

“The greatest evangelist since St Paul”

Tributes continue to pour in from all over the world, testifying to the life and witness of Dr Billy Graham, preacher and evangelist, who died at his home in North Carolina on February 21st 2018, aged 99 years. Some eulogies begin: “I became a Christian through the ministry of Dr Billy Graham.” By the grace of God, such words could also be my testimony.

Born on 7th November 1918 and reared on a dairy farm in North Carolina, the young Billy Graham attended a Reformed Presbyterian Church and later became a “Youth for Christ” evangelist and a Baptist preacher. His ministry was launched in these islands in 1954 when for three months he preached in London at Harringay arena to an audience of 11,400 people and to 120,000 people at Wembley stadium. A hostile British Press quickly mellowed as the evangelist won friends and influenced people by the charity and clarity of his gospel preaching.

Gifted with good looks and a resonant soft-spoken voice that had international appeal, an estimated 210 million people in 185 countries heard him preach directly while many millions more were reached through radio, television and instantaneous live-link technology.

He crossed boundaries for Christ. He led the way in evangelical inter-church co-operation and hesitated to hold campaigns in countries where the invitation was not from all national churches, including Roman Catholics. Massed choirs were drawn from different churches. He visited the Pope, to the discomfort of some. Converts were encouraged to choose a bible-believing church to attend. He confronted racism and segregation and was known to have removed the ropes that divided black and white members of his audience. In South Africa in 1973 he said “Christianity is not a white man’s religion and don’t let anyone tell you it’s white or black. Christ belongs to all people.” He preached in North Korea and the Soviet Union and met their leaders saying “I want to go as their friend.” Dr Graham gave critical support to numerous American Presidents and dined with the Queen. Yet, like his Saviour, “the common people heard him gladly.” 60,000 people stood in the mud and rain at the Methodist Cliff College, Derbyshire in 1954 to hear him preach as the sun began to shine. During the Troubles he famously walked the “peace line” in Belfast in 1972 wearing a doctor’s white coat.

The “Billy Graham Evangelistic Association” trained millions of us to witness for Christ and to be evangelistic counsellors. His campaigns, film ministry and satellite broadcasts permitted Christians to be inviters. People flocked to hear such words as: “The Bible says that God loves you and you can be born again.” They got up out of their seats and went forward to receive Christ as their Saviour. Follow-up classes for converts were well-resourced for he noted: “Becoming a Christian is the work of a moment; being a Christian is the work of a lifetime.”

His personal and family life was above reproach. “Christians should be known in their neighbourhoods or places of business as honest people” was his message and accordingly his financial details, both personal and organisational had accounts independently audited and published and his stipend was modest.

Listening to him, we felt that Christ’s great commission to “make disciples of all nations” could be achievable. In 1974, together with John Stott he launched the “Lausanne Covenant” which linked evangelism and social compassion, good news and goodness. He founded “Samaritan’s Purse” which continues as a relief and development ministry.

In his life he was lovingly supported by his wife Ruth who predeceased him. They called him “God’s ambassador.” Through death he has been promoted to higher service. The words of his favoured hymn and signature call to Christ are surely apt in death as in life: “Just as I am, Thy love unknown has broken every barrier down. Now to be Thine, yea Thine alone, O Lamb of God, I come!” Ken Todd