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The first condition of forgiveness is not an adequate comprehension of the atonement and a due sense of the cost. That is not saving faith. Any adequate idea on that head comes only to the saved. The cross becomes a theology only by beginning as a religion. The condition of forgiveness is answering the grace and freedom of it with a like free, humble and joyful heart. It is taking the freedom of it home and not the cost. It is committing ourselves to God's self-committal to us. It is taking God at his word, at his living word, Christ—his urgent, reticent, gracious, masterful word—Christ.

P.T. FORSYTH

God, in the gospel, takes upon him the character of a nursing father.

JOHN CALVIN

A REVIEW ARTICLE

JUST AS I AM: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BILLY GRAHAM

Billy Graham

San Francisco: Harper Collins/Zondervan (1997).

760 pages, cloth, \$28.50.

William Martin, author of the finest biography on Billy Graham yet written,¹ has said, "I think it's hard to overestimate the impact Billy Graham has had on world Christianity." No student of the history of Christianity over the last half century can doubt the accuracy of Martin's observation. To borrow a turn of phrase from the brokerage firm of E. F. Hutton, made popular by the now famous television commercial of several years ago: "When Billy Graham speaks, people listen!"

I owe much to Billy Graham. During my childhood he was my role model. Indeed, he was a hero. Here, in an unvarnished manner, was an earnest, clear, simple, biblical preacher of the gospel who never apologized for faith. I still recall sitting enthralled before my family's first television set as Billy spoke with such power and pathos. Repeatedly he uttered his now famous line, as he quoted the Bible with supreme confidence, "The Bible says!" I was further moved by the simple appeals that he gave for multitudes to express personal faith in Christ. (The way he stood reverently and quietly, praying from behind his pulpit, for the Holy Spirit to do His work, while hundreds streamed forward to the singing of Charlotte Elliott's hymn "Just As I

Am," always stood in stark contrast to my Southern cultural experience of a more high-pressured altar call.) I sometimes felt as if I knew the man personally. There was something about his manner, his sincere warmth, his honest, straightforward trust in the Word of God. He profoundly touched my life. Anecdotes about his life further moved me during my teen years. While thousands in our day want to "Be like Mike" (i.e., Michael Jordan, the basketball role model of the 90s) I often prayed that I would "Be like Billy!" Simply put— Billy urged me to be faithful to Christ and to preach His gospel with true confidence in God's authority.

Not surprisingly, Just As I Am is most certainly not a literary masterpiece. It reads well at some points, more slowly at others, and in general gives some candid glimpses into a very interesting and full life.

Finally, when it came time to choose a Christian liberal arts college in order to prepare for ministry, it was the influence of Dr. Graham and the martyred missionaries to the Auca Indians (three of the five were Wheaton alumni) that led me to apply for entrance to Wheaton College. Sight unseen I transferred to Wheaton in 1969 with the hope of being one tenth the man and the preacher that Billy Gra-

ham was. And I was not alone. A whole generation of young preachers were similarly influenced from what I have observed over these forty years. It was for all of these reasons that I read *Just As I Am* with deep personal interest.

Not surprisingly, *Just As I Am* is most certainly not a literary masterpiece. (It is actually a massive ghost-written project that covered several years of work.) It reads well at some points, more slowly at others, and in general gives some candid glimpses into a very interesting and full life. (The original draft was apparently *much* longer before the edited book was actually completed.) Yet far too much attention is given to other personalities. As an example, every United States President from Harry Truman to Bill Clinton has his own chapter in the book. Some of the important Christian personalities who did spend time with Dr. Graham are either omitted or simply passed over with only very brief mention. An example is Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones who privately urged Dr. Graham to cease his public cooperation with liberal Christian churchmen and Roman Catholic priests and further remonstrated with Billy regarding the manner in which the Graham Association was operated. The Lloyd-Jones story, as it relates to Billy Graham at least, was told by Carl Henry some years ago in *Christianity Today*. In these memoirs it is viewed as either unimportant or irrelevant, and thus left out. (Lloyd-Jones receives only a one-line mention that is altogether inconsequential. By consulting the very helpful index of persons the reader can note many others who are treated similarly. The point is that politicians are given great attention, while important evangelical leaders are seldom mentioned. Similar oversights abound.)

Frankly, I for one would have loved to hear Dr. Graham's take on those who differed with him, especially those who did so out of deep conviction and with genuine love for the gospel. Militant fundamentalists aside, there

were many prominent evangelical leaders around the world who did not always share Graham's view of evangelism. The reader looks in vain for his measured response. To hear Graham interact with such people would have made the book much more valuable for posterity. Instead of a serious interaction with either issues or people, we have a racy, simplistic overview of a deeply pious and sincere man who always sought to be a peacemaker, both in the church and the wider culture.

