

Grace Under Fire

GARTH M. ROSELL

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

—Colossians 4:6 (NIV)

For as long as I can remember, Billy Graham has been part of our family. Not in a literal sense, of course, since my father grew up in Minnesota while Billy Graham was raised in the South. Yet, God chose to weave their lives together—calling both to the work of evangelism, giving both the privilege of introducing tens of thou-

tic crusades that swept through scores of American cities during the late 1940s and early 1950s, not only swelled the ranks of a resurgent evangelical movement, but they also helped to make Billy Graham the best known and most respected leader of our century. With Billy Graham's new prominence, however, came increasing criticism. Old friends as well as new enemies began to voice concerns about everything from his theology to his style of preaching.

Well-known figures, of course, are

years. Centered on five key principles, it is a model of Christian charity that evangelical Christians in our day would do well to emulate. I have enumerated below some of the key elements undergirding his approach to ministry and his response to critics.

1. COMMIT YOURSELF TO MORAL PURITY

Richard Baxter, whom J. I. Packer has called "the most outstanding pastor, evangelist and writer on practical and devotional themes that Puritanism

The Billy Graham model for handling conflicts and controversies.



sands of men and women to Jesus Christ, and planting in both an enduring friendship. Drawn together during the 1940s through the ministry of Youth for Christ, Billy Graham, Merv Rosell, and a small cadre of gifted young evangelists—sharing not only sermons and songleaders but also long seasons of prayer and a growing sense of awe at what God was doing through them—became the surprising leaders of what the editor of *United Evangelical Action* would by 1952 be calling "one of the greatest outpourings of the Spirit in the nation's history."

Those powerful midcentury revivals, marked by the large evangelis-

always vulnerable to criticism—and special scrutiny, it would seem, has frequently been reserved for religious leaders. From Whitefield and Finney to Moody and Sunday, American evangelists have all felt the sting of unfavorable judgments made against them by their contemporaries. Yet few seem either to have understood the importance of criticism or to have developed as constructive a strategy for dealing with it as has Billy Graham.

One of his greatest legacies to those of us who come after him, I am convinced, is the pattern of dealing with criticism that he has practiced with such remarkable consistency across the

produced," opened his seventeenth-century classic, *The Reformed Pastor*, with a striking admonition to Christian leaders: "Take heed to yourselves, lest your example contradict your doctrine, and lest you lay such stumbling-blocks before the blind, as may be the occasion of their ruin; lest you unsay with your lives, what you say with your tongues; and be the greatest hinderers of success of our own labors." It is "a fearful thing" to be "an unsanctified preacher."

Few preachers, I suspect, have been as determined to heed Baxter's warning as Billy Graham. Early in his ministry, during the 1948 evangelistic meetings in

Modesto, California, he called the members of his team together to discuss ways in which they could fortify themselves more fully against "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16). As William Martin describes it in his recent biography, *A Prophet with Honor*, the Elmer Gantry image attached to American evangelism, which Sinclair Lewis had "assembled from skeletons and scraps found in the closets of real-life evangelists," was well known by Graham. So he asked his colleagues to identify "all the things that have been a stumbling block and a hindrance to evangelists in years past" so that together they might establish effective means of avoiding them.

Out of that discussion emerged the "Modesto Manifesto," as it came to be known, a set of practical guidelines for maintaining moral purity and avoiding even "the appearance of evil" amid the lures of money, sex, and power. Realizing that such rigorous standards

assent at the close of the International Conference for Itinerant Evangelists, sponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and held during 1983 in Holland. As Dad and I sat together at that session, I could not help being impressed at the clarity of Affirmations VIII and X in pointing to the continued need for moral purity: "We acknowledge our obligation, as servants of God, to lead lives of holiness and moral purity, knowing that we exemplify Christ to the church and to the world"; and "[we pledge, moreover, to be] faithful stewards of all that God gives us [and] to be accountable to others in the finances of our ministry" and to be "honest in reporting our statistics."

We "must study as hard how to live well," Baxter once wrote, "as how to preach well." Many a "tailor goes in rags, that maketh costly clothes for others; and many a cook scarcely licks his fingers, when he hath dressed for others the most costly dishes." God never

belief that the Bible is the very Word of God. Questions about the authority of Scripture had been troubling the young preacher for weeks. Knowing that the matter must be settled in his mind if he ever hoped to preach with authority and power, he wrestled with his doubts until he was able to pray: "Oh God, I cannot prove certain things. I cannot answer some of the questions my friends are asking. [Yet, here and now I am ready to accept the Bible] by faith as the Word of God."

