

A Change of Heart

In recent months many fresh voices in the church have been speaking out with a Christian witness against the insanity of the nuclear arms race. One of the most surprising and significant of these is Billy Graham's. He believes that the nation and the world now face their own hour of decision about halting the escalation of nuclear weapons. Graham's growing convictions, which he describes as a change from past years, have taken firm root and are now becoming one of his most deeply felt concerns as a Christian. He graciously agreed to share his thinking publicly by responding to these questions posed by Wes Michaelson and Jim Wallis. -- The Editors

Sojourners: When you were in Poland at Auschwitz last year, you said, "The present insanity of the global arms race, if continued, will lead inevitably to a conflagration so great that Auschwitz will seem like a minor rehearsal." Would you share further your feelings about the nuclear arms race?

Billy Graham: The present arms race is a terrifying thing, and it is almost impossible to overestimate its potential for disaster. There is something ironic about the fact that we live in a generation which has made unprecedented advances in such fields as public health and medicine, and yet never before has the threat of wholesale destruction been so real -- all because of human technology.

Is a nuclear holocaust inevitable if the arms race is not stopped? Frankly, the answer is almost certainly yes. Now I know that some people feel human beings are so terrified of a nuclear war that no one would dare start one. I wish I could accept that. But neither history nor the Bible gives much reason for optimism. What guarantee is there that the world will never produce another maniacal dictator like Hitler or Amin? As a Christian I take sin seriously, and the Christian should be the first to know that the human heart is deceitful and desperately wicked, as Jeremiah says. We can be capable of unspeakable horror, no matter how educated or technically sophisticated we are. Auschwitz is a compelling witness to this.

I know not everyone would agree with this, but I honestly wish we had never developed nuclear weapons. But of course that is water under the bridge. We have nuclear weapons in horrifying quantities, and the question is, what are we going to do about it?

Sojourners: How does your commitment to the lordship of Christ shape your response to the nuclear threat?

Graham: I am not sure I have thought through all the implications of Christ's lordship for this issue -- I have to be honest about that. But for the Christian there is -- or at least should be -- only one question: What is the will of God? What is his will both for this world and for me in regard to this issue?

Let me suggest several things. First, the lordship of Christ reminds me that we live in a sinful world. The cross teaches me that. Like a drop of ink in a glass of water, sin has permeated everything -- the individual, society, creation. That is one reason why the nuclear issue is not just a political issue -- it is a moral and spiritual issue as well. And because we live in a sinful world it means we have to take something like nuclear armaments seriously. We know the terrible violence of which the human heart is capable.

Secondly, the lordship of Jesus Christ tells me that God is not interested in destruction, but in redemption. Christ came to seek and to save that which was lost. He came to reverse the effects of the Fall.

Now I know there are mysteries to the workings of God. I know God is sovereign and sometimes he permits things to happen which are evil, and he even causes the wrath of man to praise him. But I cannot see any way in which nuclear war could be branded as being God's will. Such warfare, if it ever happens, will come because of the greed and pride and covetousness of the human heart. But God's will is to establish his kingdom, in which Christ is lord.

Third, of course, Christ calls us to love, and that is the critical test of discipleship. Love is not a vague feeling or an abstract idea. When I love someone, I seek what is best for them. If I begin to take the love of Christ seriously, then I will work toward what is best for my neighbor. I will seek to bind up the wounds and bring about healing, no matter what the cost may be.

Therefore, I believe that the Christian especially has a responsibility to work for peace in our world. Christians may well find themselves working and agreeing with non-believers on an issue like peace. But our motives will not be identical.

The issues are not simple, and we are always tempted to grasp any program which promises easy answers. Or, on the other side, we are tempted to say that the issues are too complex, and we cannot do anything of significance anyway. We must resist both temptations.

Sojourners: How would you describe the changes in your thinking on the nuclear arms question, and what factors would you cite as prompting those changes?

