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Theological Observer

Billy Graham

Theologically dominant in the first half of the twentieth century was the leftover nineteenth-century Modernism, or Liberalism, with its insistence that biblical miracles could be explained as ordinary occurrences. Fundamentalism, with its insistence that Genesis was an accurate account of creation, was brought to its knees by those favoring evolution as the correct explanation of how things happen, even though there was never one agreed-upon theory of evolution. Onto the American religious stage stepped a preacher who did not graduate from any seminary but who did more to shape religion in the last half of the twentieth century than anyone else. “Billy Graham” became a household term. His rallies filled large stadiums, and he managed to monopolize television evenings for an entire week. It is hardly possible that anyone did not get a glimpse of him. He called his hearers to confess their sins and believe in Jesus Christ for salvation. There is more to Christianity than that, but that was a message not often heard in mainline Protestantism. For him, the Bible was not a collection of books to be dismantled by the scholarly elite but the word of God that called all men to faith and repentance.

As I can remember, Graham’s rallies began with the gospel singer George Beverly Shea “warming up the audience,” a method used at some LCMS Reformation rallies. His sermons followed a prescribed format beginning with an appreciation for the host city. Then he would focus on one particular sin and call his hearers to confess it and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. At the end of the rally, he would call on those who had come to faith to come forward to the stage in the middle of the stadium and make a decision for Christ. To lubricate the audience in making decisions for Christ, the Billy Graham team arranged to have local ministers bring their members, often in buses, to these rallies, and at the signal, they would come down the stadium steps to make decisions for Christ. Youth played a big role in the conduct of these rallies. As the faithful came forward to make their decisions for Christ, the members of the audience that remained in their seats would sing “Just As I Am, Without One Plea.” With the last words of each stanza, “O Lamb of God, I come, I come,” there was no reason not to come. At the end of the rally, the middle of the stadium would fill up with the penitent, with Billy Graham praying on the stage.

By all standards, Billy Graham was a success, and preachers of every denomination, liberal or conservative, attempted to ride on his coattails. A regular

visitor to the White House, he had admirers among Catholic priests and received audiences with popes. Even some LCMS pastors encouraged their congregations to attend Graham's rallies. It was considered a good way to get the youth involved. Preachers copied his preaching style and even his appearance with their eyes piercing into the congregation. Graham was recruited to write the foreword for the autobiography of one of the LCMS's most famous preachers.¹ Since I was brought up on the lukewarm, mediating, neoorthodox theology of the St. Louis faculty in the late 1950s, I was taken in by his "This is the word of God" approach in preaching. While his sermons recaptured the central themes of Christianity, that Jesus Christ was the Savior and that the Bible was the word of God, some eventually realized that biblical Christianity was much more extensive. From that time on, his preaching lost its appeal, but what he did could not be forgotten.

He brought a biblically informed Christianity, minimal as it was, into the "public square," to borrow a term from Richard John Neuhaus. We are now in a period of perilous religious decline in which Christianity is pushed out of the public view. Annual commemorations of September 11, 2001, are totally devoid of any religious reference. Coming from the Latin word *saeculum*, a secular world is a self-contained reality from which God is excluded up to the point of being prohibited. Billy Graham spoke publicly not only of God, as many mainline Protestant clergy often do, but also of Jesus Christ and the Bible, words that have less and less meaning for the general population. His funeral service, at which the highest officials of our nation were present, shows that the church has not been completely pushed out of the public consciousness.

Though not formally educated in theology, he was largely responsible for a movement that transformed a discarded Fundamentalism into an academically acceptable Evangelicalism. Their colleges are scattered throughout the nation and are top-notch. In the Association of Theological Schools, the Evangelical seminaries have replaced mainline Protestant ones as the most successful. Their theologians are leaders in scholarly associations that were once the reserve of those who had no use for miracles. They go head to head with theologians of every type. Evangelical scholars are a force to be reckoned with. Their publishing houses—Eerdmans, Zondervan, Baker, B&H—are scholarly powerhouses.

Graham was also the chairman of the foundation that published the biweekly magazine *Christianity Today*, which during the years of LCMS turmoil (1955–1974) brought a conservative biblical program into the homes of many LCMS pastors. Here lies the connection. Its first and founding editor, Carl F. H. Henry, was a friend

¹ Oswald C. J. Hoffmann and Ronald J. Schlegel, *What More Is There to Say But Amen? The Autobiography of Dr. Oswald C. J. Hoffmann As Told to Ronald J. Schlegel*, foreword by Billy Graham (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996).

of leading conservative theologians at the time, including the late Robert D. Preus. Before becoming president of Concordia Theological Seminary here in Fort Wayne, Preus was the professor responsible for keeping the St. Louis seminary together as an institution after the faculty majority in February of 1974 left their posts.

Due to another commitment, I was able to watch only the first few minutes of Billy Graham's funeral service, and still it was good hearing those in attendance under the revival-styled tent singing "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name"—all on national television. Even in his death, Graham was keeping Jesus in the "public square."

