

## **In Defense of Billy Graham**

**By Dan Jensen (2023)**

(In order to fully benefit from this essay, I recommend reading through my “works for beginners” first. They can be found on my website.)

Because, for the most part, Billy Graham is so revered throughout the Conservative Evangelical community, many within the church are very unaware of the fact that he held some really bad and dangerous views. This had led some in the church to begin to act like they have made some new and shocking discovery, and to assert that Graham was actually a heretic at the end of the day. One of the biggest culprits of this is Doctrinal Watchdog (DW). I don't know the name of the man behind that YouTube channel. But, he has made many videos to this effect. I like a lot of what DW does; I consider him a brother in Christ. I also appreciate his no-compromise style. We actually have a lot in common. With that said, he is plainly not a very scholarly individual, as his videos often lack a great deal of nuance. He often seems ignorant of some very basic points of church history, especially historical theology. And that is why I believe he is ultimately mistaken about Graham.

I want to be clear that I too share the concerns of many regarding a great deal of the theology of Graham. I am not criticizing the basic assessment that he did indeed hold to some positions that came frighteningly close to heresy. Unfortunately though, this is actually a lot more common with many of the heroes of the faith than most true Christians realize. I get that this is a disheartening realization, but it is the reality nonetheless. Some of the most orthodox people on the planet, today and throughout history, were not terribly nice, so much so that sometimes we have to question their salvation. And some of the most loving, godly, and influential Christians in history, repeatedly and in many areas, put their toes right up to the line of heresy. The question I want to examine in this essay is: Did Graham ever fully cross that line. As the title to my essay suggests, and as

I make clear in my work on church history on my website, I am convinced that he never did.

There are a number of secondary issues that Graham embraced where I strenuously disagree with him. He was definitely no Calvinist, he was Semi-Dispensational, he was never very firm or clear where he landed on the creation issues. All of these points, and others, I find frustrating, but I would not say that they are outright dangerous positions. However, there are 3 primary areas where Graham is criticized for either being a heretic, or for coming very close to that realm. The first is his views on abortion. The second is his views on ecumenism. The third is his views on universalism. We will examine each of these in turn.

In Graham's earlier years, he was plainly not a staunch opponent of abortion. However, people need to understand the historical context here. As I've said in many of my other writings, abortion has only become a matter of absolute orthodoxy in very recent history because of the overwhelming science in favor of the fact that human life begins at conception. You may ask, "Wait a second, are you telling me that the Bible does not teach this clearly?" I think it does, but not to the point of it being an essential on its own. There is no question that the Bible teaches that God is shaping our human lives in the womb. Thus, at some point in the womb, a baby becomes present according to the Scriptures. The view that a baby is only present at birth is heretical in my estimation. And I do believe strongly that there is enough evidence to say that the Bible teaches that a full human being is present at the moment of conception. I do not believe that this evidence rises to the level of an essential doctrine. People may not like that fact, but that is my position and it is and was the position of many very godly and orthodox Protestant theologians.

It is true that most theologians, including Protestant ones, have taught that human life begins at conception or shortly thereafter. But, from the Scriptures alone, there has been debate throughout church history. Because of this, many Protestant theologians felt that the dogmatic position that we *must* say that life begins at conception was a

Catholic doctrine. And it needs to be understood that for most of Christian history, most Christian women were not seeking to have abortions. Having children was seen as a mark of God's tremendous blessing by both Catholics and Protestants for centuries. Even further, most babies did not live past infancy. Hence, most Protestant and Catholic families would have been horrified at the thought of trying to end a pregnancy, even those Protestants who were not sure when precisely life begins in the womb. Such people wanted as many children as possible because they did not know how many of those children would survive until adulthood. Hence, the question of when exactly life began was not a super pressing one in the church for a very long time.

Now, this is not to say abortion was not an issue at all. Many ungodly people (and not just women; many men pressured women) did desire, seek out, and receive abortions. This was very common when people committed adultery, fornication, or prostitution. But, both sides (Catholic and Protestant), fully agreed that all such abortions were extremely wicked regardless of where one landed on the question of when exactly life begins in the womb. It was not until the 20th century that this question became more controversial within orthodox Protestant circles. Because of vaccines, babies were surviving much longer. Also, cultural changes made it so that most people no longer viewed children as little workers from a very young age. The concept of "childhood" was becoming more and more in vogue, especially in the United States. Hence, now having many children was becoming very hard on many families, both Catholic and Protestant. Most were surviving into adulthood, and they were now a major financial and energy burden, rather than being assets to the family on those fronts.