That simple prayer transformed Graham's ministry—and convinced him, once for all, of the Bible's absolute authority. Since that special moment at Forest Home, no conviction has marked his ministry more deeply. Across the years, the Bible has remained the foundation for his preaching and the ultimate standard by which he judges both his relationships and the conduct of his evangelistic work.

Some, of course, have interpreted

THE THEOLOGIAN MEETS THE EVANGELIST

My meeting with Billy Graham, who was at that time holding his huge evangelization crusades in the Los Angeles stadium, was of great importance to me. I at first had reservations about accepting his invitation to sit next to him on the balustrade. When I then did indeed do so on the insistence of my friends, I kept my eyes wide open critically. As the people came forward in their thousands to confess their faith, however, I was aware only of calm meditation on the part of his crew and detected no expressions of triumph. His message was good solid stuff. Afterwards I wrote him a thank-you letter in which I confessed that whenever I had previously been asked for my opinion of him I had said that I felt that many essential elements were lacking in his proclamation of the gospel; he advocated an individualistic doctrine of salvation, and even this took place only in relation to the initial stages of faith. . . . I found the answer he gave me extremely significant. I was, he said, completely right in my criticism. What he was doing was certainly the most dubious form of evangelization. But what other alternative did he have if the flocks that had no shepherds would not otherwise be served? This answer gave him credibility in my eyes and convinced me of his spiritual substance.

Helmut Thielicke in

Notes From a Wayfarer: The Autobiography of Helmut Thielicke (Paragon House, 1995)

would be impossible to keep without God's help, they joined together in fervent prayer asking the Holy Spirit to guard them from those dangers. The fact that Graham's ministry has been so miraculously preserved from even the whisper of immorality is clear evidence, I am convinced, that their precautions have been honored and their prayers have been answered. Christians around the world have been blessed as a result.

The importance of this principle for Graham was underscored once again in the "Amsterdam Affirmation," the 15-point document to which over four thousand evangelists from every continent of the world gave enthusiastic

saved anyone for being "an able preacher," but because the preacher was "justified," "sanctified," and "faithful" in the Master's work. Therefore, "we must take heed," Baxter concluded in a warning that Billy Graham has echoed many times, lest we "mar the work of God by our weakness."

2. WEIGH EVERYTHING AGAINST SCRIPTURE

While eager to learn all he can from his critics, Billy Graham's ultimate authority is always the Bible. Early in his ministry, among the pines of the Forest Home conference grounds in California, he came to the rock solid

When I think about Billy Graham, I think about a true Point of Light. I think about a man who has served his fellowman with compassion. I think about a man who has dedicated himself to the Lord's work.

So I am proud to be among those saluting Billy Graham for his half a century of selfless service to others. The Bush family will always be grateful for his friendship and counsel.



George Bush
Former President of the United States

Graham's generous spirit—evidenced by his willingness to join hands with people of many traditions and backgrounds—as a sign of weakness or a lack of resolve. Yet, even here, we see that his policy is the result of deep reflection on the Bible's teaching.

Two interesting examples of this principle come to us from the 1957 New York City crusade. "If criticism is a blessing," wrote George Burnham and Lee Fisher in their book *Billy Graham and the New York Crusade*, "then [Billy Graham] is certainly one of the most blest of men." Charged by those on his theological Left with preaching a gospel "devoid of social emphasis"

and by those on his theological Right with "fraternizing with liberals," Graham found himself "caught in the cross fire." His responses in both directions are instructive.

When sharply criticized from the Left by Reinhold Niebuhr, then a well-known faculty member at Union Theological Seminary, for preaching too simplistic a gospel, Billy Graham responded in characteristic fashion, as quoted by Martin: "When Dr. Niebuhr makes his criticisms about me, I study them, for I have respect for them." While acknowledging that he "had read nearly everything Mr. Niebuhr has written," and that he had come to a deeper understanding of America's social problems as a result, he went on to make it clear that fundamental disagreements still remained. "I don't think you can change the world with all its lusts and hatred and greed," he concluded from his study of the Bible, "until you change men's hearts. Men

evangelicalism, was a major turning point in Graham's ministry. But it was one that he took only after he had carefully weighed the criticisms against the teachings of the Bible.

In a lengthy letter "on separation" that was published in November of 1958 in *Eternity* magazine, Graham wrote: "During the past few weeks, I have come to some very deep convictions. It seems to me that the entire weight of Scripture lies in the direction of *fellowship* rather than separation. John 13:34 and 35, 'A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another. . . . By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.' What is the great overwhelming evidence that we have passed from death unto life? Orthodoxy? Morality? Evangelistic passion? No! *It is love!*"

Using other biblical texts—such as John 17, Romans 14, Ephesians 2, and 1 Corinthians 12—he distinguished

to me the Scripture teaches that we are to avoid both extremes."

