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Billy Graham's America[1]

GRANT WACKER

BILLY and I hit New York City at the same time, the summer of 1957. He was 38 and about to clinch his reputation as the premier evangelist in twentieth-century America. I was twelve and about to taste freedom. But not quite yet. Without my permission, my parents packed themselves and me into a steamy subway to go down to Madison Square Garden to hear the Great Man preach. I remember that he was witty and charismatic and at the end of the sermon thousands surged forward to give or recommit their lives to Christ. Beyond that, nothing stuck. Soon our first family vacation to the Big Apple was finished, and we headed back to the quiet of a small town in southwest Missouri. As a kid, I never could figure out what the big whoop over Graham was all about. I soon realized, however, that Graham's core constituents—the millions of preponderantly white, middle-class, moderately conservative Protestants we might call "Heartland Americans"—did not share my puzzlement. They knew exactly what the big whoop was all about.[2]

[1]I dedicate this essay to David M. Scholer (1938–2008), scholar, friend, and role model, who stirred my interest in Graham many years ago. The Louisville Institute provided generous funding. On August 6, 2007, shortly before his ninetieth birthday, the Reverend Billy Graham talked with me in his home for more than an hour about his travels and ministry. Numerous friends and colleagues helped me research or conceptualize the project. I wish to thank the Duke/UNC American Religion Colloquium, The Center for the Study of American Religion at Indiana University/Purdue University, John Akers, Shane Benjamin, Anne Blue-Wills, Kate Bowler, Jim Bratt, Joel Carpenter, Mark Chaves, Liz Clark, Elesha Coffman, Charles Cook, Bob Cooley, Eileen Cooley, Mike Crisp, Seth Dowland, Paul Ericksen, Andrew Finstuen, Jean Ford, Leighton Ford, Ken Garfield, Phil Goff, Franklin Golden, Nathan Hatch, Brooks Holifield, Sarah Johnson, Michael Kazin, Jim Lewis, Mike Hamilton, David Heim, Dick Heitzenrater, Amy Beth Hougland, Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Elaine Maisner, George Marsden, Bill Martin, Kathleen McDermott, Mandy McMichael, Steven Miller, David Morgan, Rich Mouw, Harold Myra, Brooke Osborne, Brendan Pietsch, Allan Poole, Steven Porter, Wen Reagan, Maurice Ritchie, Garth Rosell, Steve Scholle, Bob Schuster, Jan Shipps, Warren Smith, David Steinmetz, Andrew Stern, Laura Stern, Skip Stout, Heather Vacek, Katherine Wacker, Kevin Walters, David Weaver-Zercher, Wayne Weber, Lauren Winner, John Wilson, Ken Woodward and, especially (as usual), Mark Noll.

[2]The literature by and about Billy Graham is vast. Though a comprehensive bibliography does not exist, the Billy Graham Archives [BGA], Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College (Ill.), houses thousands of primary and secondary documents. See the online catalog at http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/archhp1.html, especially the tabs for "Billy Graham," "Searchable Online Data Base," and "Collections." The BGA excludes Graham's personal papers, which are not available to

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In slightly more than two decades—roughly from 1949 to 1971—Graham moved from leader to celebrity to icon, and he retained that iconic status into the new millennium. Statistics pile up like snowdrifts. By the time he retired in 2005, reportedly he had preached to nearly 215 million people in person in more than 185 countries and territories, and to additional hundreds of

researchers until 25 years after his death. Graham's autobiography, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* ([1997] San Francisco: Harper/Zondervan, rev. ed. 2007), weighing in at 801 pages, certainly is ample enough, yet it remains curiously non-revealing. More revealing is an early three-part autobiographical essay, "Billy Graham's Own Story: 'God Is My Witness,'" in *McCall's*, April, May, and June 1964. Graham's 27 books, published between 1952 and 2007, are mostly theological, sermonic, and devotional, but many of them contain autobiographical asides. For a complete list with publication dates, see Billy Graham Evangelistic Association/About Us/Biographies/Billy Graham/Billy Graham/Biography, http://www.billygraham.org/MediaRelations_Bios.asp?id=0, accessed January 22, 2009. Graham has won the attention of more than a score of biographers, ranging from admiring to hostile. By far the most comprehensive and in many ways the best is William Martin, *Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (New York: William Morrow, 1991). Marshall Frady's *Billy Graham: A Parable of American Righteousness* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979) is overwritten and tendentious yet contains valuable insights into Graham's relation to American culture. David Aikman's *Billy Graham: His Life and Influence* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007) is the best short biography, enhanced by its fluid prose and even-handedness. Stanley High, *Billy Graham: The Personal Story of the Man, His Message, and His Mission* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), though consistently positive, shrewdly captures the ingredients of Graham's charisma. John Pollock's authorized *The Billy Graham Story* ([1985] Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, rev. ed. 2003) offers data, based on long association with the Graham family and organization, not available elsewhere. The monographic literature (including more than a score of M.A. theses and Ph.D. dissertations) is extensive. Four masterful treatments of aspects of Graham's career are Andrew Finstuen, *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants: The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich in an Age of Anxiety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming 2009); Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy, *The Preacher and the Presidents: Billy Graham in the White House* (New York: Center Street, 2007); Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); and Garth M. Rosell, *The Surprising Work of God: Harold John Ockenga, Billy Graham, and the Rebirth of Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008). Harold Myra and Marshall Shelley's *The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005) provides a perceptive analysis of Graham's administrative style, an important yet rarely addressed subject. Journal and academic articles about Graham are too numerous even to begin to list, but four merit special notice: David Aikman, "Billy Graham—Salvation," in David Aikman, *Great Souls: Six Who Changed a Century* ([1998] Lanham, Md.: Lexington, 2003); Peter J. Boyer, "The Big Tent: Billy Graham, Franklin Graham, and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism," *The New Yorker*, August 22, 2005, 42–54; Larry Eskridge, "'One Way': Billy Graham, the Jesus Generation, and the Idea of an Evangelical Youth Culture," *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 67:1 (March 1998): 83–106; and Steven P. Miller, "Billy Graham, Civil Rights, and the Changing Postwar South," in *Politics and Religion in the White South*, ed. Glenn Feldman (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 157–186.

. . . of 1957: Parts of the first and the final paragraphs of this article come from Grant Wacker, "The Billy Pulpit: Graham's Career in the Mainline," *The Christian Century*, November 15, 2003, 20, 26. **. . . man preach:** Contemporary newspaper coverage of the 1957 New York Crusade ran to hundreds of pages. For an uncritical though factually useful study, see Curtis Mitchell, *God in the Garden: The Story of the Billy Graham New York Crusade* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957); for ephemera related to the event, see George Burnham and Lee Fisher, *Billy Graham and the New York*

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millions through electronic media. Those numbers probably swelled in the telling, but, with the possible exception of Pope John Paul II, Graham likely addressed more people face-to-face than anyone in history. He set multiple attendance records, including 1,120,000 in Seoul in 1973 (at that time, possibly the largest religious gathering on record). In 1997, HarperCollins's first printing of his autobiography ran a cool million. Graham's 27 books sold millions of copies and saw translation into at least 50 languages. Between 1955 and 2006, he won a spot on the Gallup Organization's roster of "Ten Most Admired Men" 50 times, trumping his closest rivals, President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II, who appeared "merely" 31 and 27 times. The list of honors bestowed on Graham grew so long that even he seemed to lose track. It suffices to say that the U.S. government gave him the two highest honors a civilian could receive: the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1983 and, with his wife, Ruth Bell Graham, the Congressional Gold Medal in 1996.[3]

Perhaps the most telling marks of Graham's influence are simply anecdotal—cultural snapshots, we might call them. Four brief examples represent many. First, except for elected officials, Graham may have been the only person in the United States who needed no mailing address beyond his name. Just "Billy Graham" scratched on an envelope would do. Second, of the thousands of letters sent to Graham from children, one, posted in 1971, probably from a first- or second-grader, seemed to speak for all. After requesting a free book, the young author signed off, "Tell Mr. Jesus hi." Third, in 1988, on Graham's seventieth birthday, the historian Martin E. Marty judged that he was, with the pope, "one of the two best-known figures" in the world. Finally, the Yale literary critic Harold Bloom

Crusade (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1957). **. . . heartland Americans:** For the demographic and social characteristics of "Heartland America," see Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 309, and Lowell D. Streiker and Gerald S. Strober, *Religion and the New Majority: Billy Graham, Middle America, and the Politics of the 70s* (New York: Association Press, 1972), 23, 39, 78–81. More anecdotally, see Gibbs and Duffy, *The Preacher*, 161, and Elizabeth Kaye, "Billy Graham Rises," *George*, December 1996, 140.

