

10 Qualities That Made Billy Graham Great

I was saddened to learn today that the great evangelist Billy Graham passed away at the age of 99. Truly God blessed this man with a long and fruitful life! Having read his autobiography several times as well as other books about him, in addition to the fact that I served as a vice-chair for Billy Graham's last New York City crusade in the 2000s, I have had the opportunity to observe how he operated up close (having met with his team once per month for more than a year to prepare for said NYC crusade).

In many ways, Billy was the Protestant equivalent to a pope—a person with huge influence among a cross-section of evangelical leaders as well as diverse denominations. His ministry had a broad reach and appealed to conservative, moderate and even some liberal Christian audiences.

He probably preached to more people than any other human being in history, won untold millions to Christ and was responsible for founding or serving as a catalyst to launch numerous evangelical ministries and organizations (for example, *Christianity Today* magazine and Fuller Theological Seminary, to name a few).

The following are my observations regarding ten things that made him great:

1. He was a man of integrity.

Throughout the scandal-plagued era of the 1980s (with evangelists Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker and others) Billy was a breath of fresh air as he kept a scandal-free public persona that never embarrassed the evangelical church.

His ministry spanned nearly eight decades with no scandal.

That's an amazing accomplishment. Part of the reason for his integrity were the safe guards he placed in his life—like never being alone with a woman who was not his wife or family—and having a strong board he was accountable to in regard to finances and ministry.

When I was with a small group during the NYC crusade, he spoke candidly about some of his disappointments in ministry as well as some regrets (one regret was that he did not spend more time cultivating friendships among younger leaders). He was self-aware, humble and transparent, which was the foundation of his integrity.

Truly he built his life-foundation on character development and spiritual formation more than on his gifts, abilities and influence.

2. He was a man of simplicity.

Billy lived a life of simplicity—and eschewed the lavish lifestyle some of his peers lived—in spite of the fact his ministry brought in hundreds of millions of dollars. He had a modest home, a modest salary and lived a modest life, in spite of his significance and celebrity status.

3. He was a man who spoke truth to power.

Billy not only preached to the “down and out” but also to the “up and in” and was a pastor/friend to virtually every president of the United States for the last four decades. He's also met with many international heads of state, including various leaders representing numerous religions.

4. He was a man of innovation.

Billy used the latest modes of communication available to him to get the gospel out, whether it was the radio, newspapers or television, of the 1940s and 1950s to being a catalyst to help found major ministries such as *Christianity Today* and Fuller

Theological Seminary, he was always on the cutting edge of innovation regarding the release of his prophetic voice to culture as well as discerning the needs of the evangelical church.

5. He was a man who communicated plainly to the people.

Billy had mass appeal with his evangelistic crusades, primarily because he had an unusual gift of communicating the gospel in the vernacular of the people. I have heard more eloquent, gifted preachers—but there was no one who could garner a crowd with effective results like Billy.

6. He was a man who worked closely with his team.

Billy had the same team for decades, in spite of the fact that men like song leader Cliff Barrows could have went off on his own but did not. There was intense loyalty among his team because of the way he honored their input, treated them with dignity and valued them as friends. He knew he could never fulfill his ministry without a great, loyal team around him.

7. He was a man who understood the times in which he lived.

Billy crafted his evangelistic messages each year based on his knowledge of current events. He had the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other

8. He was a man who left a legacy with his biological family.

It's a great joy for me to see his biological children carry on the mantle of his ministry. It was also a great joy to see how Billy and his wife Ruth Graham remained true to each other in all the years of their marriage, in spite of the many challenges of an intense evangelistic ministry.

I once heard that Ruth said about her marriage to Billy in spite of his many travels, "I would rather be married to Billy even though I have him only 50 percent of the time than being married to someone else and being with them 100 percent of the

time!"

9. He was a man who was a statesman/ambassador for Christ.

Billy was not only an evangelist but also a statesman who represented the evangelical church to popes, presidents, kings, queens, Imams and every conceivable global leader in politics and religion. In regard to religion, he was ecumenical without compromising the truth so he could reach as many as possible with the gospel.

10. He was a man who trusted the Bible as the Word of God.

In all his years, he never lost his trust in the fidelity of Scripture in spite of the pushback from liberal theological trends and currents. Although he kept up with contemporary culture and read broadly—he was always primarily a man of one book: the Bible. Perhaps this was the most important reason why God was able to raise him up and trust him with a historic, global platform.

I look forward to meeting Billy again in glory!