

The Legacy of Billy Graham

*Critical Reflections on America's
Greatest Evangelist*

EDITED BY
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Introduction

Taking Billy Graham Seriously

MICHAEL G. LONG

“People forget that I am totally nonpartisan and that I do not take sides politically.” It was little more than a year into the Nixon presidency, Billy Graham was making another appearance on *The Dick Cavett Show*, and this time the audience members were deeply cynical. They were so cynical of Graham’s claim to nonpartisanship that they laughed out loud. Cavett refused to join the chorus of guffaws, but he added his own characteristically wry commentary. “Yep,” he said.¹

Fast-forward thirty-five years to the 2005 New York crusade.

No one is laughing anymore, and no one is making wry comments—we are just surprised. After all those years of robustness—his strong chin cutting through the night air, his blue eyes gazing heavenward, his lean physique symbolizing the muscularity of evangelical Christianity—Billy Graham has finally become the “Lord’s lion in winter.”²

How shocked we are to see that the Billy Graham of the Nixon years—the defiant defender—has become an elderly man in need of a walker.

It seems disrespectful to criticize one who seems so frail, and the national media, hardened as they may be in this post-Watergate era, seem to bow their heads and pay homage to America’s ailing evangelist. There are no hard questions about his past, and the few times journalists do ask him about his damning Nixon-era comments on Jews, they just sit back and give him all the time he needs to explain himself.³ As Graham historian Steven Miller notes, the media have come to lionize this lion in winter.⁴

Perhaps Billy Graham deserves such respect. He has overcome so many things—the racism of the South where he was as a child, his virulent anti-communism, his intricate descriptions of heaven above, his unholy alliance with Nixon. And he has accomplished so much more—leading millions to faith and good works, traveling behind the Iron Curtain, helping Lyndon Johnson gain successful passage of antipoverty legislation, counseling Nixon to move beyond bitterness, pushing for nuclear treaties in the Reagan era, offering healing words to our broken hearts on September 11, 2001. If any lion in winter deserves our respect, surely it is Billy Graham.

Fast-forward again, this time to 2007.

As I put the finishing touches on this book, Billy Graham is still with us. He no longer preaches at crusades, and he receives regular medical treatment for swelling of the brain, not to mention numerous other ailments. There is a quietness that now surrounds Graham as he sits in his rocker atop the mountains of rural North Carolina—the type of serenity possessed by elderly politicians who have lived through one national crisis after another and who have resigned themselves, with all their acquired wisdom, to life far from the national stage they once commanded. For so many years a legend in the making, Billy Graham has finally become a legend of epic proportion—the elderly statesman of Protestant Christianity. Perhaps he is the last of the church fathers.

The serenity of Graham's latter days is all the more striking when we turn on our televisions and hear his fellow evangelists condemning Islam, blaming gays and lesbians for the terrorism we now face, and suggesting that God will harshly judge towns that refuse to include creationism in their school curriculum. By comparison, Graham seems so level-headed, so mainstream, so quiet. "He's not so bad when you look at everyone else who's out there now," said William Sloane Coffin Jr. after I had invited him, shortly before he died, to contribute to this book.

Graham's moderation—his diplomatic evangelicalism—might be part of the reason that Christian theologians have been reluctant to criticize him in recent years. Add in the factors of his age and personal growth, and the case against assessing his life and ministry seems all the more compelling.

But reluctance to criticize Billy Graham is not new. Not since Reinhold Niebuhr publicly lambasted the evangelist during the 1957 New York crusade has a leading Christian theologian granted significant critical attention to the ministry of Billy Graham. Radical Baptist Will Campbell joined other prophetic types in denouncing Graham's quietism during the Nixon and Vietnam eras, but this opposition came in the form of occasional counterpoints rather than as systematic assessments of strengths and weaknesses. After Niebuhr's articles, the most important critical work on Graham was a book written by religious historian William McLoughlin—and that was in 1960.

Graham's harshest critics have always been the Christian fundamentalists whose separatist ways he left far behind as he wove in and out of the corridors of worldly power. In their own sheltered ways, they continue to be loud. By contrast, Graham's most appreciative supporters have come from the evangelical community, and in their own well-publicized ways, they continue to speak loving words about their evangelist.

But since Niebuhr and McLoughlin, Christian theologians outside the fundamentalist and evangelical communities have largely dismissed Billy Graham as unworthy of critical engagement. They may be respectful of Graham, but many of these theologians consider him anachronistic—a leftover from pre-modern Christianity, an uneducated preacher who made good by slapping the backs of politicians, an Elmer Gantry with deep personal piety. Niebuhr set the tone for this dismissive wave of hand. An urban, educated snobbishness ran through his commentary on the evangelist, and many theologians have since inherited and embraced this type of snobbishness, even as the wider world lionizes him at this point in his life.