[3] **. . . electronic media:** Billy Graham Evangelistic Association/About Us/Biographies/Billy Graham, http://www.billygraham.org/MediaRelations_Bios.asp?id=0, accessed January 22, 2009. The BGEA web page does not specify the years that this figure embraces, but probably it runs from 1944, when Graham launched his evangelistic efforts at Chicagoland Youth for Christ, to his retirement in June 2005. **. . . gathering on record:** Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 418. **. . . cool million:** Yonat Shimron, "Graham's Life Is an Open Book," *The* (Raleigh) *News & Observer*, April 30, 1997, A1. **. . . 50 languages:** Graham, *Just As I Am*, 284. **. . . 27 times:** Jeffrey M. Jones, "George W. Bush, Hillary Clinton Most Admired Again, Billy Graham Finishes in Top 10 for 50th Time," Gallup News Service, December 29, 2006, cited in Aikman, *Billy Graham*, 2, 307; Alec Gallup and Frank Newport, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 2005* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 482. **. . . in 1996:** For a lengthy though undoubtedly incomplete list of "Awards and Honors," see Billy Graham Evangelistic Association/About Us/Biographies/Billy Graham/Billy Graham/Biography, http://www.billygraham.org/MediaRelations_Bios.asp?id=0, accessed January 22, 2009.

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summed up the preacher's impact with brilliant succinctness: "You don't run for office among us by proclaiming your skepticism or by deprecating Billy Graham."[4]

This register of statistics, awards, and cultural snapshots suggests that Graham's reach, like that of his contemporaries Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King, Jr., extended beyond passing fame to enduring influence. For millions of Heartland Americans, he functioned very much as a Protestant saint. By the middle 1950s, he had eclipsed all competitors among postwar Protestant evangelists and, with the exception of George Whitefield in the eighteenth century, all in U.S. history. More important, by the middle 1960s, he had become the "Great Legitimator." If the newspaper coverage of his ministry serves as a reliable index, his presence conferred sanctity on events, authority on presidents, acceptability on wars, desirability on decency, shame on indecency, and prestige on dessert recipes. Most important, by the middle 1970s, many deemed him "America's pastor," as the senior President George Bush called him in 2007 in Charlotte at the dedication of the Billy Graham Library—an event attended by all three living U.S. ex-presidents. As America's pastor, he seemed to stand above the fray, transcending denominational boundaries, theological disputes, and partisan agendas. Graham symbolized, as his premier biographer, William Martin, suggested, Americans' "best selves," what they wanted to believe about themselves and their dedication to "fundamental verities." That many Americans failed to live up to those verities was beside the point. Graham did.[5]

I could extend this inventory of the marks of Graham's status at length, but I will close it with a recollection. At Duke, one of my first-year students once pointed out that Graham never won a Nobel Prize. Then she asked, with lethal perceptiveness, "Well, which is more important, to win a Nobel Prize—or for someone to notice that you have not?"[6]

[4] **. . . would do:** The Billy Graham Library in Charlotte, N.C., exhibits an array of misaddressed and barely addressed envelopes, all successfully posted. See also Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 551. **. . . Jesus hi:** Letter archived at BGEA, Charlotte, N.C. **. . . the world:** Martin E. Marty, "Reflections on Graham by a Former Grump," *Christianity Today*, November 18, 1988, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/octoberweb-only/142-23.0.html?start=3, accessed March 20, 2009. **. . . Billy Graham:** Harold Bloom, "Billy Graham," in "The TIME 100: The Most Important People of the Century: Heroes and Icons," *Time*, June 14, 1999, http://www.time.com/time/time100/heroes/profile/graham01.html, accessed January 25, 2009.

[5] **. . . dessert recipes:** I base this statement on my sampling of the thousands of pages of magazine and newspaper clippings, running from the middle 1940s to the present, in the BGA. See also Ken Garfield's revealingly titled essay on Graham's final crusade, "Faithful Flock to See a Legend: 80,000 More Gain Memory of a Lifetime," *The Charlotte Observer*, June 26, 2005, 1A. **. . . America's pastor:** Bush quoted in Leslie Boyd and John Boyle, *Asheville Citizen-Times*, in "Graham's Spiritual Journey Finds Home," *USA Today*, May 31, 2007, http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2007-05-31-billy-graham-library_N.htm, accessed August 5, 2007. **. . . fundamental verities:** Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 383.

[6] **. . . have not:** I remember the comment but, unfortunately, not the student's name.

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I. America's Puzzle

The reasons for Graham's ascendency, longevity and, above all, singularity are not obvious. His early years offer few clues. The most remarkable feature of young Billy Frank's childhood and adolescence is how unremarkable they really were. Born in 1918, he grew up near Charlotte, North Carolina, in the bucolic obscurity of a dairy farm. In high school he was, he later admitted, an ordinary student, mainly interested in girls, baseball, and fast cars. Fundamentalist education at Bob Jones College, Florida Bible Institute, and Wheaton College in Illinois launched him into a modestly successful career as a local pastor, itinerant evangelist, and Youth for Christ speaker.[7]

At first glance, Graham's middle career years—the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s—are equally barren of clues. To many, he personified the proverbial stump orator, firing 240 words a minute. In an era when academic theologians and mainline ministers favored dialogue over proclamation, Graham unflinchingly presented his own version of the Good News as the only viable one. His hobnobbing with the rich, the famous, and the powerful troubled his friends and energized his foes. And then we heard his odious remarks about Jews and the media, uttered in private in President Richard Nixon's office but secretly recorded in 1972 and revealed in 2002. Though Graham apologized in print and in person to Jewish leaders, the episode tarnished his record. Yet 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 his jut-jawed defense of Nixon during Watergate lingered long after most Americans had given up on both causes.[8]

[7] **. . . Christ speaker:** Biographical data reside in countless sources. The basic outline of Graham's life—who, what, when, and where—varies little from text to text, though emphases and evaluations differ dramatically. As noted, Martin's *Prophet with Honor* offers by far the most detailed treatment. For a very readable article-length account, see William Martin, "Evangelicalism: Billy Graham," *Christian History & Biography*, Issue 65/2000, http://www.ctlibrary.com/ch/2000/Issue65/1.12.html, accessed January 20, 2009.

[8] **. . . of clues:** All of the "standard" biographies cover the real or perceived shortcomings noted in this paragraph. For a work that underscores them, see Cecil Bothwell, *The Prince of War: Billy Graham's Crusade for a Wholly Christian Empire: An Unauthorized Biography* (Asheville, N.C.: Brave Ulysses Books, 2007). **. . . a minute:** Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 96. **. . . his record:** For a transcript of the controversial parts of the conversation, see John Prados, ed., *The White House Tapes: Eavesdropping on the President* (New York: New Press, 2003), 240–255, esp. 244–246, 252. Press coverage was voluminous and often spirited. For a succinct summary, see William Martin, "Is Billy Graham an Anti-Semite?" *beliefnet*, March 2002, http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2002/03/Is-Billy-Graham-An-Anti-Semite.aspx?p=1, accessed February 2, 2009. For Graham's lingering late-life regret about his words, see Laurie Goodstein, "Spirit Willing, Another Trip Down Mountain for Graham," *New York Times*, June 12, 2005, http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9500E1DB1E38F931A25755C0A9639C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all, accessed March 20, 2009, and Graham in "Interview with Reverend Billy Graham," *CNN Larry King Live*, aired December 25, 2005, Rush Transcript, http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0512/25/

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Outsiders, noting Graham's flaws and failures, subjected him to merciless criticism. Some of it was fair and thoughtful; much of it was unfair and thoughtless. Besides a steady flow of hate mail and occasional death threats, he received censure from all directions: the left, the right, the academy, the media, and the church. President Harry S. Truman led the charge. In 1950, when the young evangelist bungled a meeting with Truman, the president soured on him. Two decades later, Truman still remembered Graham as a "counterfeit." "I just don't go for people like that," he grumbled. "All he's interested in is getting his name in the paper." In 1966, following Graham's interdenominational crusades and ecumenical overtures, Bob Jones, Sr., president of Bob Jones University, judged that Graham was "doing more harm to the cause of Jesus Christ than any other living man." When Graham held a crusade at the University of Tennessee in 1970 and invited President Nixon to speak, the student newspaper slammed the event as a "one-man circus" complete with an "elephant." Shortly afterward, the novelist-satirist Philip Roth had Graham, the "Reverend Billy Cupcake," saying, "'I was in a European country last summer and one of the top young people there told me that the teenagers in his country want leadership more than anything else." In 1982, following Graham's visit to a Soviet Union disarmament conference, the conservative columnist George Will judged that Graham was "America's most embarrassing export." Will hoped that the preacher would "stop acting as though pious intentions are substitutes for intelligence, and excuses for irresponsibility." Twenty years later, when the National Archives released Graham's conversation with Nixon about Jews, the secular essayist Christopher Hitchens pounced. Hitchens called the aging evangelist an "avid bigot as well as a cheap liar," "a gaping and mendacious anti-Jewish peasant." White hair offered no protection.[9]

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lkl.11.html, accessed March 20, 2009. **. . . both causes:** Again, all of the "standard" biographies address Graham's troubled relation with Nixon. For particularly perceptive accounts, see Gibbs and Duffy, *The Preacher*, chaps. 16–22, and Richard Pierard, "Can Billy Graham Survive Richard Nixon?" *Reformed Journal*, April 1974, 7–13.

