A FUTURE BILLY GRAHAM?

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Category: Observations

Without doubt, Billy Graham was one of the most important, if notÂ *the* most important evangelical figures of the second half of the 20th century. It is estimated that he preached to over 200 million people, was instrumental in founding the magazine Christianity Today and the international Lausanne Movement. There is a good, short obituary here, if you haven't read one, yet.

However, while admiring Billy Graham and being very grateful for his life and ministry, I firmly believe that we don't need someone like him to step into his shoes. This isn't a criticism of Graham, he was a child of his time and acted in a way that was appropriate for his setting, but times have moved on and so must we. I'd like to suggest that there are three ways in which a ministry like Billy Graham's would be inappropriate for today.

He Was High Profile: Profiles don't come much higher than Billy Graham's. He met with presidents, dictators and starts of sport, stage and screen. His rally's were front page news and broadcast all over the world. He used this status to preach Christ and no one could be uncertain about what he stood for. However, today the media are much more intrusive, more hostile and less deferential than they were in Graham's heyday. In today's climate, Graham himself, not his message, not his preaching would be the story. Every stumble and every indiscretion (and even a man like Graham made some) would be magnified and used to undermine his message. If it was at all possible to paint him as a hypocrite, then he would be painted as a hypocrite. The high profile that served the cause of Christ in the fifties and sixties would be more of a stumbling block today.

He Used Contemporary Methods: Graham took old-fashioned revival meetings and adapted them for a televisual and radio age. Today's media landscape has changed massively since his time. A preacher could be broadcast at primetime on the BBC, but lots of people would be watching football on Sky, kittens on YouTube and repeats of Top Gear on Dave. It is difficult, near impossible, for one person to capture the media landscape in the way that someone like Billy Graham could.

He Was American: (this one might get some complaints) when Billy Graham started his International ministry in the late 1940s, the majority of evangelical Christians were found in the Western World, today that is no longer so. As I've written numerous times, the Christian centre of gravity has shifted. However, much of the power, the money and the influence in the broader evangelical world remains in the US - hence the baleful effect of TV prosperity teaching across the world. Too much influence from one country, culture and language is not helpful to the growth of authentic world Christianity. The church (especially, the Western church) needs influences and encouragements from all corners of the globe if it is to grow as it should.

In a diverse, multilingual, multi-media world, the need is not for one towering figure like Billy Graham, but for a myriad of people, fired up by his passion and his convictions about the Scriptures. We need Singaporeans, Ghanaians, Peruvians and Hungarians who know how to navigate the world of the internet, who can faithfully proclaim the gospel in their language and cultural setting while still encouraging and challenging people in other parts of the world. The church isÂ *polycentric* and we

need ambassadors and leaders from across the globe, many of them flying under the radar while reaching thousands.