10, 1916 issue of the paper used this headline:

HIS WARNING TO WOMEN
RECITAL OF MISERY OF SEX ILLS
CAUSED SCORES TO FAINT.

The paper reported: "Scores of women dropped fainting to the floor during the vivid recital of sex problems and the physical ills resulting from unfortunate marriages."

Based on the newspaper reports, it would appear, at least on the surface, that the phenomenon Bosworth mentioned was possibly due to anointed preaching and Spirit-inspired activity in the meetings. The newspaper accounts, in all likelihood, reminded Bosworth of the experiences that occurred in his meetings under the ministry of Maria Woodworth-Etter. But was Bosworth correct in attributing the experiences in Sunday's revival to the blessings of God? Notice that he prefaced his comment with the words "wonderful results."

In 1916, Bosworth's church was in the midst of a long revival. Well-known leaders in the Pentecostal movement came from all over the United States to attend the services. One may argue that after several years of witnessing supernatural activity that included people falling in the Spirit, Bosworth was simply caught up in the moment and possibly viewed the news of people fainting as being God-inspired. He probably mentioned Sunday without much thought or critical analysis. Even so, a review of several reports on Sunday's meetings suggest that people sometimes fell unconscious for reasons that were unrelated to the Holy Spirit. In many cases, it appears, they fell because of natural causes.

Environmental factors

It was not unusual for people to be overcome with emotion in Sunday's meetings. However, it was not always clear whether their behavior was due to the Spirit or some other factors. Consider, for example, this excerpt from William G. McLaughlin's book, *Billy Sunday Was His Name* (University of Chicago Press, 1955):

Because of the densely packed crowds, the sawdust-filled air, the excitement, and the overheating of the tabernacles, there were, of course, many cases of individuals who fainted during Sunday's sermons. And some squeamish and guilt-ridden persons undoubtedly fainted from shock at the lurid descriptions of sin and disease which Sunday delighted in. But instances of spasms, shakes, or fainting fits caused by hysteria were few and far between.

McLaughlin's description, at least in this instance, suggests the environment played a starring role in some of Sunday's meetings. That's not to say the Spirit was not active, as I'm fairly certain that He was. Still, the physical environment should not be ignored.

When Sunday erected tabernacles for his meetings, he typically included what he called a "Tabernacle Hospital." Medical professionals were on hand to assist with the "fainting" and other issues. One report noted: "At the hospital there are two doctors and two nurses in attendances constantly. Many women become hysterical and fainted when Billy Sunday stirs them to great religious enthusiasm."

In some cases, according to news reports (which might have been biased), the fainting in Sunday's meetings might have been caused by suffocation. William T. Ellis, in his book, *Billy Sunday, the Man and His Message* (The John C. Winston Company, 1917), reported one case in which "Eleven hundred cases, mostly of fainting, were treated in the Tabernacle hospital."

Graphic language

Apparently people in the audience would sometimes fall because of the shock of Sunday's graphic language. In his book, *Billy Sunday, The Man and Method* (Murray Press, 1916), Frederick William Betts cited one spectator who said he "saw people carried out who had fainted, under that awful definition of sensuality and depravity" in Sunday's preaching.

Sunday was known to preach at times to audiences that consisted only of men. As was his style, he would address the men in graphic terms about such things as gonorrhea and syphilis. "So vivid were Sunday's portrayals of masculine depravity and its horrifying physical and spiritual consequences that men frequently fainted," noted Robert Francis Martin in his book, *Hero of the Heartland* (Indiana University Press, 2002). Martin wrote that Homer Rodeheaver, Sunday's choir leader, said that "One of these sermons, until he tempered it down a little, had one ten-minute period in it where from two to twelve men fainted and had to be carried out every time I heard him preach it."

Since it is not often that we hear of people fainting at the sound of graphic language, it could be argued that the fainting might have been due to something other than language. Maybe the issue was generational. By that I mean, the people in Sunday's day were not as desensitized to certain language and images as today's generation. It is also possible that it might have been the Spirit, but it seems doubtful. Perhaps it was like the people who heard Jonathan Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Edward's audience reportedly had a physical reaction to his message.

Bad food and hot weather

Below is an excerpt from *The Kansas City Times* (May 22, 1916). It is the same issue that was quoted by F.F. Bosworth in his Letter to the Editor. The excerpt clearly shows that some of the people attending Billy Sunday's meetings fainted as a result of factors that were not related to the Holy Spirit. Of course, some may argue that it was indeed the Spirit that inspired Sunday's preaching, which in turn had an effect on the audience.

'HOT CAKES' TOO MUCH FOR 'EM

Improper Food and Hot Weather

Filled Tabernacle Hospital.

"Hot Cakes Off the Griddle" made business for the emergency hospital at the Tabernacle yesterday afternoon, and hot atmosphere added its quota yesterday morning and last night. The result was that the Tabernacle medical staff put in its busiest day of the campaign. Thirty persons were carried unconscious to the hospital, while perhaps a score more recovered on being assisted to the outer, cooler air.

Of the two contributing causes, "Hot Cakes Off the Griddle" produced a proportionately larger number of cases. Twelve men and boys were treated by four physicians and three nurses during the afternoon meeting. Nine others were assisted from the Tabernacle, but recovered sufficiently to stand at entrances in the cooler air. All of the beds in the hospital were occupied during the afternoon, and at times it became necessary to ask the recovered patients to make way for others in greater need of attention.

None of those treated at the hospital was dangerously ill. Physical shock induced by the psychological effect of Mr. Sunday's graphic descriptions was declared to be the cause for most of the cases treated. A few members of the choir were overcome by the atmosphere near the roof of the building at the back of the platform.

Although it was comparatively cool in the morning, eight persons were carried or assisted to the hospital. Last night twelve patients were treated, and most of these cases developed in the crowded corridors surrounding the Tabernacle proper. Many of those stricken with faintness had eaten too little for dinner, and their physical weakness became manifest as they stood during the progress of the meeting.

Eighteen persons given aid was the previous high record for the Tabernacle hospital.

Conclusion

This article is presented with the belief that the secular media that covered Billy Sunday's meetings did so from a humanistic or secular standpoint. Without faith in God, spiritual discernment or grasp of the workings of the Holy Spirit, the newspapers, not surprisingly, attributed the fainting and falling phenomenon to natural causes. However, given Sunday's history, and the well-documented patterns of audience behavior, it seems the newspapers were on point in their reporting. Whatever level of accuracy they might have had in their reports, we should remember that the most important feature in the meetings was not the fainting. Rather, it was the souls being saved. After all, there is more rejoicing in Heaven over one sinner who comes to repentance, than over 99 people who need no repentance.

Further reading:

Betts, Frederick William. *Billy Sunday, the Man and Method*. Boston: Murray Press, 1916.

Ellis, William T. *Billy Sunday, the Man and His Message: With His Own Words which Have Won*. Philadelphia: John C. Winston Company, 1917.

Martin, Robert Francis. *Hero of the Heartland: Billy Sunday and the Transformation of American Society 1862 - 1935*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.

McLaughlin, William G. *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955.

New World Encyclopedia, "Billy Sunday."

https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Billy_Sunday

Reminder: "F.F. Bosworth History" is now on Twitter. Follow @bosworth_fred

Note: My book, *F.F. Bosworth: The Man Behind "Christ the Healer,"* can be purchased [here](#) with a 25% discount. Use the discount code: **bosworth25**.

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