[9] **. . . and thoughtless:** For examples, see Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 182, 227, 300, 418, 459. **. . . the paper:** Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Berkley, 1973, 1974), 363. **. . . living man:** *Charlotte News*, March 4, 1966, quoted in Frady, *Billy Graham*, 248. **. . . an elephant:** Susan Hixon, in *The* (Knoxville) *Daily Beacon*, quoted in June Adamson, "Actions of Past Editors Remembered," *The* (Knoxville) *Daily Beacon*, August 25, 1995, quoted in Roger Bruns, *Billy Graham: A Biography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2004), 120. **. . . anything else:** Philip Roth, *Our Gang (Starring Tricky and His Friends)* (New York: Random House, 1971), 176–183, quoted in Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham*, 159. **. . . for irresponsibility:** George Will, "Let Us Pray for a Little Skepticism," *The Washington Post*, May 13, 1982, A31. Will's actual words were, "handcuffs are not America's most embarrassing export," but the context makes clear that Will meant that Graham filled that role. **. . . anti-Jewish peasant:** Christopher Hitchens, "The God Squad," *The Nation*, April 15, 2002, 9.

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Graham's multiple public identities make his success even more puzzling. He presented many faces. That the fiery anti-Communist of the 1940s differed from the irenic senior diplomat of the 2000s seems easy enough to explain. People change. But other variations are more elusive. Which was normative, the simple preacher or the savvy CEO? The down-home country boy or the uptown sophisticate? The humble servant of the church or the name-dropping servant of the White House? The tight-lipped confidant of presidents or the loquacious subject of press conferences and talk shows? All of those identities counted. The problem is that they continually appeared, disappeared, and reappeared throughout his career. Moreover, other hands contributed. Graham's self-presentation was one thing, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's orchestration of his message was another, and the media's marketing of his image was still another.[10]

The public saw countless faces, too. To begin with, for many Americans, Graham the evangelist blended into Graham the performer. His good looks clearly played a role. When Graham peered into the mirror, he saw the media's construction of the American male ideal: six feet, two inches tall, 180 pounds, blue eyes, flaxen hair, and Hollywood handsome. Nordic features gave him a head start, but he made the most of them with jogging, weightlifting and, of course, golf. For many others, Graham's hallmark was less the appearance than the voice, a timbered baritone of "vast range and power." It reminded some of his exact contemporary, Walter Cronkite. In 1950, NBC offered the preacher one million dollars a year to host a talk show.[11]

Second and more important, for numerous Americans, Graham the evangelist blended into Graham the idyllic family man. That image took two forms, and both emerged in the popular magazines' depiction of his sixty-year marriage to Ruth Bell Graham. On one hand, he endorsed hierarchical or complementarian gender roles in the family. On the other hand, he also insisted that marriage

[10] **. . . his career:** Aikman, *Great Souls*, 3, 30, 32. **. . . still another:** I owe the point of this paragraph very directly to my Duke and UNC colleagues David Morgan and Laurie Maffly-Kipp. See also Frye Gaillard, *Southern Voices: Profiles and Other Stories* (Asheboro, N.C.: Down Home Press, 1991), 120–123.

[11] **. . . of course, golf:** Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 126–127; Curtis Mitchell, "Billy Graham's Physical Fitness Program Can Help You," *Popular Science*, May 1965, 61–64, 202–205; Fact Sheet by Loyd Doctor, Christ for Greater Los Angeles, November 21, 1949, quoted in Gibbs and Duffy, *The Preacher*, 5. The dapper wardrobe complemented the physique, in 1970 even earning Graham a spot on one Best Dressed register. *Charlotte News*, January 28, 1970, cited in Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 383. **. . . and power:** Gibbs and Duffy, *The Preacher*, 18. For three of the countless references to the singularity of Graham's voice, see Gaillard, *Southern Voices*, 126; Clyde E. Fant, Jr., and William M. Pinson, Jr., "William Franklin Graham," *20 Centuries of Great Preaching: Marshall to King* (Waco: Word Books, 1971), XII: 302; Michael Luo, "In New York, Billy Graham Will Find an Evangelical Force," *New York Times*, June 21, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/21/nyregion/21evangelical.html?pagewanted=1&sq=goodstein,%20billy%20graham%20&st=nyt&scp=5, accessed February 2, 2009. **. . . talk show:** Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 152–153.

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should be companionate or equalitarian. Though the positions overlapped, the former predominated in the early years of his ministry, the latter in the later years. Increasingly, the companionate outlook prompted him to stress what many evangelicals had always stressed and what TV sitcoms were beginning to stress: that honesty, modesty, sobriety, gentleness and, above all, fidelity were both Christian and manly virtues. Yielding to desire was easy; resisting was hard.[12]

Third and most important, for myriad Americans, Graham the evangelist blended into Graham the man of character. Character was broader than Christian. It suggested a cluster of personal traits that people of all religious traditions—or none, for that matter—found admirable. Almost all visitors to the Graham household, including critics, came away saying that they found him to be a figure of warmth, humility, and sincerity. Indeed, the *Time* magazine journalists Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy likened his sincerity to "paint stripper, removing any pretense and pride." Martin Marty famously ranked him among the "non-mean," one who displayed the "fruit of the Spirit." Virtually no one questioned his financial integrity, unpretentious lifestyle, or marital faithfulness. To be sure, many non-Heartland Americans perceived Graham's character less benignly. They viewed him as a chaplain for the business establishment and as a conservative political partisan. He "certainly prays Republican," charged the columnist Murray Kempton. Graham saw himself otherwise. Brushing off suggestions that he was either a role model or a man of affairs, he insisted that God had called him to be an evangelist, and only an evangelist. Both privately and publicly, he worried that he might fail the assignment. The historian David Aikman spoke for multitudes when he judged that the preacher's achievement lay not in how he handled adversity but in how he handled success.[13]

[12] **. . . Bell Graham:** For one of many examples, see Mrs. Billy Graham, "Inside Our Home," *Guideposts*, December 1955, 1–5. **. . . or equalitarian:** Contrast Billy Graham, "The Home God Honors," sermon preached at the Los Angeles revival, 1949, in *Revival in Our Time: The Story of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Campaigns* (Wheaton, Ill.: Van Kampen, 1950), reprinted in *The Early Billy Graham Sermon and Revival Accounts*, ed. Joel A. Carpenter (New York: Garland, 1988), 68–72, with Graham in David Frost, *Billy Graham Talks with David Frost* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman/J. B. Lippincott, 1971), 39–40; Aikman, *Billy Graham*, 275; Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 159–160, 586. **. . . manly virtues:** Christine Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), esp. chaps. 3, 4, and epilogue; Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), esp. part II; W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), esp. 191. The qualifier "many"—rather than "all"—is important.

[13] **. . . and sincerity:** See, for example, Frady, *Billy Graham*, ix–x, 8–14; Cathy Lynn Grossman, "The Gospel of Billy Graham: Inclusion," *USA Today*, May 15, 2005, http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2005-05-15-graham-cover_x.htm, accessed March 20, 2009. For a wide variety of observers' comments on Graham's magnetic personal qualities—variously described as graciousness, warmth, humility, and sincerity—see Aikman, *Great Souls*, 3; Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 124, 150, 197, 229, 325, 537, 602; Michael G. Long, *Billy Graham and the Beloved Community* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2006), ix. Ken Garfield served as the

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These considerations help focus the problem at hand. Given such unpromising beginnings, so many missteps, such mordant criticism, and so many public identities, how did Graham become the premier Protestant evangelist in the United States (and many other countries) and hold that perch, unrivaled, for nearly six decades? Asked differently, how did he become, as the historian James Morris put it, the "least colorful and most powerful preacher in the United States"? More important, what does his success say about twentieth-century America?[14]

I propose one answer to the puzzle of Graham's singular eminence. It applies primarily to the American story but also, with important modifications, to its international corollaries. I can state it in a tidy sentence. *A producer as well as a product of his age, Graham displayed a remarkable ability to adapt broad cultural trends for his evangelistic purposes.* Sometimes he seemed to move by instinct, sometimes by design, and sometimes by both. The evidence strongly suggests that his approach was simultaneously heartfelt and pragmatic. I will sketch four instances of the pattern. Though they overlapped, I will note them in the order that they began to mark his public ministry conspicuously.

