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He Said What?

Ken Briggs | Aug. 26, 2013 NCR Today

The Rev. Billy Graham, the Gospel messenger to the world, wouldn't actually slit the throats of those he didn't like, would he?

It's not remotely conceivable in real time, yet there he is in the latest released batch of Nixon tapes declaring he had an urge to do just that.

Graham, known in those days as a "pastor" to presidents, called to cheer Nixon right after the President delivered his first nationally televised attempt, in 1973, to wriggle his way out of Watergate.

The golden throated evangelist echoed Nixon's disgust of CBS's coverage of the speech as the worst of the media responses. But first, he added a brick to the anti-Semitism he and Nixon shared. The Jewish "domination" of the press was in Graham's plan of salvation a "stranglehold [that] has to be broken or the country's going down the drain."

Nixon: "You really believe that?"

Graham: "Yes, sir."

Nixon: "Oh boy. So do I. I can't ever say that but I believe it."

On to the media coverage of the speech by one of the jittery President's stalwart friends eager to be counted as such at this crisis point. While the other networks weren't so bad, Graham says, CBS was "most negative," in line with its reputation for being Nixon's chief network nemesis.

Graham: "I felt like slashing their throats. But anyway God be with you." He extols the speech as Nixon's "finest hour."

No doubt Graham wouldn't have done any such thing. The point was that in the presence of a powerful figure whose favor he curried and whose politics he backed to the hilt, Graham was willing to abandon conscience for the sake of personal gain. He had for a long stretch served Nixon's personal interests by holding Sunday services in the White House where Nixon could avoid public protest. Agreeing with Nixon's darkest instincts might have come naturally to Graham, but the grisly gestures of camaraderie were as likely attempts by the preacher to remain an insider with preferred seating at the table of the number one power broker.

It is a particular blot on Graham's career but nothing unique to him. The depths to which we mortals will stoop to please those we fear or admire constitute the grist of everyday life in every precinct of humanity. It's yet another reason to scan our own behavior for deceptions and falsehoods done in the service of self-interest -- and a blinking red light on our tendency to place others on pedestals. Talk is cheap, of course, and usually meaningless in the course of private conversation which Graham assumed to be the case when he called Nixon. But it can also reveal the bad habit of twisting the arms of the angels of our better nature to achieve the purposes

of our lower one.

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