Here we find underscored an important key to Billy Graham's approach to criticism. Having wrestled with the issues raised by his critics, and having revealed his willingness to be instructed by their concerns, in the final analysis it is the Bible alone that must supply the ultimate conclusions.

3. VIEW CRITICISMS AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR CORRECTION AND GROWTH

Most of us will never have to face the kind of relentless and sometimes brutal scrutiny to which leaders such as Billy Graham are regularly subjected. Yet we can learn valuable lessons for how to deal with the stones thrown our way by observing how others have treated their critics over the years. From cynical reporters and theological opponents to angry students and jealous colleagues, Billy Graham has seen them all. Yet, with what the *London Daily Telegraph*

AT HOME IN TENTS OR CONGRESS HALLS

Billy Graham is Christianity's best-known evangelist, who literally carries the gospel to the ends of the earth, focuses clearly on Jesus Christ as the only savior of mankind, and invokes the Bible as God's inerrant Word. He is at home in tent meetings, in stadiums, and in Congress halls. His presence at the 1966 World Congress of Evangelism in West Berlin on the rim of Marxist Eastern Europe attests to his courageous dedication to the gospel.

Among television evangelists he maintains a spotless reputation for fiscal integrity. The evangelical strand of twentieth-century Christianity owes to him an incomparable challenge and debt. One can only wonder how many football fields would be crowded if converts who found spiritual regeneration and renewal through his ministry were numbered.



Carl F. H. Henry
First editor, CHRISTIANITY TODAY

must love God before they can truly love their neighbors. The theologians don't seem to understand that fact."

Meanwhile, criticism of a very different sort was coming from some of his fundamentalist friends on the Right. Citing the scriptural command to "Come out from among them, and be ye separate," they began to express their growing concern about Graham's willingness to join hands in his crusades with what they considered to be "liberal" or possibly even "apostate" pastors and churches. This issue of cooperative evangelism, marking in one sense the final and wrenching break between fundamentalism and

between appropriate and inappropriate separation. "There come times," he suggested, "when we are to separate on theological grounds! [I recognize] that there are some modernists we are to separate ourselves from; and yet, on the other hand, I am convinced there are some 'so-called' fundamentalists we are to separate ourselves from. In my opinion, the same spiritual defect which is apparent in extreme liberalism that causes deadness, hardness, callousness and unbelief is the same defect that causes bitterness, jealousy, rancor, division, strife, hardness, a seeking after revenge and vindictiveness that characterizes a few fundamentalists. It seems

described in 1955 as his "charm, sincerity, and simplicity bound together by a deep Christian charity," he has again and again turned many of his critics into his most ardent admirers.

Graham's approach to criticism can be seen in an article he wrote for the *Christian Century* (Feb. 17, 1960), entitled "What Ten Years Have Taught Me." In it we see just how seriously he listened to his critics.

[It was] just ten years ago, that my evangelistic work came to the attention of the church as the result of a Los Angeles crusade. To me it was like a bolt of lightning out of a clear sky. . . . I found my sermons and statements being analyzed

GOD GAVE IT TO HIM

Someone asked me about how I felt the [1957] Billy Graham Crusade in New York City would go.



seeking for years.

When I first heard him there was something about him that sounded so good. I didn't think any white preacher could be that good. His voice is compelling, and that wasn't acquired. That wasn't got in no seminary. God gave it to him, and no one can take it from him.

I said what I seriously believed: "It is going to be a success because God didn't sponsor no flops." That same night I went and found that it was a fulfillment of something I had been

Ethel Waters
Singer; October, 1970

The spirit of reconciliation we sense in many hearts of South Africans can be traced back directly to the Billy Graham meetings held in Durban and Johannesburg in 1973. He was the one who demanded total integration for all of his meetings, and it was done. From that moment on we were on the road to reconciliation.

Bishop Alpheus Zulu
of Zululand
Johannesburg, South
Africa, 1985

and criticized by hundreds of clergy, laymen, and theologians throughout the world. Religious periodicals joined in applause or criticism on my message, methods, and motives. To say the least, I was baffled . . . and even frightened.

Over and over again I went to my knees for guidance and direction. . . . There have been triumphs and defeats, elations and deflations, but never once have I doubted the validity of the gift or the call to evangelism. [I do wish that] I could take back some of the statements made in those early days because of immaturity or a lack of knowledge and experience. Many of those early statements were lifted out of context by some critics and used to ridicule the message as a whole. Then there were some misquotations that I still have to face and live down. For example, one evening in Pasadena I quoted the then secretary of the air force to the effect that America had two years in which to prepare. The next day a wire service sent across the country a report saying that I had predicted the end of the world in two

Moreover, he continued, his view of the church had broadened, his "belief in the social implications of the gospel" had "deepened," and his "confidence in the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God" had "increased." God has "intervened more than once in history, and there is every reason to believe that he will intervene again."

