

**FIVE HUNDRED YEAR SILENCE**  
**April 27, 2014 – Hebrews 1: 1-4**  
**The Church of the Covenant**

What happens when Billy Graham dies and goes to heaven? Or perhaps the more pointed question is – who is the next Billy Graham? --Who is the next great American Evangelist? Who is the next prophet in the lineage of the Old Testament prophets for America? Who stands in the same unbroken line as George Whitefield, John Wesley, William Tennant and John McMillan the Presbyterian Evangelists, Charles Finney, Billy Sunday, D. L. Moody? We don't know. We cannot see anyone on the horizon yet. Does this great heritage cease with the death of Billy Graham? There are many midgets but no giants. There are many mega church pastors but they are more interested in building their own kingdoms than in the Kingdom of God. Who will break through? Who is next? Or is there no one of the stature of Billy Graham coming up in the ranks? No one to fill the large shoes of being the next major American Evangelist?

And some might say, so what? I never was into any of that kind of stuff anyway. Not my cup of tea, personally. Far too emotional; not intellectual enough for me. And yet, the truth of the matter is that these great American prophet/ Evangelists always served to revivify the church; all boats rose when the Holy Spirit came and used them to lift up the Kingdom and draw more people into all the churches, Presbyterian included. Like them or not, they served the purpose of strengthening and spiritually renewing the church, including the mainline church going back to the founding of our country.

There was the First Great Awakening and there was the Second Great Awakening, but what if there is no preacher, no Evangelist, no prophet to kindle a THIRD Great Awakening? What happens to the church in America? Does it continue to slide into obscurity and mediocrity and obsolescence? Does it become so small a speck on the radar screen of most Americans that it pales to insignificance? Do churches continue their self-destructive patterns of division and dissipation and decline until we are like Europe, with grand cathedrals like this one, but sitting empty, with small aged struggling congregations, vast edifices used only as tourist sites? Would that future appeal to you? Is that your profound hope for the church in America?

So who is the next Billy Graham???? If there is to be one???? If the church gets its act together and raises up one?

This sermon came to me last year during the all congregational retreat at Laurelville. We were doing "Walk Through the Old Testament", a delightful way to remember the sequencing and content of scripture. The leader walks the participants through a segment of scripture and adds hand motions, physical devices guaranteed to have the listeners remember what they have heard. (By the way, there is another congregational retreat set for early August and we'll be walking through the New Testament so I hope that you will put it on your calendar now –you'll be glad you did) So we got to the very end of the Old Testament and the leader held up his hands in the form of two parentheses, and said "five hundred years". That was the amount of time elapsed between the closing of the Old Testament and the opening of the New Testament. Try it with me –hold up your hands like this and say –"FIVE HUNDRED YEARS". (Thank you).

What this means is that from the time the book of the prophet Malachi was written, the last of the minor prophets in the Old Testament, to the time when God picks up the story again, with the writing of the gospel according to Matthew at the beginning of the New Testament, that period of time between

the testaments was 500 years. "FIVE HUNDRED YEARS." Between when God ceased to speak through the prophets of the Old Testament to the time of the sending of His Son, Jesus Christ, was 500 years. I was sitting in the retreat and I realized, "O my Lord, You ceased to speak to Your people for 500 years." Heaven was silenced. The skies became like glass and the prayers of the people bounced back to earth. No great prophets spoke for 500 years. God shut His mouth and did not speak. It was the *500 Year Silence*. Is that the period of time into which we now enter? With no prophet, no Evangelist, are we entering into a time of 500 year silence from God??????? FIVE HUNDRED YEARS...that's a long time...