The lionizing, demonizing, and snobbishness are all unfortunate—and terribly unfair. Billy Graham deserves much better, and it is time that we take him seriously.

No Christian minister, after all, has been more influential in global politics, economics, and faith in the twentieth century, for good or ill, than Billy Graham. While theologians have been writing about and for themselves, Graham has been strategizing in the Oval Office, meeting with global business and labor leaders, and advising politicians during world conflicts, all the while preaching Christ crucified to hundreds of millions of individuals who know little if anything about Christian theology—postmodern, postcolonial, or postimperial. The cultural influence of Billy Graham simply has no equal as we head into this new century. To be sure, every now and then a Christian theologian or minister will make national news, but it is the name of Billy Graham that is seared in the hearts and minds of millions of women and men—powerful and lowly—across the entire globe.

The purpose of this book is to take Billy Graham seriously—to acknowledge his historical significance, finally, and embrace him as more than worthy of critical engagement by the brightest Christian thinkers of our day. Treating him as a serious figure, rather than as a mere caricature, will require exploring the strengths and weaknesses of his lifelong ministry, and as this book seeks to answer questions rarely asked—for example, Was Billy Graham right about theology and preaching, politics and economics, feminism and sex, war and peace, race and power?—it will set a tone that is both appreciative and critical. If there is anything clear about Billy Graham, it is that there are reasons galore for recognizing the immense value of his ministry and, at the same time,

for refusing to grant him iconic status. Like all of us, Billy Graham is both saint and sinner, and if we are to treat him fairly and understand his legacy fully, we will refuse to lionize or demonize him.

Assessing his ministry is important not only for grasping his real legacy but also for moving into a future without Billy Graham to guide us as clearly as he has. Is there a better path than the one Graham has laid out for us as we begin to make our way through the twenty-first century? Many of the contributors to this book—progressive Christian theologians—think so, and while expressing appreciation for Graham, they will also encourage us to leave behind his faults and take up a Christianity that embraces critical biblical scholarship and opposes a faith, politics, or economics that is more easily aligned with the interests of the powerful than with the needs of those on society's margins.

There is no lionizing in the pages ahead, but neither are there dismissive laughs. Billy Graham deserves so much better—and so do we as we move into an uncertain future without his clarity.

NOTES

1. *The Dick Cavett Show*, May 5, 1970, ABC. The Nixon White House tracked and recorded some of Graham's television appearances. A copy of this show is referenced as WHCA 3704 at the National Archives in College Park (NARA).
2. "Billy Graham: Lord's Lion in Winter," *Newsweek* online interview with Jon Meacham, August 6, 2006, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14206390/site/newsweek/?bctid=182654595>.
3. Graham spoke of a "stranglehold" that he believed Jews had over the United States. "A lot of the Jews are great friends of mine," he added. "They swarm around me and are friendly to me, because they know that I'm friendly to Israel and so forth. But they don't know how I really feel about what they're doing to this country, and I have no power and no way to handle them. But I would stand up under proper circumstances" (White House Tape 662-4, February 1, 1972, NARA).
4. Steven P. Miller, "Billy Graham: Have Journalists Given Us an Accurate Picture?" *History News Network*, June 12, 2006, <http://hnn.us/articles/25521.html>.

Preaching and Theology

Preaching the Good News

THOMAS G. LONG

Assessing the religious and cultural impact of Billy Graham is, to a significant degree, a matter of measuring his impact as a preacher. For over sixty years, under tents and tabernacles, in stadiums and arenas, and on radio and television, Graham has been preaching, and in many ways the instrument of the sermon has been his single most palpable form of ministry, his most prominent and powerful means of public expression. Even his best-selling books and his syndicated newspaper columns are, in effect, retooled sermons. Unlike the apostle Paul, preaching his way through the Mediterranean world, Graham has been no founder of churches. Unlike Savonarola, who sailed on the power of his sermonic rhetoric into political power in Florence, Graham has never aspired to office. Unlike Billy Sunday, railing out against the saloons and the gin mills, Graham has not focused his ministry on a white-hot agenda of social reform. Graham has been an evangelist, a preacher to souls, pure and simple.

By the best estimates, Graham has preached to more people than any other preacher in history—more than 210 million people in over 185 countries. His sermons have been broadcast, recorded, archived, scrutinized, and held up as exemplars of the craft. Yet for all the ballyhoo about Graham being the quintessential American preacher, his sermons are, in fact, anomalies on the American preaching scene. Over the six decades of Graham's ministry, the American sermon has been fashioned and refashioned by such forces as neo-orthodoxy, narrative theology, the reforms of Vatican II, the therapeutic culture, liberation and feminist thought, and the electronic communication revolution, but

Graham's sermons have remained curiously untouched by any of this. To be sure, his cultural references have changed—from illustrations about Mickey Mantle to stories about Bono and Madonna—but his sermons, theologically and methodologically, have remained essentially the same from the Los Angeles revival of 1949 to the Flushing Meadows crusade of 2005, a still point in the moving homiletical universe.