Because of this, many orthodox Protestant theologians were not sure if it was ok for parents to abort a pregnancy early on in the pregnancy or not for the sake of the family. I want to be very, very clear here when I say that none of these orthodox Protestant theologians were ever saying that it was ok to murder human life, infant in the womb or otherwise. The question was when does life truly begin in the womb, something that had been debated by orthodox Protestant theologians for some time. And these theologians had no idea about how Pagan our culture would become, and how quickly. Most of our

nation at that time was culturally Liberal Protestant. Most white suburban Americans went to Liberal Protestant churches as a symbol of them being good American citizens. And while those churches had very strong disagreements with the true church, Evangelicalism and Liberal Protestants were at that time in agreement on most social issues.

Hence, most of these orthodox Protestant theologians were only envisioning women having abortions very early on in their pregnancies, when in their minds (both the women and these theologians) the embryo was not human, and only rarely and after these women had already had many children. That was the debated issue within the church. Therefore, it is not right to look at those godly theologians through our current lens and circumstances. And Graham did side, for a time, with the theologians who tentatively thought abortion could be a helpful tool for some godly families. There is no evidence that Graham continued to hold to this position after things drastically changed in our culture. Hence, while his position was admittedly deeply regrettable, it was not heretical.

Now, I understand that my detractors on this point may point to the key prooftexts. I am in agreement with them that these texts seem to be teaching that life begins at conception. However, I'm sorry, none of these texts, either taken alone, or collectively, prove beyond all doubt that this is what the Scriptures are teaching. I also know that many of my detractors may point out that much of the science we have today was available and known by the mid-20th century. This is true of most of it, but not all of it, especially the science of genetics. Further, even much of the science that was available to the scientific community had not fully trickled down to the public by that time. We must understand that information moved much more slowly in previous generations, in ways that are almost unfathomable to younger people today. Hence, even many scholars, such as theologians; historians; political analysts; sociologists; psychologists; philosophers; etc.; were either unaware of much of this science, or did not fully understand all of it, well into the 20th century. This is one of the key reasons *Roe v Wade* was able to get through the Supreme Court. Much of the country, including much

of the conservative and religious portion of the country, were not opposed to abortion in the early weeks of pregnancy.

As time went on, the science has definitively shown that human life begins at the moment of conception. Hence, to kill a baby in the womb at any stage is murder. The Bible is unambiguously clear about murder. Hence, to defend murder is heresy. That is why the question of abortion today has become a matter of absolute orthodoxy and heresy within the true church. But, again, there is no evidence that Graham held a pro-choice position in his later life. Even further, the Paganism of our culture has caused abortions at any stage of pregnancy to run absolutely rampant. Those orthodox Protestant theologians I described above would have been shocked and horrified by what is going on today even without our current science. They never could have imagined such debauchery in our nation. Many of them lived to see much of this develop and deeply repented for and vehemently repudiated their past views. I wholeheartedly agree that Graham should have been more vocal about doing the same, but in his later life he generally refused to get overly political as he believed he had been too political in his younger years.

The second key area where Graham was far too close to being heretical, is over his views on ecumenism. Graham pretty much accepted almost anyone who claimed to be a "Christian." He accepted Catholics, Eastern Orthodox adherents, and most Liberal Protestants. I agree that this is very, very frustrating, but it is not heretical. It is only heretical to say, as do many Progressive Christians today, that there is basically no such thing as heresy. There is no evidence that Graham ever went that far. Plus, he seemed to be very naive about just how liberal many Liberal Protestants were. He seemed to think that most held to the basics of the Nicene Creed. And to some extent, this was understandable as Liberal Protestants today and back then often love to say that they hold to the Nicene Creed and thus no one can accuse them of heresy. It was/is one of the sharpest tools they have in their wicked tool belts by which they often confuse true Christians. The fact of the matter is though, that the Nicene Creed does not spell out every essential of the faith. It does spell out many of them and most of the most

important ones, but it is not an exhaustive document and it was never intended to be one.