Our scripture from Hebrews describes that time between testaments. It notes: *"In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoke to us by a Son..." (Hebrews 1: 1)* The 500 year silence was preparatory for the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, through whom now God chooses to speak. Everything after the coming of Jesus, after His life and death and resurrection, is in these last days. As this passage notes, *"when He had made purification for sins" (v. 3), "He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high", He sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, as the Apostles' Creed notes.* Since the coming of Jesus now God speaks through the Son. It is why all preaching is essentially a proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It is why all prophecy is now always in relation to Jesus Christ and His work in the world. The age of prophecy apart from Jesus Christ has ceased. Jesus Christ is, as John Calvin calls Him –PROPHET, PRIEST AND KING. So prophecy now becomes the presentation of Jesus Christ as the Good News of the Gospel, wrought through what He has done for us at Calvary and through an Empty Tomb. The Old Testament prophet becomes the New Testament Evangelist, the preacher of the Good News of the Lord Jesus Christ. But still we are left with the specter of the FIVE HUNDRED YEARS.

A long time ago, much earlier in ministry for me, I was praying about a phrase which the Lord had given me, and it was "the one who is to come". I always felt that at some point in my ministry I would have the opportunity to preach to a young person who was "the one who is to come". I always felt that this young person would be particularly adept in ministry, gifted as a preacher, the one whom the Lord would raise up to make a profound difference in the church and in our world. I felt that this young person would become one of the foremost preachers of their day. I have been waiting and praying for that young person now for some 30 years. I watch and I pray for them, hoping that my eyes might one day behold them and see them as the one who is to come. I have always felt that I would have the opportunity to know this person as a young person. Perhaps we do not have to suffer the destruction of the church during a 500 year silence. Perhaps the church can get its act together and unite with other churches (some which we might not entirely be comfortable with) in order to do a great work. Perhaps we could get over our Presbyterian reticence a bit, and pray for the renewing of the church, whatever that might take. Perhaps we could be the place that could raise up the one who is to come, the next great American Evangelist. Billy Graham, after all, had Presbyterian roots. Perhaps...

Billy Graham told a story about the great physicist Albert Einstein. Einstein's house, by the way, is in Princeton, NY, right next to my seminary, and right before important finals a group of students would go over the gatepost of the Einstein house to rub it, hoping, I suppose, that some of his brilliance might rub off on us! Anyway, as Billy Graham tells the story, Einstein is on a train and the conductor comes by to punch the tickets and Einstein has seemingly lost his ticket and is hunting for it frantically. The kind conductor says, "Don't worry, Dr. Einstein, I know who you are; you don't need to show me your ticket to prove to me who you are." And the conductor continues up the aisle of the train. He looks back to see Einstein still frantically searching for his ticket. So the conductor goes back to say not to worry. But Einstein says to him: "I know who I am but I forget where I am going." Billy Graham then breaks into this story to point out his dark blue preacher suit and to tell the crowd that the next time they probably

see this suit will be at his own funeral. And then he added: "See, I know who I am...and I also know where I am going." In Christ, we know who we are. We are a child of God by adoption; the precious love of Jesus Christ has reached out to us from the cross to melt our heart and turn us toward God. God now speaks through His only begotten Son and tells us we are His and He is ours. And then also, in Jesus Christ, we know where we are going. We know we have a future and a hope. We know that life is not the end but that we possess a promise in a risen Savior of life and eternal life in HIM.

There is a young person who needs to hear WHO THEY ARE today...and also WHERE THEY ARE GOING. There is a young person who needs to know that in Christ they are the "one who is to come". We need young people to rise up and take hold of the greatest and most important task imaginable –the reclamation of the world for God through His Son, Jesus Christ. Here is a mission worthy of your life and everything within it. We need young people to stand up for Jesus and to stand forth in the power of His Word. Preach the WORD of TRUTH to a world who needs to hear the Gospel of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Here are words worthy to speak from your lips. We need young people to catch fire for the Lord Jesus Christ and to carry the Gospel to our community and nation. There is no higher, better calling than following Christ of the upward way. And congregation, these young people need a people worthy of them, they need to see in us our passion and whole-hearted dedication to the proposition that we do not want a 500 years silence to fall upon the church. FIVE HUNDRED YEARS. Rather, we want to speak words of life in Jesus' name. We want the Savior never to be silent but to use us for His glory.

*"In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers"....but NOW God wants to speak through us, for God has spoken to us "by a Son". Beloved, what is Jesus saying to YOU today? And Amen.*

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*