

When Charles Spurgeon Took on Slavery and Billy Graham Took on Segregation

Without a doubt, Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) and Billy Graham (1918-2018) were gospel preachers rather than social justice warriors. Yet both of them addressed some of the greatest social evils of their day without for a moment diluting their Jesus-centered messages. To be sure, they lost some of their audiences because of the stands they took. But they never took their eyes off the ultimate goal: lifting up the risen Savior and pointing all people to Him.

As for Spurgeon, slavery and the slave trade had already been abolished in 1807 in England, more than a quarter of a century before he was born. So when he spoke out against slavery, he was addressing America rather than his homeland.

An article on the website gives the background, along with one of Spurgeon's best-known anti-slavery quotes:

Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation 154 years ago today, promising liberty to some 3 million enslaved Black men and women.

Charles Spurgeon also fought the evils of slavery: '[The] hope of deliverance seemed far away, it was God that gave an Abraham Lincoln, who led the nation onward till 'Emancipation' flamed upon its banners' (MTP 29:243).

Spurgeon exchanged correspondences with Frederick Douglas, received former slaves into his Pastors' College and pulpit, and condemned slavery in his sermons and media articles:

"I do from my inmost soul detest slavery ... and although I commune at the Lord's table with men of all creeds, yet with

a slave-holder I have no fellowship of any sort or kind. Whenever one has called upon me, I have considered it my duty to express my detestation of his wickedness, and I would as soon think of receiving a murderer into my church ...as a man stealer" (Pike, "The Life and Work of Charles Haddon Spurgeon," p. 331).

How did many Southern Americans respond, including not a few Southern Christians? Representative headlines from 1858-1860 proclaimed:

- Spurgeon is a "beef-eating, puffed-up, vain, over-righteous pharisaical, English blab-mouth."
- Spurgeon is a "fat, overgrown boy."

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- Spurgeon is a "hell-deserving Englishman."
- Spurgeon is a "vulgar young man" with "(soiled) sleek hair, prominent teeth, and a self-satisfied air."
- Many "would like a good opportunity at this hypocritical preacher."

When it was alleged that Spurgeon removed the anti-slavery portions of his sermon collections that were distributed in America,

"He denied this was true, although he again noted that he had rarely made mention of slavery in his printed sermons. He intended to focus more on the subject, however. 'I shall not spare your nation in [the] future ... the crying sin of a man-stealing people shall not go unrebuked.'

He followed up this letter with another in which he said that he was not aware of any "allusions" in his sermons that were

cut. Again, he denounced slavery as “a crime of crimes, a soul-destroying sin, and an iniquity which cries aloud for vengeance.”

Little wonder that, “‘Several volumes of Rev. Mr. Spurgeon’s sermons, strongly tinctured with anti-slavery and abolition, were burned in the jail yard.’”

Not only so, but had he “visited the Southern states in 1860 as he planned to do,” the results may have been disastrous: “America might have executed him: ‘If the Pharisaical author should ever show himself in these parts, we trust that a stout cord may speedily find its way around his eloquent throat’ (“Mr. Spurgeon’s Sermons Burned by American Slaveowners,” The Southern Reporter and Daily Commercial Courier [April 10, 1860]).”

As for Billy Graham, he became known for standing against segregation, despite the criticisms of some that he ignored the issue at first. Most famously, he personally removed the ropes that separated whites from Blacks in some of his meetings (the first time was in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1952). And he paid the bail to have Martin Luther King released from prison in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. (They were already friends and colleagues by then.)

But Graham also took a stand against apartheid in South Africa. As reported on the Billy Graham website:

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Mr. Graham held Crusades in both Durban and Johannesburg in 1973, some 20 years after receiving initial invites to preach in South Africa. He wouldn’t accept an invitation unless the Crusade meetings were racially integrated. Two decades before that, he personally removed segregated ropes at a

Chattanooga, Tenn., crusade.

"My wife and I have prayed for the country of South Africa since 1951, when I was first asked to hold meetings there," Mr. Graham said in a 1994 statement on the election of Mandela as President of South Africa. "We refused to accept that invitation until 1973, when we were able to hold fully-integrated crusades in the cities of Johannesburg and in Durban."

Overflow crowds of more than 100,000 people came out to see Mr. Graham preach in Durban and Johannesburg in the country's first integrated public meetings.

"Christianity is not a white man's religion," Mr. Graham preached during the rallies, "'and don't let anybody ever tell you that it's white or black. Christ belongs to all people.'"

"It was at those meetings that I was struck with the terrible injustice of the apartheid system, which I referred to as 'sin,'" Mr. Graham said.

Not surprisingly, Graham received criticism for the stands he took as well, including receiving "several threatening messages from white people who disapproved" of Graham inviting Dr. King to pray at his noteworthy New York City gospel rally in 1957.

For Graham, though, like Spurgeon, it was the gospel that was the ultimate answer to social evils, including racism. As Graham said, "There is only one solution to the race problem, and that is vital, personal, experiences with Jesus Christ on the part of both races."

We do well to keep the same focus that Spurgeon and Graham did, putting evangelism and discipleship first, without neglecting issues of justice, unless your primary calling is

to fight injustice and social evils. In that case, you might function as a reformer first and an evangelist second.

But whatever our calling might be, we must remember that only God can change a heart and that the ultimate answer to human evil is the gospel of Jesus.

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