

The God of Billy Graham

Dr. Billy Graham's Funeral Post-Reflections

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“Please make sure that you will use any given opportunity to speak about the One Billy Graham served, rather than of Billy Graham himself.” Before the final prayer, this was the phrase that was heard at the reception and dinner offered by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) in Charlotte, NC, on March 2nd, 2018 to several international guests invited to attend Dr. Billy Graham's funeral. Reverend Viktor Hamm, Vice President of BGEA, encouraged us in this way to faithfully keep the focus of the entire ministry of Billy Graham, which was “nothing except Christ and Him crucified” (2 Corinthians 2:2).

As expected, the last evangelistic crusade of Dr. Billy Graham, his funeral service, provided an opportunity to broadcast to the whole world the merits of a Saviour and the impact of God's amazing grace in a life of a very humble man. Dr. Graham's funeral, planned in detail for a decade, was an eulogy, first and foremost to Jesus and, the way He decided to use someone that was frequently presented as God's ambassador. The way God sees us is so important, but it also matters how others see God through and in us. Every Jesus' follower projects an idea of who God is through our attitudes, behaviour and character. As one of the most significant evangelical voices and Christian leaders of the past century, someone who preached the Gospel of Jesus to hundreds of millions of people around the world over decades, Billy Graham gives us a necessarily limited glimpse of who God is.

The God of Billy Graham is Kingdom-minded. My connection with the BGEA began through one of my mentors, Dr. Samuel Faircloth, Billy Graham's college mate. One of the pictures that I hold dear in my heart and in my pastoral office is a picture taken in 1972, in Amsterdam, where Samuel Faircloth, an American missionary to Portugal, presents Billy Graham with a book inviting him to have a crusade in Portugal. The pages of that book contained over 7.000 signatures of pastors, evangelical leaders from every denomination, and church members – a page for each church, which includes, as I was told, the signature of my father. Unfortunately, the BGEA crusade that was scheduled for Portugal in 1975, never took place due to the Carnation Revolution. Earthly kings and political turmoil, however, cannot stop God's Kingdom purposes. Therefore, in 2008, BGEA opened their offices in the country and I was invited to serve as the National Coordinator for My Hope, a BGEA project that brought the Gospel preached by Billy Graham to thousands of homes through a three-day TV show broadcasted by the Portuguese public TV station. Soon after, we developed a Portuguese version of BGEA's internet evangelism website, “Peace With God”, to reach people searching for answers online. The Kingdom of God, cannot be confined to a particular church or denomination, a nation or an ethnic group. The Kingdom of God, as Billy Graham always modelled, cannot be mixed with any eminent politician, political party or any kingdom of this world, because Billy Graham knew the prophecy of Revelation 11:15, *“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.”*

The God of Billy Graham is Love. It is almost impossible to watch one video or read a Billy Graham sermon that does not include the sentence: “God Loves You”. This is not just a great sermon line that encompasses the centrality of God's character, but it was also Graham's theological comprehension of God's character. In October 1974, before an audience of 225,000

people who filled Rio de Janeiro's Maracanã Stadium, Billy Graham declared, "God is a God of love, a God of mercy. He has the hairs of your head numbered...He wants to come into your life and give you new hope." The love of God shaped Billy Graham's ministry and his love for the lost. Someone who has been loved by God so steadfastly is never indifferent to those around them. For several years, I shared with my family the desire to attend Dr. Graham's funeral as an opportunity to glorify Jesus and to pay tribute to someone who impacted my life so deeply. In a way I was trying to give back the love I received from the BGEA family when my mother passed away in July 2011. On the day of her life celebration, the BGEA's head office in Charlotte sent the most beautiful flower arrangement to honour my mom considering her passion for evangelism and her precious investment in my life. A few weeks ago, I received a phone call from the BGEA European Affairs Director, Hans Mannegren, inviting me to attend Dr. Graham's funeral. Once again, I felt deeply loved and honoured by Graham's organization, despite my short and humble participation in their ministry.

The God of Billy Graham is Righteous. My involvement with Dr. Graham's ministry, was, in many ways, an amazing opportunity to stretch my leadership skills, but moreover an occasion to humble myself and to leverage my accountability platform. BGEA's staff and volunteers are told that they need to depend on the Holy Spirit to develop a culture of responsibility and irreprehensible integrity as servants and stewards of a righteous God. In fact, Graham believed that a "God of love must be a God of justice. It is because God loves that He is just. His justice balances His love and makes His acts of both love and justice meaningful" (Graham 1965, 236). Mr. Graham was known by his self-imposed rules of integrity and that culture permeated every worker or volunteer who held Billy Graham's organizational badge. Another famous quote credited to Billy Graham, expresses how he valued integrity, "When wealth is lost, nothing is lost. When health is lost, something is lost. When character is lost, everything is lost" (Myra and Shelley 2005, 63). At the funeral, I witnessed a humble but honourable ceremony that exposed the shortcomings of the Graham's family. Ruth Graham, the youngest daughter of the Graham's, in her honest eulogy, said these words: "My father was not God. But he showed me what God was like that day. When we come to God with our sin, our brokenness, our failure, our pain and our hurt, God says, 'Welcome home.'"

The God of Billy Graham is always Good News. On a particular day, Billy Graham described the content of his Bible-based teaching by saying, "During all my years as an evangelist my message has always been the Gospel of Christ. It is not a Western religion, nor is it a message of one culture or political system...it is a message of hope for all the world" (Busby, 1999, 197). One of the things that impressed me most at Graham's life celebration was Billy Graham's pine plywood casket. A simple casket that was made by inmates at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. Not by chance, the grave marker reads: "Preacher of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ." That same Gospel which brings good news through the death, resurrection and the Lordship of Jesus, is the foundation of another precious quote that was attributed to the "The Bible Says Evangelist": "Someday you will read or hear that Billy Graham is dead. Don't you believe a word of it! I shall be more alive than I am now. I will just have changed my address. I will have gone into the presence of God!" (Busby, 1999, end sheet).

Billy Graham's funeral, from the very first moment till the end, was a meaningful worship service for the glory of God and God alone. It was not by chance, that Billy Graham asked Michael W. Smith to sing a song written by Paul Baloche and Lenny LeBlanc that embodies what I described above as Billy Graham's limited description of the One he faithfully served:

“Above all powers, above all kings, above all nature and all created things, above all wisdom and all the ways of man, You were here before the world began. Above all kingdoms, above all thrones, above all wonders the world has ever known, above all wealth and, treasures of the earth, there's no way to measure what you're worth. Crucified, laid behind the stone, You lived to die, rejected and alone, like a rose trampled on the ground, You took the fall, and thought of me, above all.”

References

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