

Billy Graham's legacy for Christians, evangelical and otherwise

As the years passed, Graham's list of doctrinal dealbreakers got shorter. He kept preaching his simple, nonsectarian call to faith.

by [Grant Wacker](#) in the [March 14, 2018](#) issue



Billy Graham (Religion News Service)

When Billy Graham died February 21 at age 99 in Montreat, North Carolina, the Christian world lost one of its most influential voices. Born on a farm near Charlotte, Graham spent the early years of his ministry mainly as an itinerant Youth for Christ

speaker in the Midwest. But highly publicized crusades in Los Angeles in 1949 and in New York in 1957 hurled him into the national and international spotlights. He held that iconic position for the rest of the century and beyond.

Graham's achievements piled up like snowdrifts. Most notably, nearly 215 million people around the world heard him preach in person, a figure possibly exceeded only by John Paul II. He scored a spot on Gallup's list of Ten Most Admired Men in the World 59 times, nearly twice as many as his closest rival, Ronald Reagan. Besides more than 30 books (authored or authorized), he introduced the *Hour of Decision* national radio program in 1950; the *Hour of Decision* quarterly network television program in 1951; World Wide Pictures, a feature-length film division, in 1951; *My Answer*, a daily syndicated advice column, in 1952; *Christianity Today*, a serious theological fortnightly, in 1956; and the popular monthly *Decision* in 1960. Most of these ventures reached millions of people.

Graham's international crusades and evangelism conferences—especially at Lausanne in 1974—helped make his name a household word not only in the United States but in many other parts of the world. A friend of ten successive presidents (and close friend of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush, along with their First Ladies), Graham enjoyed extraordinary access to the pinnacle of political and cultural power. Stalwarts saw God's hand in all this, but journalists saw Graham's own tireless hands too. Whatever else Graham was, he was a man of bold ambitions.

Graham's susceptibility to the glamour of celebrities, the allure of the ultrarich, and the influence of high-ranking politicians troubled his friends and energized his foes. Odious remarks about Jews in the media, uttered in private in President Richard Nixon's office in 1972 (not revealed until 2002) tarnished his record. Repeated apologies lightened but never erased the stain. Most disturbing for all but the most ardent followers was Graham's political posture in the 1960s and early 1970s. His real or perceived support for the Vietnam War and jut-jawed defense of Nixon during Watergate lingered long after most Americans had given up on both causes. Many called him the "White House chaplain."

How did Graham rise to such Olympian heights of praise as well as criticism? The answer must begin with his ministry as a preacher, always the centerpiece of his multifaceted career. From beginning to end, Graham voiced boilerplate evangelical theology focused on a simple, nonsectarian call to faith. Virtually every sermon

started with a recitation of world crises, followed by national ones, and then personal ones. For each crisis, Christ offered the answer. Whatever the stated text, the actual text of every sermon was the same, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world . . .” Though Graham shunned prosperity and personal fulfillment gospels, he offered a good deal of practical advice about day-to-day living.

How Graham presented his message—his recognizable diction, accent, timing, gestures, enunciation, posture, and humor—proved equally telling. Gradually the blazing speed slowed from 240 bombastic words a minute to something like a grandfatherly fireside chat. Most sermons ended with a call to stand up, walk to the front, and make a clear choice for Christ. More than 3 million decision cards and the millions of letters posted from ordinary folk to Graham’s Minneapolis headquarters showed the results.

Graham capitalized on both inherited and acquired qualities. His Hollywood face, trim physique, million-dollar grin, and voice—aptly described as “an instrument of vast range and power”—came naturally, but he also tended them very carefully. More important were the personal disciplines he maintained. Fame never compromised his commitment to marital fidelity, financial transparency, honesty about numbers, and, with rare exceptions, refusal to criticize others. The historian William Martin said it well: Graham represented Americans’ “best selves.” Journalists took note.

Graham left two main legacies for the Protestant mainline. First, he displayed a steady though sometimes uneven march from a conservative to a progressive position on most of the key social issues of the day (excluding women’s rights). A southerner, he gradually moved from support for racial segregation to opposition to it to calling racism a sin and admonishing whites to obey civil rights laws. Originally the fiercest of hawks about communism and indecisive about the Vietnam War, he grew to champion nuclear disarmament.

Nixon’s downfall in 1974 changed Graham in other ways. Though a lifelong Democrat with moderately Republican instincts, he struggled—albeit with mixed success—to model nonpartisanship in the pulpit and in his public life. Graham stoutly refused to support the Christian Right when it arose in the late 1970s. By the 1980s his repeated denunciations of poverty, hunger, and American exceptionalism placed him in the forefront of all but the most progressive evangelicals of his generation.

Graham's second legacy to mainline Protestantism lay in what might be called evangelical ecumenism. As the years passed, fewer and fewer doctrinal particularities served as deal breakers for him. This posture pivoted on his willingness to work with almost anyone who would work with him as long as they did not ask him to change his message. He labored tirelessly, and often in the face of venomous criticism, to build bridges with fundamentalists, other evangelicals, Pentecostals, mainline Protestants, Catholics, and partisans of other religions. He refused to speculate about the fate of non-Christians, insisting that was God's call, not his.

The mainline's attitude toward Graham varied from person to person and from time to time. In the 1950s the *Christian Century* voiced sharp criticisms. *Century* writers challenged Graham for being reticent to talk about racism, succumbing to consumerism, marketing unreliable numbers, and reviving fundamentalism. Graham "hasn't a glimmer of a notion about what is really going on in the world," the *Century* declared in 1956.

Yet the mainline was neither monolithic nor frozen in time. Most leaders of the Protestant Council of the City of New York supported his 1957 megacrusade in their city. Martin Marty, church historian and longtime *Century* columnist, said in 1988, on the occasion of Graham's 70th birthday, that though in the past he had grumbled about Graham's approach, he judged that "left and right, liberal or conservative, mean less than mean and non-mean, and Graham—to our great fortune—has been 'non-mean.'" In a conference in 2013 devoted to analyzing the preacher's legacy, Marty said that the Mt. Rushmore of American religious history would include at least these three: Jonathan Edwards, Martin Luther King Jr., and Billy Graham.

For years journalists speculated about Graham's successor. At times some awarded the title to his culture warrior son Franklin, while others gave it to the theologically and politically moderate megachurch pastor Rick Warren, and still others pointed to famous humanitarian Christian voices such as the rock star Bono. Though Franklin Graham has insisted that his stridently partisan positions echoed stances taken by his father, Franklin's views differed dramatically from the increasingly irenic, progressive, and practical faith that his father preached late in life. It seems more likely that Graham's shadow fell not on any one figure but on a generation of evangelists working in all parts of the world.

Like his contemporaries Martin Luther King Jr. and Pope John Paul II, Graham seemed to soar above the political, cultural, and religious divides of the second half of the

20th century. He provided a compelling vision of peace—peace within, peace with neighbors, and peace with God. His ministry helped millions see that no matter how badly they had messed up their lives, Christ offered them a second chance.

A version of this article, which was edited on February 23, appears in the print edition under the title "A preacher's vast legacy."