THE ROOTS OF GRAHAM'S PREACHING

At age sixteen Billy Graham was dramatically changed—he would say “converted”—during a November 1934 Charlotte, North Carolina, revival conducted by the rough and ready itinerant Kentucky evangelist Mordecai Ham. A sensationalist and a provocateur, Ham, as he conducted revivals in southern hamlets, villages, and towns, often attracted crowds through carnival theatrics. His favorite technique was to inquire in each new place about the most notorious local sinners and atheists and then to issue pugnacious challenges to them by name from the pulpit. Ham was a vigorous, physical preacher, strutting across the stage and stirring up strong emotional responses, and it was not uncommon for his evangelistic services to be tinged with the threat of violence from those who were the targets of his sharp tongue.

Graham adopted as his own much of what he experienced in Ham's preaching, beginning with Ham's athletic style of delivery. Until illness and age subdued him, Graham was always a fiery and physically dramatic speaker, particularly in his earliest days as an evangelist. A reporter listening to him preach at a Houston revival in the 1950s observed that Graham “repeatedly banged his fists on the pulpit, clenched them in symbolic anguish against his temples, and swept the huge stadium with a punctuating forefinger.”¹ Also commenting on his early style of delivery, William G. McLoughlin Jr. says of Graham, “As he retells the old Biblical stories of heroes, villains, and saints, he imitates their voices, assumes their postures, struts, gesticulates, crouches and sways to play each part.”²

Graham's critics have sometimes ridiculed his hyperkinetic delivery as “Christian vaudeville,”³ and, as he matured and became more prominent, Graham pulled back a bit on the histrionics. Though still a charismatic and physically active speaker, as he aged, he spoke with a more measured pace and more moderated use of his body. Some of this was no doubt due to the influence of his wife, Ruth, who, as a Presbyterian, never warmed to her husband's more frenetic sermons. “As an actor . . . I'm afraid he is pretty much a ham,” she said. “When he starts that kind of acting sermon, I usually start to squirm. . . . Afterward, I'll

say, ‘Bill, Jesus didn’t act out the gospel. He just preached it. I think that’s all he has called you to do.’”⁴

Also, Graham has, throughout his career, preached a variation of the simple, even simplistic, twofold sin-and-redemption formula employed by Ham and by other “mass evangelists,” such as the ex-baseball player turned evangelist Billy Sunday: first, present human sin in vivid, accusatory, and perhaps even lurid language, and second, summon the hearers, with equal passion, to open themselves to the rescuing, saving power of Jesus Christ. The night Graham heard Ham preach, his first words to the crowd were, “There’s a great sinner in this place tonight.” Graham later confided to his friend Grady Wilson, who was sitting beside him at the meeting, that he heard those words as if they had been addressed to him personally. “Mother’s been telling him about me,” Graham thought. Ham’s direct appeal to a sinful and guilty self was what transformed Graham that cool, November night, and it is the approach Graham has sustained in his own preaching to this day.

Another characteristic of Ham’s approach that has carried over into Graham’s sermons is his anti-ecclisial bias, again a stock-in-trade theme for Billy Sunday and other revivalists. For Ham, participation in the church was at best irrelevant, and at worst antithetical, to a personal relationship to God through Christ, which could be established and maintained without the props of formal creed or communion. The teenaged Billy Graham who felt the effects of Ham’s sweaty appeal was no wastrel or reprobate but a youth leader in a Charlotte, North Carolina, Presbyterian congregation. But those commitments would have been dismissed as spiritual static by Ham. Graham might well have heard remarks like these, typical of Ham’s sermons:

You say, “Why I’ve been a faithful Sunday School teacher. I’ve been a faithful member of this church. I’ve been loyal to the truth. I’m fundamental. I’m orthodox. I try to live right. I try to do the best I can. I don’t know what else I can do.” But that isn’t acceptable to the Lord! That’s what the “old man,” Adam, is doing.⁵

By forming his own preaching after the pattern he observed in preachers like Mordecai Ham, Graham has placed himself firmly on the trajectory of emotional and personalistic American revival preaching arcing back at least to Charles G. Finney. As such, his preaching methods are curiously anachronistic. In the last half century, as American preaching has become highly creative and preachers all around him have experimented with everything from narrative to free-form structure to PowerPoint, Graham soldiers on with a preaching style shaped more by the communicational realities of the nineteenth century than the twenty-first. “The message I preach here is going to be the

same. It hasn't changed," an eighty-six-year-old Graham said before his 2005 New York crusade. "Circumstances have changed. Problems have changed. But deep inside, man has not changed and the gospel hasn't changed."⁶

