

Commentary: I have no doubt what Billy Graham would have told the high school kids from Parkland, Fla.

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(RNS) — On the day Billy Graham died and we remembered his life and message, high school kids in Florida were speaking out about gun control.

To me, the juxtaposition was fitting.

As teenager in New Jersey, I attended Billy Graham's 1957 New York evangelistic crusade on a weekly basis — our church rented a bus to make that possible. One of those evening services in Madison Square Garden was "Youth Night." For me it was an experience that had a deep impact on my life.

Growing up in the evangelical world, I attended many "youth rallies." Much of what happened in those gatherings clearly bordered on entertainment. Peppy music. "With it" speakers who knew how to use our teenage language ("Following Jesus is as cool as you can get!"). Testimonies from star athletes and "beauty queens" about how they continued to maintain their strong faith when surrounded by the temptations that afflict "the party crowd."

There was none of that during Billy Graham's "Youth Night" service. There were prayers and readings from the Bible, with some numbers by the large choir. And George Beverly Shea sang "How Great Thou Art," long a powerful Swedish hymn that had recently been translated into English and became a mainstay in the Graham meetings.

Then Billy spoke. He made no effort to be “hip.” There was no humor that I can remember. Nor were there any promises about how a decision to love God with all our hearts would lead to happier and more successful lives. He simply spoke to us about what should be most important in a teenager’s heart.

He told us that God cares deeply about us, and the Lord takes us seriously. Many adults, he said, forget what it was like to be young. When teenagers try to talk about what is important to them, adults find it easy to dismiss what the kids have to say. “You’re young yet. You have a lot of growing up ahead of you!”

Those adults are wrong, Graham said. The things you young folks worry about, the concerns that you have about life on a daily basis are some of the most basic issues of what it means to be a human being. God understands those things, and God cares about the struggles of being a teenager. Don’t let anyone tell you, he said, that the struggles you deal with are “innocent” and “immature.”

I had invited some of my high school friends — several of them professing no religious faith at all — to go with me that evening. I had hopes that they might hear some things that would influence them for the good. And when Billy issued his invitation to walk down the aisles to the area before his podium, making a “decision” for Christ, two of them went.

And I did too. I was moved to respond with a public commitment to Graham’s challenge. He made it clear that God took my teenage struggles seriously, and I wanted to respond with a commitment to take God’s concerns seriously in turn.

We teenagers who “went forward” that evening did so while the choir sang the same words that it did for adults: “Just as I am, though tossed about / with many a conflict, many a doubt / fighting and fears, within, without / O

Lamb of God, I come.”

The Florida high school students who have been speaking out about gun control these days are clearly “tossed about.” And they are amazingly articulate about their conflicts and doubts about being young in an America where violence is all too present as a fact of life.

I have no doubts about what Billy Graham would say to them: Keep at it! God takes your concerns seriously, and adults need to listen to you.

In a much publicized speech being reported as I write this, a National Rifle Association leader tells us that he too grieves over the recent deaths of “the innocent” in our schools. But the well-meaning expressions of grief by those who survived the recent shootings, he says, are being manipulated by “opportunists” who are using this tragedy for political purposes.

The Florida teenagers are not “innocents.” I learned that in my own teenage years from Billy Graham. They are persons with genuine human concerns — and with a unique perspective on those concerns. I am learning from them and I pray for the success of their efforts to teach us.

To them I offer Billy Graham’s favorite benediction: “And may the Lord bless you real good!”

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