

The Most Admired Man in America: Billy Graham

By John M. Mulder



He has spoken to an estimated 2.2 billion people during his lifetime, more than any other person in human history. That includes 1.2 million people at one time, an estimate later confirmed by aerial photographs. At one point, he spoke to as many as 8 million people at one time by television in 175 countries, using 12 production trucks broadcasting to 29 time zones. His words

were translated simultaneously into more than 40 languages.

In post-World War II America, he recognized the power of media—especially television—and helped create a vast array of media institutions, including *Christianity Today*, a widely-respected and widely-circulated magazine of news and opinion, as well as the heart of a media company. He was directly and indirectly responsible for the founding and the growth of several respected institutions of higher education.

Criticized for being anti-intellectual, he read avidly—the works of crucial contemporary philosophers, influential magazines of critical opinion, and the popular press. He was labeled a conservative, but his harshest critics were conservatives.

He has been the friend of eleven Presidents and sometimes their counselor. A son of the South, he advocated an end to segregation as early as the 1950s and insisted that his Crusade meetings be racially integrated. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke on the same platform with him in 1957, and he later

bailed King out of jail in the 1960s when King was arrested for civil rights demonstrations.

Historians argue that more than any other American in the second half of the twentieth century, he changed the attitudes of Americans about the world, including nuclear disarmament, communism, poverty, race, and gender.

From 1946 to 2013, he has appeared on the Gallup poll’s list of the top ten most admired men and women in America 57 times in 67 years, more than any other. This includes 49 consecutive years, more than any other individual in the world. In 1999, Gallup asked who were the most admired men and women in the twentieth century. He was number seven, coming in behind Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, Albert Einstein, Helen Keller, and Franklin D. Roosevelt but ranking higher than Pope John Paul II, Eleanor Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Mohandas Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela.

His name is Billy Graham, and if you asked him, he would say all he wanted to do was save lives.

Now in his 95th year, Graham was the subject of a 2013 conference sponsored by the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College, a widely-respected center of scholarship that has contributed greatly to the deeper understanding of American evangelicalism and American religion. The conference was organized by the Institute’s director, Edith Blumhofer, and Grant Wacker of Duke Divinity School, who is completing a biography of Billy Graham. Casting a wide net to cover Graham’s multi-faceted ministry and extensive influence, the meeting was entitled “The Worlds of Billy Graham.” Sponsored by Lilly Endowment, the presentations will be published as a book (title to be determined), and a new documentary of Graham’s ministry, *A Gathering of Souls: The Billy Graham Crusades* is available through www.visionvideo.com.

The title, “The Worlds of Billy Graham,” suggests correctly both the diversity of Graham’s ministry and subjects of the papers. It is impossible to cover each of the rich presentations justly, so I have extracted four themes for this article:

- 1. The Grahams**
- 2. Graham’s message**
- 3. Graham’s method**
- 4. Graham’s legacy**

A list of all the authors and their papers can be found at the end of this article.

1. The Grahams

Nearly all the presentations touched on Billy Graham as a person, and from the beginning of his ministry, he emphasized conversion—a personal, life-changing experience of forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

For someone who so strongly emphasized conversion, Graham’s own experience was relatively mild. According to his autobiography, Graham was converted when he was 16 at a series of revivals led by evangelist Mordecai Ham. But it wasn’t a very tumultuous event. Graham admits that he didn’t feel much of a change the next day and wondered if his teachers and friends would look differently at him. They didn’t. But gradually his faith deepened; slowly he began to develop a sense of God’s design for his life. He said the definitive moment came on “the 18th green of the Temple Terrace Golf and Country Club” in Florida, a peculiar but pleasant place to experience an epiphany of God’s presence. God called him to be an evangelist.

Graham consistently sought to strengthen his own faith and to practice evangelism with integrity.

Two critical events stand out in Graham’s ministry. The first came at the launch of Graham’s career as an evangelist in 1948 in a hotel room in Modesto, California. Graham was deeply concerned that his ministry avoid the financial and sexual improprieties captured by Sinclair Lewis in the character Elmer Gantry. He told his associates, “Let’s try to recall all the things that have been a stumbling block and a hindrance to evangelists in years past, and let’s come back together in an hour and talk about it and pray about it and ask God to guard us from them.”