Further, many Liberal Protestants say that they believe in the Nicene Creed, but when pressed it becomes clear that it is just lip-service. Many will say that they believe in the “tradition” of the creed, but then define that in all sorts of different ways, depending on the Liberal Protestant making this claim. Some say that it is merely a beautiful expression of what most “Christians” have believed throughout church history and so we should still recite it in church. What?! How on earth does that qualify as actually *believing* the creed. But such is the deception that is so common to the vile religion of Liberal Protestantism. Finally, many Liberal Protestants, both today and back then, do not hesitate to say that they do not believe in this creed. Hence, when so many Liberal Protestants claim that almost all Liberal Protestants hold to the creed, they are fibbing. A huge number do not. Graham, though, seemed to take many of them at their word. Thus, he disagreed with them on many key points, even the more “conservative” ones, but he refused to say that they were heretical.

As I’ve said many times, it is only heretical to fully embrace a heresy, it is not heretical to fail to fully call a heresy a heresy. If that is confusing, I clear this up on pages 95-96 of my *Doctrine: Going Deeper* (part 1). With all of that said, we should absolutely lament Graham’s views here, but they were not heretical. In fact, even such a towering theologian as Hodge was even more careless on this point. He pretty much said that anyone who said that Jesus was God, should be considered orthodox. That is a truly egregious position to take. And yet very few Conservative Evangelical leaders, including myself, including the vast majority of the most conservative Reformed ones, would call Hodge heretical. Thus, it is not consistent or fair to call Graham one over this point. If DW or others wish to say that Hodge was in fact a heretic, that’s fine, but they should be aware of this.

The third and final issue concerns Graham’s universalist tendencies towards the end of his life. There is scant evidence that he struggled with this problem before the very tail

end of his life. That alone should give people more pause. While Graham certainly seemed to be very lucid in his latter years, we cannot be certain of the degree to which this was actually the case. This fact alone should cause us to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Further, there is no evidence, none whatsoever, that Graham ever fully embraced any form of the full heresy of universalism. There is no evidence that he denied hell or its eternality. There is no evidence that he said that anyone could ever receive eternal life apart from faith in the biblical Christ. Even in many of his worst interviews towards the end of his life, the ones that are often most used against him, he often made statements that would mitigate against us coming to such conclusions. Graham seemed to have come to the conclusion late in life, and again, to what extent this was actually reflective of his true heart is hard to say, that many (if not most) people around the world actually did believe in the biblical Christ, they simply did not realize it. This is an atrociously bad doctrine in my estimation. But, it is not heretical and it is unfortunately held to by a lot more true believers than many in the church realize.

Before you start questioning how sound I am personally on this point for not fully condemning this position as heretical, allow me to say a few key things here. Most Christians throughout church history (myself included) have not believed that only those that placed conscious and knowledgeable faith in Jesus Christ were saved. Most have believed that many (if not all) infants (if they die in that state) and the severely mentally disabled are saved. Many have believed that children will be saved if they die as children. Most believe in an age or time of accountability when this will no longer be the case. If you don't want to believe in these doctrines, that is fine, I respect that. If you want to believe that they are heretical, again, that is fine, but you should realize how radical that position is. You are saying that the vast majority of Christians today and throughout church history were not actually saved and were in fact heretics.

Graham and many others throughout church history have simply taken this controversial point and extended it to those who have not heard the gospel or who in their minds

have never *really* heard the gospel because of cultural pressures. They are adamant, just like the Christians discussed in the previous paragraph would be with infants, young children, and the severely mentally disabled, that *if* such people were to *truly* hear the gospel, they would immediately receive Jesus in a conscious sense because they have already received Him deep down. I passionately disagree with them regarding mentally capable adults, but I cannot call their position fully heretical.

Now I know that DW and others may say that I'm the one who is being inconsistent because I would not be shy about condemning the views of Osteen on this point. The two are not comparable though. First of all, I am not entirely positive that Osteen is fully heretical here. He could take a very similar view to Graham. With that said, Osteen is unquestionably heretical on many other grounds. Hence, I have no reason to give him the benefit of the doubt when he has repeatedly made universalistic statements. Graham spent most of his life preaching the biblical gospel to millions of people all over the world. Osteen has spent most of his life preaching his false gospel to millions of people, seen all over the world. One deserves the benefit of the doubt and the other does not. Plain and simple.

Because of all that I have laid out, I still believe that Graham was a true Christian hero and was one of the most influential leaders in the church in all of church history. That does not change the fact that I wholly agree that he did hold many views that were repugnant.

For further resources on these topics, please see the extensive bibliography I provided at the end of my *A False Kind of Christianity*.