II. America's Southerner

The middle third of the twentieth century witnessed a vast process of social and cultural transformation that historians have called the "Southernization" of America. Massive population movements from the South to the North and West allowed Southern attitudes and practices to move outward. Southern emigrants carried Dixie's earmarks with them. Elvis, NASCAR, and the California Gunbelt, dominated by ex-Southerners, symbolized the force of the impulse. So did Charlotte's hometown boy.[15]

religion editor for *The Charlotte Observer* for twelve years and wrote hundreds of stories about Graham. Garfield said: "One of Graham's strengths is that he was able to be this mythic, larger-than-life figure in the pulpit, while transforming himself into a warm and accessible farm boy from Charlotte when he stepped down and back into real life. . . . He had this ability to cut himself down in size in a way that deepened his ministry in warmth and humanity": e-mail, March 23, 2009. **. . . and pride:** Gibbs and Duffy, *The Preacher*, xi. **. . . the Spirit:** Marty, "Reflections." **. . . Murray Kempton**, *New York Post*, September 9, 1960, quoted in Gibbs and Duffy, *The Preacher*, 92. **. . . an evangelist:** Graham, *Just As I Am*, xvi–xvii, 119, 420, 525, and 745. **. . . the assignment:** interview with John Akers, Durham, N.C., February 27, 2009; Graham, *Just As I Am*, 743. **. . . handled success**: Aikman, *Great Souls*, 58.

[14] **. . . United States:** James Morris, *The Preachers* (New York: St. Martin's, 1973), 387.

[15] **. . . the impulse:** The literature on the Southernization of America (and the reverse) is extensive. Darren Dochuk ably summarizes it in "Evangelicalism Becomes Southern, Politics Becomes Evangelical," in *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the Present*, ed. Mark A. Noll and Luke E. Harlow ([1990] New York: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed. 2007), esp. 300–303. Other key works include Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising: How the*

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How did Graham represent the South, the region of his roots and, as he repeatedly said, his heart? Most noticeably, he spoke as a Southerner. Though he gradually modulated his distinctive accent—what one New York City journalist called "Carolina stage English"—he never lost it. In addition, Graham's machine-gun facility with language and fondness for jokes and stories expressed the South's emphasis on orality. "Next to fried foods," quipped the North Carolina-born journalist Walter Hines Page, "the South has suffered most from oratory." At the same time, if Southerners were talkers, they also were writers. No one would accuse Graham of being a great one, but he was prolific, and he esteemed the conversionary power of sentences clearly crafted.[16]

Graham was a Southerner in a second sense. He took care to present himself as a simple country boy, toughened when he was growing up by a daily pre-dawn milking regime. That rustic image, furthered by admiring journalists and biographers, formed a big part of his appeal. Graham's natal family fit the image. His parents, married for life, represented stable, hard-working, churchgoing, Psalter-singing Presbyterians—the center of the center of the Southern Protestant mainline. In a cover story on the South, *Newsweek* editor Jon Meacham aptly observed that the South tended "not to contradict but to exemplify, if sometimes in an exaggerated way," what much of the nation thought and felt. As Americans hurtled toward a metropolitan future, Graham seemed to remind them of a receding world of small towns, summer nights, and stable values.[17]

South Is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture (New York: Random House, 1966); John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); James M. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), esp. chaps. 1 and 6; Jack Temple Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination* ([1978] Athens: University of Georgia Press, rev. ed. 1986); John Shelton Reed, *My Tears Spoiled My Aim, and Other Reflections on Southern Culture* (San Diego, Calif.: Harvest Book/Harcourt Brace, 1993), esp. chap. 10.

[16] **. . . stage English:** Boyer, "Big Tent," 47. **. . . from oratory:** Page quoted without attribution in Reed, *My Tears*, 59. **. . . clearly crafted:** Graham's daily newspaper column, "My Answer," has run from 1950 to the present and reportedly has appeared in 200 newspapers with a circulation of 15 million to 20 million readers. It likely reached more people than his books. He did not pretend to write all of the columns himself but said they saw publication under his "supervision." Graham, *Just As I Am*, 283; Billy Graham, *My Answer* ([1954] Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960), 9; Gibbs and Duffy, *The Preacher*, 49; High, *Billy Graham*, 152.

[17] **. . . milking regime:** Graham, *Just As I Am*, chap. 1, with the revealing title, "Down on the Farm." **. . . his appeal:** See, for example, Frost, *Billy Graham*, "Billy Graham: The Dairyman's Boy," 89–90; and Pollock, *Billy Graham*, 15–16. **. . . Protestant mainline:** Graham, *Just As I Am*, 22–25; Patricia Daniels Cornwell, *A Time for Remembering: The Story of Ruth Bell Graham* (Minneapolis: Grason, 1983), 53–54. **. . . and felt:** Jon Meachem, "Just Ain't That Different Anymore," *Newsweek*, August 11, 2008, http://www.newsweek.com/id/150478, accessed January 27, 2009.

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Graham was a Southerner in a third sense. He inherited the region's prevailing assumption that the private and the public realms overlapped. That notion certainly was not unique to the South, but it remained especially conspicuous in the area. Despite—or perhaps because of—a long tradition of subaltern violence, most folk supported a Christian social order policed by orderly Christians. In the "Christ-haunted South," in Flannery O'Connor's famous phrase, Christians, both white and black, presupposed their right to serve as its moral custodians. One especially clear case is Graham's view of church and state. Though at one level he supported separation, at a deeper, more culturally encoded level, he advocated prayer and Bible reading in the public schools and posting the Ten Commandments in public buildings. When the prayer meeting let out, he knew how to play political hardball.[18]

Graham represented his region in one additional respect. He perennially assumed that the best way to get things done was to work with, not against, established authorities. To be sure, that notion reflected his genial temperament, but it also reflected the compatibility of his class location with that of the folk who ran things—two slices from the same pie. In the South, the most influential voices spoke from the pulpits and occupied the pews of the mainline churches. Think of First Baptist in Dallas (where Graham was a member for 55 years). Or Myers Park United Methodist in Charlotte. Or Hillsboro Church of Christ in Nashville. Or perhaps the (African American) Wheat Street Baptist in Atlanta. In those redoubtable institutions, respectable people worshiped in respectable ways on Sunday and ran respectable enterprises the rest of the week. The Southern mainline was broadly evangelical, but it was still mainline. It countenanced no extremism, theological or otherwise. It removed the welcome mat when millenarians, snake handlers, and Unitarian pacifists came to town. Its partisans were

[18] **. . . realms overlapped:** Charles Reagan Wilson, "Preachin', Prayin', and Singin' on the Public Square," in *Religion and Public Life in the South: In the Evangelical Mode*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson and Mark Silk (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), esp. 9; Paul Harvey, "At Ease in Zion, Uneasy in Babylon: White Evangelicals," in *Religion and Public Life in the South*, ed. Wilson and Silk, 66–69; Seth A. Dowland, "Defending Manhood: Gender, Social Order, and the Rise of the Christian Right in the South, 1965–1995," Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2007, esp. chaps. 1–3. **. . . public schools:** For example, contrast Graham, Press Conference, Columbus, Ohio, January 28, 1963, 9–10 (BGA CN24 B4 F9), with Graham, Press Conference, Charlotte, N.C., April 14, 1972, 7–8 (BGA CN24 B1 F36). To be sure, sometimes Graham said such exercises should be "voluntary," but he remained vague about what "voluntary" actually meant in a structured public school setting. Graham, Press Conference, San Diego, Calif., April 30, 1964, 4-5 (BGA CN24 B4 F13). See also "Billy Graham Voices Shock over Decision," *New York Times*, June 18, 1963, 27; Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 27. **. . . public buildings:** Graham interview in Sonja Steptoe, "10 Questions for Billy Graham," TIME/CNN, November 21, 2004, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,785335,00.html, accessed February 4, 2009.