Graham: It has only been relatively recently (sort of a pilgrimage over the last few years) that I have given as much attention to this subject as it deserves. I suppose there have been a number of reasons why I have come to be concerned about it. For one thing, during my travels in recent years I have spoken to a number of leaders in many countries. Almost to a person they have been concerned and pessimistic about the nuclear arms race.

Second, I think also that I have been helped by other Christians who have been sensitive to this issue. I guess I would have to admit that the older I get the more aware I am of the kind of world my generation has helped shape, and the more concerned I am about doing what I can to give the next generation at least some hope for peace. I have fourteen grandchildren now, and I ask myself, "What kind of world are they going to face?"

Third, I have gone back to the Bible to restudy what it says about the responsibilities we have as peacemakers. I have seen that we must seek the good of the whole human race, and not just the good of any one nation or race.

There have been times in the past when I have, I suppose, confused the kingdom of God with the American way of life. Now I am grateful for the heritage of our country, and I am thankful for many of its institutions and ideals, in spite of its many faults. But the kingdom of God is not the same as America, and our nation is subject to the judgment of God just as much as any other nation.

I have become concerned to build bridges of understanding among nations and want to do whatever I can to help this. We live in a different world than we did a hundred years ago, or

even a generation ago. We cannot afford to neglect our duties as global citizens. Like it or not, the world is a very small place, and what one nation does affects all others. That is especially true concerning nuclear weapons.

Sojourners: Have your crusades and experiences in Eastern Europe influenced your thinking on the arms race? Do you feel that the differences between the East and the West are worth nuclear war?

Graham: The opportunities I have had to visit Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Poland have been very significant. I went with many stereotypes in my mind, but I came away with a new understanding especially of how the church exists and in some instances thrives in these societies -- and a new awareness of their concerns about peace.

I especially was impressed with the concerns various Christians in these countries expressed about peace. I believe their concern is genuine, and they have something to teach us here. Take Poland, for instance. They have a long history of invasion and occupation, climaxing in the horror of Nazi occupation and terror. They know that a war would bring them to the brink of destruction, especially in the nuclear age.

I think Americans sometimes forget how fortunate we have been, because we have not known what it is to have a war on our own territory since the Civil War. It has tended to make us complacent, I think, and has made us forget the destruction and disruption war brings.

To answer the rest of your question: No. I do not think the present differences are worth a nuclear war. There is no denying that there are differences between us. But there are many things we have in common, especially on an ordinary human level. I am not a pacifist, but I fervently hope and pray our differences will never become an excuse for nuclear war. I hold the view that some wars had to be fought in history, such as the war against the Nazis. The alternative would have been worse.

Sojourners: A year ago several evangelical leaders joined with others in signing "A Call to Faithfulness," a declaration committing themselves as Christians against nuclear weapons. The Southern Baptists recently held a convocation on the nuclear crisis, and others, including the National Association of Evangelicals, have begun making statements opposing the arms race. What has been your response to such developments, and what significance do you see in them?

Graham: These are highly significant, because they indicate a new awareness (especially on the part of evangelicals) of the arms race and the responsibilities we have to work for peace. I have encouraged such statements, but more than that I am encouraging evangelicals not just to make statements but to go beyond them and get involved in various ways.

There was a time when evangelicals were in the vanguard of some of the great social movements. I think of the fight against the slave trade, for example. Then in some respects we lost sight of our responsibilities to fight social evils. We said that the world would never be reformed completely anyway until Christ came again, so why bother? But of course that was evading the issue. After all, I know that not everyone will believe the gospel, but that does not mean I should give up preaching it. I know the human race is not going to be suddenly converted to Christ but that does not keep me from preaching him. I also know the nations are not going to suddenly lay down their arms but that does not keep us from doing all we can before it is too late.

Now I think evangelicals are regaining their social concern, seeing that God is concerned about the whole person. There is a danger that we will go to the opposite extreme and reduce the gospel to social activism, of course. But what we all need to do is return to the Bible afresh -- not going to it to prove a point, but seeing what it says as the Holy Spirit opens our eyes. We need to see what it says about our priorities, our lifestyles, and our mission in the world. Then we need to obey. I think evangelicals are seeing this, and the things you mention are evidence.

