

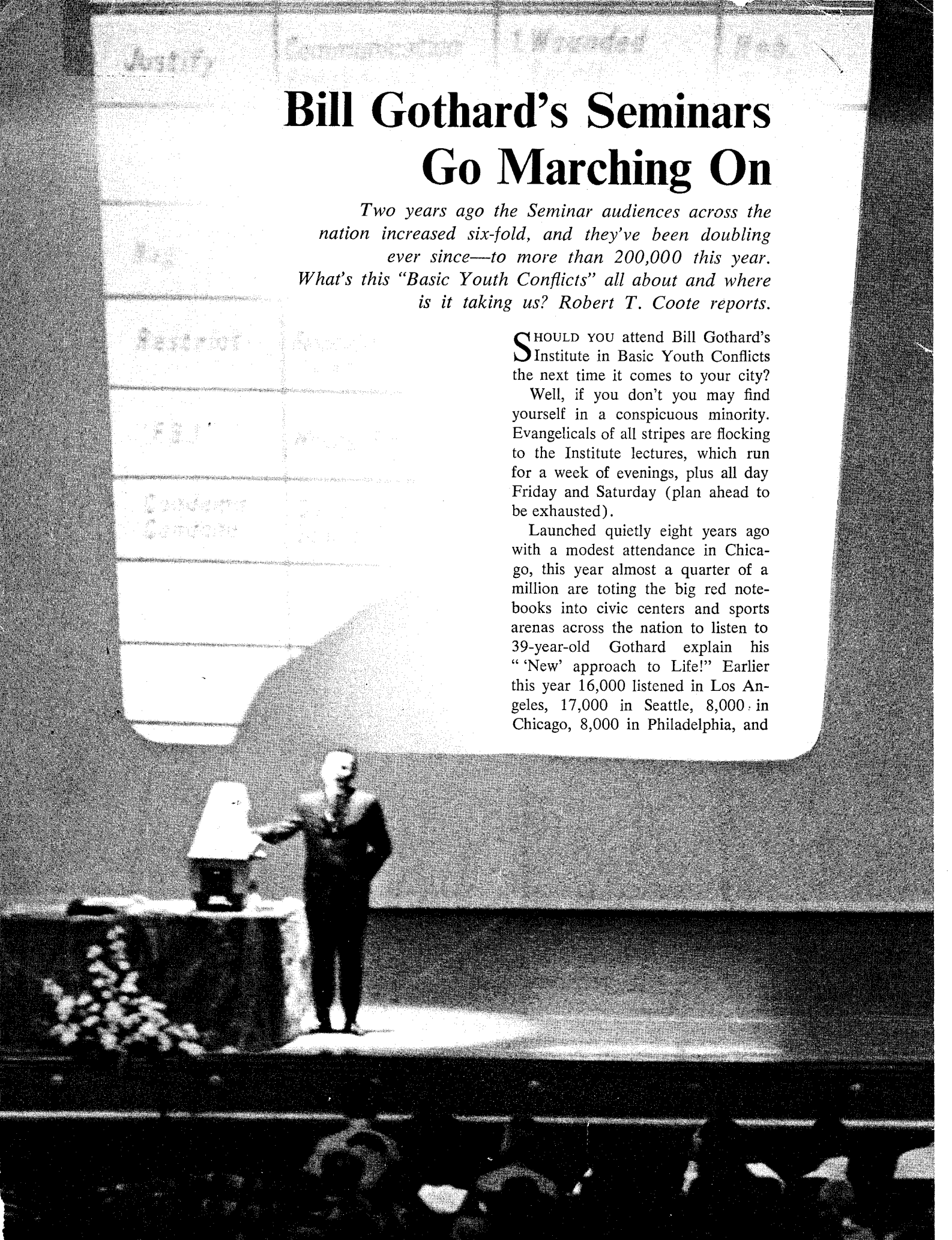
Bill Gothard's Seminars Go Marching On

Two years ago the Seminar audiences across the nation increased six-fold, and they've been doubling ever since—to more than 200,000 this year. What's this "Basic Youth Conflicts" all about and where is it taking us? Robert T. Coote reports.

SHOULD YOU attend Bill Gothard's Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts the next time it comes to your city?

Well, if you don't you may find yourself in a conspicuous minority. Evangelicals of all stripes are flocking to the Institute lectures, which run for a week of evenings, plus all day Friday and Saturday (plan ahead to be exhausted).

