

Billy Graham remarks influence ministry of Christians

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

The recent controversy stirred by Dr. Billy Graham's reported remarks concerning Jews in America has raised questions about the singular role of the church and its mission. It also has occurred in a time when our society values pluralism and each person's right to determine their own beliefs and behavior patterns in place of the search for "the" truth and absolute moral values.

The flap was stirred by the release of recordings of a conversation between Dr. Graham and then-President Richard M. Nixon. On the tapes, Graham expressed concern about a Jewish "stranglehold" that he said was detrimental to the country. Dr. Graham has since issued a statement apologizing for the remarks and affirming that they do not reflect his views or beliefs.

The response has been, from some, understanding and accepting of a lapse on Rev. Graham's part, affirming that he has shown good will and cooperation with Jewish groups over the years.

Others have lashed out at the unfortunate remarks, essentially writing off the life-long ministry of the well-known evangelist.

One wire service story suggested that the remarks would be Dr. Graham's lasting legacy. That view, fortunately, is off the mark in that they represent a small blip in an otherwise distinguished career of religious and moral leadership, pastoral care to an often-hurting nation, and evangelism.

Christians will, instead, remember the legacy of millions of people whose lives have been transformed through Dr. Graham's evangelistic rallies as he has led them to a commitment to Jesus Christ. They will affirm that his faithfulness to his Lord and his public witness and tireless efforts to reach out to people in search of truth far outweighs a comment that passed his lips in a careless moment.

One irate letter to the editor correspondent condemned Graham for his remarks and questioned how the evangelist would ever expect to get to heaven if he harbors those types of opinions.

For a Christian, such comments, whether reflecting accurately Graham's opinions or not, have nothing to do with one's salvation. As Billy Graham has preached hundreds of times around the world, one's salvation is assured by their acceptance of Jesus Christ and not by other words or deeds. The Christian faith is not judged by works but by faith. Works are a result of faith, but not a determination of salvation.

The controversy comes on the heels of continuing Jewish objections to proposals by the Vatican to beatify Pope Pius XII who, it is alleged, collaborated with the Nazis and

harbored anti-Semitic opinions and thus, according to those who question the process, should not be eligible for canonization.

While questions must legitimately be raised within the church about the moral as well as spiritual qualifications of any such honor, the attempts to pressure the Vatican on this issue or to judge whether a Protestant evangelical will be judged by one statement or another begs the question of who sets the agenda for the church.

Any pastor or priest will affirm the almost daily flow of requests from interest groups asking him or her to declare a certain Sunday as “environment” Sunday or “disabled” Sunday and to preach a sermon on the appropriate topic.

While most such requests come from well-meaning groups with laudable agendas, church leaders must be cautious lest their preaching and focus is determined from outside or directed by the Holy Spirit.

Evangelical Christians believe that their authority comes from the Bible and nowhere else. They also believe that they are called upon to evangelize, to present the claims of Jesus Christ to those who are not Christian, offering them eternal life that is available only through Him. No amount of outside pressure, pluralism or other secular philosophies will deter them from following what they see as this biblical command.

To succumb to outside pressure that says Christians should not evangelize, that equates salvation with what a person does or says rather than their faith in Jesus Christ, that assumes a person’s eternal and ultimate legacy will be predicated on what current society values, (as good and worthy as that value may be) would be to negate all that Christians have believed and fought for over the centuries.

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