Out of the meeting came three crucial guidelines that the Graham crusades observed tenaciously.

First, finances had to be managed with absolute honesty and integrity. Previous evangelists were and still are known to take a big cut of the so-called love-offerings contributed at services. Graham insisted that he and his team take a fixed salary, no matter what the contributions were. He adamantly rejected the idea of a pension, but when he was finally persuaded, he insisted that it be applied retroactively to people who had already retired. What became the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association has made contributions to other religious groups over the last 50 years, which is virtually unheard of before or since. Contemporary TV evangelists spend nearly their entire time on the air raising money to stay on the air to raise money. In Graham broadcasts, the request for support lasted about two or three minutes. Graham has gone untouched by charges of financial irregularity during his sixty years of ministry, and the *Boston Globe* at one point declared that he was “perhaps the lowest-paid evangelist of modern times.”

Second, there was the problem of sex that plagued his predecessors and his contemporary evangelists. Graham (and his associates) were handsome men. Scarcely a single article of Graham has ever appeared without mentioning that he was handsome. Early on, he was approached to be a movie star and said he wouldn't consider it “for a million dollars.” Graham and his aides decided the requirement would be that they never appear alone with a woman, other than their wives, in public or in private. Sexual scandal has never affected Graham or his organization.

Third, evangelists often set themselves up as the critics of churches and their so-called cold faith and empty practices. Graham and his team decided they would never go into a city without the invitation of area churches. They insisted that the invitation would have to come from a broad spectrum of churches, both Protestant and Catholic, not just the conservative, evangelical congregations. The result was that Graham crusade meetings in a city were preceded by years of cooperative planning and followed by concerted effort to bring the converted into the fellowship of churches. The Graham organization would take the names and addresses of those who came forward (interestingly, known as “inquirers,” not “converts”) and immediately refer them to the closest church to their homes. If the church didn't follow up, the names were sent to another church.

The second epochal event also came at the beginning of his ministry. His close friend and fellow evangelist was Chuck Templeton, who was a

brilliant and inquiring thinker and a preacher as eloquent as Graham. Templeton began to press Graham on complex theological and philosophical issues that challenged Christian faith, especially the authority of the Bible. Graham was shaken by his friend’s insistent inquiries. His spiritual crisis came to a peak in August, 1949, at a student conference at Forest Home, located in a wooded area near Los Angeles. Confused and conflicted, Graham took a night walk into the woods with his Bible. He prayed, confessing his confusion about intellectual challenges to his faith.

Then came a breakthrough. As he says in his autobiography, “At last the Holy Spirit freed me to say it, ‘Father, I’m going to accept this as Thy Word—by *faith!* I’m going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts, and I will believe this to be Your inspired Word” (p. 139). He apparently never doubted again. In fact, his friend Templeton, who had a distinguished ministry but ultimately left the church, admitted that at the heart of Graham’s success was the fact that he truly believed—without reservations or compromises.

One of the marks of his ministry, according to Seth Dowland of Pacific Lutheran University, was Graham’s “new evangelical manhood.” Dowland argued that Graham was “an icon of manhood.” He aligned himself with the robust virility of earlier evangelists, but over time his masculine image evolved. His “invitations” in the Graham Crusades projected “an openness and vulnerability through surrender.” Dowland argued, “By the end of Graham’s career, men could be more vocal, more emotional, and more openly religious than their fathers and grandfathers had been. Graham subtly changed what it meant to be a ‘real man’ for millions of American evangelicals.” Graham even reached the point of endorsing women as preachers, which incurred the wrath of his fellow conservatives but paved the way for his the ministry of his daughter, Anne Graham Lotz, whom Graham has described as the best preacher in the family.

Many observers saw the personal warmth of Graham in dealing with individuals in private. In public, he was much more distant. At once attractive and yet mysterious, Graham was “America’s most complicated innocent,” in the graceful phrase of Steven Miller, an independent scholar.