Launched quietly eight years ago with a modest attendance in Chicago, this year almost a quarter of a million are toting the big red notebooks into civic centers and sports arenas across the nation to listen to 39-year-old Gothard explain his "New" approach to Life!" Earlier this year 16,000 listened in Los Angeles, 17,000 in Seattle, 8,000 in Chicago, 8,000 in Philadelphia, and



in Dallas 20,000. Gothard visits these cities and several others twice a year, drawing as large a crowd or larger on the second visit. Anywhere from 25% to 50% are alumni from previous Institute seminars.

If attendance keeps doubling or more each year as it has thus far, by 1981 Gothard will have shared his biblically based "Principles of Life" with an audience equivalent to the nation's population. And by employing closed-circuit television, his organization expects to expand fast enough to do exactly that.

Reaches all groups

The Institute successfully spans all age groups and crosses every denominational line. Couples in their thirties and forties vie with youngsters in their late teens; graying business executives and their wives are as much in evidence as the college generation. Baptists and independents undoubtedly take first place in denominational attendance, but evangelicals from Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran and Episcopal churches are increasingly common. Contingents of charismatics are in evidence, and Catholic priests and nuns register for the seminar along with Catholic laymen. In a Mennonite area such as Pennsylvania the familiar dress of that church tradition highlights the presence of scores upon scores of men, women and teen-agers.

Girls bring their unchurched boyfriends and vice versa. Most represent the slightly mod establishment culture, but hippie types are in evidence too. And while Gothard's hard-core audience comes from the ranks of American fundamentalism, one will meet many a mainline sophisticate. In the hallways during lecture breaks a fair number of young people and adults betray their non-fundamentalist orientation through

cigaret smoke. Only occasionally will a teen-age pair appear to be more interested in holding hands than in taking notes (many manage to do both), and equally rare is the bored young fellow who dozes off in the balcony.

The intense concentration on everything Gothard says and outlines on his overhead projector is nothing short of phenomenal. A few years ago when attendance was more limited, this might not have been so surprising. Having laid out \$45 for registration, the church youth leaders and concerned parents who came for answers to the chaotic youth scene of the late '60s might have been expected to persevere. But these days increasing numbers are coming in church groups of 20, 50 or more, driving 30, 70 or even 100 miles in car convoys and buses. Yet in spite of this mass attendance there is little evidence of declining attentiveness.

Background in youth work

Gothard's background is midwestern fundamentalism. The son of a hard-driving Chicago businessman and Gideons International executive, he's been intensely committed to youth work ever since high-school days. During college at Wheaton he found 35 hours a week to pursue youth work.

Gradually Gothard began to size up most youth work, including his own, as a near-failure. Although churches and youth organizations invested all kinds of time and personnel in indoctrinating and entertaining their young people, Gothard saw that as they grew up a majority contributed very little in spiritual ministry to others. Indeed many went away to college and came back agnostic or indifferent to Christ and the church. This led Gothard to decide that basic principles of the Christian life just weren't getting through to young people. He also saw what it was essential to inculcate these prin-

ciples in pastors, youth leaders and parents. As Gothard witnessed time and again, many adults had only a superficial grasp of the basic principles of the Christian life.

As a result, older Christians who go to Gothard's seminars to find out how to understand and work with teen-agers end up understanding themselves better. As Gothard closes his nightly lectures with prayer, the upraised hands of adults as well as young people indicate that many, many people are dealing with the Lord to clear up their unresolved "basic youth conflicts."

Where do Gothard's principles come from? They come out of more than 20 years of an intense sort of personal Bible study, shaped perhaps more than Gothard admits by his own personality and experiences. Always a poor student in grade school and junior high, Gothard entered high school and accepted an older friend's challenge to memorize a chapter of Scripture a week. At first the task took him 17 hours a week, but gradually his powers of memory and concentration improved. He was soon able to shift the emphasis from memorization to *meditation*. Meditation is the key, he tells Institute audiences, to discovering the Bible's principles of life. And in the process of memorizing and meditating, Gothard's academic abilities soared upwards until he graduated as an honor student.