Here, in capsule form, we can discover the spirit that has come to characterize Billy Graham's response to criticism. It involves, first, an awareness of his own weakness and need for correction. Second, it points to his continued reliance upon God's sovereign power, appropriated through prayer, for the fulfillment of his ministry. Third, it is ready to admit that mistakes have been made within his ministry. Fourth, it reflects a determination to correct those mistakes and make whatever changes are needed. And finally, it reveals a passionate desire to serve God as fully as strength

[and] by loving them, led them to the gates of the kingdom of God."

4. REMEMBER THAT YOUR MOST EXACTING CRITIC IS GOD

In *A Biblical Standard for Evangelists*, published in 1984, Billy Graham reminded himself and his colleagues in evangelism of the need for "transparent honesty" in everything they said and did. Even if others are "not watching us and evaluating our ministries by what they see of our honesty and integrity," he argued, "we still should be above reproach, because we are accountable to God."

There is a sense in which Graham's critics have not been nearly as hard on him as he is on himself. In his 1979 biography *Billy Graham: Evangelist to the World*, John Pollock reports a conversation in which Graham commented about his growing concern that in a "day of publicity and media exposure," people would have a tendency to "put

WITHOUT SHADES OF GRAY

I've known Billy Graham for 60 years, and some time ago, he said to me, "I don't know how much longer I can keep going at this speed." I responded, "Billy, the difference between you and me is that you are 76 years old and I am 76 years young." He returned, "If I didn't have any more to do than you do, I'd feel young, too!" The man has a sense of humor.

In 1950, when he went to the Mayo Clinic the first time, thinking something was drastically wrong with him, he asked me to accompany him. Then a strange thing happened; they turned him loose and kept me. During my surgery, the doctors allowed Billy to come in and observe. One of the doctors gave me some sodium thiopental—truth serum—and said, "Now is the time for us to find out what preachers have done in their past."

Billy told me later that "I stood over you, ready to club you at a minute's notice. I didn't care what you said about yourself, but I didn't want you to incriminate me!"

Stories aside, Billy is honorable and open in the area of personal ethics. I have been with him when people have offered him homes, airplanes, and all kinds of other things. He has always responded, "I cannot accept any personal gifts." He wants no gray areas in his life—he is a man of integrity.

I also know one movie producer who offered him a fantastic salary if he went into the motion-picture business. Billy turned him down, explaining that God had called him to preach the gospel. Billy is a man of singular vision.

T. W. Wilson

Billy Graham Evangelistic Association



When I first met him, I was impressed by his genuineness, his enthusiasm, and his obvious excitement for ministry. As I have worked with him these past five decades, his kindness, genuine compassion, loyalty, and humility have left an indelible imprint upon my heart and life. His fidelity to the Word of God and his unswerving commitment to his call as an evangelist have been a continuing source of inspiration and encouragement to me and to countless numbers around the world.

Cliff Barrows

Songleader, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

years. It took me a long time to learn that a public [speaker] must be careful about the text as well as the context, else he is sure to be misunderstood.

"The lessons of this decade," Graham continued in the article, "have been staggering. [I] have come to recognize more clearly [the] narrow limits assigned to the evangelist . . . that mass evangelism," while an appropriate tool, may not be "the most ideal method of reaching out to sinners." Furthermore, he continued, "[my theological convictions] have deepened," particularly "with regard to the truth and power of the Word of God."

and human abilities will allow.

What is not expressed directly, but which seems to underlie all the others, is a loving regard for those whom he is called to serve—even if they happen to be opponents. David Poling in his book *Why Billy Graham?* seems to capture the sentiment when he writes: "When the last conclusions about Graham are sifted and recorded, [it may be] that his greatest gift for the last half of the twentieth century" was not that he "packed them in" at Madison Square Garden or Earls Court or the Hollywood Bowl, or that he was successful in "radio and television" and "publishing." Rather, it may be that he "loved people greatly

him on a pedestal" where, he is convinced, he does not belong. "[I am] not the holy, righteous prophet of God that many people think I am. I share with Wesley the feeling of my own inadequacy and sinfulness constantly. I am often amazed that God can use me at all."

What prompts such a comment is the awareness that God's standards for truth and righteousness are far beyond any expectations that even the harshest critic might harbor. Standards of lifestyle and conduct for those in the Christian ministry are rooted in the Scriptures. Therefore, it is essential that each Christian prayerfully study God's Word, come to understand its com-