



Faith Pulpit

Some Thoughts on Ecumenical Evangelism – A Case Study

Introduction

Forty-five years ago most Bible believers in evangelical denominations would have been shocked at and repulsed by the suggestion that they should join hands with liberal and/or liturgical churches in an evangelistic endeavor. Today, however, very little objection is raised to such cooperation, and the person who hesitates is thought of as strange indeed. For many this is simply a non-issue. Even among those who are a part of historically separatist groups one seldom hears the issue of ecclesiastical separation raised, preached upon, or taught. And when an ecumenical evangelistic campaign is held close by, many so-called separatist pastors cooperate with it or are strangely silent, allowing it to be advertised and promoted in their churches. Perhaps the growing involvement by such pastors in mainstream evangelical circles or—in some cases—participation in local liberal ministerial associations has dulled their discernment toward the cooperation issue.

Much of the reason why evangelicals today so readily cooperate with non-evangelicals in evangelistic activity is due to the long, successful, and influential ministry of Billy Graham. He, therefore, serves as a good case study of the cooperative ecumenical evangelistic principle. What can we learn from his pioneering and prominent cooperative evangelistic ministry? What especially does it teach those of us who claim to be separatists? Has the cooperative principle affected the Christian leader himself?

It appears to this writer that at least three major changes have taken place in the lives of Christian leaders—especially seen in Billy Graham—as a result of practicing ecumenical evangelism. And these changes often go unnoticed by the Christian public, but they impact their attitudes, priorities, tolerance level, and practices nevertheless. What are these changes resulting from ecumenical evangelism?

I. It Changes One's Mind

This is particularly true regarding one's attitude toward and evaluation of liberal and/or liturgical clergy. Initially Billy Graham believed that those who did not preach and teach the fundamentalist message of salvation were not genuine Christians. He began to include such clergy in his meetings in order to preach the gospel to them and their people. After working with them, however, his attitude changed regarding the genuineness of their Christianity. In the early 1960s he wrote,

during the past ten years my concept of the church has taken on greater dimension. Ten years ago my concept of the church tended to be narrow and provincial, but after a decade of intimate contact with Christians the world over I am now aware that the family of God contains people of various ethnological, cultural, class, and denominational differences. . . . In groups which in my ignorant piousness I formerly 'frowned upon' I have found men so dedicated to Christ and so in love with the truth that I have felt unworthy to be in their presence. I have learned that although Christians do not always agree, they can disagree agreeably, and that what is most needed in the church today is for us to show an unbelieving world that we love one another ("What Ten Years Have Taught Me," *The Christian Century*, Feb. 17, 1960, p. 188).

In the late 1970s he again underscored this changed attitude. He said,

I am far more tolerant of other kinds of Christians than I once was. My contact with Catholic, Lutheran, and other leaders—people far removed from my own southern Baptist Tradition—has helped me, hopefully, to move in the right direction (emphasis his) ("I Can't Pay God Any More," *McCall's*, Jan. 1978, p. 158).

II. It Modifies One's Doctrinal Convictions

On several significant occasions comments have been made by Dr. Graham after meeting with those of other faiths—comments which appear to tone down his own personal beliefs. When meeting with an editor of *The Lutheran Standard* he is quoted as saying,

I do believe that something happens at the baptism of an infant, particularly if the parents are Christians and teach their children Christian truths from childhood. We cannot fully understand the mysteries of God, but I believe a miracle can happen in these children so that they are regenerated, that is, made Christian, through infant baptism. If you want to call that baptismal regeneration, that's all right with me ("A Lutheran Looks at Billy Graham," Oct. 10, 1961, p. 12).

And when interviewed by *McCall's* magazine he said,

I don't even give a thought anymore as to whether five or five thousand people come forward. All I care about is whether I have done the very best I can to explain as simply as I can what it means to be a

Christian. The cost of Christian discipleship is coming more and more into my message now. This is where I think I failed in my earlier ministry—I didn't emphasize enough what it costs to follow Christ. That's something I've learned from traveling to other countries and from my American critics.' Graham confesses that he has taken a more modest view of his own role in God's plan for man. 'I used to play God,' he acknowledged, 'but I can't do that anymore. I used to believe that pagans in far-off countries were lost—were going to hell—if they did not have the Gospel of Jesus Christ preached to them. I no longer believe that,' he said carefully. 'I believe that there are other ways of recognizing the existence of God—through nature, for instance—and plenty of other opportunities therefore, of saying "yes to God." In recent years Graham has shown particular affection for Jews. Like most Christian Fundamentalists, Graham once believed that Jews, too, were lost if they did not convert to Christianity. Today Graham is willing to leave that up to God. 'God does the saving Graham asserts. I'm told to preach Christ as the only way to salvation. But it is God who is going to do the judging, not Billy Graham.

And, further, he continued: "I've found that my beliefs are essentially the same as those of orthodox Roman Catholics, for instance We only differ on some matters of later church tradition" (Jan. 1978, pp. 156, 158).