The cornerstone: 'meditation'

"If I could tell you how to guarantee that everything you do will prosper, would you be interested?" he coaxes. There is a clearcut Bible text for this guarantee: Ps. 1:3. The blessed man, says the Psalmist, meditates on the law of God day and night "and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper." "You may not have success as the world defines success," Gothard adds, but he makes this biblical promise sound

Mr. Coote is managing editor of ETERNITY Magazine.



This spring Mr. Gothard presented his Seminar to 20,000 in Dallas's Memorial Auditorium. Through closed circuit TV the seminars will eventually be viewed simultaneously in major centers across the nation.

more than compelling.

Well, what are some of the basic principles that have come out of Gothard's extraordinary commitment to Bible meditation? Four of the most prominent can be labeled as *self-acceptance* (the circumstances and endowments of your life are ordered by God's pre-design and are meant for your spiritual good); *submission to authority* (God's blessing and shaping of your life comes to you through those placed over you, whether they are Christians or not; particular stress is placed on parent-child and husband-wife relationships to illustrate this); *freedom from bitterness* (only by forgiving all offenses and asking forgiveness for your own basic offenses—stressing wrong attitudes as well as actions—can you be freed from bitterness, guilt and fear); *self-denial* (turn over to God all personal rights so that you no longer consider yourself cheated when others fail you, and so that blessings are

received as unexpected and undeserved occasions for gratitude, producing a radiant spirit).

Gothard calls these the principle of design, the principle of the chain of command, the principle of a clear conscience, and the principle of yielding rights. Other basic topics include obtaining moral freedom ("not the freedom to do what you want but the power to do what you ought"), developing a life purpose, discerning God's will, the crucial role of suffering, and the principles of dating, marriage and family discipline.

Gothard's method of lecturing is to break down every major truth or idea into four or five, seven or eight, or even a dozen steps or parts. Even the parts may be subdivided, and charts, diagrams, drawings and outlines flesh out every major concept.

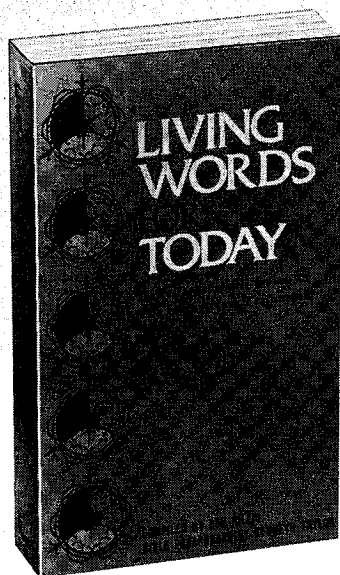
Inevitably the amassing of principles and biblical texts cause some critics to balk. Some will find flaws in Gothard's method of biblical in-

terpretation and some will question his underlying assumptions and attitudes about man and his culture. But the truth of the matter is that he deals with the truly critical areas of personal relationships. His basic principles are commonly taken for granted and sadly neglected in many churches and Christian homes. His message is so clearly marked by common sense and Christian ideals that critics, however well-founded their prejudices, will be hard put not to profit from his insights.

In answer to those who disagree with him, Gothard insists he is open to change. "Our goal is to exalt the Word of God and see it applied in the daily lives of people. We're not trying to present a closed system of thinking." Gothard particularly credits alumni with contributing many additional insights through the years. He points out that the Institute uses a notebook, not a textbook, making

(Continued on page 38)

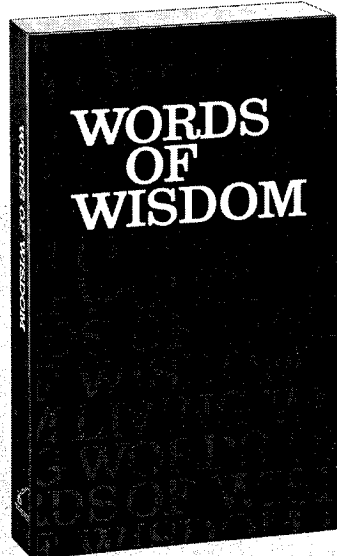
Exciting Books from Tyndale House



LIVING WORDS FOR TODAY. Daily devotional selections arranged for a year's reading compiled from *The Living Bible*. Imitation leather with gold imprint gift editions: green, blue, red, or black, \$3.95. Kivar, \$1.95.

