



February 15, 2001

You may have heard about Billy Graham's surprising comments in an interview with Robert Schuller a few years ago. Here's a partial transcript of what he said:

SCHULLER: Tell me, what do you think is the future of Christianity?

GRAHAM: Well, Christianity and being a true believer, you know, I think there's the Body of Christ. This comes from all the Christian groups around the world, outside the Christian groups. I think everybody that loves Christ, or knows Christ, whether they're conscious of it or not, they're members of the Body of Christ. And I don't think that we're going to see a great sweeping revival that will turn the whole world to Christ at any time. I think James answered that; the Apostle James in the first council in Jerusalem, when he said that God's purpose for this age is to call out a people for His name. And that's what God is doing today, He's calling people out of the world for His name, whether they come from the Muslim world, or the Buddhist world, or the Christian world or the non-believing world, they are members of the Body of Christ because they've been called by God. They may not even know the name of Jesus but they know in their hearts that they need something that they don't have, and they turn to the only light that they have, and I think that they are saved, and that they're going to be with us in heaven.

SCHULLER: What...what I hear you saying is that it's possible for Jesus Christ to come into human hearts and soul and life, even if they've been born in darkness and have never had exposure to the Bible. Is that a correct interpretation of what you're saying?

GRAHAM: Yes, it is, because I believe that. I've met people in various parts of the world in tribal situations that they have never seen a Bible or heard about a Bible, and never heard of Jesus, but they've

believed in their hearts that there was a God, and they've tried to live a life that was quite apart from the surrounding community in which they lived.

SCHULLER: ...I'm so thrilled to hear you say this. There's a wideness in God's mercy.

GRAHAM: There is. There definitely is.

Based on what he told Robert Schuller, Billy Graham's theology includes some unorthodox views. He claims that the Body of Christ encompasses non-believers and that God's mercy is wide enough to encompass people who don't follow Christ. Apparently, Graham believes that God will extend His grace to people who've never worshiped Christ, but who believe in a supreme being and adhere to a moral standard that rises above the level of the culture around them.

Obviously, Billy Graham's comments to Robert Schuller (and later to Larry King) have caused a great deal of confusion within the church. Can Billy Graham--who has spent his life preaching the gospel and evangelizing the lost--truly believe people can be saved without the gospel? Can a man whom God has used so mightily to bring people to salvation be confused about how salvation is truly attained?

Whether or not Billy Graham meant what he said to Robert Schuller is unclear. When asked to clarify similar statements he's made in the past, he's always reverted to the biblical view that salvation comes solely through a professed faith in Christ.

Regardless of where he stands, one thing is certain. Billy Graham is the highest profile evangelist of our time, and when he makes statements about the gospel, people listen. And because he wields so much influence, when those statements are unclear or contradictory, problems arise. The church must be clear about what it means to be saved.

Of course, ambiguity when it comes to the nature of salvation is nothing new. Throughout history, many church leaders and Bible scholars have muddied the water by arguing that God's mercy may be wide enough to save everyone who deserves to be saved, even those who don't acknowledge Christ as Lord. Billy Graham's comments, whether he meant them or not, reflect a misinterpretation of salvation that has plagued the church for centuries.

At first glance, it's not difficult to understand the attraction of a wider mercy view of the gospel. What could be wrong with believing that God will save more people? Why shouldn't He save devout, well intentioned Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims? And isn't it only fair for God to save men and women who recognize a creator, but have never had the opportunity to hear the gospel?

But while that kind of thinking may be attractive, it also brings disastrous repercussions for the church.

First, it robs the church of its purpose. From the beginning, Christ gave the church a clear mandate: spread the good news that He will forgive sin. But if we buy into the notion that God is going to save people who don't follow Christ, why bother sharing the gospel? If God's mercy extends to men and women who simply recognize that there is a God and try to live up to some kind of moral standard, why should we concern ourselves with telling people about Christ? If sinners don't need to accept Christ's pardon for sin, we don't need to evangelize the lost or send missionaries because people don't actually need to hear the gospel to be saved.

Second, it threatens the purity--and power--of the church by blurring the line between the Christian and the non-Christian. According to the Bible, a Christian is someone who has been delivered from his sin by trusting in Christ as his Lord and Savior. But if we accept a wider mercy view of the gospel, just about anyone can be called a Christian. A Buddhist or a Muslim may be a Christian. Atheists may actually be Christians too, in spite of themselves. And if the church starts welcoming non-Christians into the fold, how can we remain separate from the world? How can we point the lost to Christ and call sinners to repentance if we don't even agree on what it means to be saved, or that we need to be saved at all?

Finally, believing that God will save people who don't follow Christ attacks the inerrancy of Scripture. Christ's teaching on salvation is clear. The only way to the Father is through Him. He is the door, not one of many. Peter preached that there is no other name by which men can be saved. To believe that God will deliver men and women who have never named Christ is to make a liar out of Christ and His apostles. It undermines the very foundation on which we build our faith.

No doubt this false interpretation of Scripture is dangerous. Under the guise of attributing more mercy to our Lord, it threatens to remove our focus on evangelism, dilute the purity and power of the church, and undermine the inerrancy of the Bible.

And yet the notion that God will save people who don't believe the gospel continues to gain a foothold. Some church leaders have endorsed it, and many believers have begun embracing it. Perhaps it's even entered your church.

For that reason, I interrupted my study in the book of Luke to address this latest trend to blow through the evangelical world. I wanted to alert the members of my congregation of this false teaching and help prepare them to meet it head on, armed with biblical truth. I wanted them to be able to recognize the threat and keep it from coming in the door.

And because I believe this is such an important issue, I want you to hear that message as well. That's why we've put it on the enclosed tape titled, "Who Is Really a Christian?" In it, you'll discover the pervasive nature of this false teaching and hear biblical answers to the questions it raises. Most of all, I pray "Who Is Really a Christian?" will help you understand the truth about this false teaching and recognize the dangerous threat it poses.

I'm certain the material I cover on "Who Is Really a Christian?" will bring a fair share of criticism. The biblical truths which that message affirms may not be the most popular, but God never said His truth would be.

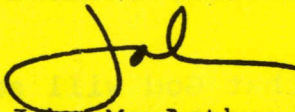
But as I've told you before, our goal at Grace to You has never been to become the largest or most popular ministry. We have always aimed to glorify God by teaching His Word in and out of season--by making verse-by-verse Bible teaching available to as many men and women like you as the Lord allows. When believers ask questions, we have labored to provide biblical answers. And when false teaching and wrong thinking have threatened to enter the church, we've endeavored to bar the door with God's truth.

I'm grateful for Grace Partners like you who share our conviction to teach the whole Word of God. Your generous support has played an important part in our ability to take a firm stand for truth.

And so I want to thank you for lending your voice to ours. Your gifts and prayers truly make this ministry possible. Every broadcast we air, every tape and book we give away, is the result of the sacrifices believers like you make. Thank you for giving so faithfully and praying so fervently. You're part of an amazing legacy. The impact you're helping us make is echoing into eternity.

May God's richest blessings be yours as you remain faithful to Him.

Yours in His service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John MacArthur', written in a cursive style.

John MacArthur
Pastor-Teacher

JFM/bdd