David P. Scaer

Sermon for Easter Tuesday

The following sermon was delivered by Dr. David P. Scaer during the daily chapel service on Easter Tuesday (April 3, 2018) at Kramer Chapel, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana. The text was 1 Corinthians 15:35–49. —The Editors

If your birthday comes between March 25 and April 25, there is always the chance that it will fall on Easter. This year, Richard Lammert¹ hit the jackpot. When I asked him how he was going to pass the day, he replied that celebrating the Lord's resurrection precludes celebrating anything else. In comparison to the resurrection, everything else and everyone else is simply unimportant. Jesus' resurrection embraces all mankind. It is true before Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John discover that the tomb is empty and whether anyone believes it or not. It is a fact, not a faith event. The resurrection of Jesus is a cosmic event, transcending and embracing all history: "As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Cor 15:22).² And nevertheless, the resurrection happened in ordinary history, during the prefecture of Pontius Pilate, an appointee of Tiberius Caesar; and the place was a rock tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea. Jesus' resurrection is not an abstract doctrine like the real presence, justification, or sanctification, doctrines that can only be believed. The resurrection is a thing, a something, an "it." It is the foundation of faith, and this faith is first of all what God did in Jesus. So, we put on hold all the first-person singular pronouns *I*, *me*, and *my* found in Luther's explanations, and we let the creed stand on its own merits.

¹ Richard Lammert serves as Technical Services and Systems Librarian at CTSFW.

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All this has implications for how we celebrate Easter. So, the first hymn of the day is “Christians, to the Paschal Victim” (*LSB* 460).³ In his resurrection, Jesus is not simply a resuscitated cold corpse, but in his being raised from the dead, he remains, as St. Paul says (1 Cor 5:7), the *pascha*, the “Passover lamb,” the perfect and final sacrifice whom God received as an atonement for sin and gives to us as a sacrament in Holy Communion. Then comes the hymn “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today” (*LSB* 457). Translated from the Latin *Surrexit Christus Hodie*, one hymnologist describes it as a hymn “mak[ing] no pretensions to greatness . . . and yet obviously [it] has a certain appeal.”⁴ And its appeal is that it is all about God. This is the Lord’s doing and it is marvelous in our eyes. It is God’s triumphant holy day. What divine law required, divine love provided; and all this happened within the trinitarian mystery, which is what God is all about. Condemnation and love is the necessary distinction by which Satan was conquered and the sting of death extracted from our mortal bodies.

Easter is first and last about God, but Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher had a point in saying that religion comes from us and is about us. Socrates put it like this: “Know thyself.” We look at ourselves, and we find the mind with malfunctioning gray cells, muscles softening with age, ligaments tightening up and bent over, bones that no longer respond to rigorous exercise. Protein drinks of horrid-tasting greens cannot turn the clock back to what we once thought we were or advance us to what we would still like to be. If Easter means that the crucified body of Jesus is transformed into a glorified body, then in the days after Easter we discover our perishable bodies are ill-equipped to put on the imperishable. Easter ecstasy is muted by a face-to-face encounter with the FairHaven Funeral Home as you exit the campus onto North Clinton. Ash Wednesday is the only reality: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19; cf. Eccl 3:20). After that, “Man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets” (Eccl 12:5), but to the testament of death, Solomon adds this codicil: “And the [soul] returns to God who gave it” (Eccl 12:7). Going to God is not the resurrection, but it is not without its advantages. Yet Ecclesiastes is the not the last book in the Bible. God has more to say.

The grave is not our eternal home but only a stop on the way, and the song of the mourners is not the last hymn of the day. Jesus takes the ground once cursed with weeds for Adam’s sin, and by his resurrection he cultivates it into a fertile soil into which our perishing bodies are planted as the seeds from which our resurrected

³ The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006).

⁴ Frank Colquhoun, *Hymns That Live* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 106–107. The author was Canon Residentiary and Vice Dean of Norwich Cathedral, United Kingdom.

bodies will spring forth with supernatural splendor. In the valley of the dry bones, Ezekiel described how this would happen. Bones, muscles, and ligaments will be tied back together, but it will not happen with the excruciating detail as the prophet said. On this point, Paul got it right. The trumpet shall sound, and in the twinkling of an eye, our deteriorated bodies will be reassembled (cf. 1 Cor 15:52), all in less time that it took God to shape Adam from the clay. We will no longer look like the man who was sentenced to return to the dust from which he was taken, but we will look like the man from heaven, Jesus Christ, whose image he implanted in us in Baptism when we shared in his death.

Some scholars argue that the account of Christ's transfiguration should have been included in the accounts of the resurrection and not in the middle of the Gospels. They have a point. Transfiguration really is a foretaste of Easter. Bodies in the state of deterioration longing to be released from the perishable will put on the imperishable, transfigured glory of Christ's resurrection. It will be a transubstantiation of death into life, a transformation of corruption into incorruption, a transfiguration of the perishable into the imperishable, but it will not be a homogenization. Each of us as individuals will not be blended into a divine nothingness and lost. Each of us will retain our own identity. Just as the light of the sun, moon, and stars differs in intensity and specific color, so the glory of the saints will differ from one another according to the works Christ did in them while on earth.

All that said, Easter is not about our faith or our future. It is about Christ and Christ alone. His empty tomb is the only pulpit, and the only sermon is "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay" (Matt 28:5-6). The details come later.

David P. Scaer