BOOKS TO LIVE BY
Tyndale House 
PUBLISHERS-WHEATON, ILL 60187

WORDS OF WISDOM. Living Psalms and Proverbs uniquely arranged for daily reading as used by Billy Graham. Kivar, \$1.95.



TYNDALE'S 1973-74 CATALOG
FREE to you-upon request

BILL GOTHARD'S SEMINARS

(Continued from page 31)

it easy to respond to suggestions with revised material. He frankly admits that sometimes his critics are "like Aquila and Priscilla and show us 'a better way,' and sometimes we're able to show them a bigger perspective." The one thing he asks is, "Show me how your belief is based on Scripture and leads to more Christ-like living." Here he appeals to I Tim. 6:3.

One hallmark of Gothard's ministry is his ability to express the most basic and simple insights in an arresting way. Challenging his listeners to have a spiritual ministry in the lives of others, he asks, "How many people would grieve for their spiritual lives if you were to die?" In beginning the material on family discipline, he observes, "If we can't even make disciples out of our own children, how are we to go out and disciple the nations?" Another favorite of the still unmarried lecturer is, "How do you know if God has given you the gift of being single if you have never tried it?"

Two disturbing tendencies

The most disconcerting element, in this writer's opinion, is the recurring impression that Gothard manipulates his biblical texts and oversimplifies the ambiguities of human experience.

On the first evening (the principle of design) we are told that some of Christ's disciples were short men and therefore felt inferior. Their feeling of inferiority shows that they hadn't accepted God's design for their lives. To compensate, they placed an over-emphasis on clothing ("Why are you anxious about clothing?" Jesus asked).

All of this Gothard derives from Matt. 6:25ff, interpreted in light of extensive experience with young people who give excessive attention to clothing in the effort to escape feelings of inferiority.

In the process Gothard bypasses the uncertainty over the best way of rendering verse 27. Is it, "which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his *span of life*?" (RSV) or "to his *stature*" (margin)? Even if one accepts "stature," there is no basis in the context to establish that the disciples felt inferior or that Jesus was making an oblique attack on those feelings. Instead Christ is obviously dealing with our common experience of worrying about the daily necessities of life, a worry that comes to those who are tall and do not feel inferior as well as to those who are short.

In another lecture Gothard offers a particularly novel interpretation of Job's life situation, based on implications

he sees in chapters 1, 2, 29, 30 and 31 of Job. Against the clear biblical statements that Job was a righteous man and that he suffered because of no sin of his own, Gothard claims: 1) Job was over-committed to Christian work and good deeds; 2) this led to his neglecting the family; 3) therefore his sons became embittered against God and cursed Him at their parties; 4) this was the reason Job wasn't invited to join them (he interceded for them at home instead); and 5) Job had a wrong attitude toward the man-in-the-street. Instead of desiring to have a spiritual ministry in the lives of other men, he evaluated them only in terms of their usefulness to his "organization," working with his herds (Job 30:1).

If Gothard's reading of Job were correct, we would be deprived of an indispensable source of comfort in times of inexplicable trials. Instead of a call to faith in God's goodness and sovereignty, even in the midst of the misery and mystery of suffering, we have a case of spiritual failure and a warning to search out our own character faults without delay. (It's not a bad idea—but it doesn't come from Job!)

His tendency to be simplistic and careless with biblical contexts is seen in an anecdote concerning a girl who recently faced the threat of sexual assault. "You saved my life!" Gothard quotes her as saying. She followed the advice he had given in a lecture and God delivered her.

The advice? "Cry out to God!"

The text? Deut. 22:23ff.

What Gothard seems to overlook is that the passage is concerned not with saving a girl from attack but with the problem of determining guilt or innocence in the case of such an attack. If she's within the city, witnesses should be able to hear her cry for help and thereby attest to her innocence, whether or not help comes in time to rescue her. If she's in the country and no one is nearby to witness her cry of alarm, her innocence is to be assumed. Only her attacker will be punished. Gothard's account makes "Crying out to God" sound like a fail-safe insurance in a time of urban violence.

But don't let these criticisms deter you from attending the Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts. You'll find Bill Gothard almost always on solid ground, even when he seems to get there for the wrong or inadequate reasons. His comprehensive principles could easily revitalize if not revolutionize your daily life, and you'll go away with more basic insights for solving basic problems than you can implement in a year or two of meditation.

Then, try returning as an alumni (no charge). They all say you get more out of it the second time. I did. □