

# The life and ministry of billy graham



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## **Introduction**

When Billy Graham was born, no one could have predicted the influence he would one day have on his country, the world, and the global church. Since 1949, when the world first took notice of his crusade in Los Angeles, until his death on February 21, 2018, Graham was a well-respected evangelist, author, and public figure. Graham preached the simple, naturally-offensive message of the Gospel to people all around the world. It is safe to say that no single evangelist has preached to more people in their lifetime than Billy Graham. Because of the rise of television, radio, and now internet video technology, Graham's proclamation of the Gospel was heard by countless millions the world over. Graham also preached to more people in person than any other human being, selling out arenas and speaking to the largest recorded gathering of listeners in history in South Korea with a live audience of at least 1, 000, 000 people. These are fantastic numbers, but it is vital to examine Graham's impact on the world and the church as a whole. When the crusades packed up and left town, what happened to the souls who walked the aisles while "Just as I Am" played, indicating a desire to be saved? This essay will seek to briefly examine several areas of Billy Graham's life and ministry and cultivate a better understanding of his beliefs, methodologies, theology, and impact on the church.

### Early Life

William Franklin Graham Jr. was born in Charlotte, NC, on his parents' modest property just outside the city. For a man who would have so much impact on Christianity, he began his life with a somewhat apathetic attitude

towards religion. In his autobiography, *Just As I Am*, Graham states that there was "...about (the church I grew up in) to make it lively for me, not even in the youth group." [1] This is a sad statement, and Billy Graham remained fairly uninterested in church until he went to a Mordecai Hamm tent revival at age 16. It was there that he heard the Gospel clearly, gave his life to Christ, and made a "complete 180-degree turn" as he describes it. [2]

After high school, Graham attended Bob Jones College in Cleveland, TN, briefly; however, he found the teaching and policies to be too legalistic. After one run in with school leadership, Billy Graham was nearly expelled from the school. Bob Jones would later recall telling him that he had a voice that could pull people in, and that God could use that voice of his. [3] In the end, Graham would transfer after one semester to Florida Bible Institute, a small Bible college near Tampa, FL.

After graduating from Bible school, Graham went on to get a degree from Wheaton College outside of Chicago, IL. It was at Wheaton that he met the love of his life, Ruth Bell, whose parents were long-time missionaries in Asia. [4] Billy and Ruth were married in 1943. [5] Later in 1943, Graham pastored his first congregation, the United Gospel Tabernacle near Wheaton. Then, in 1948, Billy became president of Northwestern Bible College in Minneapolis. He was the youngest college president in the nation—a testament to his sharp intellect and superb leadership qualities. [6]

### External Influences

The young Billy Graham had many influences in his ministry career, but a few stand out. Though Graham was saved at a Mordecai Hamm revival, it is <https://assignbuster.com/the-life-and-ministry-of-billy-graham/>

interesting to note that his preaching style ended up being decidedly different from Hamm's, whose accusatory tone and sometimes harsh treatment of the crowd was controversial in his time. Instead, Graham seems influenced in his preaching by other preachers, theologians, and evangelists who ministered just before his time, such as D. L. Moody and Billy Sunday. Sunday's evangelistic style, in particular, seems to have stuck with Billy Graham. His fiery, tent revivals, and clear communication style was later echoed in the young Billy Graham.

Beyond these famous evangelists whose ministry resembles Graham's, not much is known of his influences. We do know that he attended local church regularly, and while at Florida Bible Institute, he began to preach for the first time. Graham also looked up to his contemporaries, including Charles Templeton, who was a well-known evangelist comparable to a young Billy Graham before turning from the faith and writing several works professing atheism.[7]

## Writings

Though remembered as a preacher and evangelist, Graham penned 33 books and short writings for the benefit of the church. Graham wrote several books that became best sellers, such as *Angels: God's Secret Agents*, *How to be Born Again*, *The Holy Spirit*, and *The Jesus Generation*. Graham's writings range from evangelistic in tone to having a fairly deep theological premise, such as *Angels* and *The Holy Spirit*, which examine the doctrines of angels and the Holy Spirit, two fairly difficult and widely debated doctrines.

One of the most influential writings Graham wrote was titled *Peace with God*. The work of this book became a classic Gospel tract which has been translated into at least eight languages and distributed across the globe. Because of the internationally known and well-respected name of Billy Graham, many would read a short tract penned by him that would not normally read a Gospel tract, wondering what the appeal of this man could be.

