

Dear Friends in Christ,

I've been trying to understand the religious landscape in America. Why? History is always fascinating and stranger than fiction *and* I want to know our place in this mess. Ultimately, I want to give glory to God, and that involves both our congregations being faithful to God in everything, which necessarily means being faithful evangelists of Jesus Christ.

So who better to study than Billy Graham? There are things I admire about him, and things I'd do differently (I'm going to leave out any criticisms of the Southern Baptists I may have, and deal with Graham as an individual public figure). We'll start with the positives that we can take away.

Graham was a godly man of character. When he started his ministry, he came up with 4 rules for Protestant ministers (called the Modesto Manifesto), and they can be summed up like this - avoid sexual sins, avoid financial scandal, don't exaggerate numbers, and don't publicly trash other members of the clergy. Mike Pence got publicly dragged through the mud by citing the "Billy Graham rule" - he said that he wouldn't eat alone with a woman who wasn't his wife.

I think these rules provide a great list for us to focus on. The first 2 (sex and money) perpetually haunt churches. But exaggerating? I think pastors are prone to this because we can't really ever know the effect we have. It takes years to see growth in God's vineyard, and sometimes we never see it because we can't see what's in people's hearts. So to cope, we brag about the numbers, and even stretch them from time to time. And this isn't just a clergy problem - we all like to pretend we're more successful than we really are. This forces us to fundamentally redefine success. We pray for success in Psalm 118:25 (the same verse that says Hosanna!). But that success is found only in faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Whatever numbers may come, let that be. I want all of Sherburne County (and Stearns and Benton) to attend our churches because I desire what God desires - for all to be saved. But you cannot give up faithfulness to Jesus to fill the pews.

What about publicly trashing members of the clergy? The reason this rule is here is because Graham wanted to work *with* congregations, not against them. Despite what probably happened, he didn't want his events to become church, but rather to get people to church. This may or may not have happened, but again, look at our definition of success.

One more thing I admire about Graham - he was clear from the pulpit. I've watched some of his sermons, and from what I've read, people admitted that he wasn't the most profound preacher. But he was clear - you knew what he was saying. What we need in our day is clarity. Don't muddy the water. Jesus Christ and His cross is the only way to heaven. The Bible tells us plainly what's good and what's not (and yes, life gets messy, but don't deny that there is an absolute moral good).

Which leads me into my main critique. When it came to other religions, he wasn't clear. He got in hot water when the Nixon tapes got released and he was recorded as saying some things about the Jews, and tried to soften his words by suggesting that Christians worship the same God as the Jews. (I should probably write an article about Judaism sometime just to clear the air. For the record, I'm not defending what Graham said on the tapes; those have to be evaluated on their own terms. I'm simply pointing out he didn't want to publicly condemn the Jewish religion for rejecting Jesus.) After 9/11, he wasn't willing to condemn Islam as being a false religion (while his son Franklin was).

We don't do anyone favors when muddy the waters on who God is. My favorite line from "A Mighty Fortress" is "And Jesus Christ it is, of Sabbaoth Lord, and there's none other God!" (st 2).

Why was Graham unwilling to plainly say that all religions besides Christianity are wrong? It's because he was a public bridge builder. Being a public theologian is tough, and it comes with temptations to soften the words of Scripture. But how can we save people from false belief if we're not willing to say that all religions aren't the same?

What can Graham teach us? Live a godly life, and when you fall short, confess your sins. Be clear. Confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that He died on a cross to save the world and me from our sins, and He came back from the dead! Whoever believes in Jesus Christ has eternal life.

God's blessings to you this Easter,

Pastor