Graham’s public image was reinforced by his wife, Ruth Bell Graham. Born to Presbyterian missionary parents in China and educated before college on the mission field, Ruth Graham aspired to be a missionary in Tibet. She

met Billy at Wheaton College, and after an on-again/off-again courtship, they married and eventually had five children. Publicly she “burnished Billy’s manly image,” said Anne Blue Wills of Davidson College. In the press, she was constantly described as Billy’s “pretty wife” and “feminine,” meaning “modest.”

But there was another Ruth Graham. She wrote and published poetry (*My Laughing Fire*), which Blue Wells argued was “a release for her.” She critiqued her husband’s sermons and edited his books, especially one of his best-known works, *Peace With God*. She felt that Billy wasn’t really such a fine preacher and needed help in making his ideas as simple as possible. There was even a slight tension between them. According to Blue Wells, Billy proclaimed “the feast of the Gospel,” but Ruth Graham believed that sin was “the curse that needs to be reversed” and the Christian life began “at the foot of the cross.”

In short, the relationship between the Grahams that looked so simple and stereotypical was more complex and richly textured.

2. Graham’s Message

In one of his last sermons in 2006, Billy Graham proclaimed:

“I’m going to ask you to do something. . . . I’m going to ask you to come and make this decision. Make certain that you know Christ as your Lord and Savior. You may want to rededicate your life. You come.”

And then, of course, came the lilting words of “Just As I Am”:

“Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.”

The key was “decision,” the word that characterized Billy Graham’s entire ministry. Michael S. Hamilton of Seattle Pacific University declared, “From the beginning of his career to the end, people responded to his invitation in far greater numbers than anyone expected.” Behind the “decision” was a theme with deep resonance in the American psyche, said Grant Wacker of Duke Divinity School: Everyone has a second chance, with others and with God.

Studies indicate that the vast majority of people who came forward in the Graham Crusades were not “converted” but “recommitted” to the Christian faith. After the Crusades there was a high level of their attrition from churches. However, the studies did not and cannot track the changes, if not transformation, of individuals and their decision to accept God’s forgiveness and promise of a new life released from shame, guilt, and sin.

Graham basically preached the same sermon over and over again from his first large evangelistic meeting in Los Angeles in 1949 to his last crusade in New York in 2005. The world’s problems and your individual problems, he would proclaim, will be solved by turning over your life to Jesus Christ.

Part one was a description of the global and personal crises of the modern world. From the late 1940s to the mid 2000s, his emphasis on global affairs gradually shifted from a repeated and histrionic condemnation of “godless, atheistic communism” to the dangers of nuclear war and the need for disarmament, to racial injustice, to the problems of global poverty and capitalist greed. This global perspective was fascinating for two reasons. One, it set American Christianity in the midst of the complexity of the second half of the twentieth century. Second, it forced people to realize that their lives were tied to large movements that confronted not only them but people all over the world. Then Graham turned to individuals and their discontents—broken families, fractured marriages, moral confusions, and especially loneliness.

Part two focused on the answer—accepting Jesus Christ as one’s savior. One’s relationship to God depended on one’s decision. This emphasis dominated his entire evangelistic ministry. His weekly radio program was called “Hour of Decision.” His official organization’s magazine was called *Decision*. His newspaper column was called “My Answer,” and one of his several books was entitled *America’s Hour of Decision*. The message was clear. You have doubts. The Bible has the answers.

Part three offered the promise of life following one’s decision—the resolution of global problems and the assurance of forgiveness and reconciled relationships. At the end of every sermon came “the invitation”—the opportunity to come forward and commit or recommit one’s life to Jesus Christ.

Graham’s theology remained consistent throughout his ministry, even if it was somewhat softer and delivered in less histrionic tones toward the end. Critics have often lambasted Graham for “anti-intellectualism” because of the simplicity and sameness of his message. But the picture is more complex, argued Andrew Finstuen of Boise State University. Finstuen explored Graham’s dozens of visits to colleges and universities, including Harvard, Yale, the University of California at Berkeley, Dartmouth, Union Theological Seminary in New York, the University of Chicago, Oxford, and Cambridge.

Graham set himself up for critique by accepting these invitations in the first place; one can scarcely imagine a contemporary evangelist speaking at these institutions today. He also armed his critics with his humble, self-effacing admissions: “The Bible has been my Harvard and Yale.” The truth, argued Finstuen, is that Graham read widely in Christian theology, including Kierkegaard, Barth, and his nemesis Reinhold Niebuhr, as well as contemporary social thinkers.