Beyond Graham's published works, his radio and television ministries reached millions. Graham had a weekly radio show, *The Hour of Decision*, which reached audiences around the globe for more than 50 years. The BGEA still airs television broadcasts of Graham's sermons (taken mostly from various crusades throughout his career). The broadcasts include a telephone number which listeners can call and reach a live counselor with questions about the Gospel or salvation. The true impact these broadcasts have made for the Kingdom of God is unknown. My wife's own grandfather was saved one night when, on a business trip, he flipped on the television to see Billy Graham preaching. The fiery but clear presentation kept his interest, and the message of the Gospel cut right to his heart. That night, though he grew up in church and had accepted the *premise* of the Gospel, he realized that he did not have a relationship with God. He got on his knees in his hotel room and began that relationship, and today he is in Heaven, along with the preacher he listened to that night.

Theology and Methodology

Some would criticize Billy Graham as having not given enough time and credit to theological matters over his career. Many people, both secular and religious, have stated a distaste for the massive crusade crowds, wondering if true conversion really took place, or simply emotional decisions. This essay seeks to briefly evaluate some of the theological and methodological practices and beliefs that shaped Graham's ministry.

One critic of Graham's ministry, Joe E. Barnhart, wrote a book analyzing Graham's theology and methodology entitled *The Billy Graham Religion*. The book is truly a critique of evangelicalism, but critiques the entire evangelical theology by critiquing its most well-known voice at the time of its authorship, which was Billy Graham. Barnhart writes that Graham's evangelical style was like that of an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century "miracle medicine" salesman—promising a quick cure and making a *hard* sell for the product.[8]Barnhart compares the simple Gospel Graham proclaims to a fairytale.[9]While, from a secular perspective, this is a fair and understandable assessment of evangelism, the question arises—if Billy Graham believed what he said was true, and that the Gospel of Jesus is the *only* way of salvation, why would he *not* make as hard a "sell" as he could? Why would he *not* proclaim the message as broadly, boldly, and simply as he could? Barnhart's unbelief is his own decision; however, if Graham truly believed what he preached, then his methodology matched his message.

In his book *Examining Billy Graham's Theology of Evangelism*, Thomas Paul Johnson critically analyzes Billy Graham's theological viewpoint from many different angles. Johnson points out that Graham's attitude in speaking about sin seemed to suggest a theological belief not of man's depraved nature, but

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of sin as a wrong attitude towards God—a lack of love for him.[10] Still, Graham always maintained the doctrine of individual sin requiring individual salvation.

Another interesting point about Graham's theology that Johnson draws out is his view of social responsibility. Specifically, Johnson contrasts evangelism and the call to proclaim the Gospel with the call to take social action in the world. Johnson quotes Graham in saying that his view of the Christian's purpose from now until death or the Lord's return could be summed up in the words proclamation and service.[11] Johnson argues that Billy's desire to take social action actually outpaced the reach of his ministry, the BGEA. [12] This is an interesting point, which helps us to understand Graham's view of evangelism. It seems that the older he got—which coincided with the more he traveled the world—the more he placed an urgency for social action *while maintaining* a commitment to inspire Christians towards world evangelism and fulfilling the Great Commission. In *The Canvas Cathedral*, Lewis A. Drummond writes that Billy Graham was able to keep a balance between fighting social injustice and staying focused on the message of the Gospel[13]. To Graham, especially later in life, it seems that helping those in need was part of evangelism. In an essay on the "tangible evangelism" of Billy Graham, later published in *The Legacy of Billy Graham*, it was later argued that Graham's ministry had such a great impact—both evangelically and socially—because he himself lived the Gospel message with his life.[14]

One of the hallmarks of Graham's ministry was the simplicity with which he preached. Some view this as his greatest strength, while others seem to view it as his greatest weakness. Before examining both sides of this issue, it is

important to understand that Graham was intentionally simple in his preaching style. He stated that he believed, "... preaching, to be successful, must be simple." [15] It was not as if Graham were so theologically simple that he could not be more complex in the way he preached or presented ideas. Rather, he made a concerted effort to be simple and precise in the evangelistic message he shared with the world. Still, many people believe Graham was too simple in his presentation. Johnson tells of the criticism American philosopher Francis Shaeffer had of Graham, stating that he did not build a solid foundation for the ones he preached to, and instead started building on the "upper stories" by calling for a decision in an emotional moment. [16] While this is understandable, Johnson explains that Graham's simple message was shaped by his believing that Scripture had real power and that the Holy Spirit could move in the hearts of those hearing the clearly-presented Gospel message, leading them to an instant conversion. [17]

### Legacy and Major Contributions to the Church

Billy Graham's crusades were phenomenally successful. People flooded arenas, filled overflow areas, and streamed down aisles in response to his messages. While these sights might fill a one's heart with joy, others have raised legitimate and natural questions as to the helpfulness of Graham's crusades, his style of mass evangelism, and what impact churches saw after the crusade had moved on to the next city.

