



**Billy Graham, After All**  
**By Neil Earle**

On Billy Graham's death the respected conservative columnist George Will ran into a headwind of controversy after criticizing Graham for a failure to rise to the demand of calling out American culture for its many deviations from the path of a "prophetic" Christianity.

Will sees the Southern preacher as "an accommodator to culture" rather than prophet-like figures who abetted real societal beneficial change. His two examples were Martin Luther King, Jr.—the inveterate foe of racial segregation—and the Polish Pope, John Paul II, whose actions in undermining Communism in the 1980s are indeed of historic note.

Passions and tumults aside there are some things in Reverend Graham's legacy that might fit this harsh diagnosis. There were his remarks made about negative Jewish influences in a conversation with President Richard Nixon, though church historian Randal Balmer partly blames Nixon's noted ability, perhaps, to coax his hearers into sharing his prejudices even if in minor key. There are also things that many Canadians might find questionable, such as Dr. Graham's presence in the White House before President George H. W. Bush launched the 1991 invasion of Iraq and the subsequent bombing of Baghdad, a city of 5 million civilians. There is also the quasi-embarrassing aspect of his early career being given a notable boost by hyper-capitalist and anti-communist William Randolph Hearst and the publisher's edict during the Los Angeles Crusade of 1949 to "puff Graham!"

One suspects that Billy Graham himself would be embarrassed at the media-driven celebrity culture of our times. That tendency to exalt flesh and blood figures way beyond their own opinions of themselves. Billy himself felt he wished he had studied more theology and was dismayed when his Canadian ally Charles Templeton gave up belief in God to take a far different path in life. There are elements in Billy's life of our omni-present 20<sup>th</sup> century curse of making the legend outstrip the subject, be he Elvis or Oprah.

Nevertheless, if Reverend Graham could not claim to be what historian Richard Niebuhr calls a "Christ against culture" stalwart such as Dr. King or John Paul II, he seems to fit into Niebuhr's other category of representing "Christ the transformer of culture."

For those of us who passed through half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with him, the sight of that handsome erect figure with the clear crystalline Southern tones pointing his finger and intoning "The Bible says" is almost indelible. If it is a truism that many of those who "came forward" after a Graham altar call, did drift away from their commitment, there were also too many dramatic about-faces to easily discount the freshening, enlivening response he brought to stump preaching.

At that same Los Angeles venue in 1949 a cowboy radio star named Stuart Hamblen came forward to repent and later write "It is No Secret (what God Can Do)" a favorite of singers from Anne Murray to Hank Snow. Then there is that song forever associated with the Graham team, "How Great Thou Art." Who has not heard that hymn or sung it in a religious gathering? At that same 1949 meeting Billy's preaching helped turn around the sad life trajectory of a World War Two concentration camp survivor named Louis Zamperini who went on to witness to thousands of Japanese afterwards, including the pilot who led the first strike at Pearl Harbour in 1941. This is beyond fascinating. At the New York crusade in 1960, Michael Cassidy, a young Christian from South Africa was on his way to seminary studies when he dropped in on the Graham crusade at Madison Square Garden. Deeply moved, he found a quiet spot and received the first inspiration to found "African Enterprise," an ongoing successful movement to reach the leading cities of Africa.

"By their fruits you shall know them" and the power of Billy's preaching steadied many a wavering Christian on his journey. After all, we are not all called to be confrontationalists though there were plenty of calls to action in his other Los Angeles crusade of 1963. "The whole world is asking: Does America have the moral and spiritual capability to lead the world to freedom at this moment?" Billy cried out forcefully as he went on to score immorality, racism, self-indulgence and even the complacency of the churches.

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The New Testament tells Christians to “admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak” (2 Thessalonians 5:14) and to be an exhorter and encourager more than a prophet.

My own contacts with Billy Graham’s ministry traces to my organist mother training me to sing “It is No Secret” at a school Christmas concert and my equally devout Anglican aunt supporting Billy’s ministry financially and Decision magazine coming to our house. It was hard for any of us not to be affected by that truly charismatic figure stirring us to remember there was more going on than our own concerns. Friends at university teased me after watching the 1963 campaign on television that “Neil was passing through a Billy Graham phase.” Later in life when I received a theology degree from Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, CA I smiled to see that Dr. Graham was listed on my diploma as part of the Board of Trustees of that institution. Indeed, Billy had helped found Fuller to be an institution dedicated to strengthening Christianity’s intellectual side.

In short, one cannot discount the impact of people who just stand up and preach the word, for in the right hands the biblical text is truly a hammer and a fire that breaks the rock (Jeremiah 23: 29). For that reason, St. Paul praised even those who preach when motivated by envy and strife (Philippians 1:15-18). But there was no hint of scandal in the Graham organization. The Word makes all the difference and Billy could preach it! That dedication to preaching was all Billy Graham wanted on his headstone. Perhaps—seen in the long run—a prophet after all!

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