Finstuen’s conclusion is worth quoting at length:

“What was central [for Graham] was his articulation of a philosophy of humanity and history based on the Christian gospel. That philosophy held that sinful individuals could never correct the sinful workings of society. But universities were full of lifestyles and isms that pretended to be final answer for human well-being and the common good. The consequences were a confused humanity destined to cycle through and be divided by an endless array of secondary truths.

“This argument placed Graham in fundamental affinity with a line of twentieth-century American public intellectuals like Walter Lipmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, Philip Rieff, Christopher Lasch, and Allan Bloom. Of course, with the possible exception of Allan Bloom, not one of these thinkers would have recognized such affinity. . . . [These thinkers do not] share a uniform and fully accurate diagnosis of the past eighty years of American evangelical culture.

“I am suggesting, however, that Graham was an evangelist who understood that ideas mattered. He knew they shape how people talk, vote, eat, marry, work—in short, how they live. His

concern with them and with university populations was that ideas about life were secondary to a way of life in Jesus Christ. He had arrived at this way of life with unflinching certitude in 1949. Yet, from there he embarked on an intellectual pilgrimage marked by a courage to risk looking the fool in front of academic audiences, a charity intent on cultivating mutual understanding with them, and a humility to keep going back for more.”

Graham’s theology—unfailingly consistent. His application to social problems—“a work in progress,” according to the majority of the speakers at the Wheaton conference. In fact, it is stunning to recognize the extent of Graham’s willingness to address the problems of American society and the world during his nearly 60-year ministry and his willingness to let his experience alter his views.

It is important to realize that Graham was raised in an evangelical Protestant and southern culture in which churches believed that Christians, especially preachers, should stay out of politics. This was one of the factors behind southern churches’ massive resistance to advocating racial equality through the 1960s. According to David King of Memphis Theological Seminary, Graham always insisted that “winning people to Christ was his first priority,” but he also declared, “Christians, above all others, should be concerned with social injustices.”

Graham changed. He virulently condemned “godless, atheistic communism” in the 1950s, but in the early 1980s he made a very controversial visit to Russia—against the strong opposition of the Reagan administration (John Akers, “Billy Graham and the Soviet Union”). He distanced himself from his home of southern segregation by integrating his rallies as early as 1953 (Steven Miller), a policy that frequently angered his hosts. Yet Curtis Evans of the University of Chicago Divinity School sees a shift in Graham from a progressive advocate of change to a preacher defending Christian virtues and values amidst social disintegration in the 1960s, setting the stage for the rise of the New Religious Right.

Nevertheless, he took his meetings overseas, and his international travels left an indelible mark on his moral conscience. He became a strong advocate for economic justice and the alleviation of global hunger and poverty (including the forgiveness of the debt of emerging countries). “Three-fifths of the world lives in squalor, misery, and hunger,” Graham

declared. “Too long have the privileged few exploited and ignored the underprivileged millions of the world” (King).

Another time he preached, “We in America cannot go on driving Cadillacs and getting richer, while the rest of the world drives oxcarts and gets poorer. One of the biggest sins of America is selfish refusal to share its wealth with the world’s poor” (King). Speaking to students at Harvard in 1982, he declared, “As a Christian, I believe that God has a special concern for the poor of the world, and public policy should in some way reflect that concern” (King).

Graham was criticized for his political involvement (especially his being co-opted by Richard Nixon, an association he regretted). Eventually he won acclaim for what he described as two more conversions in his life: first, his complex commitment to racial equality (Darren Dochuck, Washington University, “‘Go to Harlem!’ Billy Graham and Encounters with Race in an Age of Law and Order”; and Miller, “Those Welkin Eyes: Billy Graham, Marshall Frady, and the Enigma of the Modern South”) and second, his advocacy of world peace.

What emerges from the Wheaton conference is the image of a politically conflicted Graham. On the one hand, he once declared, “Evangelists cannot be closely identified with any particular party or person. We have to stand in the middle in order to preach to all people, right and left. I haven’t been faithful to my own advice in the past.” On the other hand, he added, “A lot of things that I commented on years ago would not have been of the Lord, I’m sure, but I think you have some—like communism or segregation, on which I think you have a responsibility to speak out.”

