

**“No Reserves, No Retreats, No Regrets—
The Story of Bill Borden”**
by Pastor Scott Estell



Childhood Years in Chicago

William Whiting Borden was born in Chicago, IL on November 1, 1887, the third of four children. His father was a successful businessman, having made a fortune in silver mining.¹ It was his mother, however, who profoundly influenced his life for the cause of Christ.² When Borden was 7, his mother experienced a spiritual renewal (salvation?) and started attending the famous Moody Church (at that time called the Chicago Avenue

¹It is commonly believed that Borden was of Borden dairy fame. However, I could find no definitive evidence to confirm this.

²“Perhaps the one person God used most in the formation of Bill Borden’s life—and in his transformation to likeness to Christ—was his mother” (Dick Bohrer, *Bill Borden: The Finished Course—The Unfinished Task*, p. 7).

Church), pastored at the time by the renowned R. A. Torrey. While 7, Borden publicly dedicated his life to God's service following a sermon by Dr. Torrey.

Later High School Years in Pennsylvania

Borden spent the final two years of high school at a private prep school for boys in Pottstown, PA called The Hill School, from which he graduated in 1904. While at "The Hill," he heard chapel messages from such men as G. Campbell Morgan.

Trip Around the World Between High School and College

During the 1904-1905 school year, Borden took a trip around the world with a friend of the family, Mr. Walter Erdman. Three significant things happened on this trip, which God in His providence used to point Borden to the mission field: 1) meeting several missionaries on their way to their respective fields; 2) seeing the harvest fields of the world (John 4:35) firsthand, including China³; and 3) hearing a message by Dr. Torrey while in London, which God used to make the reticent Borden much more courageous in sharing his faith.

College Years at Yale

³Several years later, when a friend of Borden's told him that he was "throwing himself away" by becoming a missionary, Borden replied, "You have not seen heathenism" (Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Borden of Yale '09: "The Life That Counts,"* p. 211). Borden had, and it made an indelible impression on him.

Though Borden's personal preference was to attend Moody Bible Institute (at that time a staunchly fundamental school), at the insistence of his parents he enrolled at Yale University (New Haven, CT), formerly a fundamental school for training men for the ministry, but at that time rushing headlong into theological liberalism. During the middle of his freshman year, Borden attended the Missionary Convention of the Student Volunteer Movement held in Nashville, TN. It was at that conference that he heard for the first time Dr. Samuel Zwemer, arguably the greatest Muslim missionary of all time and one whom God in His providence used to burden Borden's heart for Muslims.⁴ It was also during his freshman year that Borden's father unexpectedly passed away. During his sophomore year, Borden helped found The Yale Hope Mission, wherein he

⁴Zwemer was a powerfully persuasive preacher, as the following excerpt shows: "We who are missionaries to Moslems today call upon you to follow with us in their train, to go to these waiting lands and light the beacon of the love of Christ in all the Mohammedan world Let us be like those Scots of Bruce who were ready to falter until that man on the white charger took the heart of Bruce in its casket and swinging it round cried out, 'O, heart of Bruce, lead on!' As he flung it toward the enemy and bore down upon them you could not have held those soldiers back with bands of steel. Say not it is the appeal of the Mohammedan world or of the missionaries—it is the call of the Master. Let us answer with the shout, "O, heart of Christ, lead on!' And we will follow that cry and win the Mohammedan world for Him" (Taylor, p. 109).

remained active the remainder of his college days. Borden graduated from Yale in 1909.

Seminary Years at Princeton

Borden continued his training for the mission field at Princeton Theological Seminary⁵ (Princeton, NJ), at that time a fundamental institution. During his seminary years (while in his early 20s), Borden was made a trustee of Moody Bible Institute; a delegate to the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference (the youngest of 2,000 delegates); a director of the National Bible Institute; a member of the North American Council of the China Inland Mission; and a member of the American Committee of the Nile Mission Press. Borden graduated from Princeton in 1912.

Ordination at Moody Church in Chicago

Borden was ordained at his home church, Moody Church in Chicago, on September 9, 1912, the renowned Dr. James Gray preaching the ordination sermon and the local press highly publicizing the event.