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mannered, neighborly, and well connected. They aimed not to see their name in the newspaper.[19]

Graham was part of the club. So was his wife, the decorous and quick-witted daughter of a conservative Southern Presbyterian surgeon. One might say, with a wink, that she taught her husband which fork to use at the state dinner with the queen. It is no surprise that Graham—the official unofficial chaplain to the nation's power brokers—carried himself so effortlessly in the corridors of power.[20]

When, in 1940, Graham left Florida Bible Institute and headed north to Wheaton College, he rode the expansionist wave that bore millions of Southerners North and West. He later remembered that he felt out of place and alone. He may have been out of place, but he was not alone. He took the South with him.[21]

III. America's Voice

Graham masterfully adapted his old-fashioned message to new media. He knew that the journalism giants William Randolph Hearst and Henry L. Luce had helped launch his career, and he never forgot the lesson. In an age increasingly given to hurried interviews, sound bites, and visual images, Graham took care to deliver his ideas in crisp and compelling forms. Reporters and academics endlessly and, one suspects, enviously analyzed his very smart print, radio, television, satellite, Internet, and advertising moves. Sympathetic observers touted them and unsympathetic ones lamented them, but no one doubted them. Standing behind it all was the well-oiled Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Executives traveled to its Minneapolis headquarters to examine its operations. A small army of professionals and staffers mediated Graham's message and image with consummate skill and aggressive protectiveness.[22]

[19] **. . . the newspaper:** Reed, *My Tears*, 139–141. For my sense of post-war Southern Protestant culture (including " . . . Unitarian pacifists," which I roughly remember but can no longer locate), I am deeply indebted to John Shelton Reed's numerous books and articles. See also Wilson, "Preachin'," 16–20; Ted Ownby, "Evangelical But Differentiated: Religion by the Numbers," in *Religion and Public Life*, ed. Wilson and Silk, 34; Samuel S. Hill, "Religion and Politics in the South," in *Religion in the South*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 146; Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), chap. 3; Elizabeth Hill Flowers, "Varieties of Evangelical Womanhood: Southern Baptists, Gender, and American Culture," Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2007, 108–114.

[20] **. . . the queen:** Aikman, *Billy Graham*, 114, 280, 287, and Cornwell, *Time for Remembering*, esp. chap. 16. **. . . of power:** Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 276, 269, and 383.

[21] **. . . and alone:** Graham, "Billy Graham's Own Story," 204.

[22] **. . . new media:** For post-war evangelicals' appropriation of new media, see the essays in Quentin J. Schultze, ed., *American Evangelicals and the Mass Media* (Grand Rapids, Mich.:

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The same savvy marked the crusade meetings, which were, after all, studio exercises in the communication arts. The services were orderly affairs, marked by few tears and considerable decorum. But not too orderly. Graham also knew how to put on a good show. Toe-tapping music and heart-warming testimonies made for a fine evening out—or, for that matter, home by the radio or television. The testimonies served a deeper purpose, too. They placed individuals' spiritual struggles in the longer story of Christ's redemption of the world. Graham remembered what many seminary-trained pastors forgot: that the arbiter of truth was not the theology textbook but the personal narrative.[23]

In Graham's hands, the conversion experience, the centerpiece of the revival tradition, pivoted on classically American understandings of the importance of rational decisiveness. Graham told the story of his adolescent conversion countless times. It involved no special feelings, just a clear choice to stand up, walk to the front, and make a decision for Christ. To be sure, at the end of his crusade sermons, familiar, low-keyed hymns packed with nostalgia accompanied the invitation to step forward. And Graham allowed that for some, conversion might entail a measure of emotion. Nonetheless, audiences heard little cajoling, just the imperative, "Come. We will wait. You come." Significantly, he called his weekly radio program *The Hour of Decision*. Premiering in 1950, it soon ranked as one of the mostly widely heard religious broadcasts in the country. Similarly, he named his monthly magazine *Decision*. Launched in 1952, it soon ranked as one of the most widely received religious periodicals in the country. The program and the magazine spoke the language of Heartland America.[24]

Zondervan, 1990), esp. Schultz's introductory chapter. The book brims with references to Graham's role in the media revolution. **. . . the lesson:** Graham, *Just As I Am*, xx, 149–150, 162, 213, 220. **. . . aggressive protectiveness:** Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 25, 105, 543. Martin discusses the BGEA throughout; see the index entry on 721. See also Myra and Shelley, *Leadership Secrets*, 111–112; William C. Christian, "Electronic Evangelism," *Business Automation*, June 1962, 28–33; William G. McLoughlin, Jr., *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age* (New York: Ronald Press, 1960), chaps. 7–8.

[23] **. . . or television:** See, for example, the DVD *Billy Graham, God's Ambassador: The Story of Billy Graham's Extraordinary Life and Ministry*, Gaither Film Productions, 2006. For musical and preaching clips from the 1957 New York Madison Square Garden Crusade, which represent the tenor of most of the larger crusades, see BGA website, http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/exhibits/NYC57/11sample59.htm. **. . . personal narrative:** For reflections on the functions of personal testimony in the evangelical revival tradition, see Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), chap. 3.

[24] **. . . countless times:** See, for example, Graham, *Just As I Am*, 29–30. **. . . broadcasts in the country:** Exact data are hard to pin down. By one authority, more than 150 ABC-affiliated stations carried the first broadcast; within weeks, the program had won 20 million listeners. In 1997, 664 stations in the U.S. and 366 around the world carried it. J. Gordon Melton and others, eds.,

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The extraordinary planning that went into the crusade meetings sometimes obscures the obvious. Graham's preaching remained the centerpiece. Faith, after all, came by hearing. He was not a great preacher. He knew it and almost everyone else did too, including his wife. Learned exegesis was not expected, and neither was eloquence. "Homiletically," said W. E. Sangster, a leading cleric in England, "his sermons leave almost everything to be desired." Noting that the average person sported a working vocabulary of 600 words, Graham spoke plainly, using vernacular terms, short sentences, and brief paragraphs. He also spoke directly. In a telling metaphor, Graham said that in his early work with Youth for Christ, "We used every modern means to catch the ear of the unconverted and then we punched them straight between the eyes with the gospel." Nonetheless, he possessed the gift—The Gift—that elusive combination of voice, gesture, timing, vocabulary, organization and, above all, authority that proved inimitable.[25]

The typical sermon merits brief examination. After a couple of warm-up jokes, Graham invariably rehearsed a laundry list of statistics and anecdotes about the dire state of the world. This litany made everything feel more

"Billy Graham Evangelistic Association," in *Prime-Time Religion: An Encyclopedia of Religious Broadcasting* (Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx, 1997), 28–29. "Radio Ratings: Radio's Most Popular Programs of the Golden Age" shows that, for the 1951–1952 to 1955–1956 seasons (the only ones tabulated), the *Hour of Decision* topped all religious programs. Among the top 25 programs of all types, for each of those seasons, it ranked 14, 15, 7, 6, and 4. See http://www.old-time.com/ratings/index.html, accessed February 5, 2009. **. . . periodicals in the country:** Determining exactly how widely received is difficult. Since *Decision* accepted no paid advertising, the government did not require circulation data. Martin claims that by 1966 *Decision* went to 5 million American homes, making it "by far the most widely received religious publication in the country." John Pollock said that by 1966, with a circulation of 3 million, it enjoyed the highest circulation of any religious periodical in America. Later, Pollock put the figure at 4 million in North America by 1969. Timothy T. Clydesdale set the circulation at 2.1 million in 1965, 5 million in 1975, down to 1.7 million in 1992. In 2009, the BGEA claimed a circulation of 600,000 worldwide. Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 250; John Pollock, *Billy Graham: The Authorized Biography* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 241, and Pollock, *Billy Graham Story*, 110; Clydesdale, "Decision," in P. Mark Fackler and Charles H. Lippy, eds., *Popular Religious Magazines of the United States* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1995), 206; BGEA: http://www.billygraham.org/mediaRelations/bgeaFacts.asp?p=5, accessed January 31, 2009.

[25] **. . . his wife:** Billy and Ruth Graham quoted without citation in High, *Billy Graham*, 49, 87–88; see also chap. 3. **. . . be desired:** W. E. Sangster, quoted without citation in High, *Billy Graham*, 49. **. . . brief paragraphs:** Pollock, *Billy Graham Story*, 141; Graham interview in Frost, *Billy Graham*, 73. **. . . the gospel:** Billy Graham, *Revival in Our Time* (Wheaton, Ill.: Special Edition for Youth for Christ International, 1950), 3, quoted in McLoughlin, *Billy Graham*, 38. **. . . proved inimitable:** Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 583. For astute studies of Graham's preaching style, see High, *Billy Graham*, chap. 3, and Fant and Pinson, "William Franklin Graham," 295–302. For an analysis of Graham's sermons as "iconic and ritual events," see Thomas G. Long, "Preaching the Good News," in Michael G. Long, editor, *The Legacy of Billy Graham: Critical Reflections on America's Evangelist* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2008), chap. 1 (quotation page 13).

