

John 17:17-23
(Isaiah 55:10-11; 2 Timothy 3:14-17)
“Between the Word and the World”

Introduction

Since the midpoint of the last century, the two acknowledged leaders of the worldwide evangelical movement have been Billy Graham and John Stott. This past Wednesday, John Stott died at the age of ninety, and tributes have been pouring in from around the world. His old friend, Billy Graham, called him “the most respected clergyman in the world today,” and Chris Wright wrote that he was, “a walking embodiment of the simple beauty of Jesus, whom he loved above all else.”

Marianne and I had the great privilege this past Thursday, while visiting with Tullian and Kim Tchividjian in Montreat, of spending an unforgettable hour or two with Dr. Graham around his kitchen table, listening to him as he reflected quietly with some effort, for he is mentally sharp but physically frail, on his friend, John Stott, and on his own life and ministry.

We have been studying, for the past three Sundays, Paul’s words at the end of his first letter to Thessalonian Christians, in which he prays that they might be completely sanctified and kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus. We asked why in our day this doctrine of Christian living is so neglected in the western church, and tried to understand why it is so very important. This morning, I want to look at the text that served last week as our Gospel reading, because here in John 17, Jesus also prays, as Paul prayed, that his followers may be sanctified, making clear the way that God sanctifies us and emphasizing the missional dimension of the lives we live.

This text and the one that we have been studying took on a deeper meaning for me this past week as I reflected on the life of John Stott and sat in the presence of Billy Graham. What strikes me as I reflect on the remarkable lives of these two servants of Christ is that the same God who called them when they were far from him and living in sin, who justified them and equipped them for the ministries he entrusted to them, who filled them with his Spirit and led them on their journeys, faithful to the end, is the same God who knows your name and mine, who called us from our rebellion and sin, the same Christ who bore our sins on the cross and defeated every power that would separate us from God, the same Spirit who has graciously come to fill us, equip us, empower us and lead us to our journey’s end.

Make no mistake: the call to be sanctified followers of Jesus, to be set apart by God for his purposes, the call to grow in knowledge and in power, to walk in joyful obedience, is *not* a call to get our eyes off of Jesus and onto ourselves. It is a call to yield ourselves to his control, to become what he has already made us by grace.

Body

1. God's Word is God's means of sanctifying his people.

"Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (17:17).

2. God's people are God's means of saving his world.

"As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them" (17:18).

3. So, our sanctification is directly related to the salvation of the world.

"So that the world may believe that you sent me" (17:21&23).

Conclusion

Toward the end of our time with Dr Graham, Tullian shared a profoundly instructive lesson that his grandfather had taught him. When Tullian first went to Ft Lauderdale to serve as pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church and faced some very difficult days of transition, he visited his grandfather and asked Dr Graham to pray that he would be given wisdom, courage and grace in the face of severe opposition. Dr Graham said, "No, I won't pray that for you." As Tullian recounted the story, Dr Graham smiled and said, "That's right. I told you the Lord had already given you all those things and more in Christ. I told you that I would pray instead that you might grow in the knowledge of what is already yours in Christ, and grow in your faithful use of all that Christ has already provided."

That is a beautiful, clear statement of the biblical doctrine of sanctification: first to understand, then to walk, in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we may know him whom to know is eternal life, and so that the world may believe that he has come to redeem the world from sin and death. Thank God that in Christ our lives are restored to the dignity of being God's children whom he has sent into the world for the world's salvation, and for the glory of his name.

© John M. Wood, all rights reserved