Graham had and still has his critics. They blasted him for simply being wrong. They skewered him for reducing complex problems to simple solutions. They said he went too far or didn’t go far enough. They declared he followed public sentiment, rather than leading it.

But within American Christianity, Graham was in the vanguard of an epochal change with profound and perplexing implications. Billy Graham effectively destroyed the distinction between a private faith and public social responsibility, especially in American evangelicalism. He had his allies, but because of his access to the media, his voice sounded above the cacophony of others.

In the larger culture, he both mirrored the changes in American political and social attitudes and, for the most part, influenced them for the good. The Wheaton presenters portray a minister on a pilgrimage, a study in change shaped by his own experience and what he perceived it meant to follow Christ.

3. Graham’s Method

Billy Graham was a master of the media. During Graham’s Los Angeles rally in 1949, William Randolph Hearst issued his famous dictum to his newspaper editors: “Puff Graham.” According to Elisha Coffman of Dubuque Theological Seminary, “By 2013 the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association amassed 1 million ‘likes’ on Facebook. Between those milestones,” she declared, “Graham became one of the most recognized, televised, photographed, published, and quoted figures in America—and abroad—owing in large part to his adept engagement with media.”

“The intersection of media and evangelism is a tricky place to operate,” said Coffman. “There’s a fine line between skilful and manipulative, savvy and slick.” She contended “that Billy Graham, media producer and media star, navigated that line adeptly as he advanced his great goals: the evangelization of the world, and the establishment of evangelicalism as a religious tradition.”

Graham never met a journalist he didn’t like, and he counseled Richard Nixon not to be so negative about the press. Despite their predilections, journalists overwhelmingly admitted he was a nice guy. Even the *Playboy* interviewer, Saul Braun, admitted he left the interview feeling like “Graham’s child” and knowing that “Graham loved me and would care for me” (Dowland).

Graham never shied away from press conferences, even in the midst of controversy, and he always arrived in a city early—partly to learn what were the chief concerns of its residents but also to be interviewed by the press. He deftly turned aside questions of local controversy, but on the big issues confronting the nation and the world, he offered his clear and what he considered his biblically-based convictions.

Music is sometimes an overlooked component of a Graham evangelistic meeting. Edith Blumhofer, the Executive Director of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals, drew on her previous work in American

religious music and described “Singing to Save: The Signature Sound of the Graham Crusades.

In addition, one of my personal favorites in the conference was “A Billy Graham Community Sing” with Billy Graham Evangelistic Association musicians Tom Bledsoe and John Innes. Like the Graham Crusades, they led a volunteer choir, but this time it had only a couple dozen voices, in sharp contrast to the Crusade massed choirs of hundreds of voices. At Wheaton, Bledsoe and Innes rolled out some of the favorites of the Graham crusades: “Come Thou Font of Every Blessing,” “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” “Blessed Assurance,” “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name” (one of Graham’s favorites and for a while the Crusade theme song), and of course “How Great Thou Art” and “Just As I Am.”

Blumhofer described how Cliff Barrows (the pianist and choir director) and George Beverly Shea (the soloist) developed a distinctive Crusade “sound.” Barrows frequently had only 30 minutes to rehearse the choirs. Shea’s deep bass always set the stage for Graham. Reporters, said Blumhofer, “marveled at [Barrows’] easy rapport with the audience: ‘There is a fine art to preparing crowds numbering up to 50,000 to sit quietly and listen to an hour-long sermon; it is no undertaking for an amateur.’”

Shea and Barrows introduced lost hymns to the Crusade audiences. The most notable example is “How Great Thou Art,” which Shea discovered in England and performed at the 1957 New York Crusade. It caught on immediately. “The *New York Times*,” Blumhofer said, “reported that aggregate attendance had approached 2 million and that ‘many persons attending the Graham rallies in Madison Square Garden were more moved by Mr. Shea’s rendering of “How Great Thou Art” than by the evangelist.’” The hymn has since become a staple of Protestant hymnals, entered Catholic hymnbooks, and been performed in movies and on television. Three Presidents have named it their favorite hymn.