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urgent. Graham's legendary ability to win converts—"inquirers," he called them—rested on a more fundamental ability to capture an audience's attention. He instinctively appreciated the evangelist Sister Aimee Semple McPherson's recipe for rabbit stew: first, "you have to catch the rabbit." In addition, Graham's drumbeat quoting of the exact words of the King James Bible bestowed the power of immemorial tradition on his preaching. (He literally cut and pasted Bible passages into his skeletal sermon outlines.) The preacher's self-deprecating humor helped seal the deal. He liked to tell about the man in an elevator who looked him up and down for about thirty seconds and said, "My, what an anticlimax." And of the woman who strolled over to his restaurant table and alleged, "You look like Billy Graham." To which he drolly responded, "Yes, people often say that." The evangelist knew his audiences.[26]

Finally, and most important, whatever the stated text, the actual text of every sermon was John 3:16: "whoever believes on him shall not perish but have everlasting life." All messages demanded a decision. There was nothing new here. For two centuries, the call for a clear choice, up or down, had served as the evangelist's stock-in-trade. Yet Graham sensed, better than most, the importance of pressing his hearers to stand up and walk to the front for all to see. Critics charged that the seemingly endless lines of inquirers, streaming forward from all parts of the crusade stadiums, betokened superficiality at best and mass suggestibility at worst. The preacher thought otherwise. Publicly declaring a new direction for one's life implicitly acknowledged that things had gone wrong and that it was time to make them right.[27]

Taken together, Graham's taped and published sermons, stretching over nearly six decades, reveal the perennial clarity of his message. Critics, of course, judged it not clarity but simplemindedness. That is what Reinhold Niebuhr said: too simple for a complex age. Yet partisans prized his focus on

[26] **. . . brief examination:** Graham's personal sermon notes are not available to researchers until 25 years after his death. The BGA holds "hundreds if not thousands" of video and audio sermons (some online), as well as many unedited sermon transcripts. One may purchase more than 300 pamphlet sermons, preached over many decades, from Grason, a division of the BGEA. For two anthologies, see Graham, *The Challenge: Sermons from Madison Square Garden* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), and Graham, *Blow Wind of God: Spirited Messages from the Writings of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1975). **. . . the rabbit:** Aimee Semple McPherson quoted by her daughter, Roberta Semple Salter, interview with Matthew A. Sutton, New York, March 16, 2004, in Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 77. **. . . an anticlimax:** Graham, in "Why God Allows Suffering and War," Houston Crusade, 1965, quoted in Bill Adler, ed. & comp., *The Wit and Wisdom of Billy Graham* (New York: Random House, 1967), 158; Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 581–583. **. . . say that:** E-mail from Graham's sister, Jean Graham Ford, January 29, 2009. **. . . his audiences:** Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 291, 581, 583.

[27] **. . . them right:** I owe this point to Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 551, 527. See also Aikman, *Great Souls*, 58, and Gaillard, *Southern Voices*, 127.

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the evangelical essentials of human sin and divine forgiveness. In the approaching darkness (or glorious light) at the end of history, there was, he insisted, no time to trifle with subtleties or fuss about matters in dispute. Corny jokes and butchered facts, always part of the deal, harmed Graham's reputation about as much as they harmed Lyndon Johnson's and Ronald Reagan's—which is to say, except in Cambridge, Berkeley, and Chapel Hill, not much at all.[28]

IV. America's Entrepreneur

No one person created the modern evangelical insurgence, but Graham, more than anyone, should be credited—or blamed, according to one's mood—for channeling its explosive force and vitality. The Cold War and Vietnam eras formed the backdrop. The fears of the 1950s and the ruptures of the 1960s produced a yearning for consensus. Millions of Heartland Christians shared that yearning, and so did Graham. Weary of bony denominational structures and toxic theological debates, he pursued new ways to achieve old ideals. Graham's constructive efforts manifested themselves in the leadership of *parachurch evangelicalism* and of *cooperative evangelicalism*.[29]

By the late 1930s, the trans-denominational coalition that historians later called parachurch evangelicalism was well established. Graham fell in step. At Florida Bible Institute, he rubbed shoulders with freelance paladins from a variety of traditions. At Wheaton College, he met future champions of the

[28] **. . . his message:** Graham acknowledged that other hands helped research, edit, or write some of his speeches, articles, and newspaper columns, as well as his autobiography. If one assumes, as I do, that Graham's principal historical importance lies in his role as a public figure, the distinction between words that he personally authored and those that others authored in his name is relatively unimportant. Graham, *Just As I Am*, 755–757; Graham in "Candid Conversation with the Evangelist," *Christianity Today*, July 17, 1981, 24; Graham in "Billy Graham: 25 Years an Evangelist, 55 Years a Man," *Eternity*, November 1974, 29; Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 138, 551; and Aikman, *Billy Graham*, 259–260. For a different interpretation, see Long, *Billy Graham*, 227–232. **. . . complex age:** Reinhold Niebuhr, "Differing Views on Billy Graham," *Life*, July 1, 1957, 92; Niebuhr, editorial, *Christianity and Crisis*, March 5, 1956, 18, quoted in Mark Silk, "The Rise of the 'New Evangelicalism,'" in William R. Hutchison, editor, *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 286. For a brilliant analysis of the Graham-Niebuhr relation, see Andrew S. Finstuen, "The Prophet and the Evangelist: The 'Public' Conversation of Reinhold Niebuhr and Billy Graham," *Books and Culture*, July/August, 2006, http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2006/julaug/3.8.html, accessed February 16, 2009.

[29] **. . . and vitality:** For Graham's seminal role "at the creation," see Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), esp. chap. 12. **. . . for consensus:** See, for example, William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* ([1986] New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 5th ed.), chap. 13.

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independent foreign missions network. Graham gradually moved to the front of the pack. By the 1960s, he decisively and permanently had eclipsed all others. Over the years, he invested his considerable organizational skills and financial resources in the founding or support of a host of parachurch institutions. Besides his own Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, some of the more important ones included (in chronological order) Youth for Christ, Campus Crusade for Christ, *Christianity Today*, the *Living Bible*, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Samaritan's Purse.[30]

If for Graham parachurch identification meant much, denominational identification meant little. The Southern Baptists ordained him when he was 21, but he always worshiped indiscriminately. (In this respect, he differed from his wife, who remained Southern Presbyterian to the end. He also differed from his lifelong associate, Grady Wilson. When a reporter asked Wilson what he would be if he were not Baptist, Wilson shot back, "I'd be ashamed.") As early as 1963, Graham told *Newsweek*'s Ken Woodward that he found himself most comfortable in the evangelical wing of the Anglican Church. That outlook endured. In his sunset years, he asked the Reverend Richard Bewes, the rector of All Souls in London, to help officiate at his funeral.[31]

Graham's parachurch instincts led to a growing openness toward other traditions—an openness that the historian Michael Hamilton aptly called "cooperative evangelicalism." Graham started out, as the historian George Marsden put it, as a "purebred fundamentalist." But he did not stay there. Virtually from the day Graham graduated from Wheaton, he began to pull away from the hard hitters on his right. He led the soft hitters like himself to a more open-minded attitude toward other traditions and toward the surrounding culture. Indeed, he soon grew uneasy with the combative connotations of the label "fundamentalist" and opted instead for the accommodative connotations of the label "evangelical" or, simply, "Christian." The move was heartfelt, but it was also shrewd. Graham knew

[30] **. . . in step:** Rosell, *Surprising Work*, 109–118. **. . . all others:** It is easy to forget that Graham emerged from a field of very real competitors. See ibid., esp. chap. 4, significantly titled, "A Band of Brothers." **. . . Samaritan's Purse:** Ibid., 109–118, 102 n. 143, 206–208, and John G. Turner, *Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ: The Renewal of Evangelicalism in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), throughout.

[31] **. . . be ashamed:** I have not been able to find the Wilson story in print, but it is a staple in BGEA oral tradition and fits Wilson's style of humor. E-mails from Graham's former associate minister and brother-in-law, Leighton Ford, February 4, 2009, and from John Akers, special assistant to Billy Graham, February 5, 2009. **. . . Anglican Church:** Kenneth L. Woodward, "The Autobiography of Billy Graham," *Commonweal*, August 15, 1997, 22; "Entrepreneurial Religion," in Woodward, *Getting Religion: Belief, Behavior and Belonging from the Age of Eisenhower to the Era of George W. Bush, A Memoir*, forthcoming. **. . . his funeral:** E-mail from Leighton Ford, January 21, 2009.