Graham's theological views are seldom put forward, and only in very elemental ways. I would love to have heard how Billy arrived at his views, who influenced their formation, and what effect his particular beliefs had upon both faith and practice.



Graham's theological views are seldom put forward, and only in very elemental ways. I would love to have heard how Billy arrived at his views, who influenced their formation, and what effect his particular beliefs had upon both faith and practice. What we have, instead, is a vague picture of deep personal piety without much confessional framework to support it beyond a simple love for Jesus. This would be adequate if Graham were a humble lay

leader, but the fact is this—he is the most admired evangelical leader and spokesman in the world today. Remember—when he speaks, multitudes listen!

Having studied Graham's life for many years, and having toured his museum at the Graham Center at Wheaton College many times, I know there is much more to his views than comes out in this autobiography. Therefore, I was disappointed that he did not allow me to see the turn of his mind at many critical junctures in his life. Who influenced Billy's thought? How? Why? To raise these questions is part of the problem. Dr. Graham has become *the* spokesman for broad evangelicalism, both in North America and beyond. And the evangelicalism that he has shaped is increasingly ill-defined and nontheological. Dr. Graham, though admittedly not a scholar, has some very definite theological views and believes certain things about the revelation of God in Holy Scripture. Yet one is honestly hard pressed to know what exactly these beliefs are. Sadly, this present autobiography will not resolve the problem.

Billy Graham has unquestionably touched the lives of millions. He has preached to more people than any man who has ever lived! The simple facts of his ministry are staggering. The faithfulness and integrity of his life are beyond question. In an era of public scandal this in itself is commendation worthy of deep appreciation. Yet Billy Graham has been far from perfect. He is the first to admit it, as *Just As I Am* demonstrates.

In these memoirs Graham seeks to put some things right that he believes have been misunderstood over the years. In telling his own story Graham candidly admits several mistakes. These include admissions that his being away from home so often did not serve his family well. He also admits that his dealings with President Truman, early in his ministry, were clumsy and foolish. He further acknowledges that he was too trusting of some people,

Richard Nixon in particular. (Yet even here he seeks to defend Nixon in several ways. Further, who can forget how he spoke at Nixon's funeral service, with such confidence that the departed was openly said to then be enjoying the pleasures of heaven with Christ!) Graham also admits that he sometimes spoke too freely and incautiously in the political arena (especially regarding Communism and the persecuted church). Such admissions make Graham even more endearing to many of us. Historian Mark Noll, however, lends an element of cautious reflection regarding these same admissions in his own review of Graham's memoirs. Noll observes:

What sets this memoir apart is not the effectiveness of such rebuttals, for self-justifications of this sort, whatever their merits, are almost impossible to pull off. Rather, it is the mood or tone of voice with which such infrequent efforts at score-settling are attempted. Even in these passages the Billy Graham who reveals himself in this memoir is an almost unbelievably nice person.²

Mark Noll offers three theses that are worth considering regarding Graham and this autobiography. First, Noll suggests that Graham has "traded angularity for access." The second thesis is "the way he minimized offense at his preaching by restricting his enumeration of sins mostly to those that received close attention in the evangelical culture . . ." While Noll seems to grudgingly approve this second point I have grave reservations myself. Noll concludes:

Since in his sermons the sense of sin is the beginning point for the balm of the Gospel, the charge of self-protecting spiritual myopia might be reasonable. Why witness about how Christ forgives sins to whichever public person you best love to hate (for Graham is almost certain to have maintained

some level of friendship with that person), if you won't speak plainly to that person about the sin most obviously being committed? It is a good question, but perhaps a misdirected question, since Graham's preference for generic (and hence not too threatening) sins has enabled him to keep speaking to all sorts of people in all sorts of places and, moreover, has enabled the innumerable schemes, ventures, publications, movies, programs, educational institutions, and miscellaneous ventures to which he has lent his name to benefit from the almost universal fondness for Graham himself.³

Graham has successfully used his inoffensive approach to human sin, as Noll notes, to become a powerful force for ecumenicity. The problem in all of this is simple—this is clearly a sword which cuts both ways. While Graham has become the very symbol of gentle, compassionate and loving evangelicalism he has also become the symbol for an evangelicalism that speaks cautiously, politically and non-theologically. Though Graham was able to escape the harsh and divisive fundamentalism of the right, which he inherited from his early background, he was never able to escape the fuzzy, atheological pragmatism of modern evangelicalism. I fear that his primary legacy may well be this: It is Billy Graham, more than any other figure in this century, who helped to create by his overwhelming persona, the present evangelical crisis which threatens to destroy the very institutions and causes in which Graham invested his life and energy for over fifty-five years. Time will tell, but Graham's legacy should not be too quickly measured as entirely positive. At best, a much more sanguine evaluation might be in order, especially given the current state of an evangelicalism which owes so very much to his influence.

