

Voices: Three things I learned from Billy Graham

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[Billy Graham](#) passed away in his North Carolina home last week after nearly a century of life and 50 years of public ministry. Health problems kept him from being particularly active in public for the last decade of his life, so news of his death may have been the first time many have thought about Graham for a while.

Despite his relatively quiet last years of life, his impact on Christianity has been tremendous. The sheer number of people reached is almost unbelievable; by one estimate, Graham's preaching reached more than two billion people and led to professions of faith from over three million hearers.

Even beyond the sheer number of people who heard the gospel in the 20th century because of Graham's work, Billy Graham was one of the finest examples of a faithful disciple to Christ the church has had in recent times.

Graham was (and remains) a personal hero of mine. Here's what I've learned from his life and ministry.

A passion for the gospel

"The greatest form of praise is the sound of consecrated feet seeking out the lost and helpless," wrote Graham.

"Sin is the second most powerful force in the universe, for it sent Jesus to the cross. Only one force is greater—the love of God."

Graham devoted his life to showing the love of God to as many people as possible, in as many places and life circumstances as possible.

Graham preached to presidents.

He preached to [mob bosses](#).

He preached in 185 different countries.

He turned down a five-million-dollar contract offered to him by NBC because it would have conflicted with his revival preaching (for which he received, at the time, a yearly salary of \$15,000).

Graham would let nothing — distance, language, race, money — keep him from sharing the gospel with as many people as possible.

So what did “the gospel” mean to Billy Graham?

A holistic faith

Protestantism in the 21st century suffers from a sharp juxtaposition between the doctrinal and ethical dimensions of the gospel. Conservative-leaning churches tend to focus on evangelism and faith confessions while progressive-leaning churches tend to think of the Christian mission in terms of social justice and advocacy.

This is a real problem. The earliest Christians didn’t think in this “either/or” method, and implying that we can have one without the other — right doctrine without right social practice, or right social practice without right doctrine — ignores the message of the New Testament.

Graham’s ultimate goal was to see people confess faith in Christ. But Graham also knew that societal injustices were an obstacle to this goal and were contradictory to the freedom the gospel proclaimed. Because of this,

Graham didn't see sharing the gospel and advocating for social justice as completely separate activities.

Segregation was the major gospel-inhibiting issue in Graham's day. Graham refused to preach to segregated audiences, going so far as to physically remove a rope separating black and white audience members at a 1953 rally.

Graham knew, as the covenant of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism he helped found stated, that "evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty."

A willingness to confess

Billy Graham was far from a perfect man. By all accounts, he would be the first to tell you that.

One of Graham's biggest regrets was his intense, early involvement with politics, both in endorsing candidates for office and giving advice to political figures. His close relationship to Richard Nixon led to public embarrassment and regret following the Watergate scandal. Graham would [reflect](#) later:

"I came close to identifying the American way of life with the kingdom of God Then I realized that God had called me to a higher kingdom than America. I have tried to be faithful to my calling as a minister of the gospel."

Graham was already having second thoughts about his close association with political powers during the Nixon years, and the shock and embarrassment of Watergate convinced Graham that he had a "higher calling" than political maneuvering. He promised to focus on preaching the gospel instead of the "American Way," and he kept that promise for the rest

of his life, avoiding working on behalf of any political party ever again.

Graham made mistakes, but he did everything he could to make things right after. Billy Graham displayed a remarkable ability to confess his mistakes and learn from them.

A prophet with honor

William Martin named his massive biography of Billy Graham *A Prophet with Honor*. It's hard to think of a more appropriate summary of Graham's life.

Graham hasn't been publically active for nearly 20 years and has now gone on to his reward. His ministry has been and will be sorely missed.

Graham was a uniting figure for Christians. His singular focus on a holistic, life-encompassing gospel and willingness to engage in public confession brought Christians of different backgrounds and viewpoints together in a way that seems unimaginable in our current climate.

We need Billy Graham's witness today as much as we did when he began his ministry. Will God raise up another such "prophet with honor"?

We can only hope and pray so.

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