THE TYPICAL BILLY GRAHAM SERMON

The evangelistic sermon, of which Graham has been a noteworthy practitioner, cannot be fully captured in words on a page. It is, as Kenneth L. Woodward has described, "a genuine American performance art."⁷ Graham himself liked to quote the eighteenth-century evangelist George Whitfield, who, when someone asked permission to print one of his sermons, said, "You may print it if you put in the thunder, the fire, and the lightning."⁸

Even so, the hundreds of manuscripts of Graham's sermons, preached over the many years of his ministry, do reveal much about the methods of his preaching. (Not all of Graham's sermons were actually penned by Graham; the claim that Graham has often used ghostwriters, who created sermons for him, carefully aping his style and vocabulary, is controversial but well documented.⁹) While not every sermon fits the pattern, many of Graham's sermons are arranged according to a four-part scheme. These parts are not so much sermon "points," to use the traditional vocabulary, as they are movements in a sermonic drama of personal redemption. They are as follows.

The Grave Crisis in Our Time

Sometimes this part of the sermon is prefaced by a brief reprise of the Scripture lesson on which the sermon is based, but this review of the text is essentially done in order to show that the passage calls us to think deeply about the human predicament and thus to allow Graham to segue into a presentation of the present moment as one of extraordinary crisis.

In describing the problems that bedevil humanity, Graham is usually newsworthy and often seriously hyperbolic. At the beginning of 1951, he preached, "Everyone seems to agree that a terrible catastrophe lies just ahead. . . . Selfishness seems to have gripped the entire human race. The worst that is in man is now manifesting itself."¹⁰ By 1957, he was announcing, "Many students of world affairs believe that the world is plunging madly toward a third World War."¹¹ In 1961, pointing to communist threats in Europe, the Congo, and Southeast Asia, Graham quoted scientist James Orr, who warned, "The whole race is crumbling to destruction."¹² Graham agreed, adding, "Not only is the world itself facing its greatest crisis since our race appeared, but Christianity beholds giants rising out of the earth to contend with it, more powerful, more

worldwide in the influence they are able to exert than any the church has known since the downfall of paganism fifteen hundred years ago.”¹³ Preaching at the Nixon White House in 1970, Graham declared that the affluences of society had created a great sense of alienation and emptiness and that “thousands are turning to drugs, thousands are even turning to suicide.” He went on to claim, “Spiritual leanness haunts millions. The starvation of the human soul has reached alarming proportions.”¹⁴ In New York City in 2005, Graham told the Flushing Meadows crowd, “Tonight, I was interviewed by two of the national television people, and they both asked the same questions: ‘What’s wrong with our world? What’s happening? Is there any answer to it?’”¹⁵

The evils change with the era—here communism, there nuclear war, now AIDS, then drugs—but the world inhabited by Billy Graham’s sermons is forever on the brink of total ruination and disaster. He does not, like the classic street prophets of *New Yorker* cartoon fame, wear a sandwich board reading “The World Is Coming to an End,” but it has been the opening salvo of his sermons for six decades. These are chronically “the worst of times,” with hardly a glimmer of “the best of times,” and were his sermons to end after this opening move, he would be merely a pulpiteering Chicken Little. But they do not end here, of course. They move on to a focus on the plight of the individual soul.

The Restless and Captive Soul

Homiletically, it is a rule of thumb that problems raised at the beginning of a sermon should be addressed somewhere in the body of the sermon. In short, preachers should not release snakes they cannot kill, or at least defang. But Graham consistently violates this rule. He describes an emergency, a world tottering on the brink of collapse, but not in order to sound a moral call to arms, to address social ills from the perspective of the gospel, or to summon his hearers to a globally aware faith. He does not even urge them to rush into the desert to “flee from the wrath to come.” Instead, he describes the shaking of the world’s foundations simply as a backdrop for the real topic of the sermon: personal restlessness, brokenness, and alienation. For Graham, the full and only reason why the planet is in trouble is because it is populated by sinful individuals. He describes social gloom and makes dire pronouncements of catastrophe, not to set the church working for reconciliation, peace, or justice, but to claim that all anxiety about the plight of the world is but a mirror reflecting the true crisis of humanity: the bankruptcy of the individual soul.

In this second part of the sermon, Graham places his finger on the troubled inner spirit of his hearers, their loneliness, guilt, fear, and hunger for meaning. What he said in one of his 2005 New York sermons is characteristic of

almost every Billy Graham sermon. Having raised the global issue of grinding poverty and hunger set amid the affluence of others, Graham then downsizes the problem to fit into the smaller space of the individual human heart:

In Genesis, the Bible tells us that God made us in His image. We were meant to be like God! But sin intervened. We rebelled against God, and now there is another kind of poverty that plagues us—a poverty of the soul, where our longings are never satisfied, where our desires are never filled, where our hopes are unrealized and fears grow.