The third thing Noll urges us to notice is what he believes to be "the most important." This thesis relates to ". . . the question . . . whether Graham's strategies of access and ecumenicity undermine his message."⁴ Noll suggests that

there are two reasons for suggesting that Graham has "reduced the Gospel to a utilitarian device." The first is Graham's consistent relating of the gospel to the cause of America, a relationship all too common in the 1990s, even among many within the Reformed community. The second reason Noll suggests is that Graham has tended to make the gospel "the way to individual peace, social harmony, life adjustment, and spiritual satisfaction" (Graham's own words). But is God to be sought because He meets our needs? Noll believes, and I share his view at this point, that Graham's ability to keep his message near the basic theme of the cross has generally kept him from going too far in the direction of utility. There has always been something uniquely clear about Graham's ability to bring the simple message of the cross to bear upon the true needs of all people. Clearly, Graham believes that the preaching of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ is central to evangelization, something multitudes of churchmen did not believe in the twentieth century.

But what is *not* admitted in this massive autobiography is what troubles me the most. Two recent public interviews with Billy Graham underscore the problems significantly related to his long ministry. The first is an interview Graham granted to Dr. Robert Schuller upon the release of this autobiography last year. (For many years Graham has uncritically praised Schuller's controversial ministry which redefines most of the basic theological terms of historic Protestantism.) When I first read a written account of this interview with Schuller I was so stunned that I ordered the video tape, watched it several times, and then took down the words verbatim. Finally, I sent the transcript to the Graham Association for their comment. Here is one telling portion of the interview:

Dr. Schuller: Tell me, what is the future of Christianity?

Dr. Graham: Well, Christianity and being a true believer—you know I think there's the body of Christ which comes from all the Christian groups around the world or outside the Christian groups—I think everybody that loves Christ, or knows Christ, whether they're conscious of it or not, they're members of the body of Christ and I don't think that we're going to see a great sweeping revival that will turn the whole world to Christ at any time. I think James announced that, the apostle James, in the first council in Jerusalem when he said that God's purpose for this age is to call out a people for His name, and that's what God is doing today. He's calling people out of the world for His name, whether they come from the Muslim world, or the Buddhist world, or the Christian world, or the non-believing world—they are members of the body of Christ because they've been called by God.

They may not even know the name of Jesus but they know in their hearts that they need something that they don't have, and they turn to the only light they have, and I think they are saved, and that they're going to be with us in heaven.

Dr. Schuller: What I hear you saying [is] that it's possible for Jesus Christ to come into a human heart and soul and life, even if they've been born in darkness and have never had exposure to the Bible. Is that a correct interpretation of what you're saying?

Dr. Graham: Yes, it is, because I believe that. I've met people in various parts of the world in tribal situations, that they have never seen a Bible or heard about a Bible, and have never heard of Jesus, but they've believed in their hearts that there is a God, and they tried to live a life that was quite apart from the surrounding community in which they lived.

Dr. Schuller: This is fantastic. I'm so thrilled to hear you say that. There is a wideness in God's mercy!

Dr. Graham: There is. There definitely is.⁵

There is much more in this particular interview that space will not permit. Having watched this interview several times I confess that I still feel grave agony over both the content and the context. Having seen similar confusing and disturbing expressions in Graham's frequent interviews on "Larry King Live" (CNN), as well as other popular American television programs, I finally wrote the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association a gracious letter asking for an explanation of such comments. I included the verbatim transcript of the Schuller interview. (I suggested that Graham's Parkinson's disease might be a possible clue, or that even he might have been unprepared and might now retract these words upon further reflection.) The reply I received was not helpful at all. It suggested that Dr. Graham's views were the same as they had always been. Included in the response was an article from *Decision* magazine (from the 1960s). There was no recognition that the statements reflect the serious inroads of missionary inclusivism and religious pluralism. It seems quite apparent that Dr. Schuller understood the response of Graham as I do, since he seemed so delighted with it. I hope that I am wrong in my evaluation, but this episode underscores an ongoing problem that is highlighted by *Just As I Am*.

An even more recent interview presents the same grave concerns. Dr. Graham appeared on the popular NBC "Today" show in early March 1998. Here he stated that he "forgave" President Clinton because "I know the frailty of human nature. . . . He has such a tremendous personality that I think the ladies just go wild over him." This is an incredulous response. Even the youngest believer ought to know better than to speak this way, much less in such a public forum.