Sojourners: What word would you have for the church, and specifically the evangelical community, on this issue?

Graham: First, we cannot wash our hands of our responsibilities. What some people do not see is that failing to oppose something may at times actually be condoning it. God is concerned about every area of life, and Christ's lordship means we also must be concerned about every area of our lives and seek to bring everything under that lordship.

Second, we must place the will of God before all else. Is it His will that resources be used for massive armaments which could otherwise be used for alleviating human suffering and hunger? Of course not. Our world has lost sight of true values and substituted false gods and false values.

Finally, we must do what we can, both individually and collectively, to try to bring some sanity into our world.

Sojourners: What should Christians in the United States be saying and doing to reverse government policies that are escalating the nuclear arms race?

Graham: This is a very complex issue, and I believe it demands the energy and thoughtfulness of the whole Christian community. I would not pretend to have a complete answer by any means.

However, the first thing we must do is understand the issues. I think many Christians are only just beginning to see that the nuclear arms race is an entirely new factor in human history, and that we cannot be complacent or treat it as just another minor issue. We need to educate the Christian community about the moral and ethical issues which are involved.

Then we must do what we can to work for policy change where it is needed. I do not favor unilateral disarmament, but we must sometimes be willing to take risks (within limits) as a nation. It is here that we need to think carefully about what we are doing.

Within our system it is possible to bring about changes, and we need to let our voices be heard by those we have elected. I would also say this to Christians of other nations that have or are developing nuclear weapons.

But let's remember also that the most important thing we can do is to pray. I believe we ought to be praying for the leaders of our world -- not just our president, but the leaders of every major country. And we ought to pray for Christians in other countries, especially ones which are very different from our own nation, that God would give them wisdom and courage to work for peace. Sometimes we forget that prayer is our most powerful weapon, even if we may not understand how God can use our prayers.

Sojourners: How do such responses to the arms race affect the credibility of the evangelical witness throughout the world?

Graham: Well, of course we should take a stand for what is right, whether it helps our visibility in the world or not. But I believe this is a very crucial issue for the whole world, and because of it, the world is going to be watching us very closely. Our works must always back up our words, and it is certainly true on this issue.

Sojourners: As you know, Senator Mark O. Hatfield has indicated his possible opposition to the SALT II treaty because it will permit the U.S. to build a new generation of nuclear weapons systems -- such as the cruise missile, Trident, and the M-X missile. What is your reaction, and your feelings regarding the SALT II treaty?

Graham: A treaty such as this is highly technical, of course. As I understand it, it is not a comprehensive treaty; there are vast areas which are untouched, and this concerns me. Some of the worst and most sophisticated weapons are not involved. Furthermore, nothing is done about some of the frightful weapons which are even now being developed -- weapons which would be far more advanced technically than present weapon systems. These weapons which are waiting in the wings concern me greatly.

Personally, however, I think a major factor must be another question. What will happen if the treaty is not passed? Granted, the treaty will not bring the arms race to a halt. Some say it will escalate it. But if the treaty is not approved, I fear not only escalation but the psychological effects on the world.

If SALT II were the final treaty we would ever negotiate for arms limitation, then relatively little has been accomplished. But these things have to be taken one step at a time. SALT II should give way to SALT III. I wish we were working on SALT X right now! Total destruction of nuclear arms.

We have taken years to make even the limited progress we have achieved in the U.S.-Soviet relations. We must do whatever we can to make this fragile relationship more secure. We have to take a long-range view, and not seek some temporary short-term advantage or solution which will only harm the chances for reconciliation with the Soviet Union. This is true whether we are speaking about nuclear arms limitation or our relationship with China, or any other foreign policy issue.

We may be living on the edge of Armageddon. I do not know; this may be one of God's great springtimes in human history. Jesus told us to watch the signs of the times. The signs I see are both ominous and hopeful.

I know one thing -- the ultimate hope of the world is the coming of the Prince of Peace -- when war shall be no more. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.