

“That Narrow Gate”

a sermon by

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Text: “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:13-14).

There is a fascinating article in this week’s New Yorker Magazine, entitled “The Big Tent,” in which the author, Peter Boyer, contrasts the styles of two very prominent figures in American Christianity: Billy Graham and his son Franklin Graham. Boyer notes that over the decades Billy Graham has played such a major role in evangelical Christianity there has been a gradual softening and mellowing in Billy Graham’s message and life. Early on, Graham insisted that his crusades not be segregated by race and he received a great deal of criticism by some people in the 1950s by insisting that all of his religious crusades be open to all people of all races. In more recent years, the elder Graham has been open to people of other religions, particularly in the days since September 11, 2001. At the recent crusade in New York Graham welcomed former President Bill Clinton and his wife, the Senator from New York. Graham remarked to the audience that had gathered that evening that “he felt that the former President

should be an evangelist, because he has all the gifts and it would allow his wife to run the country.”

Franklin Graham, on the other hand, has a certain edge in his presentation. “My message,” he said recently, “is very focused. My message is to call on people to repent of their sins.” Franklin Graham’s assessment of Islam has been widely quoted, but his statements about abortion and homosexuality are equally divisive. And yet, even among his most severe critics, there is universal praise for what Franklin Graham has done for international relief through his organization, Samaritan’s Purse. It has brought relief to impoverished areas throughout the world. Franklin Graham has emerged today as one of the most important spokespersons for the fight against AIDS in the world.

I.

In many ways the tension between this famous father and son is consistent with one of the tensions that are present within our faith. When Paul wrote his first letter to the church at Corinth he said that “he had become a Jew to the Jews that he might win the Jews, and he intimated that he had become a Greek to the Greeks that he might win the Greeks.” “I have become,” he said, “all things to all men that I may by all means save some.” That is as modern and contemporary as this morning’s paper. It speaks eloquently of the inclusive nature of the Christian faith. It is a model statement of adjustment and accommodation.

But that is not all Paul said. Had it been all, Paul would have disappeared from sight in an indistinguishable blend with the Greco-Roman culture of his day and it is doubtful that we would have ever heard of him. When he wrote his second letter to the church at Corinth, he said something else:

“Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you” (II Corinthians 6: 17).

Jesus understood this tension very clearly. In the Sermon on the Mount he speaks of what he calls “a narrow way” and a “broad way,” a “narrow gate” and a “wide gate.” For Jesus the choice was quite clear. There is a broad path in life that leads to destruction. There is a narrow way that leads to life.

That is one of the fascinating and enduring aspects of the teaching of Jesus. He was simple, but never simplistic. He understood that life is often a series of choices and that some of the choices are not as complicated as we would like to believe. “You cannot serve God and Mammon,” Jesus said. On another occasion he noted, “Those who live by the sword, die by the sword.” And again Jesus said, “There is a broad way that leads to destruction and a narrow gate that leads to life.” So how does a person find that narrow gate?

II.

In the first place, most of us would probably agree that all religious faith, if it is to be active, alive, and relevant, must from time to time accommodate itself to change. The Book of

Hebrews declares, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” That is the faith we proclaim. But having said that, we also acknowledge that the church is constantly seeking to translate that ancient truth into new settings.

That was certainly the case in early Christianity. It went from a narrow Jewish setting into a new Greek culture and would have never survived if it had not assimilated into its faith the profound insights of Greek philosophy. So in the classic creeds of the faith such as Nicene and the Apostle’s Creed we see a blending of the old faith with the new philosophy and in that process the Gospel of John and the Apostle Paul played a major role.

In our own time we have witnessed remarkable changes in the church as the church in the 1960s struggled during the Civil Rights Movement to break down the barriers of segregation and discrimination that were contrary to the gospel of Christ. In the same fashion the Presbyterian Church in this country was one of the first denominations to ordain women as ministers, elders, and deacons, recognizing the tremendous gifts that they bring to the church. So clearly, one of the great tensions that is always present in the church is the tension between holding on to what is essential and yet, not losing the capacity to understand how the gospel of Christ must be adapted to new situations.

