

## **CHRISTIANITY TODAY**

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## **Biblical Authority in Evangelism**

I had many doubts about the Bible. Now I see Scripture as a flame that melts away unbelief.

**BILLY GRAHAM** | OCTOBER 15, 1956



Image: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

**I**t is a sultry day with a hot breeze spinning little dust whirls down the winding road by the Sea of Galilee. There is an air of expectancy everywhere. We hear voices, raised to an excited pitch as friend calls a greeting to friend. Down every trail leading to Galilee little clusters of people make their way. Word has spread abroad that Jesus is returning to Galilee.

### **Thronging multitudes**

Suddenly He and His little band of followers come over the brow of a little hill on the Capernaum road. Following close behind swarms a vast multitude of people from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and beyond Jordan.

Quickly the word passes from mouth to mouth, "Jesus is coming." Crowds from Bethsaida and Capernaum soon appear and join the others. Together they follow the little band of thirteen men,

simply dressed in flowing robes. As they reach the summit of the hill, where gentle winds afford relief from the heat, Jesus stops and motions for all to sit down and rest.

### **The authoritative teacher**

The air is tense. It is a moment to be captured and held for eternity. The crowd hushes as Jesus mounts a large rock and sits down. Quiet falls upon the multitude, their faces turned expectantly toward Jesus. Then He moves His lips and begins to speak. What He was saying there, on that Mount of Beatitudes in faraway Palestine, was to illuminate the pages of history. The most profound, the most sublime words ever uttered were spoken there that day. In simple words, Jesus revealed to His dumfounded hearers the inner depth of God's commandments and a new way of life!

No one who once heard Jesus could ever again be the same. What was the secret of this Master Teacher? How did He hold those crowds spellbound? "And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one *having authority*" (Matt. 7:28, 29). Is not this authoritative note part of the secret of the earthly ministry of Christ?

### **The prophets and revelation**

The great prophets of the past had also spoken with authority. The impact of their preaching cannot be traced simply to an authoritative technique. Nor was their authoritative note based on confidence merely in the rightness of their own intentions and speculations. Their secret is traceable to nothing less than the confidence that they were the mediators of Divine revelation. Throughout the Old Testament we find Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and the other prophets continually using such expressions as "The word of the Lord came unto me" or "Thus saith the Lord." The flaming prophets of old gained their authority from this: they were not simply speaking their own words, they were mouthpieces for God.

The authority of Jesus is more than a prophetic authority. The Christian Church rightly acknowledges that in Him alone the incarnate God entered history; the very words He spoke are the words of the one and only God-man. Yet the remarkable fact is that in His teachings Jesus continually referred to passages in the Old Testament as fully authoritative. His Messianic self-consciousness, His very authority as the Son of God, are combined with the highest regard for the Old Testament as the authoritative record of the will of God.

Even a casual study of Church history will reveal that the great giants of pulpit and pen, from Augustine to Wesley, relied heavily on Scripture for their authority. In this, they followed a sacred precedent hallowed by Christ and the apostles.

### **A word of confession**

In 1949 I had been having a great many doubts concerning the Bible. I thought I saw apparent contradictions in Scripture. Some things I could not reconcile with my restricted concept of God.

When I stood up to preach, the authoritative note so characteristic of all great preachers of the past was lacking. Like hundreds of other young seminary students, I was waging the intellectual battle of my life. The outcome could certainly affect my future ministry.

In August of that year I had been invited to Forest Home, Presbyterian conference center high in the mountains outside Los Angeles. I remember walking down a trail, tramping into the woods, and almost wrestling with God. I dueled with my doubts, and my soul seemed to be caught in the crossfire. Finally, in desperation, I surrendered my will to the living God revealed in Scripture. I knelt before the open Bible and said: “Lord, many things in this Book I do not understand. But Thou hast said, ‘The just shall live by faith.’ All I have received from Thee, I have taken by faith. Here and now, by faith, I accept the Bible as Thy word. I take it all. I take it without reservations. Where there are things I cannot understand, I will reserve judgment until I receive more light. If this pleases Thee, give me authority as I proclaim Thy word, and through that authority convict me of sin and turn sinners to the saviour.”

### **Preaching from the Bible**

Within six weeks we started our Los Angeles crusade, which is now history. During that crusade I discovered the secret that changed my ministry. I stopped trying to prove that the Bible was true. I had settled in my own mind that it was, and this faith was conveyed to the audience. Over and over again I found myself saying “The Bible says.” I felt as though I were merely a voice through which the Holy Spirit was speaking.

Authority created faith. Faith generated response, and hundreds of people were impelled to come to Christ. A crusade scheduled for three weeks lengthened into eight weeks, with hundreds of thousands of people in attendance. The people were not coming to hear great oratory, nor were they interested merely in my ideas. I found they were desperately hungry to hear what God had to say through His Holy Word. I felt as though I had a rapier in my hand and, through the power of the Bible, was slashing deeply into men’s consciences, leading them to surrender to God. Does not the Bible say of itself, “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb. 4:12)?

### **Fire in the pulpit**

I found that the Bible became a flame in my hands. That flame melted away unbelief in the hearts of the people and moved them to decide for Christ. The Word became a hammer breaking up stony hearts and shaping them into the likeness of God. Did not God say, “I will make my words in thy mouth fire” (Jer. 5:14) and “Is not my word like as a fire? ... and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?” (Jer. 23:29)?

I found that I could take a simple outline and put a number of pertinent Scripture quotations under each point, and God would use this mightily to cause men to make full commitment to Christ. I found that I did not have to rely upon cleverness, oratory, psychological manipulation of

crowds, or apt illustrations or striking quotations from famous men. I began to rely more and more upon Scripture itself and God blessed.