How can Dr. Graham "forgive" President Clinton since President Clinton has never actually confessed that he has sinned? What exactly is Graham pronouncing forgiveness

for? Is there no point at which Dr. Graham will be *specific* about sin when it is public moral failure? This is precisely why I agree with Mark Noll's review so profoundly and yet find him, at the same time, so unconvincing in his conclusion. He seems to think that these same tendencies have not borne serious harm to the cause of Christ.

If all of this could be credited to unusual or uncommon statements, made perhaps because of failing health or old age, I would be the first to offer defense for Dr. Graham. Indeed, I would like to defend him for all the reasons I have previously cited. Yet I do not think the reason for these kinds of statements is so simple.



Columnist Cal Thomas is much more forthright in assessing the damage of Graham's comments:

Graham, who used to decry cultural decline in sermons that reminded people of the consequences of sin, said on "Today," "We're living in a whole different world today, and the pressure on anybody today is difficult." Try this line on your wife if she catches you in a compromising situation:

"Honey, you know what difficult times we live in. Even Billy Graham says so."

Graham wasn't through, unfortunately. He said Clinton would make a good preacher. Like Jimmy Swaggart? What could he possibly mean? Is he speaking only about the president's oratorical skills, or should a preacher have some personal integrity behind his message?⁶

Cal Thomas concluded his critique of Graham's counsel by adding:

I've known Billy Graham for nearly 30 years and have written of his supreme integrity. Now that he is in the twilight of his life, at age 79, and suffering from Parkinson's disease, perhaps he and all preachers should impose a moratorium on schmoozing with presidents and focus solely on building the Kingdom of God, which is not of this world.⁷

If all of this could be credited to unusual or uncommon statements, made perhaps because of failing health or old age, I would be the first to offer defense for Dr. Graham. Indeed, I would like to defend him for all the reasons I have previously cited. Yet I do not think the reason for these kinds of statements is so simple. I wish we could leave it alone, but reading *Just As I Am* does not permit this conclusion if one considers the facts. Dr. Graham seems to rise above the theological and personality struggles of the older paradigms of fundamentalism/modernism. Yet he never actually escapes his own presuppositions regarding God, man, the human will and divine sovereignty. The failures he confesses in *Just As I Am* are all too common. They extend, sadly, over the entirety of an illustrious and useful life. The defects of Dr. Graham's life are not personal, in the sense of moral failures. They are not even failures that this generation finds obvious. Indeed, Graham's errors have no

compelling interest to the average person at all. Why is this? Because his errors are theological, and almost no one asks theological questions today. Graham's errors include, but are not limited to, the following:

1) The work of the Holy Spirit in converting sinners is too narrowly confined by "revivalism" and its methods. Graham is admittedly the successor of Billy Sunday and the popular evangelism of his era. Both Graham and Sunday are the heirs of Charles G. Finney, whether intentional or not. Both have acknowledged this in several places. This heritage is not healthy, and the results are sadly predictable after 150 years of effect upon the church.

2) Sinners are not sufficiently instructed regarding the holiness of God and His moral law; as a result the depth of human depravity is never recognized, and the real guilt of sin is neither felt or acknowledged.

3) Faith is not properly preached. Often people are led to believe that if they believe Christ died for sinners and if they "accept" His death for them He will most certainly save them. Further, such simple faith is associated with the physical act of coming forward, or making "a decision for Christ," and not with wholehearted trust in the person of Christ alone.

4) The association of inward joy and human happiness is virtually made the essence of saving faith and true believing. One comes to Christ, i.e., because of the need to get his/her life fixed! This is the all too common legacy of a century of evangelistic practice in North America.

5) The sovereignty of God in the saving of sinners, as well as the absolute necessity of God's efficacious grace, is explicitly denied in both content and practice. Dr. Graham has often indicated that in the end the salvific decision lies within man, not in the will of God. This has led to a spurious understanding of both the work of the evangelist and the call to repentance and faith.

None of my objections are new. For decades similar responses have formed a kind of minority report from those aligned closely with the Protestant Reformation. What makes this different, in light of *Just As I Am*, is that now the sad deficiencies of Dr. Graham's legacy are bearing fruit even before the last chapter of his illustrious life has been written.

EDITOR

Notes

1. William Martin, *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991). This very helpful and insightful volume was reviewed by the editor in *Reformation & Revival Journal*, Volume 3, Number 3, 1994, 152-58.
2. Mark A. Noll, "The Innocence of Billy Graham," in *First Things*, January 1998, 35.
3. *Ibid.*, 36-37.
4. *Ibid.*, 38.
5. "The Hour of Power," a television broadcast, from June 1997.
6. Cal Thomas, "Graham Can't Offer Clinton Forgiveness," *Los Angeles Times Syndicate*, 1998.
7. *Ibid.*