One who has studied carefully Dr. Graham's statements has concluded,

He has a broad notion of the church as embracing all who believe in Christ and are united in some sort of visible fellowship, without worrying about questions of doctrine (beyond 'traditional orthodoxy')... worship or church order. In other words, all churches, or ecclesial communities in the terminology of Vatican II (*Lumen Gentium*), which owe their allegiance in some way to Jesus Christ, are church, are part of the People of God. This approach enables Graham to win the cooperation of ministerial associations across a very broad theological spectrum, and thus have access to a much wider audience than he would if he had a more specific notion of the church (*A Catholic Looks at Billy Graham*, Paulist Press, 1973, p. 97).

When religion editor Terry Mattingly interviewed Dr. Graham in 1987, he asked the evangelist to define who is an evangelical. Dr. Graham responded,

I think a person who accepts the Apostles' Creed is an evangelical, or the Nicene Creed. I think there are evangelicals in the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches.' So, I asked, is the pope an 'evangelical?' This one is,' said Graham. 'We've had some interesting discussions about that . . . ' Evangelicalism has one set of doctrinal and cultural 'barnacles' that offend believers in Catholicism and Orthodoxy, he said. Meanwhile, these historic churches have doctrinal and cultural 'barnacles' that offend conservative Protestants. 'But inside that church tradition and framework and organization of the church is the kernel, which is the heart of the gospel,' said Graham ("Billy, Catholics, and Evangelicals—A Flashback," *Current Thoughts and Trends*, Jan. 1995, p. 24).

III. It Broadens One's Message

Since one's mind is changed about the genuineness of the Christianity of liberal and/or liturgical people through contact with them in cooperative evangelistic efforts and one's doctrinal convictions tend to be modified also, it follows that the message one preaches will be expressed in broadened terms. This is not only a logical result but in Billy Graham's case is also deliberate. The late liberal Methodist leader, E. Stanley Jones, once wrote about the significance of this. He said,

The Graham crusade is a symptom of that emerging synthesis. Both groups [conservatives and liberals] want to share Christ in differing terminology and in differing methods, but both want to share Christ. The synthesis is emerging at a very important place—at the place of evangelism. There conservative and liberal could join in the only place they could get together—at the place of making Christ known to people inside and outside the churches who need conversion. That synthesis is a good one, the best possible one. For it is vital, not verbal. Hence the conservative groups and the Protestant council of churches could come together on this basis in the New York crusade—and rightly. . . . After talking personally with Billy Graham I am persuaded that he is more or less consciously one of the meeting places of this movement toward synthesis (“Letters to the Editor,” *The Christian Century*, Aug. 14, 1957, p. 970).

When he received an honorary doctoral degree from the Roman Catholic Belmont Abbey College in 1967, Dr. Graham remarked about the present changed ecumenical spirit from ten years earlier and said that now ‘We can talk to one another as Christian brothers’ (“Catholics Laud ‘Dr. Graham’,” *Christianity Today*, Dec. 8, 1967, p. 41). He went on to talk about eternal truths which do not change. Among them, he said, “... the way of salvation has not changed. I know how the ending of the book will be. The gospel that built this school and the gospel that brings me here tonight is still the way to salvation” (“Belmont Abbey Confers Honorary Degree,” *The Gastonia Gazette*, Wed., Nov. 22, 1967).

One further example is given. In the fall of 1991, Dr. Graham met with leaders and staff of the headquarters for the National Council of Churches. One report of that meeting said,

the evangelist paid a much publicized visit to a bastion of ecumenicity, the National Council of Churches headquarters in New York. Focusing on the need for unity among all Christians, Graham and NCC General Secretary Joan Brown Campbell pledged to increase understanding and fellowship between conservative evangelicals and mainline Protestants. Campbell cited, ‘the barriers that get falsely built between people’ and the need ‘to bring those barriers down . . . to find ways in which Christian people can show the love of God in working together on behalf of this hungry and hurting world.’ Graham responded in kind with an endorsement that may have astounded some. ‘There’s no group of people in the world I’d rather be with right now than you,’ he told NCC staff members and other religious leaders. ‘I think of you, I pray for you [and] follow with great interest the things you do’ For Graham, the thought of uniting the often divided evangelical and mainline wings of

American Protestantism for common mission outreach brings with it an irresistible satisfaction. ‘The world looks on us and sees our divisions and our problems, and they’re turned off,’ he said. ‘But if they could just see that we love each other and we work together because we believe in Jesus Christ, that would be one of the greatest things that could happen’ (“The Graham Touch: Salvation and Unity,” *The American Baptist*, Jan./Feb. 1992, p. 11).

Conclusion

We may not be able to change this direction within evangelicalism, but we do have a responsibility to speak up and warn those within our fundamentalist circles of the dangers ahead if we do not teach and practice Biblical principles regarding cooperation and fellowship. May God give us the courage and conviction to do so. (A recently published and excellent treatment of what is happening within evangelical circles is: Ernest D. Pickering. *The Tragedy of Compromise*, Bob Jones Univ. Press, 1994. Note especially his chapter three: “Broadening the Sawdust Trail. Ecumenical Evangelism and Billy Graham.”)

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