It is important to note that the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's own policy was to never hold a crusade in an area that did not already have a



group of solid, healthy churches dedicated to preparing for the crusade and continuing the work of the crusade.[18]In his autobiography, Graham stated, “ I did not simply want the audience to come from the churches. I wanted to leave something behind in the very churches themselves.”[19]Graham also said very plainly, “ We don’t go anywhere unless we are invited by the local churches.”[20]

Graham noted that the inspiration for this policy was a terrible crusade held in 1949, just months before the phenomenally successful Los Angeles crusade that same year. Graham did not feel that that crusade had enough backing from local churches in the area in which it was held.[21]Graham firmly believed that church support was the key to a successful crusade because he believed that prayer was essential to a successful crusade. The job of prayer that local churches and their members were assigned with before, during, and after every subsequent crusade became a vital part of the crusade’s method of operation.

While most think of Billy Graham’s evangelistic messages from crusades, given to a diverse mix of lost sinners and heavily-churched Christians (and all in between), one of the most insightful sermons I have heard him give was a to a group of students at a Christian college, where all were presumed to already be believers. The message, given in 1952, was titled “ Missionary Commitment”, and in it, Graham delivered one of the most convicting, Biblically-based sermons I have ever heard about the urgency Christians are to have. At times, the sermon was a scathing critique of the apathy found in churches then, and still found in churches now. Thus, it is important to consider Graham’s entire body of work in determining his persona and his <https://assignbuster.com/the-life-and-ministry-of-billy-graham/>

message, rather than just what he presented at his crusades. Indeed, this was not a man of simplistic thinking.

Another subject that has received a good deal of controversy and speculation was Graham's involvement in politics. He was great friends with Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, and was a personal counselor to many Presidents[22]. However, some have argued that Graham—for an evangelist known around the world—mixed too much politics with religion. In his book *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Evangelical South*, Steven P. Miller examines the tensions Graham experienced by championing the causes of both conservatism (morally and politically) and the Civil Rights Movement[23].

## Conclusion

Ephesians 4: 11-12 says that Christ gave, "...the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ..." (ESV). Truly, Billy Graham was a gift from Christ to the church—not to a specific church, but to the worldwide body of believers. Not only has he built up the body of Christ by adding to its number worldwide, but his crusades and sermons have also encouraged millions of those already saved and part of the church.

Though Graham is not without the flaws of humanity, and though he is not without critics of his theology or his methodology, Graham was arguably one of the most influential church figures and influencers in the 20th Century, and certainly the most recognizable. He significantly touched not only the church's culture, but the culture of the world around him. His commitment to <https://assignbuster.com/the-life-and-ministry-of-billy-graham/>

preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ as clearly as he could to as many people as he could serves as a great example to the church of how to faithfully fulfill the Great Commission. This is not to say that each believer should hold nightly crusades at arenas worldwide; rather, believers should observe the life of Billy Graham and be inspired by his bold proclamation of the Gospel to *anyone* who would listen. One of my favorite stories about Billy Graham comes from John Stott, who spent a Christmas with Billy's family at their mountain home in Montreat, NC. Stott observed how the Grahams, whose patriarch preached to the masses, each took a Christmas gift to their poor, "hillbilly" mountain neighbors[24]. Graham let the Gospel of Jesus take hold of him and permeate his life, and as a result, he proclaimed it—both to throngs of listeners in faraway places, and to his poor, easily-forgotten neighbors at home. His life mission should inspire the church to allow the Gospel to take root in our hearts that same way. By applying the Gospel to his life and ministry, Billy Graham was able to make an eternal impact on the church through beliefs, methodologies, and theology.

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[4] *Ibid* ., 44

[5] *Ibid.* , 45

[6] *Ibid.* ., 69

[7]Pollock, 77-78

[8]Barnhart, Joe E. 1972. *The Billy Graham Religion* . Philadelphia, United Church Press, 1972. 82-83

[9] *Ibid.* ., 103-104

[10]Johnson, 242-243

[11] *Ibid.* ., 147

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[17]Johnson, 191

[18]Graham, *Just As I Am*, 145

[19] *Ibid* ,. 145

[20] Mitchell, Curtis, and George M. Wilson. 1966. *Billy Graham : The Making of a Crusader* (Philadelphia : Chilton Books, 1966), 210

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