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that millions of evangelically inclined believers warmed the pews of non-evangelical churches.[32]

From the early 1950s, Graham proved eager to work with believers anywhere. In 1990, he proudly told *Time* magazine that in 1981—back when Protestant-Catholic relations were just beginning to thaw—Pope John Paul II had grasped his thumb and said, "We are brothers." When the pope died in 2005, Graham judged that the pontiff had been the "most influential force for morality and peace in the world in the past 100 years." The venue for Graham's remark was as significant as the remark itself: the nightly television talk show *Larry King Live*, a microphone to the world. Graham exhibited the same openness toward over-scrubbed mainliners on his theological left, under-scrubbed pentecostals on his theological right, and many folk who did not fit on any conventional theological map, including the Orthodox. He led millions of evangelicals to embrace the Christian world beyond their door, a globe filled with vibrant Anglicans in Britain, fervent Catholics in Poland, and exuberant charismatics in Africa. Jews too. Finding that he and Jewish leaders held much in common, Graham forged enduring ties with many of them at home and abroad. Repeatedly he said he would work with anyone who would work with him as long as they did not ask him to change his message. Many people saw Graham, but, as historian Sarah Johnson observed, it also is true that he saw many people, and they left their mark.[33]

[32] **. . . cooperative evangelism:** Michael Hamilton, unpublished article manuscript in my possession. **. . . purebred fundamentalist:** George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* ([1980] New York: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 2006), 233. **. . . simply, Christian:** Graham in "Candid Conversation," 26; Graham in "Billy Graham Answers His Critics," *Look*, February 7, 1956, page n/a; Graham in J. H. Hunter, "He Came—He Saw—He Conquered," *Evangelical Christian*, May 1955, 215. **. . . non-evangelical churches:** Graham, *Just As I Am*, 284.

[33] **. . . are brothers:** Graham interview with David Aikman, "Preachers, Politics, and Temptation," *Time*, May 28, 1990, 14. Mandy McMichael, "Ties that Bind: Evangelicals and Catholics Together?" Ph.D. seminar paper, Duke University/University of North Carolina, 2008, carefully documents Graham's growing embrace of Catholics. **. . . 100 years:** Michael Ireland, "Remembrance: Billy Graham: Pope John Paul II Was 'Most Influential Voice' in 100 Years," *Larry King Live*, aired April 2, [2005], ASSIST News Service, http://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/BibleStudyAndTheology/Perspectives/ANS_PopeGrahamCaviezel.aspx, accessed February 1, 2009. The quoted material is Ireland speaking for Graham. In 1970, Graham told David Frost that Pope John XXIII and Dwight L. Moody ranked as the most important religious leaders of the twentieth century: Frost, *Billy Graham*, 77–78. **. . . in Africa:** Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 310, 332. **. . . and abroad:** See, for example, Graham, *Just As I Am*, 301, 509, 511, 353, 450, and Marc Gellman, "The Spiritual State: Words of Faith: A Rabbi Explains Why Billy Graham Is a Giant among Preachers," *Newsweek*, June 8, 2005, http://www.newsweek.com/id/49787, accessed February 8, 2008. Graham insisted that he aimed to evangelize, not proselytize, Jews (though the distinction remained unclear): Graham, *Just As I Am*, 301, and Graham in James Michael Beam [Kenneth L. Woodward], "'I Can't Play God Any More,'" *McCall's*, January 1978, 158. See also Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 223, 658 n. 223; and David L. Altheide and John M. Johnson, "Counting Souls: A Study of Counseling at Evangelical Crusades," *The*

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In 2006, *The New Yorker* journalist Peter Boyer perceptively argued that Graham "triangulated" American Protestantism. Until he came along, Boyer contended, two high-profile combatants dominated the landscape: liberals and fundamentalists, locked in mortal combat. Yet the preacher sensed that many Christians had grown weary of that antagonism. They were rooted in a deeper and wider but less conspicuous tradition of irenic evangelical conviction. They desired a faith that took seriously venerable theological affirmations *and* modern social needs. By the middle 1950s, he had determined to fly his flag as a cooperative evangelical. His fundamentalist friends never forgave him. Their attacks still rage on the Internet, suggesting the bitterness of an abandoned lover. Graham too suffered wounds, but he never looked back.[34]

A theological rationale undergirded cooperative evangelicalism. Though Graham was not a theologian and never pretended to be, he thought seriously about things that mattered. In the process, he changed. Official Graham sources rarely admitted any revising, let alone compromising, of evangelical cornerstones, yet it is easy to see the preacher softening some of the hard edges—most notably, his refusal to speculate on the final fate of the earnest non-Christian. In his maturity, Graham came to feel that his job was simply to preach the Good News and leave the rest to the wideness of God's mercy.[35]

V. America's Counselor

Finally, as Graham grew older, the nation's expanding social vision powerfully influenced him, but that development was a long time coming and followed a zigzag path. To be sure, one thing never changed: his conviction that individual

Pacific Sociological Review 20 (July 1977), 336. **... their mark:** Sarah Johnson, personal conversation, Duke University, May 2007. See also Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 206, 211, 224, and 294.

[34] **... cooperative evangelical:** Boyer, "Big Tent," 44. **... abandoned lover:** For one of countless examples, see Dr. Ernest Pickering, "Should Fundamentalists Support the Billy Graham Crusades," pamphlet, 1957, posted on SharperIron, June 30, 2005, http://www.sharperiron.org/showthread.php?t=1081, accessed January 31, 2009. **... looked back:** Graham, *Just As I Am*, 251; Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 218–224.

[35] **... that mattered:** Contrary to the convention that Graham was an intellectual lightweight, Finstuen demonstrates that Graham, like his contemporaries Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, grappled with classic problems of human nature, albeit in the language of everyday life: Finstuen, *Original Sin*, esp. chaps. 3 and 5. **... hard edges:** Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 576. **... earnest non-Christian:** Graham interviewed in Frost, *Billy Graham*, 60–61; in Beam, "'I Can't Play God,'" 156, 158; in Larry King, *Larry King Live*, CNN, aired June 16, 2005, http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0506/16/lkl.01.html, accessed February 11, 2009. See also Aikman, *Billy Graham*, 258–259, 295. For some of these references and for insight on this subject, I am very directly indebted to D. Steven Porter, "Billy Graham and the Wideness of God's Mercy," Th.D. seminar paper, Duke University, 2008.

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conversion formed the only firm foundation for enduring social progress. Yet two things did change: his growing conviction that the movement from individual conversion to social reform required intentional implementation, and that the gospel, fully realized, required structural as well as spiritual solutions.

Three sets of events defined Graham's posture toward social engagement. The first was the Vietnam War, the second civil rights, and the third a cluster of issues broadly concerning global justice. The first ran from the middle 1960s to the middle 1970s; the second spanned his career; and the third extended from the late 1970s to the end of his active ministry. We might sum up most Americans' verdicts on the three as, respectively, bad, mixed, and good.

Though Graham's view of the Vietnam War was tangled, and the public's perception of his view was equally tangled, several overall comments seem warranted. First, he moved from clear support for the administration's policies in the middle 1960s to professed uncertainty by the time it ended in 1973. Yet many Americans doubted that his uncertainty ran very deep. Into the 1970s, he made statements that appeared to minimize if not trivialize the human cost of the fighting, and he refused publicly to challenge the controversial invasion of Cambodia in 1970 or the even more controversial Christmas bombing of Hanoi in 1972. Second, Graham oscillated between noninvolvement and involvement. On one hand, he actually spoke very little about the geopolitical details of the conflict, effectively saying that as a preacher the question was above his pay grade. On the other hand, in public, with rare exceptions, he stood shoulder to shoulder with Presidents Johnson and Nixon. The title of a 1969 *New York Times Magazine* article spoke volumes: "The Closest Thing to A White House Chaplain." Graham never seemed to suspect that his close personal and pastoral relationships with the two presidents might have influenced *his* judgment about *their* judgment. Finally, by the late 1970s, Graham acknowledged that in times past he had fallen into political partisanship, especially during the Nixon years. Repeatedly he said he regretted it.[36]

[36] **. . . seem warranted:** All of the "standard" biographies examine Graham's relation to the Vietnam War at length. For a particularly perceptive treatment, see Richard Pierard, "Billy Graham and Vietnam: From Cold Warrior to Peacemaker," *Christian Scholar's Review* 10:1 (October 1980): 37–51. **. . . pay grade:** Graham, *Just As I Am*, 415. **. . . house chaplain:** Edward B. Fiske, "The Closest Thing to a White House Chaplain," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 8, 1969, http://www.positiveatheism.org/writ/graham.htm, accessed February 3, 2009. Graham disliked the chaplain title, yet simultaneously and, clearly unintentionally, showed why many found it credible. See Graham, *Just As I Am*, 450, and compare the first and final paragraphs on the page. See also Aikman, *Billy Graham*, 201, 214. **. . . regretted it:** Graham, *Just As I Am*, 445, 724. See also Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 431, 472–473; Beam, "'I Can't Play God,'" 156; Kenneth L. Woodward, "Politics from the Pulpit," *Newsweek*, September 6,