### **Hunger for God's Word**

I am convinced, through my travels and experiences, that people all over the world are hungry to hear the Word of God. As the people came to a desert place to hear John the Baptist proclaim, "Thus saith the Lord," so modern man in his confusions, frustrations, and bewilderments will come to hear the minister who preaches with authority.

I remember how in London many secular and religious journalists remarked on this very point as being perhaps the greatest secret of the meetings there in 1954. One of the thousands who came to commit their lives to Christ in that crusade was a brilliant young Communist. She was a student at the Royal Academy of Drama and Arts, and was already a successful young actress. She had joined the Young Communist League because the members were zealous and seemed to have the answers to the problems of life. Out of curiosity she and some of her fellow students came to our meetings at the Haringay Arena "to see the show." She later testified how startled she was to hear not a lecture on sociology, politics, psychology, or philosophy, but the simple word of God quoted. This fascinated her and her companions. They came back several nights until the Word of God did its work of breaking open their hearts. They surrendered their lives to Christ.

### **The bugaboo of bibliolatry**

I am not advocating bibliolatry. I am not suggesting that we should worship the Bible, any more than a soldier worships his sword or a surgeon worships his scalpel. I am, however, fervently urging a return to Bible-centered preaching, a Gospel presentation that says without apology and without ambiguity, "Thus saith the Lord."

The world longs for authority, finality, and conclusiveness. It is weary of theological floundering and uncertainty. Belief exhilarates the human spirit; doubt depresses. Nothing is gained psychologically or spiritually by casting aspersions on the Bible. A generation that occupied itself with criticism of the Scriptures all too soon found itself questioning Divine revelation.

It is my conviction that if the preaching of the Gospel is to be authoritative, if it is to produce conviction of sin, if it is to challenge men and women to walk in newness of life, if it is to be attended by the Spirit's power, then the Bible with its discerning, piercing, burning message must become the basis of our preaching.

From my experience in preaching across America, I am convinced that the average American is vulnerable to the Christian message if it is seasoned with authority and proclaimed as verily from

God through His Word. Do we not have authority in other realms of life? Mathematics has its inviolable rules, formulas, and equations; if these are ignored, no provable answers can be found.

Music has its rules of harmony, progression, and time. The greatest music of the ages has been composed in accordance with these rules. To break the rules is to produce discord and “audio-bedlam.” The composer uses imagination and creative genius, to be sure, but his work must be done within the framework of the accepted forms of time, melody, and harmony. He must go by the book. To ignore the laws of music would be to make no music.

Every intelligent action takes place in a climate of authority.

### **Basis in divine authority**

I use the phrase “The Bible says” because the Word of God is the authoritative basis of our faith. I do not continually distinguish between the authority of God and the authority of the Bible because I am confident that He has made His will known authoritatively in the Scriptures.

The world is not a little weary of our doubts and our conflicting opinions and views. But I have discovered that there is much common ground in the Bible—broad acres of it—upon which most churches can agree. Could anything be more basic than the acknowledgment of sin, the Atonement, man’s need of repentance and forgiveness, the prospect of immortality, and the dangers of spiritual neglect?

There need be no adulteration of truth nor compromise on the great Biblical doctrines. I think it was Goethe who said, after hearing a young minister, “When I go to hear a preacher preach, I may not agree with what he says, but I want him to believe it.” Even a vacillating unbeliever has not respect for the man who lacks the courage to preach what he believes.

### **Messengers and the message**

Very little originality is permitted a Western Union messenger boy. His sole obligation is to carry the message he receives from the office to the person to whom it is addressed. He may not like to carry that message—it may contain bad news or distressing news for some person to whom he delivers it. But he dare not stop on the way, open the envelope and change the wording of the telegram. His duty is to take the message.

We Christian ministers have the Word of God. Our Commander said, “Go, take this message to a dying world!” Some messengers today neglect it, some tear up the message and substitute one of their own. Some delete part of it. Some tell the people that the Lord does not mean what He says. Others say that He really did not give the message, but that it was written by ordinary men who were all too prone to make mistakes.

Let us remember that we are sowing God's seed. Some indeed may fall on beaten paths and some among thorns, but it is our business to keep on sowing. We are not to stop sowing because some of the soil looks unpromising.

### **We have our orders**

We are holding a light, and we are to let it shine. Though it may seem but a twinkling candle in a world of blackness, it is our business to let it shine. We are blowing a trumpet. In the din and noise of battle the sound of our little trumpet may seem to be lost, but we must keep sounding the alarm to those in danger.

We are kindling a fire in this cold world full of hatred and selfishness. Our little blaze may seem to have no effect, but we must keep our fire burning. We are striking with a hammer. The blows may seem only to jar our hands as we strike, but we are to keep on hammering.

We are using a sword. The first or second thrust of our sword may be parried, and all our efforts to strike deep into the enemy Hank may seem hopeless. But we are to keep on wielding our sword.

We have bread for a hungry world. The people may seem to be feeding busily on other things, ignoring the Bread of Life, but we must keep on offering it to the souls of men.

We have water for parched souls. We must keep standing and crying out, "Ho, everyone. that thirsteth, come ye to the waters."

### **Plea for Bible preaching**

Give a new centrality to the Bible in your own preaching.

Jesus promised that much seed will find good soil and spring up and bear fruit.

The fire in your heart and on your lips can kindle a sacred flame in some cold hearts and win them to Christ. The hammer will break some hard hearts and make them yield to God in contrition. The sword will pierce the armor of sin and cut away self-satisfaction and pride, and open man's heart to the Spirit of God. Some hungry men and women will take the Bread of Life and some thirsting souls will find the Water of Life.

Preach the Scriptures with authority! You will witness a climactic change in your ministry!

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