

Billy Graham

Introduction

Billy Graham is widely regarded as one of the premier Christian evangelists of this past century. Born and raised on a small dairy farm near Charlotte, North Carolina, he gained international acclaim by preaching before large audiences in multiple nations and through his organization that provided a ministry to every country across the globe over a time frame that exceeded four decades.¹ This essay seeks to examine his life and ministry in three ways: first, an overview of his life and ministry; second, a discussion of the contexts of him and his ministry (religious, public or political, and cultural); and third, the two ‘movements’, racial and political, he considered and how those examples might inform public theology today.

Life and Early Ministry

In the year 1918, William Franklin “Billy” Graham Jr. was born near Charlotte, North Carolina. He was the first of William Sr. and Morrow Graham's four children. Growing up in a typical rural environment, he experienced an evangelist named Mordecai Haimz when he was there in 1934, which resulted in him “deciding for Christ”. He attended the Florida Bible Institute (now Trinity College), where he enrolled in education, and then transferred to Wheaton College in Illinois, where he graduated in 1943, shortly before marrying Ruth Bell that same year. He became ordained as a minister in the Southern Baptist denomination in 1939, and after a very short pastorate, he became more involved in evangelism.² Their first major event in terms of external exposure started in Los Angeles in 1949. The event began and went beyond scheduled dates, drawing national media attention. In 1950, he began the Billy Graham Evangelistic

¹Graham, Billy. “Billy Graham | WiKi Persons.” Wiki-persons.org, February 15, 2022

² Balmer, Randall. “Billy Graham | Biography & Facts.” In *Encyclopædia Britannica*, February 17, 2019.

Association (BGEA), the organization that would form and then organize all of his crusades and overseas ministry, and start radio broadcasts and television ministry, and later a program called Docker. He preached to an estimated 215 million people in over 185 countries and territories over decades in ministry.

Ministry across Arenas

Graham's main occupation was evangelism, in which he preached the gospel (sin, salvation, repentance, faith) to very large congregations, often referred to as "crusades". A characteristic of Graham's proclamations was their uniform simplicity, conviction, and focus on scripture. Graham was an early adopter of new media (radio, television) to communicate the gospel message and pioneered the radio show Hour of Decision in the early 1950s. Although he was a child of the Southern Baptist tradition, Graham collaborated with mainline Protestant denominations to straddle the lines of division in Christianity in the United States.³ Graham's ministry evolved in the light of certain ethics: he and his colleagues produced a "Modesto Manifesto" at the beginning of his evangelistic ministry in 1948, a code of conduct for evangelistic campaigns related to money, publicity, and integrity.

While Graham was not only a preacher of churches, he also transitioned into a public persona and a counsellor. Harry S. Truman was regularly called upon to speak or pray in civic and national contexts. In this public as well as political space, Graham was a mediator between the religious world and the political and civic world. He was sometimes called "America's Chaplain" or "Chaplain to the Presidents". Graham served not only in national politics but also in the cultural sphere on a global scale. He preached in stadiums around the world in places such as

³ Gibbs, Nancy, and Micheal Duffy. "The Preacher and the Presidents." Google Books, 2025.

Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and invited media coverage to the worldwide stage, bringing the Christian message into popular culture and global consciousness.

Transcending Traditional “Lines”

While Graham’s ministry may appear to follow the standard lines of evangelicalism, a more thorough examination shows important ways in which he moved beyond some of the margins, including racial and political margins, to share the gospel in ways relevant to public theology today.⁴

For example, Graham crossed the racial divide during a 1953 revival in Chattanooga, Tennessee. During the program, Billy’s son and assistant, Dewey and Timothy Graham, watched the revival, complete with segregation ropes separating black and white people; Billy Graham ordered him to remove the ropes during the show. This was a remarkable and revolutionary work in the context of segregation in the United States.⁵ As a result of this action, Graham ordered that all revivals be treated as one incident. Graham wanted his gospel to proclaim that its implications were racial justice and Christian unity. “Beneath the cross the ground is level”, was a line Graham repeated throughout his ministry.

In the political world, Graham moved into the public sphere in a public-religious manner. He maintained no distance from Social Media Block. He has been involved in numerous activities with National-level Political Leaders (i.e., current President), as well as engagement with Cultural Events (e.g., Christmas, National Day of Prayer), and expressing opinions on National Crises (i.e., the killing of former President John F. Kennedy). He was not limited to the

⁴ Hollinger, David. “The Evangelical Capture of the Republican Party and Its Implications for Academia.” *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture*, 2025.

⁵ Gibbs, Nancy, and Micheal Duffy. “The Preacher and the Presidents.” Google Books, 2025.

private space of his faith. Graham transitioned from private faith to public life, demonstrating a unique form of public theology and preaching the faith that resonated not only in the church sphere but also in civic, national, and global contexts.

Utilizing These Examples in Modern Public Theology

Graham's early works advocating racial integration resonate with current times of racial inequality and division, cultural divides, and identity politics. Graham's public theological pentad means that Christian leaders today are actively working on racial justice issues, not only in the realm of commentary but using their spheres of influence to organize integrated gatherings, partner relationships in formerly divided communities, and speak out against structural injustice. Churches can create public platforms for theology that build trust and peace among Black, Indigenous, and white Christian leaders in co-mission and prove that the gospel transcends cultural-ethnic divides.

In a time of political and religious fragmentation, Graham's posture offers a model of living public life through Christian beliefs while eschewing partisan loyalties as a trap. Graham prayed for, counselled, and openly discussed with both partisan presidents while making changes to the gospel, praying for each president and speaking for the gospel without assigning either party for partisan purposes. Today's call for public theology may have generational continuity with Graham, and a call to public policy and public life arising from the moral tradition of Christianity, regardless of the partisan ties of pastor, theologian, or faith tradition.

Conclusion

The life and ministry of Billy Graham, like every other, embodies the broad nature of evangelical engagement: from rural upbringing to a farm boy, to an international warrior, from the local church to the White House, from an exclusive stadium to a coordinated mass movement. Billy Graham's crossings of racial and cultural barriers illustrate that the gospel can go beyond social boundaries when it is Christ-centered. While Billy Graham's legacy holds many lessons for modern public theology, there are two very important lessons from Graham's life as an Evangelist that have modern-day application: first, that the message of Christianity is a challenge to our culture and an advocate for racial reconciliation and visible unity; secondly, that the voice of faith in the public square is legitimate to be heard in the public arena with truthfulness, sincerity, and conviction, without being limited only to the limitations of political party affiliation.

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