

An Anchor of Integrity

My first memory of the Rev. Billy Graham was etched into my brain when I was a 6-year-old boy living in Alabama. My father took me to a Graham crusade that was held in a football stadium in Montgomery. As a youngster I usually fidgeted and kicked the pews during altar calls in church—especially if we sang more than four stanzas of “Just as I Am.” But Graham captured my full attention when he called sinners to the stage that day.

There was something almost magical about the way people were drawn to the altar. They came from every section of the arena as soon as the evangelist began his appeal. With a Bible in one hand and his other arm outstretched, Graham gave the invitation in his irresistible North Carolina drawl: “Come to Jesus today, my friend. He loves you. He died on the cross for you.”

While we sang a hymn about how Jesus “softly and tenderly” calls us home, people seated even in the highest rows made their way down the steps to the grassy field below. This wasn’t manipulation or theatrics. It was the simple, unadulterated gospel—clear enough for a first-grader to understand, yet compelling enough to win the hearts of teenage prodigals and hardened old men with walking canes.

What is amazing to me is that Graham’s message hasn’t changed during the 60 years he’s been in ministry. Even after he began airing his crusades on television and writing daily columns for newspapers, he didn’t modify the conditions of repentance. Though he became friends with American presidents, he didn’t compromise his morals, sell out to special interests or cash

in on his celebrity.

And when an increasingly secular culture began selling the idea that all religions are the same, Graham held his Bible in the air—maintaining that salvation comes only through Jesus. He isn't ashamed to say that name publicly, yet he doesn't come off like a mean-spirited zealot. Even political liberals and anti-God activists consider him a gentleman.

He has stayed faithful—to God, to his wife of 61 years and to the gospel message. While countless preachers have caved in to the pressures of greed, lust and pride, Graham has held tightly to the truth and become an anchor for us all.

People often wonder who will replace Graham when he dies. I don't think that is the right question. What I am wondering is whether we will model his faithfulness to a new generation.

When I survey the modern evangelical movement—especially those of us who call ourselves charismatics and Pentecostals—I see many boats tossing in the waves but few anchors to prevent shipwreck. Graham's solid biblical faithfulness seems to have been replaced with a lightweight version.

A few years ago, Oklahoma pastor Carlton Pearson began teaching that people don't need to repent or say a sinner's prayer to become Christians. His exotic "inclusionist" theology states that everybody is already saved—because Jesus died for everybody. His teachings got him labeled a heretic last year by one prominent board of Pentecostal leaders. Yet on Pentecost Sunday this year, Pearson was in the pulpit at the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, a prominent church in

Atlanta pastored by Earl Paulk.

Pearson's "everybody's saved" doctrine isn't new; it's been known as universalism for centuries. If it were true, we wouldn't need Graham or any other evangelist to call sinners to tear-stained altars. We wouldn't sing about Jesus calling wayward souls to repentance. We would just throw out the Bible and start from scratch.

I hope this installment of the universalist heresy doesn't spread too far. But what really concerns me is how many preachers are rewriting Scripture and whitewashing their sin after engaging in adultery and multiple divorces. Biblical standards that Graham helped us preserve are now up for grabs.

Marriage used to be viewed as a solemn oath sealed at a holy altar. I wonder how it is viewed in a "Spirit-filled" church where the 50-something pastor has already divorced two wives and is preparing to marry the young woman who used to date his son. How will faithfulness be defined in a church where an adulterous charismatic minister actually teaches that it is morally acceptable for a married man to have two sex partners? (These scenarios are not fictitious.)

Is there a link between universalism and the lowering of sexual standards? Absolutely. When sin infects church leadership, the bar is lowered. Before long, someone steps up to the pulpit and begins teaching that old-fashioned conversion is passé. It's a convenient way to justify bad behavior.

If this trend isn't challenged, it won't be long before heresy of the worst kind invades the church. When it does, the

question will not be about who is taking Billy Graham's place. The real question will be: Do we have enough integrity left to raise a standard against the darkness?