Some of you tonight are in that situation. You have a girlfriend or a boyfriend who has left you, or you might have a death in your family, or you may have a habit you cannot control. You have tried to control it, but you've failed.¹⁶

Two characteristic marks of this second part of Graham's sermons are the citing of several biblical texts for authority, usually with the formulaic introduction "the Bible says," and the occasional swipe at "churchy" Christianity. Graham encourages his converts to become active in churches "where Christ is proclaimed," but church religion, in Graham's glossary, can too easily be about righteous appearances alone. God looks beneath the religious-looking surfaces to the true depths of the heart. "Now, take some of you people on Sunday morning," Graham told a Charlotte crusade in 1958. "You dress up and put a little halo on your head, and you go to church and look like a saint. . . . You get out of church, shake hands with the minister, go home, take the halo off, take your wings off, pick up your pitchfork, and the horns begin to grow again. No change has taken place."¹⁷

This naming of the hearers as troubled and restless, as sinners in full rebellion against God, who sees through their pretense to the truth about their lack of righteousness, sets up the third movement of the sermon: the divine remedy for sin.

God's Response and Invitation

In his early sermons, Graham had a very full theological understanding of how God responded to the dilemma of human sin, which essentially involved a substitutionary view of the atonement. Human beings can do nothing to address the problem of sin; only God can forgive sin and repair the broken spirit, and on the cross the sum of human sin was placed upon Jesus. What is left for the believer to do is to surrender. "I come to the cross," he preached,

and I say, "Jesus is my Savior, and He is my own Savior. I am trusting in Him, and Him alone, for salvation. I am not trusting in anything or anybody but Christ. By faith, I surrender to Him."

... Now the moment you come to Christ by repentance and faith, God in a miraculous and glorious way, changes your life. He forgives all your past. He gives you a new nature. He gives you new values, and new motives, and a new direction in your life. He puts a smile on your face, and a spring in your step, and joy in your soul.¹⁸

Presented in such bare terms, as Graham was wont to do, this process of redemption came perilously close to being a quasi-mathematical transaction. The believer changes his attitude toward God, and God responds by changing the divine attitude toward the believer, which in turn allows the believer to change his inner values and attitude toward the whole of life. In Graham's later sermons, though, the clumsy tit-for-tat machinery has largely given way to a more intimate, loving understanding of God's role in the drama of salvation. Although the theological details are fuzzy and not worked through, in Graham's most recent sermons, the God who demands satisfaction for sin fades, and the God who loves and embraces the brokenhearted sinner is emphasized. "I read somewhere that what young people want and need from older people first of all is to be loved," Graham told the last New York crusade, "and the Bible says God loves you. God loves *you!* God loves everyone here tonight."¹⁹

Get Up Out of Your Seat and Come to Christ

All of Graham's public crusade sermons are aimed at a single telos: the conversion of individual hearers. Graham does not mince words at the end of his sermons; like the good salesman he has always been, he tries to close the deal. In Charlotte in 1958, he concluded his sermon with words he would repeat, in one form or another, thousands of times, all the way to the very last service in New York in 2005:

I'm going to ask you to get up out of your seat, hundreds of you, right now. Get up out of your seat, and come and stand right here. And say tonight, "I want Christ. I am ready to pay the price. I am ready to renounce my sins. I'm ready to receive Him as Lord and Master and Savior. I'm ready to follow and serve Him. I don't care what it costs. I'm ready by God's grace to pay the price."²⁰

And get up out of their seats, they do. Nearly three million people over the last sixty years have walked forward at the end of Graham's sermons.²¹ When one compares this amazing track record of effectiveness with the actual substance of the preaching, with the plausibility of Graham's simple formula in a world of increasing complexity, one wonders, why?

THE PUZZLE OF GRAHAM'S PREACHING

The enigma of Billy Graham's preaching is that it produces such dramatic results when, honesty compels us to say, most of his sermons fail almost every imaginable test of quality—theological, ethical, homiletical, and aesthetic. Graham has never claimed to be an excellent or deep preacher, and, technically at least, he is right to avoid claiming these titles. Structurally, Graham's sermons are rhetorical dinosaurs full of canned illustrations, suspect logic, sometimes wild misstatements of fact, simplistic ideas, and high-fundamentalist theology. Yet over the years, millions have made a decision to follow Christ in response to his preaching. To be sure, many of those people sooner or later slipped back into their old life patterns (one of the most frequent criticisms of Graham and his evangelistic techniques has to do with his poor "staying power" statistics), but others of his "converts" have genuinely grown and matured as Christians. Some of them have even achieved a much greater complexity and depth in their faith than Graham has achieved himself, and they consider their initiation into the Christian community via a Graham crusade to be a kind of "breech birth." For some people, hearing Graham preach is a bit like going to an old school chiropractor; you may not appreciate all of his theories, but you walk a little straighter after the visit.

