

Bill Rea ? Graham got some things right

Anyone who knows me knows that I have limited use for evangelists, and that includes those who use television to advance their agendas.

I think an argument could be made that people who go on TV try to make me or anyone watching adjust their faith or the way they worship a supreme being is proselytizing. However, that effort can be flattened easily. One at home needs only to grab the remote, press a couple of buttons and watch The Simpsons, or whatever.

Yet people kept watching the late Billy G



am for years and years and years. And they listened to him on the radio too.

Graham died last week at the grand old age of 99. Facts are facts ? not many of us are going to live that long. And not many of us are going to be as successful as he was. Granted, I was never a willing customer of what he was selling (I prefer to shop around on my own, as it were), He was on top of his game and kept his message relevant throughout his career.

My first exposure to Graham came when I was a little kid and my family would take our annual holiday in August at a fishing camp on Lake Nipissing. I came from a family that from routine, always had a radio on in the house if there was someone home to listen to it, That was the case from first thing in the morning until bedtime. I guess my folks were a little reluctant to change that when we were vacationing, so my dad's portable radio was going just about all the time we were in the cottage. The problem was in those days there was only one station we could pick up, and that was running out of North Bay. Dad hated it. The music was something my brother and I could sort of relate to, so naturally Dad hated it. But the variety with which he was presented was a little on the limited side, so he was stuck with the only game in town.

But Sunday nights had the station picking up a feed to the weekly hour with Billy Graham and his Crusade. This was long before a TV was part of the vacation routine for my family, so we listened to the Crusade, while reading or playing cards or Monopoly. It always concluded with a few words from Billy Graham himself, and remarks always ended with the words ?May the Lord bless you, real good.?

OK, he was trying to reach as broad an audience as possible. And the fact is over the years, he succeeded.

Billy Graham brought his Crusade to Toronto in the early 1980s. Those were the days when I was waiting tables in a hotel, so there were a lot of people in town, and hotel drew a lot of the business. I remember the people who were in town for the event. I don't remember them for being terribly memorable as tippers (and that was an important consideration for a fellow in the line of work I was in at the time). They were also very quiet and unassuming, seeming to be uninterested in calling attention to themselves. They were also appreciative of anything done for them. In other words, they were very nice people.

Graham made many, many TV appearances over the years, and I would sometimes watch them, intrigued at the appeal the man commanded.

As the saying goes, ?Some of us have got it.?

If one is going to be an evangelist, especially one on TV, they had better have a lot of appeal, or the act is not going to be successful for very long. But the appeal can have other byproducts.

To Graham's very great credit, he never became tangled up in a major scandal. He sometimes seemed to be on the wrong side of current popular opinion, but it's very hard to please everyone, even with a great deal of charm.

In reading his obituaries, I found some people apparently thought ill of him for being supportive of Richard Nixon. I chuckled at that. What ever his flaws, Nixon did have his supporters, even as he was writing his resignation address. Besides, if that's the worst

they could come up with against Graham, that's more a feather in his cap than anything else.

There are other evangelists who have found themselves on tougher times.

Jim Bakker is one who springs readily to mind.

His show used to be seen in these parts late in the evening (I can't remember if it was before or after midnight). This was still the time when I was waiting tables, and I would get home at night, anxious to chill out a bit before going to bed, so I would find something to watch on TV. There were times when Johnny Carson didn't have much interesting on, and there seemed to be few other alternatives presenting themselves. In such cases, I might have settled for Jim and Tammy Faye and their PTL Club. I would occasionally watch these two, wondering in the back of my mind how anyone sensible could take them seriously for more than a couple of minutes. But Bakker eventually fell. While it was through his own misdeeds, I still had sympathy for him.

Then Jimmy Swaggart fell, over comparable offences, then he did his now infamous blubberfest from the pulpit. I have never been able to figure out why the media or public didn't latch on at the time to the fact that Swaggart had been prominent among those who torpedoed Bakker.

Billy Graham never had to face such issues. Indeed, every biography I have seen of the man states he went to great lengths to avoid such problems, up to and including making sure every hotel room he was to occupy had been thoroughly checked before he entered. Every successful politician and communicator knows the key to success is staying on message, and that's what Graham did. That's why he succeeded where others didn't.