To the Mission Field

⁵Taylor (p. 174) wisely comments: “Three years of close mental application was a price he willingly paid for the strength that comes from knowledge and settled convictions.” That Borden was a real scholar is seen by the fact that during seminary he and another student studied Arabic on the side and started making an Arabic concordance (Taylor, p. 183)!

By his sophomore year at Yale, Borden had chosen China as his mission field, eventually targeting the province of Kansu, located in northwestern China between Tibet and Mongolia and home to three million Muslims. To further prepare himself for the field, Borden decided to first go to Cairo, Egypt, the “intellectual centre of the Mohammedan world” (Taylor, p. 245), to study under Dr. Zwemer. On December 17, 1912, he set sail for Cairo.

Last Days

Only a few months after arriving in Cairo, Borden contracted cerebral meningitis. After battling the disease for several weeks⁶, he succumbed to it on April 9, 1913 at the age of 25. News of his death flashed ‘round the world.⁷ Borden’s body was laid to rest in Egypt. Memorial services were held in Princeton, NJ (2); New Haven, CT (at The Yale Hope Mission); Chicago (at the Moody Church); New York City; Japan; Korea; India; and South Africa.

⁶His battle was testament to his great physical strength. In a letter to his father during his freshman year at Yale, Borden recounted how he had wrestled one of the seniors for 49 minutes straight before finally being pinned (Taylor, p. 105)!

⁷“When the death of William Whiting Borden was cabled from Egypt, it seemed as though a wave of sorrow went round the world. There was scarcely a newspaper in the United States that did not publish some account” (Taylor, p. ix).

Testimonials

- “I always felt he was of the stuff martyrs were made of, and heroic missionaries of more modern times” (John Magee, quoted in Taylor, p. 149).
- “‘What has impressed you most since you came to America?’ Dr. Henry W. Frost asked a much-traveled visitor. Without hesitation came the reply: ‘The sight of that young millionaire kneeling with his arm around a “bum” in the Yale Hope Mission’” (Taylor, p. 223).
- “He won that greatest victory of all, the victory over himself He won the victory over his environment . . . an environment of wealth. He felt that life consisted not in ‘the abundance of things a man possesseth,’ but in the abundance of things which possess the man” (Dr. Zwemer, quoted in Taylor, pp. 279-280).⁸
- “He kept the faith--but he did not keep the faith to himself” (Dr. Zwemer, quoted in Taylor, p. 280).
- “Here was a man with the frame of an athlete, the mind of a scholar . . . and the heart of a little child” (Dr. Zwemer, quoted in Taylor, p. 240).
- “William Borden was one among a million. There was no better among the younger men who have gone out from our colleges in the last ten years” (Dr. Robert Speer, quoted in Taylor, p. 267).
- “I know of no young man in this country or in England from whose life I expected greater things” (Dr. R.A. Torrey, quoted in Taylor, p. 275).

⁸A striking example of this fact is that Borden never purchased a car, thinking it to be an unjustifiable luxury (Taylor, p. 228).

- “I have absolutely no feeling of a life cut short. A life abandoned to Christ cannot be cut short” (Sherwood Day, quoted in Warren Wiersbe, “Millionaire Missionary,” *Good News Broadcaster*, May 1982, pp. 30-31).

The Secrets of Borden’s Success

- Prayer

“Prayer was to him his most important work, as well as the breath of his life. He had a card-system for recording prayers and their answers in connection with individuals who were on his heart, and a loose-leaf note-book in which he listed subjects for prayer in groups, one for each day of the week. To take in the meaning of those notes even for one day is a revelation of the depth and thoroughness of the prayer life they represent, reaching out to the ends of the earth” (Taylor, p. 145).

“One learned in those days more of the secret of Bill’s life, that his strength lay in his prayer-life” (a friend, quoted in Taylor, p. 157).

“All his work began, continued and ended in prayer Prayer was to him the first means to be used in accomplishing any object” (Mr. Don Shelton, quoted in Taylor, p. 191).

- His “Morning Watch”

(Borden in a letter to his mother, dated April 24, 1906) “I get up about seven, dress, have my

Morning Watch, which I like to call my “breakfast” (Taylor, p. 114).