Criticisms of Graham are easy to produce since he makes himself into a large target. In the 1950s, Reinhold Niebuhr famously and publicly scolded Graham in a series of essays and articles for being pietistic, moralistic, and individualistic. Niebuhr was especially bothered by the flow of Graham's typical sermons, an issue I identified earlier—a homiletical tendency to describe large social issues and problems and then, in reductionistic fashion, to suggest that the solution to them is personal salvation alone. As a case in point, Niebuhr cited a Graham sermon on the "Seven Deadly Sins" in which Graham had discussed America's "economy of abundance." Niebuhr zeros in for the kill: "But having dealt with this sin of a whole culture, he irrelevantly presents Christian salvation as a kind of magic panacea, with the assurance that the 'blood of Jesus Christ' can save us from this sin, too. There is nothing here about the temptations to which even the most devoted Christians are subject in a very wealthy nation."²²

Niebuhr was right, of course, and while Graham was fully aware of the great theologian's criticisms, and took them seriously, there is little evidence that he took them to heart. Despite the much heralded social gestures, such as racially integrating his crusades, Graham never really walked the aisle at Niebuhr's crusade, never turned his preaching over to a broader, more socially alert understanding of the gospel. He has remained a "hot gospeler" to this day, insisting that every human problem, when seen for what it truly is, falls before

the remedy of personal forgiveness and that every human being has but one compelling spiritual need—individual submission to Christ. According to Graham, even the Buddha at the end of his life was “still searching for truth”—the truth that is Jesus Christ.²³

To Niebuhr’s general critique of the theological and social analytical depth of Graham’s sermons, we can add a few more demurrers:

Plausibility. In some ways it is ironic that Graham’s preaching career has been such a long one. John the Baptist–type preachers, who thunder that “even now the ax is laid to the root of the tree,” generally exit the scene after a few sweaty sermons. Either the ax falls or it doesn’t. But Graham has been announcing the urgent crisis of a world coming apart at the seams for years. Through nearly a dozen presidential administrations and countless social and cultural changes and permutations, Graham continues to claim that never before in the history of the human race have we faced a moment so full of dread and urgency. As William McLoughlin said, “Ten years of crisis is the limit of human endurance, and Billy Graham has now had his ten years.”²⁴

But McLoughlin made that remark in 1960, and Graham still stands in the pulpit almost half a century later, dressed for combat, his trumpet sounding the battle alarm. Only in America, perhaps, a culture without a strong sense of historical memory, a culture in which tragedies like the events of September 11, 2001, are forever seen out of social and historical context and as perpetual signs of the crisis that can ever strike without warning, could a preacher shout like an air raid siren for nearly seventy years and still be taken seriously.

Biblical exegesis. In a 1999 online chat, a young pastor asked Graham for advice about ministry that he could “use the rest of his life.” Graham replied, in part, that “a young minister must know the Bible and preach from the Bible. I believe,” he added, “that God uses what we call expository preaching—which means that you explain paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter to the congregation what God said.”²⁵

Strangely, though, very few of Graham’s sermons display anything like the methods and results of expository preaching, which he so solidly advocates. In fact, most do not show evidence of significant interpretation of the biblical text at all. To be sure, Graham has plenty of biblical references in his sermon, and occasionally some pieces of Bible-encyclopedia-type data will appear sprinkled into the material, but as for wrestling with the ambiguities of the text, as for clinging to the text as a major source of the sermons’ intellectual and theological content, this is mostly absent from Graham’s preaching. What gives content and shape to Graham’s preaching is the die-cut sin-to-salvation theological template that dominates almost every sermon. Indeed, biblical texts are used mainly as proof texts, as illustrations of and warrants for a theological paradigm of rebellion-redemption already in place. For the most part, every text,

whether psalm or parable or prophetic oracle, is pounded into the square hole of Graham's prefabricated sermon design.

Years ago, when his friend and fellow evangelist Charles Templeton challenged Graham's simplistic use of the Bible and posed some hard questions about the flat and literalistic way he uses Scripture, Graham was at first at a loss for words. Finally he replied to Templeton's dismay: "Chuck, look, I haven't a good enough mind to settle these questions. The finest minds in the world have looked and come down on both sides. I don't have the time, the inclination, or the set of mind to pursue them. I found that if I say 'The Bible says' and 'God says,' I get results. I have decided that I am not going to wrestle with these questions any longer."²⁶

Ambivalence toward culture. There runs through the entire corpus of Graham's sermons a profoundly divided mind about the place and value of culture. On the one hand, Graham possesses all of the native suspicions of a white southern farm boy about the ruling elites of finance, education, and media. "The higher the civilization," he observes, "the higher the suicide rate."²⁷ He plays to working-class prejudices by frequently depicting people who have achieved status and celebrity, people who have attended the best schools and who bring down the big salaries but who are wretched nonetheless. He preached, "I go to some colleges where there are no rules. Everything is permissive, and you find the most miserable-looking, unhappy people."²⁸ In Graham's sermons, people have fortune, power, education, and fame, but they remain restless and unhappy, ignorant about what gives true meaning in life. In one sermon, Graham reports being invited to address eight hundred scientists at a convention. After doing a bit of "aw shucks" about "being like a fish out of water because I know very little about science," Graham gets to the point and reverses the cultural tables. When it comes to the human equation, it was the scientists who were clueless. "Science needs the help of the church," one of the convention leaders confided in Graham.²⁹