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Graham's civil rights record, in contrast, won both censure and praise. Unsympathetic observers charged that he dithered on the integration of his Southern crusades; that in the middle 1960s, he urged firebrands on both sides to quiet down as if their causes were morally equivalent; that he never marched in the streets, went to jail, or threw his power and prestige behind fundamental structural reforms. Sympathetic observers, on the other hand, noted that he moved to integrate his crusades before *Brown v. Board of Education*; that he experienced threats on his life, the loss of friends, and the wrath of White Citizens' Councils; that he forthrightly endorsed Martin Luther King, Jr. (until King attacked the Vietnam War); and that he won the support of prominent African American associates, numerous black pastors, and multitudes of minority lay followers. Politicians split, too. In Graham's closing years, Jesse Jackson lamented the paucity of his efforts for racial justice. At the same time, Bill Clinton lauded him for taking a stand when he did not have to. One thing is clear: how Americans evaluated Graham's relation to the civil rights movement depended on the criteria they deemed most important. If they placed priority on prophetic words and bold actions, he fell short. If they placed priority on the steady witness of a half-century of integrated crusades, he walked tall.[37]

Graham's work for global justice represents a third posture, winning the praise of all but the most obdurate critics. His increasingly progressive record on health care, the environment, world hunger and poverty and, especially, the arms race, which he called "insanity, madness," placed him near the front of evangelical Christians' social conscience. As the evangelist's vision widened to see the world and its suffering as one, the line between insiders and outsiders blurred. He sidestepped the Christian Right and largely avoided public association with discordant figures like Phyllis Schlafly and Jerry Falwell. In December 2005, television journalist Larry King asked Graham what he thought about his son, Franklin, calling Islam "evil and wicked." Graham responded, "Well, he has [his] views and I have mine. And they are different sometimes." No one should have been surprised. The previous June, *The New York Times*'s Laurie Goodstein asked

1976, quoted in William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway, 1996), 153.

[37] **. . . and praise:** Again, all of the "standard" biographies treat Graham's relation to the civil rights movement at length, ranging from very positive to very negative. Steven P. Miller, "Billy Graham," and, more extensively, *Billy Graham*, offer a meticulous examination of this controversial subject. See also Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 202, 296. **. . . have to:** For Jackson, see the interview with David Aikman, video, *Billy Graham: Ambassador of Salvation*, 2002, volume 1 in 6-part PBS series *Great Souls*, quoted in Aikman, *Billy Graham*, 145, 8. For Clinton, see Boyer, "Big Tent," 44.

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Graham whether he anticipated a "clash of civilizations" between Christianity and Islam. His response was telling: "I think the big conflict is with hunger and starvation and poverty." That same month, Graham preached his final crusade—fittingly, in Flushing Meadows, one of the most ethnically mixed sections of New York City. The diversity of the meeting's counselors symbolized just how much his ministry had changed in sixty years. They represented more than 20 language groups, including Arabic, Armenian, Korean, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Tamil, and Mandarin Chinese.[38]

The mature Graham's expanding social vision grew from an underlying conviction that people deserved a second chance. That ideal—not to be confused with conservative notions of can-do entrepreneurialism *or* with liberal notions of social reconstruction—simply said that all people should receive an opportunity to make more of themselves than their genes and circumstances might portend. With few exceptions, the thousands of letters that made their way each week to "Billy Graham, Minneapolis, Minnesota" spoke of suffering—husbands calling it quits, kids gone astray, jobs lost, and loneliness. Above all, loneliness. In historian Heather Vacek's words, "Graham was a public figure holding private pain." That role may have been his most enduring legacy. The letters make clear that he helped many wayfarers find fresh water in dry wells. Here, he drew on deep-running streams in the American tradition. Sister Aimee, the flamboyant evangelist of the preceding generation, had well understood the power of the promise of a second chance. And so had the Great Commoner, William Jennings Bryan. Nothing was more American than believing that things old and broken really could become new and whole.[39]

[38] **. . . insanity, madness:** Graham on *CBS Evening News*, aired March 29, 1979, quoted in Pierard, "Billy Graham and Vietnam," 37. **. . . social conscience:** See Graham in "Candid Conversation," 21–22; Graham in Colin Greer, "'Change Will Come When Our Hearts Change,'" *Parade*, October 20, 1996, 6; Aikman, *Billy Graham*, 149, 155–156, 160; Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 439, 521, 576; Gaillard, *Southern Voices*, 121–122, 126. **. . . Jerry Falwell:** Aikman, *Great Souls*, 55; Martin, *Prophet with Honor*, 472; Ken Garfield, "Crusade Will Show a Softer Graham," *The Charlotte Observer*, June 23, 2005, 1A. **. . . different sometimes:** Graham in King, "Interview with Reverend Billy Graham." The transcript has Graham saying, "my views," but, from the context, it is obvious that he meant "his views." The previous June, in an interview with *The New York Times*'s Laurie Goodstein, Graham had distanced himself from Franklin's 2001 statement, saying, "We had an understanding a long time ago, he speaks for himself. . . . Let's say, I didn't say it": Goodstein, "Spirit Willing." In the King interview, Graham added that Franklin "doesn't hold that position now." **. . . and poverty**: Graham in Goodstein, "Spirit Willing"; see also Boyer, "Big Tent," 44, and Garfield, "Crusade Will Show a Softer Graham." **. . . Mandarin Chinese:** Gibbs and Duffy, *The Preacher*, 341, and BGEA, June 26, 2005, "Greater New York Billy Graham Crusade Updates," http://www.billygraham.org/News_Article.asp?ArticleID=104, accessed February 2, 2009. For the multiethnic and, to be sure, elegiac tone of that final crusade, see Gibbs and Duffy, *The Preacher*, 339–341.

[39] **. . . private pain:** Heather Vacek, Duke/UNC American Religion Colloquium, November 18, 2008. The BGEA does not release data on the number of letters the organization has received. In

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VI. Conclusion

For many decades Graham seemed invincible, but time exacts its toll. Now nearly 91 and frail, he quietly spends his days in his mountain home in Montreat, North Carolina. Ruth Bell Graham died in 2007. Except for a housekeeper and health care workers, he lives alone. In 2007, poll data suggested that nearly a third of Americans under the age of 30 did not recognize his name. The closing of the Graham era offers a fresh opportunity to consider what his story says about America's story.[40]

For the cultural historian, Graham's work provides a perch for viewing some of the most powerful changes that swept the postwar landscape. I have tried to provide glimpses of fruitful places to look. Neither romanticizing nor debunking him will take us very far. Rather the task is to see how he used the times to speak to the times. That analysis will exhibit the achievements and, inevitably, the shortcomings of a life played on the world's stage. It also will help show how the angular fundamentalism of the 1940s became the expansive evangelicalism of the 2000s. Most important, it will illumine the reciprocal impact of religion and culture in modern America, an impact that included but extended far beyond conventional politics. Billy Graham holds a secure place on the Mount Rushmore of American religious icons. The challenge is to see how the man reveals the contours of the rest of the mountain.[41]

1974, Graham said that he received 5,000 to 10,000 letters a day when he was not on television and 100,000 a day when he was. He told Johnny Carson that the letters most often spoke of loneliness. See virtually any sampling of the letters housed at BGA CN 74 and CN 575; Graham, "Billy Graham: 25 Years an Evangelist," 29; Graham on *The Tonight Show*, aired June 12, 1973, Track 1, BGEA DVD, dubbed August 2, 2007, in my possession.

[40] **. . . his name:** The exact figure was 29 percent. "Public Expresses Mixed Views of Islam, Mormonism," *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, September 25, 2007, http://pewforum.org/surveys/religionviews07/, accessed February 2, 2009. Stephen Prothero's 2007 book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't* includes an entry for Graham. In a review, the American religious historian Mark Oppenheimer judged that he would have omitted the entry for Graham because he was "irrelevant today." Oppenheimer, "Knowing Not," *New York Times*, June 10, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/10/books/review/Oppenheimer-t.html?_r=2, accessed March 22, 2009.

[41] **. . . Mount Rushmore:** After I drafted this line, I discovered that David Aikman wrote a similar one in "What If Billy Graham Had Made Another Choice?" Nelson Newsroom, September 25, 2007, http://news.thomasnelson.com/2007/09/25/what-if-billy-graham-had-made-another-choice, accessed March 20, 2009.

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