

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Legacy of Billy Graham (1918-2018)

The home-going of Billy Graham marks a watershed in American evangelicalism. He received a number of accolades during his life, but perhaps none is more endearing than “America’s Pastor.” He had his critics, but, for the most part, Graham was universally admired as a man of integrity who preached a consistent, simple message of the Gospel—and that is the heart of his legacy. Why was he such an important figure in American evangelicalism? By the grace of God, why was he able to consistently maintain his reputation as a man of integrity?

Russel Moore, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, reports that years ago he was sitting in an almost-empty church listening to an Episcopal bishop discuss why Billy Graham was irrelevant. The prelate insisted that it was not Graham the man or his sincerity or his integrity; it was his message: “Modern people simply cannot accept the supernatural basis of Billy Graham’s gospel. Billy Graham should change his gospel or he will never reach our world as it is.” Someone seated next to Moore turned and said, “There are 40 people here, and four million listened to Billy Graham in a crusade last night.” Billy Graham rejected the message of theological liberalism, which argued in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that Christianity could only compete with rationalism and secularism if it played down or discarded the supernatural (e.g., the virgin birth, the resurrection, the Second Coming). Graham rejected this and consistently affirmed, “The Bible says” Graham kept his singular message focused on the truth of Scripture and the salvation Jesus Christ offered to sinful humanity.

Billy Graham was in many ways the face of evangelicalism. In the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1920s and 1930s, fundamentalist Christianity lost control of almost all the major Protestant denominations; theological liberalism triumphed in almost all of them. Additionally, and many historians believe unfairly, the famous Scopes trial of 1925 became a symbol of the narrow-minded, separatistic Christianity of the 20th century. By the 1940s and 1950s many conservative Protestant Christian leaders were dissatisfied with fundamentalism’s image and demeanor, and organized another movement, now generally called evangelicalism.

Billy Graham was one of the key leaders of this shift. Evangelicalism was more open and engaged, not separatistic and isolated. It was intellectually respectable, focusing on exegetical study of God’s Word, while giving focus to Christian apologetics and ethics in an increasingly secular culture. For example, in 1956 Graham asked theologian Carl Henry to be the editor of a new publication, *Christianity Today*, which was to be the evangelical answer to the theological liberal *Christian Century*. He played a role in the founding of Fuller Theological Seminary and

was a strong supporter of the National Association of Evangelicals. Furthermore, in 1953, Graham de-segregated his crusades, removing all ropes and barriers separating blacks and whites at his crusades. In 1957, he invited Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. to give the opening prayer at his famous Madison Square Garden crusade in New York City. One of his regular music team members was African-American giant, Ethel Waters. In 1954, he led a crusade at Wembley Stadium in England and gained an admirer in Queen Elizabeth, who invited him to meet with her at Buckingham Palace several times.

One of the important and memorable converts in his crusades was Louis Zamperini, whose story was told in the bestseller, *Unbroken* by Laura Hillenbrand. A runner in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Zamperini joined the Army Air Corps, serving in the Pacific theater of World War II. He crashed in the Pacific, drifted for 47 days, only to be captured by the Japanese. He spent two years in a Japanese prison camp—beaten, brutalized and tortured. Liberated at the end of the war, Zamperini came back to the US, but, due to his bitterness and anger, his life deteriorated into a cycle of rage, alcoholism and self-destructive behavior. After years of brokenness, in 1964 Zamperini went to hear Billy Graham at one of his crusades. This eventually led Zamperini to place his faith in Jesus Christ. His life was transformed and his rage, alcoholism and bitterness were replaced by the peace, purpose and confidence that resulted from his salvation. Zamperini went on to helping boys as lost as he was and even going to Japan to find the Japanese military officer who tortured him. He came with the message of forgiveness and grace. Only Jesus Christ could have changed a man like Louis Zamperini. Billy Graham was the messenger of that life change!

During his long ministry, Billy Graham leveraged technology to reach as many people as he could. It is estimated that 215 million people personally heard him preach the Gospel and that, through all of his media resources, he ultimately reached 2.2 billion people in 185 different countries. These were the various ministries and outreach tools Graham used:

- The Hour of Decision radio ministry
- Televised crusades and eventually satellite TV connections worldwide
- His newspaper column, “My Answer”
- *Decision* magazine
- World Wide Pictures—a vehicle for dramas that focused on the Gospel. His most famous film was Corrie Ten Boom’s story, *Hiding Place*.
- He authored over 30 books, the first one being *Peace with God*.

How did Graham maintain his life of integrity? In 1948, Graham and his team met in Modesto, California and investigated why past evangelists and revivalist ministries often failed. After extensive prayer and discussion, the team settled on these 4 causes: 1. misuse of money; 2. sexual immorality; 3. exaggeration of results; and 4. criticism of other clergy. Therefore, they agreed on Modesto Manifesto, which unswervingly characterized Graham’s ministry:

1. BGEA would conduct regular audits with full disclosure.

2. Never travel alone with a woman other than family.
3. Rely on outsiders to enumerate attendance records.
4. Emphasize agreements not disagreements with other clergy and Christian traditions.

Graham's message was the simplicity of the Gospel message that Jesus' death, burial and resurrection was the answer to the confusion, hurt, pain and dysfunction of a fallen world. Appropriating that finished work by faith brought peace with God. John 3:16 always had a prominent place in his crusades and the well-known "Just as I am" gospel song closed out his crusades as he invited people to come forward and place their faith in Jesus Christ. His particular focus was never on himself; it was always on Jesus and the salvation He offered. Billy Graham was unique as a preacher, as an evangelist and as a statesman for genuine, biblical Christianity. When he passed into eternity, he heard his Savior say, "well done!" Only eternity will tell how many others welcomed into heaven! That, above all else, is his legacy.

See Peggy Noonan's column in the *Wall Street Journal* (24-25 February 2018).