On the other hand, Graham is himself a member of the celebrity class, and his sermons are salted with references to playing golf with Eisenhower, conversing with Karl Barth, and hosting rock stars in his home. Graham works both sides of the street, at one and the same time flattering his listeners' desire to believe that egghead Harvard graduates automatically know less about life than the average working Joe and vicariously satisfying their desire to ride in limousines, converse with movie stars, and tee up a golf ball at Augusta National.

William Franklin "Billy" Graham Jr., known around the world as one of Christendom's greatest preachers, would, based on his usual level of sermon exegesis, structure, theology, and language, perhaps struggle to get a grade of C in an intellectually demanding seminary preaching course. But for Graham and his hearers, the eventfulness of their encounter has never been about the technical

quality of his sermons. Theologically, Billy Graham may well stand as a prominent representative of a truth that applies to all Christian preachers: the words of sermons may well be weak, shallow, and misguided, but they can also be taken by God's Spirit to accomplish more than their intrinsic worth would allow. Many preachers would understand Graham's experience that the act of preaching seems to him like "wrestling with the devil," who does everything to make a mockery of the event of proclamation, including magnifying the flaws of preacher and sermon. When the sermon is over, Graham has said, "some sort of physical energy goes out of me and I feel terribly weak. I'm depleted."³⁰ Even the best sermons, as Karl Barth reminded us, involve an embarrassing presumption on the part of frail human speakers to try and capture divine lightning in a bottle made of mere words. If the Spirit does not choose to speak in and through the sermon, preaching becomes a laughable, vain, and foolish activity indeed. Better to get a job putting cherries on cupcakes.

There is yet one more thing to be said about Graham's sermons, namely, their efficacy as iconic and ritual events. Graham is not exactly a typical post-modern celebrity, famous basically for being famous, but his celebrity status is now a key to the power of his preaching. It hasn't hurt him through the years that he has the clean good looks and the soothing voice and the confident calm of the boy you wish lived next door. It also has not hurt him that he is humble and self-effacing, that he admits he possesses little in the way of fancy knowledge and that he hasn't the foggiest notion how a computer works. For millions of people with ordinary lives and modest ambitions and hopes, Billy Graham is one of them. They do not so much listen to the content of his messages; they participate in the event of Billy Graham. They are, for a moment, Billy Graham, and he is, himself, the message. He believes, really believes, in the innocent and righteous faith of their childhood, and, having seemingly kept himself free from scandal and impropriety, he embodies the pure, honest life we once believed we could live. Through him, we hobnob with royalty, visit exotic places, and dine with Fortune 500 CEOs. What could seem like shameless name-dropping in his sermons is, to his hearers, only a gracious invitation to go where Billy has gone and to meet those whom he has met. If occasionally some opportunist like Nixon uses him for nefarious political purposes, well, it's just a sign of Billy's innocent trust of all people. The Rev. Dr. Graham is loved and welcomed all over the world, but to us, he's just "Billy," our Billy.

And then our Billy gets up on the rostrum, folds his hands in prayer, and preaches. We know what he is going to say. He says it every time, in one way or another. He is going to say that he knows how lonely and disappointed and sad we are, knows that life has not turned out as we had hoped. But he is also going to give us a chance to start over, to wipe the slate clean and start afresh.

In his book *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*, Dan P. McAdams makes the case that Americans, especially the most generative citizens among us, both live by and tell stories of redemption, religious and secular. Down in our philosophical and civic religious souls, he argues, we are optimistically persuaded “that we will be delivered from our pain and suffering no matter what, that we will overcome in the long run, that we will rise from the depths of the present, that things will get better and that we will eventually grow and find fulfillment in the world.”³¹

That’s our story, and we’re sticking to it. But life gets so complicated and weighed down and messed up and sad that it is sometimes hard to hold on to this story and even harder to live it out. We are, as Paul Simon once sang, “slip-sliding away.” And then there is Billy Graham, standing there under the klieg lights, full of confidence and faith and righteousness, his strong and mellow voice reassuring us that our story of redemption is true and that personal renewal is within our grasp.

