COOPERATIVE EVANGELISM AND THE DOCTRINE OF SEPARATION

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The emergence of Evangelist Billy Graham in the last half of the 20th century has caused many to examine the issue of cooperative evangelism as it relates to the Biblical doctrine of separation. Although cooperative evangelism is certainly nothing new, the acceptance or rejection of the methods employed by Graham and a host of lesser-known evangelists has to a large degree become a defining point in determining a professing Christian's view of the holiness of God and the purity of His church. The subject at hand involves several Biblical principles, including the commands to: 1) "go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature..." (Mark 16:15); 2) have love for and unity with our brethren as the sign Christ says will mark us as His disciples (John 13:35); 3) be separate from disobedient brethren and unbelievers (II Corinthians 6:14-17; II Thessalonians 3:6). All of these principles must be obeyed if we are to be servants of the Lord with whom He is pleased.

Biblical Cooperation in the Past

Throughout history, particularly in the United States, there have been many instances of united effort to preach the Gospel of Christ. Indeed the "Great Awakening" and the "Second Great Awakening" cut across denominational lines. Many instances are recorded of cooperation between leaders in various denominations. Ian Murray, writing in his book *Revivals and Revivalism*, states: "As was seen in the time of Edwards, Whitefield and Davies, one mark of an outpouring of the Spirit of God is the presence of a stronger catholicity of spirit among believers." At another place, Murray writes: "True revivals rarely remain within denominational boundaries."

As the westward migration began at the end of the eighteenth century, even more cooperation was seen. Peter Marshall and David Manuel, in their popular book *From Sea to Shining Sea*, describe the "camp meetings" in western Kentucky in which ministers from various denominations would preach. Although some questionable practices surfaced, there appears to be a genuine united effort. Francis Asbury, the Methodist Bishop, recorded in his *Journal and Letters* his reflections on a meeting held in a Presbyterian Church in Kentucky in October of 1800: "Methodists and Presbyterians united their labours...mercy flowed in abundant streams of salvation to perishing sinners." In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, no evangelist was more prominent than Dwight L. Moody, who preached to huge crowds and received wide support from virtually all Protestant denominations. Where Rev. Charles Finney, beginning in the 1830s, put great emphasis upon human ingenuity and initiation in converting souls, Moody appeared to give glory to the Lord. It is important to note that such Reformed leaders as the Bonar brothers in Scotland and Charles Haddon Spurgeon in England, although not approving of all aspects of Moody's theology, gave him their warm support. Spurgeon, who ably defended the doctrine of separation from apostasy, appeared to be quite ready to lend support to Moody's endeavors. Even J. Gresham Machen, the stalwart Presbyterian defender of orthodoxy, allowed

room for cooperation with others who deviated from the Reformed faith in certain regards. In his book *Christianity and Liberalism*, Machen writes:

> A Calvinist is constrained to regard the Arminian theology as a serious impoverishment of the Scriptural doctrine of divine grace.... Yet here again, true evangelical fellowship is possible between those who hold, with regard to some exceedingly important matters, sharply opposing views.

Of course Machen was not one to tolerate doctrinal sloppiness and insisted on a clear and accurate presentation of the Gospel. This is paramount in any evangelistic endeavor.

Unbiblical Cooperation Today

As has briefly been shown, various levels of cooperation have been encouraged and blessed by men of God through various periods of our country's history. Some may wonder then what is the difference between the level of cooperation seen in previous centuries and that seen in the cooperative evangelistic endeavors of our day. Up until the 20th century, virtually all denominations held to the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Christ, and other cardinal doctrines of God's Word. Although there were important differences which cannot be trivialized, the situation as it exists today, with many in the mainline denominations denying these major doctrines, was not an issue. Such groups as the Unitarians did exist, but they were not accepted as orthodox.

The present day situation is not limited to the ministry of one man, but it certainly is represented by the practices of Evangelist Billy Graham. His influence has been enormous, and he has forged the path followed by most evangelicals of our day. Graham left his strict adherence to Biblical teaching on separation and now includes men on his sponsoring committees who openly deny the plain teachings of God's Word. This has been well documented in other places, but one example will suffice here. Bishop James Pike was on the platform and delivered a prayer at Graham's Detroit Crusade in 1960. Graham also preached in Pike's pulpit and had various joint appearances with him through the years. Pike's denial of God's Word was well known. Even as recently as this year, Pike was used as an example in a secular magazine for his rejection of orthodoxy (*Newsweek*, February 26, 1996). The article reported: "Bishop James Pike, who died in 1969, rejected orthodox Christianity (he dismissed the Trinity as a "committee god")...." Second John tells us that if a man denies the doctrine of Christ you are to "receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed. For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds."