Graham, Shea, and Barrows were a team of three, Blumhofer concludes, each making a distinctive contribution but together shaping a carefully constructed worship experience.

The Graham Crusades recruited a wide range of musical talent, depending on the time (and therefore the popularity of musical stars) and the location (Crusades outside of the United States featured musicians from the host

country or region). One of Graham’s frequent guests was Ethel Waters, an African-American blues artist, whom the *New Yorker* called “the one truly great, compleat, popular singer this country has produced.” Ethel Waters chafed singing the blues and what she called “ungodly raw” songs. “I wanted to sing decent things, but they wouldn’t let me,” she said. “They didn’t even know I could.” From the late 1950s to the 1970s, Waters performed for the Crusade meetings, especially her signature song, “His Eye Is on the Sparrow.”

Graham’s fame helped the artists. The artists’ fame brought people. For example, Johnny Cash sang for the Graham Crusades. Cash’s relationship to Christianity was deeply rooted in his youth, but his religious devotion ebbed and flowed throughout his alcoholic and drug-addicted life. For Graham, Cash was undoubtedly a big draw for people who loved his gravelly bass voice, but it also enhanced Cash’s image among his fans. Fame is sometimes reciprocal.

From the early radio programs, to television, to films, to magazines and books, to mass media—the Graham Crusades demonstrated that intriguing paradox of American evangelicalism. It is a movement devoted to proclaiming a faith “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8) with the latest sophisticated and powerful media.

4. Graham’s Legacy

The Wheaton conference began with a short but magisterial overview by Grant Wacker of Duke Divinity School and Graham’s latest biographer. He described his experience of lecturing on Graham at Trinity University in Connecticut and asking the students what they knew about Billy Graham. He was confronted with utter silence. Finally a student asked, “Isn’t he a wrestler?” The student was right.

Wacker said that even though Graham’s fame and influence may be waning, he remains a pivotal figure in American history but especially American and world Christianity. Graham knew eleven Presidents, and George H. W. Bush called him “the nation’s pastor.” He has also been dubbed “the thirteenth apostle,” and Marshall Frady called him “Christianity’s American son.”

Wacker delineated three reasons for “the magnitude and longevity of Graham’s influence.” First, he is “a polestar of decency.” Second, he is

able “to be Christian, modern, and American at the same time.” Third, he “offered a second chance in life.”

Borrowing a phrase from one of his students, Wacker said Graham became “a public vehicle for private pain.” When Graham appeared on the Johnny Carson show, he was asked about the hundreds of letters he received every week. Carson inquired whether there was any common theme in the correspondence. Graham replied with one word: “Loneliness.” Graham saw the depths of human despair.

Graham’s offer of a second chance addressed the quest for a new opportunity amidst that despair, and he even applied to his own life. When asked what he wanted to say to God when he got to heaven, Graham replied, “I’m going to ask the Lord whether I can edit the film.”

Wacker concluded that Graham with Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Paul II are “the three most constructively influential Christians of the twentieth century.” All three, Wacker said, were “sowers of winter wheat.” They did not expect to see the results of their work during their lifetimes and did not seek benefits for themselves.

The conference concluded with a fascinating discussion moderated by Wacker. The participants included Leighton Ford, evangelist and Billy Graham’s brother-in-law; Jean Graham Ford, Graham’s sister; Martin E. Marty, retired professor at the University of Chicago and the dean of historians of American religion; and former *Newsweek* editor Kenneth Woodward.

What emerged from that discussion and the conference as a whole were at least three themes of Billy Graham’s legacy.

First, Graham is a man of integrity. He avoided the moral dilemmas of money and sex that have afflicted so many public leaders, both inside the church and in the areas of business and politics. He remained unstintingly devoted to his wife Ruth, who had to endure the endlessly repetitive description of her as “pretty” and presumably brainless and ineffectual, when she influenced him considerably. Graham stood up for what he believed—religiously and politically—but he changed his mind steadily when he confronted the realities of the post-war United States and the world. That illustrates both his capacity to change but also his inherent humility, which baffled and befuddled his critics. In one of his last

interviews before retirement, he declared, “I won’t play God any more.” He constantly insisted that he was simply an evangelist with a simple message from Scripture: “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved” (Acts 16:31).