Years ago, Graham was scheduled to preach at the Citadel, the famous South Carolina military academy. As he walked across the campus with the school’s president, General Mark Clark, a cadet approached Graham and said, “Mr. Graham, you’re not going to let us down, are you?” Graham asked him what he meant, and he answered, “You are going to tell us how to be converted, aren’t you?”³²

This is an interesting and revealing exchange. It was not as if the cadet was seeking information. His very question shows that he knew what to expect from a Billy Graham sermon. He was not a religious seeker asking for the secret of conversion to the truth; he was an insider hoping that Graham would fulfill his expectations by sticking to the script. The cadet was like a child at bedtime asking for an old and familiar book to be read, ready to be comforted by the expected rhythms and the beloved story. At no time was this more evident than in the climactic 2005 New York crusade. Graham’s sermons were versions of the same sermons he has preached throughout his career; in fact, some of the material he preached in 2005 he had preached in New York in 1957. But this time Graham made his way to the pulpit using a walker. His voice was softer, and his age and illness sometimes caused him to stumble over words and to lose his focus momentarily. The sermons were shorter, almost schematic diagrams of the sermons of old. But the thousands who had come listened to him in rapt silence. They were doing more than hearing a Billy Graham sermon; they were participating in a Billy Graham event.

What did Graham think about what the Citadel cadet told him? “I went into that chapel service with that on my mind and my heart,” Graham says. Of course. Sermon after sermon, year after year, decade after decade, he always has.

NOTES

1. *Houston Post*, June 2, 1952, 1, cited in William G. McLoughlin Jr., *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age* (New York: Ronald Press, 1960), 124.
2. McLoughlin, *Billy Graham*, 125.
3. Nancy Gibbs and Richard N. Ostling, "God's Billy Pulpit," *Time*, November 15, 1993, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,979573,00.html>.
4. Quoted in Stanley High, *Billy Graham* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), 86, and cited in James E. Kilgore, *Billy Graham the Preacher* (New York: Exposition Press, 1968), 23–24.
5. Mordecai Ham, "What Do You Offer God?" http://sermons.christiansunite.com/Mordecai_Ham.shtml. Billy Sunday often preached the same antiecclesial message. In one of his sermons he said, "There are lots of men who will be true in all these things, and false to Jesus Christ. They will go to church and partake of the communion, then will line up in front of some bar and tell smutty stories. True in business, true to lodge, true in society, true in the home, but a perjurer in the sight of God. If you are such a man you are a backslider—a backslider, sir, and a liar" (Billy Sunday, "Backsliding," <http://www.billysunday.org/sermons/backsliding.html>).
6. Quoted in Andy Newman, "For an Ailing Graham, a Crusade with a Little Less Fire," *New York Times*, June 22, 2005, B2.
7. Kenneth L. Woodward, "A Voice in a Crowded Wilderness," *New York Times*, June 26, 2005, D13.
8. Billy Graham, *The Challenge: Sermons from Madison Square Garden* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), ix–x.
9. See Michael G. Long, *Billy Graham and the Beloved Community* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 227–32.
10. Billy Graham, "Whither Bound?" in *America's Hour of Decision* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen Press, 1951), 139.
11. Billy Graham, "The Signs of the Times," a sermon on *The Hour of Decision* (Minneapolis: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1957), n.p.
12. Billy Graham, *Prepare for the Storm* (Minneapolis: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1961), 2.
13. *Ibid.*, 3.
14. Billy Graham, "God's Answer to Man's Dilemma," in *White House Sermons*, ed. Ben Hibbs (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 137–38.
15. Billy Graham, "You Must Be Born Again," in *Living in God's Love: The New York Crusade* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2005), 50.
16. Billy Graham, "The Rich Young Ruler," in *Living in God's Love*, 79–81.
17. Billy Graham, "Conversion," Billy Graham Archives, <http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/docs/bg-charlotte/1003.html>.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Graham, "Rich Young Ruler," 83.
20. Billy Graham, "Rich Young Ruler," Billy Graham Archives, <http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/docs/bg-charlotte/1002.html>.
21. Gibbs and Ostling, "God's Billy Pulpit."
22. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Literalism, Individualism, and Billy Graham," *Christian Century*, May 23, 1956, 641.

23. In one of his sermons in the 2005 New York crusade, Graham said, "You know, Buddha said at the end of his life, 'I'm still searching for truth.' Jesus said, 'I am the truth.'" See Graham, "Rich Young Ruler," in *Living in God's Love*, 86.
24. McLoughlin, *Billy Graham*, 231.
25. Online chat with Billy Graham, <http://www.time.com/time/community/transcripts/199/070699grahamtime100.html>.
26. As quoted in William Martin, *A Prophet with Honor*, and cited in Gibbs and Ostling, "God's Billy Pulpit."
27. Billy Graham, "Two Sets of Eyes," in *Challenge*, 129.
28. Billy Graham, "The Giants You Face," in *Challenge*, 143.
29. Billy Graham, "The Second Coming of Christ," Billy Graham Archives, <http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/docs/bg-charlotte/1005.html>.
30. Quoted in Gibbs and Ostling, "God's Billy Pulpit."
31. Dan P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.
32. Graham, "Conversion."