“Here at camp he was up early for his Morning Watch as regularly as, I am sure, he must have been at the Seminary. I can see his Testament coming out of his pocket now!” (Harriet Day, quoted in Taylor, p. 166).

- Integrity

“As we walked up the streets of Hyannisport, where Bill had spent a summer as a boy, he remembered that at the close of that vacation he had gone away owing some shopkeeper in the place a few cents. He had forgotten all about it, but it came back to him as we walked up the street that day, and he must needs find the little shop and pay the debt, that he might be straight with the world” (Charles Campbell, quoted in Taylor, p. 151).

While attending the first reunion of his class at Yale, Borden left prematurely to attend a board meeting of the National Bible Institute, missing the “climax of the proceedings,” the “triennial banquet,” much to the dismay of his former classmates, who urged him to stick around and skip the meeting (Taylor, p. 201).

- Generosity⁹

⁹To put Borden’s generosity in greater perspective, consider the fact that in 1912, a loaf of bread cost only 5 cents and a fine house only \$3,000 (Bohrer, p. 108).

Borden gave away \$70,000 during his seminary years to various Christian causes (Taylor, p. 227). He bought the building that became home to the Yale Hope Mission (Taylor, p. 135). Once when the National Bible Institute was in a financial pinch, facing a \$5,000 deficit, Borden quietly slipped the Treasurer a check for \$5,200 before slipping off to catch a train (Taylor, p. 195). Not only was he generous with his wealth, but also with his time. In 1912, he postponed a vacation to Switzerland at the last minute to run the National Bible Institute when the president was unexpectedly forced to take a sabbatical for health reasons (Taylor, pp. 195-196). He bequeathed virtually his entire fortune (roughly 1 million dollars; approximately 40 million in today's dollars) to the Lord's work.¹⁰

- Evangelism

¹⁰\$250,000 to the China Inland Mission; \$100,000 each to the National Bible Institute, the Moody Bible Institute, and the Chicago Avenue Church; \$50,000 each to Princeton Theological Seminary, the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. (South), the Board of Foreign Missions of the United Presbyterian Church, and the Chicago Hebrew Mission; and \$25,000 each to the Nile Mission Press, the American Bible Society, the Chicago Tract Society, and the African Inland Mission (Taylor, p. 231).

(Borden's recounting of a "Mission Band" meeting during his freshman year at Yale in a letter to his mother dated January 14, 1906) "When he [the speaker] was through he asked as usual whether there was anything special to be brought up. I immediately thought of that verse in James, 'Confess your faults one to another and pray for one another.' I felt that I ought to confess. For a moment I hesitated, but I was given strength to do so, thank God. I read the verse and said that I knew that I must learn to save people here before I could hope to do so anywhere else, and that I had a good chance this afternoon to speak to a fellow and had failed, and that I wanted their prayers. I just managed to get this out before I was overcome with emotion and sat down Get the church to pray for me" (Taylor, p. 101).

"The outstanding thing in one's memory of Bill is his missionary motive" (Dr. Kenneth Latourette, quoted in Taylor, p. 144).

"No one would have known from Borden's life and talk that he was a millionaire, but no one could have helped knowing that he was a Christian and alive for missions" (a classmate at Princeton, quoted in Taylor, p. 211).

In his haste to get to the mission field, Borden left in the middle of December, rather than wait until after the holidays (Taylor, pp. 221-222).

- Surrender

During his freshman year at Yale, Borden wrote the following words: "Lord Jesus, I take hands

off, as far as my life is concerned. I put Thee on the throne in my heart. Change, cleanse, use me as Thou shalt choose. I take the full power of Thy Holy Spirit. I thank Thee.” Then he added this postscript: “May never know a tithe of the result until Morning” (Taylor, p. 123). In an article he wrote for the National Bible Society in 1912, Borden ominously wrote regarding missionaries: “It was at tremendous cost they made the decision” (Bohrer, p. 87).

Great Quotes Attributed to Borden

“Are you steering or drifting?” (Taylor, p. 217)

“Are you willing to be made willing?” (Taylor, p. 218)

“No reserves, no retreats, no regrets” (found written in his Bible shortly after his death)