Second, Graham is a kind man. For all the extravagant rhetoric of his early years (he was dubbed “God’s machine gun”) through the eventual moderation of his preaching in the latter years, he was a man marked by concern for others. He was manipulated by Richard Nixon—willingly—during Nixon’s campaigns and Nixon’s presidency. Graham threw up halfway through listening to the Watergate tapes. But he never gave up hope for Nixon the man. When evangelist Jim Bakker was released from prison after serving his sentence for embezzlement, Graham offered him a place to stay. At the Wheaton conference, Martin Marty recalled, in a choked voice, how Graham heard that Marty’s wife was dying of cancer (news that was not publicly known) and wrote him a letter of support. These and other private pastoral gestures marked the Graham that the public never knew.

Third, Graham’s message of the second chance gave people hope. When he urged people to accept Jesus Christ, he was also saying that they didn’t need to live self-destructive, tragic lives. By surrendering, they could find a new path and embark on a new journey that would benefit them but also all those around them. In many ways, his message mirrored the teaching of Bill W., Alcoholics Anonymous, and hundreds of 12 step movements. Admit you’re powerless, says AA. Admit your sin, says Graham. Decide to turn your life over to a Higher Power, says AA. Decide to accept Jesus Christ as your Savior, says Graham. Then you’ll find sobriety and serenity, says AA. Then you’ll find salvation and peace, says Graham.

Serenity through surrender; salvation through surrender: it’s the same message using different words. This emphasis on a second chance may speak powerfully in American culture, but it also addresses a fundamental human predicament and affirms an aspiration of the human heart.

Graham will have no successor for a number of reasons. The field of evangelists today is so over-populated and so competitive—for air time and money—that no one of them will ever achieve the public stature of Graham. Hundreds of television stations and the Internet allow anybody with a Bible to go on the air.

Another, and much more important reason, is that the fulcrum of Christianity has shifted from the western world, including the United States, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The election of Pope Francis from Argentina is the most visible symbol of the fact that Christianity is now a world religion in ways it has never been before. Its strength is in the southern hemispheres, not in Europe and North America. In a way, that is Graham’s greatest legacy because he has trained thousands of evangelists in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, and it is these evangelists who are bringing Christianity to their own people.

At the conference, Martin Marty said that if there were ever an American Mount Rushmore for religion, it would have the eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards, Martin Luther King, Jr., Billy Graham, and one other figure (to be determined).

Marty also gave this assessment, referring to the work of philosopher Eugene Rosenstock-Huessy, who said that a good book is about at least one thing. Marty declared, “A good life is about one thing.”

That is true of Billy Graham. His life is about one thing: saving people.

Conference speakers (in order of presentation)

“Billy Graham and American History,” Grant Wacker, Duke Divinity School.

“From Desire to Decision: The Evangelistic Preaching of Billy Graham,” Michael S. Hamilton, Seattle Pacific University.

“Singing to Save: The Signature Sound of the Billy Graham Crusades,” Edith Blumhofer, Wheaton College.

“‘You Cannot Fool the Electronic Eye’: Billy Graham and Media,” Elesha Coffman, Dubuque Theological Seminary.

“‘An Odd Kind of Cross to Bear’: Being Mrs. Billy Graham,” Anne Blue Wills, Davidson College.

“Billy Graham and the Soviet Union,” John Akers, Independent Scholar.

“A Politics of Conversion: Billy Graham’s Political and Social Vision,”
Curtis Evans, University of Chicago Divinity School.

“Professor Graham: Billy Graham’s Missions to Colleges and Universities,”
Andrew Finstuen, Boise State University.

““Go to Harlem!”: Billy Graham and Encounters with Race in an Age of Law and Order,” Darren Dochuk, Washington University in St. Louis.

“Those Welkin Eyes: Billy Graham and the Enigma of the Modern South,”
Steven Miller, Webster University.

“Preaching Good News to the Poor: Billy Graham and Evangelical Humanitarianism,” David King, Memphis Theological Seminary.

“Billy Graham and the New Evangelical Manhood,” Seth Dowland, Pacific Lutheran University.