

Is it possible for a preacher to be too popular?

By Chris Ayers

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The memory of that night is still vivid: George Beverly Shea's strong voice hitting all the notes in "How Great Thou Art." Billy Graham preaching about salvation and the end of the world, the invitation being extended to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, the choir softly singing "Just As I Am," people streaming down the aisles making the decision to become a Christian or to rededicate their lives. Graham appearing on the television screen to speak to those of us watching the crusade in our homes to encourage us to make a profession of faith, and me as a little 9-year-old boy publicly saying I wanted to turn my life over to the Lord.

My mother was ecstatic with my decision. It seemed she called everyone in the whole world to tell the good news of what I had done. I will forever be grateful to Billy Graham for introducing me, leading me, to Christ.

As we anticipate Graham's coming to Charlotte for his last crusade, many people are having similar sentiments of thanksgiving for his life and ministry.

Billy Graham, in an era of much televangelist fraud, has been a shining example of integrity. He has been more concerned with our souls than with our pocketbooks. He really cares about us. Unlike others, this evangelist always makes it a point to encourage individuals to get involved in a local church. Yes, much is to be admired about this favorite son of Charlotte.

Despite his deserved accolades, I find myself comparing our response to Billy Graham—and to other popular preachers, such as Charles Stanley—with responses to Jeremiah, Peter and Jesus by people of their time. Billy Graham has a highway named after him. He will be awarded the congressional gold medal. He has been invited to the White House by presidents on numerous occasions. The religious establishment drools over Graham.

In contrast, when Jeremiah preached in the temple the priests and the prophets and all the people said, "You shall die." It must have been "a killer of a sermon." When Peter preached, the government authorities arrested him and told him to shut up. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the religious establishment plotted to end his life. Government officials did, in fact, order his execution.

Why is Billy Graham so popular? Why were Jeremiah, Peter and Jesus so unpopular?

While we do not want to encourage a victim mentality among ministers, maybe anytime a preacher is popular we should wonder about it. On the other hand, I like what Grandpa says in Olive Ann Burns' "Cold Sassy Tree": "When Jesus said, take up your cross and follow me, he didn't mean for us to nail our hands to a board."

The church does not need Christians, ministers or not, “nailing their hands to boards.” The church does, however, need prophets—whose messages are not as popular as the messages of evangelists. Sermons about the salvation of individuals, judgment of personal sins, the coming end of the world, God’s assured victory . . . yes, those themes need to be preached, especially by people like myself and liberal Christians who have conveniently ignored them.

The hard prophetic themes must not be neglected either. Like Jeremiah, we must tell the religious self-assured they are not as saved as they think they are. To those interested only in self-protection, a ticket into heaven, and who are not committed to helping the poor, we must join the prophet and preach about not oppressing the alien, the orphan and the widow (Jeremiah 6:4-6). Like Peter, we must preach even that which is disturbing to our government. No civil religion for us. And we must remember that Jesus seemed to save his harshest words for the “big Bible believers of his day.”

Obviously, and for good reasons, the religious establishment and the ruling government did not like what Jesus, Peter or Jeremiah preached. They preached about the principalities and the powers. For them sin was not only personal, it was corporate. They talked about the end of the world, but they talked much more about how God expects us to live on this earth than about our next destination. They talked about the impotence of the religious practices of their day.

Of course, sermons preached along those lines will not get you invited to the White House or get you a highway with your name on it or have much of the Christian world drooling after you. Preaching in this manner will not get you taken out to lunch after church by congregants or get you a suit to add to your wardrobe or a week at a church member’s beach house. Such themes may end a career or, even worse, a life. But if the Church is to be relevant and faithful, it must not neglect these unpopular themes.

Perhaps as we give thanks for the life and ministry of Billy Graham, we should also give attention to those voices who unsettle us to the very core of our being, to those people we frankly would not welcome into our city or our churches.

There is more to being a Christian than hearing what we want to hear. Can you and your church tolerate unpopular preaching? Have we organized our churches so that prophetic preaching is highly unlikely?

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