It is hard to imagine a Jonathan Edwards or even a Dwight Moody accepting such a man as a sponsor! However, when it became clear that Graham had abandoned his separatist stand in the 1950s, it was not long until one of his supporters attempted to justify the change. In 1958, Dr. Robert O. Ferm published a book entitled *Cooperative Evangelism: Is Billy Graham right or wrong?* In it he attempts to justify from Scripture the practice of including these unbelievers in cooperative evangelistic endeavors. Dr. Gary Cohen, presently president of Cohen Theological Seminary, wrote a masterful rebuttal to Dr. Ferm's arguments. It would do the interested reader

well to read both Dr. Ferm's and Dr. Cohen's books. A major reason for this shift we see in much of modern-day evangelism can undoubtedly be seen in the understanding of what the Bible teaches about revival. As mentioned before, Charles Finney, in the early part of the nineteenth century, rejected the Calvinistic understanding of revival which placed it entirely in the hands of God. Finney declared: "WILLING to obey Christ is to be a Christian. When an individual actually chooses to obey God, he is a Christian." This is in marked contrast to the beliefs of Jonathan Edwards, a major leader in the first Great Awakening. Edwards wrote:

> There is an absolute and universal dependence of the redeemed on God. The nature and contrivance of our redemption is such, that the redeemed are in every thing directly, immediately, and entirely dependent on God: They are dependent on Him for all, and are dependent on Him every way.

Finney thought that human persuasion and innovation could bring men to accept Christ. Much of the results were in the planning and execution, rather than being a "surprising work of God," as Edwards put it. Over the last 150 years, this vital change has permeated the understanding of many of God's people. Although Graham speaks of the work of God's Spirit, he also makes it clear that "...God has never designated anyone to go to hell because man does have that free choice, that free will" (*The Charlotte Observer*, September 25, 1996). *The Charlotte Observer*, March 20, 1996, states concerning Graham:

> With rare exception, he does not tackle theological questions or deal with issues that divide or distinguish denominations from one another, lest his comments disrupt the peaceful ecumenical cooperation he needs for a successful crusade or conference.

Graham's own *Christianity Today* (November 13, 1995), states:

> To others, whatever theological difficulties may be involved for contemporary Protestantism, [Rev.] Graham's ministry demonstrates the pragmatic success of his evangelistic message.

The host of celebrities, race car drivers, rock musicians, etc., which Graham employs in his crusades is a clear example of the use of human means to attempt to convert the lost. The Charlotte Observer (March 20, 1996), in discussing this use of human means writes:

> By that time, said Graham biographer Bill Martin, the evangelist will have driven home one of his ministry's central points: 'Use whatever techniques to hook 'em in, then punch 'em with the gospel,' said Martin. 'Whatever it takes to get their attention.'

This philosophy is being used by a host of new evangelists including Graham's son Franklin and Greg Laurie of Harvest Ministries in California. When man depend upon these innovative means, it is not long before he must compromise the Biblical principle of separation from worldliness (I John 2:15) and separation from unbelief and compromise. The pragmatic soon becomes preeminent. "We can reach so many more people if...." Certainly, including people and events which appeal to the flesh are going to attract a bigger crowd, but is it pleasing to God? Certainly, involving influential men on the Crusade committees who deny the Word of God will

increase one's influence and perhaps draw more people, but is it a policy of obedience to God's Word? A true evangelistic endeavor can only be conducted by those who love Christ and his Word. Unregenerate men have no place in such a work. J. Gresham Machen wrote in *Christianity and Liberalism* that

> ...Christian service consists primarily in the propagation of a message, and specifically Christian fellowship exists only between those to whom the message has become the very basis of all life.

The oft-stated maxim applies so clearly: "God's work must be done in God's way in order to receive God's blessing." Dr. Charles H. Spurgeon, in his lectures on soulwinning, commented on the call of Christ: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). Spurgeon states:

> I understand this, first, in this sense: Be separate unto Christ.... We are called most distinctly to come out from among the ungodly, and to be separate, and not to touch the unclean thing. We cannot be fishers of men if we remain among men in the same element with them. Fish will not be fishers. The sinner will not convert the sinner.... The worldly Christian will not convert the world.

Elsewhere, Spurgeon speaks of liberal ministers such as Graham regularly welcomes on his platform as "traitors," and states: "They have given the people the name of the gospel, but the gospel itself has evaporated in their hands." Rather than advancing the true Gospel, Spurgeon says that such men are a hindrance to soul-winning. Yet, those making "decisions" at Graham's crusades are regularly sent to churches where they will be fed by such men.

Conclusion

The servant of God who seeks to be faithful to Christ will have love for lost souls and for his brothers in Christ. However, he must preach the Word faithfully, in accordance with Scripture and trust God for the results. When we see salvation as coming from Christ alone, we no longer have the need to be preoccupied by the results. Our witness may be to large crowds, or it may just as easily be one-to-one or in small groups. Our comfort will lie in being busy doing what Christ commanded: "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15), and trusting Him for the results. 📖

> *See Mr. Gsell's booklet* The Legacy of Billy Graham: The Accommodation of Truth to Error in the Evangelical Church *for a compelling look at the ministry of Rev. Billy Graham, published by Fundamental Presbyterian Publications, P.O. Box 26164, Charlotte, NC, 28221.* —Ed