Tom Long, who teaches worship at the Chandler School of Theology at Emory University, pointed out recently that one of the most controversial elements of the life of the church through the ages has centered on music. Martin Luther, during the time of the Reformation, stirred up a great deal of controversy, when he took some of the “drinking tunes” of the pubs and bars and used them in writing Christian hymns. Luther’s response to the criticism he received was, “Why should the Devil have all the good tunes?” Likewise, when pipe organs were introduced into the churches in the 19th Century there was severe opposition to what some saw as a terrible intrusion into the life of the church. Today, the debate centers on the use of contemporary music and worship in the church, but the point is the same.

III.

But having spoken of the need for change and accommodation, there is something else that needs to be said. The church today is often guilty of watering down the message of Jesus Christ and accommodating it to a contemporary world so that the message is no longer recognizable.

One of the greatest preachers of the past century was Harry Emerson Fosdick, who for a number of years was the minister of the Riverside Church in New York City. Fosdick was for my money the most powerful and effective preacher of the Twentieth Century. Through the pulpit of the Riverside Church and through the National Vespers Program on Radio he preached to millions of people in this country every week. He was a craftsman without peer. Every minister who has followed him has lived under a giant shadow. He believed that every sermon preached should contain an hour of preparation for every minute in the pulpit. One one occasion when he preached the ordination sermon for a young minister, he asked if might speak for twenty-seven minutes instead of the twenty-six minutes that had been allotted to him. One of the people

present who put a stopwatch to the sermon observed that it was exactly twenty-seven minutes. On May 21, 1922, Fosdick preached a sermon at the First Presbyterian Church of New York City, entitled “Shall The Fundamentalists Win?” That sermon was preached in the midst of a great controversy that was tearing apart many churches. The controversy, which has many parallels today, focused on the church’s reaction to the Enlightenment of the Nineteenth Century, particularly the writings of Darwin, Freud, and Karl Marx. Fundamentalism was an attempt to counter the enlightenment by refusing to take seriously any of the great strides that were taking place in science, sociology, and religion. Fosdick’ sermon was a magnificent cry for tolerance and openness to new truths about our world that today most of us take for granted.

Later in his ministry Fosdick preached a sermon he entitled “The Church Must Go Beyond Modernism”. In that sermon he chastised the church for accommodating itself to the culture to such an extent that there was no longer any separation from the church and the culture. Fosdick’s cry was for the church to stand out from the culture and challenge it.

IV.

The greatest challenge for the church today is to be the church that God intends us to be. As Christians we must proclaim that we believe that Jesus Christ is the decisive revelation of God. The grace that we encounter in Jesus Christ not only promises to forgive our sins, it also is power to live our lives joyfully, purposefully, and with serenity and confidence. In his great work *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Reinhold Niebuhr has a chapter entitled “On Having and Not Having the Truth”. Niebuhr argues that as Christians we profess Jesus Christ as “the way, the life, and the truth.” But Niebuhr also recognizes that there is another sense in which we do not have the truth. We are creatures and not the creator. Moreover, we are all sinners, which means that we view the truth in terms of our own self-interest. That is why humility and toleration are the great virtues we seek. They remind us that we must not shrink from our confession about Christ as truth. But we must also respect those whose view of the truth is not the same as ours.

Shortly before his death three years ago Dr. John Leith wrote something that has stayed in my memory in an indelible way. Toward the end of his life Dr. Leith came to the realization that the greatest problems facing our society today were not economic or social or political, but theological. The first great question that each person must answer is the question: “Why am I here?” Does human life have meaning, or is it simply a senseless, meaningless episode in the history of the universe that will end in ruin without purpose or meaning? The second most important question is the question of guilt and salvation. Is there some power in the world that enables each of us as human beings to overcome the dominance of instinct and impulse and the corruption of instinct and impulse by our own self-interests?

Dr. Leith went on to say that the church is involved in many wonderful activities from outreach to childcare, and all of these are important. But there is one thing that the church has to offer the world that no one else can offer is a witness to what God has done for our salvation, in creation, and particularly in the coming of Jesus Christ by whose life, death, and resurrection God has give hope to every human being who believes.

That is the narrow way and it is the only way that leads to life.

Amen.