

Rice University's Baker Institute Fellow William Martin comments on Billy Graham

As the author of “A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story” (William Morrow, 1991), I expect to receive requests from various media to comment on Mr. Graham’s life and ministry at the time of his death. Because I have been retained by ABC News to be available on an exclusive basis for any of its television programs in the period immediately after Graham’s death, it will likely be somewhat difficult for me to find time for interviews during that period. In anticipation of such a situation, I have been interviewed by staff members at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy. The following is a lightly edited transcript of that interview. Some questions are answered more than once, and it is quite possible that some questions you might have are not answered at all, but I’ve tried to talk about things I have been asked about most often over the years. A broadcast-quality audio version of this interview is available and may be [downloaded](#) and used. For information, contact David Ruth, director of national media relations at Rice University, at david@rice.edu or 713-348-6327.

William Martin

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Why did Billy Graham have such a huge reputation and why was he admired?

Graham was among the dominant religious leaders of his era; no more than one or two popes, perhaps one or two other people, could come close to what he achieved.

He was the key leader and the major spokesman of the evangelical movement during the last half of the 20th century. That movement has become one of the strongest in all of world Christianity and

world religion, and he played the major role in that.

Crusades. He did it by his crusades, held all over the world in more than 80 countries; he preached in person to more than 80 million people and live to hundreds of millions of others through television, video, film and webcasts. That brought many people directly into Christian churches for the first time, and it plugged an even larger number back into their churches and the Christian faith on a higher voltage line.

Conferences. He organized conferences that brought evangelical leaders from all over the world, giving them a sense of being part of a great movement and showing them how to cooperate with each other to accomplish a great deal more.

Training evangelists. Graham sponsored international conferences in Amsterdam in 1983, 1986 and 2000, where his organization personally trained tens of thousands of evangelists in how to do the everyday nuts-and-bolts work of personal evangelism. Smaller versions of those were held in other countries. Those are the people who will be Graham's true successors. I've often been asked, "Who's going to be the next Billy Graham?" I think it's not any one person, but these tens of thousands of evangelists trained by his organization.

Media. Graham was one of the true pioneers in the use of radio and television, including satellite television, in ways that went beyond what we often think of as "television evangelists." He founded Christianity Today magazine, which has become the flagship publication of evangelical Christianity.

Political. He was a friend and counselor to virtually all of the presidents since Dwight Eisenhower. It meant a great deal to evangelicals to think, "This is our man, and our man is welcome in the halls of power, not only in this country but in other countries as well."

Public stature. Billy Graham was one of the best-known, most admired people in the world, showing up repeatedly on lists of “most admired” people in the country or the world. In my favorite poll, I believe it was in the Ladies’ Home Journal, he was chosen second only to God in “Achievements in Religion.”

A statesman for the church

Graham developed an ability to be a statesman not only for evangelical religion and Christianity but also for the United States and democracy. Beginning with President Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s, when he would go to foreign countries to hold crusades, he would ask the White House if there were any messages that it would like for him to deliver. He would often meet with heads of states in other countries, and when he came back he would debrief and say, “This is the situation as I see it. Here are the things that would need to be understood and recognized.”

The Soviet Union and other Communist countries counted him as an enemy. They saw him as very much an anti-Communist and a spokesman of the United States, so he was barred from some places or resisted in some places because he was seen as an ambassador without portfolio.

It pleased evangelicals to see their major spokesman walking in the halls of power in this country and in other places, and it didn’t hurt the president. For them,, whether it was Eisenhower, Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton or the Bushes, if the president was a friend of Graham’s, people were apt to say, “That man must be a good man, perhaps even a Christian man; and since he is a friend of Billy Graham’s, his policies must be good policies, perhaps even Christian policies.” Graham gave as good as he got in those exchanges. Sometimes, of course, he was manipulated, particularly in his relationship with President Nixon. After Watergate, Graham came to understand that.

When conservative Christians became involved in politics in the latter part of the 1970s, he cautioned against getting involved in what came to be called the “religious right” or “Christian right.” He said, “My friends, it’s easy to get manipulated. They have information you don’t and you can be used in significant ways that will come back to embarrass you,” as it had embarrassed him. After that, he played mainly a friendship role in dealing with the presidents. He had been a friend of Reagan’s for a long time, and he visited the White House many times during Reagan’s administration, but he said, “We never talked about politics. He really just wanted to talk about the old days in Hollywood.” He was a longtime friend of both the presidents Bush and, later, of Bill and Hillary Clinton. He was able to be the kind of confessor and adviser they needed, and they trusted him, knowing he would not reveal their conversations.

Race

Graham’s view on race, segregation and integration grew over time. As a child growing up in North Carolina, he more or less accepted the standard practices. But as an adult, he soon began to see that segregation is not appropriate for Christians. In 1953, when he learned that a crusade in Chattanooga, Tenn., was to be segregated, with ropes marking the “colored” section, he personally went to the tent and took down the ropes, declaring, “I won’t preach in a segregated crusade.” Within a year, after a time or two where he accepted an arrangement that he probably shouldn’t have, he stuck with that pledge. During the civil rights movements and the race riots and protests of the 1950s and 1960s, he went to Birmingham, Ala., to Little Rock, Ark., and other cities that were torn by racial strife and insisted on integrated meetings. And in 1957, during a New York City crusade, he invited Martin Luther King Jr., who was leading boycotts in Montgomery, Ala., to lead prayer, introducing him by saying, “Dr. King is leading a great social movement.”

He eventually had trouble with some of King's more confrontational tactics. Graham avoided confrontation and thought everything should be done in a peaceful way, and he said King had told him, "I'll stay in the streets; you stay in the stadium. You're doing more good there." Graham was never in front of the parade but he was always ahead of his unit, and he was moving.

How did he avoid scandal?

Some have compared Graham to Herman Melville's Billy Budd, but Billy Budd was a true innocent. Graham knew better. He knew that all of us are subject to temptations. When he preached about sexual temptation, it was clear he didn't get all his information from survey research. In 1948, in an early revival in Modesto, Calif., with a small group of associates who would later work with him for decades, he said, "Boys, it looks like God has something special planned for us. I want you to go back to your rooms and write down the problems that evangelists have faced over the years that brought their ministries to shipwreck.

Their lists were pretty similar: sex, money, misrepresenting their statistics and criticizing local preachers to make themselves look good. They decided, in what came to be called the "Modesto Manifesto," that they would avoid these pitfalls. From then on, the policy of the Graham organization was that a man should not ride in a car, have a meal in a restaurant or be in an office with the door closed with a woman other than his wife at any time.

They also determined to be open and transparent about the money they received, and not long after that, he put himself on a salary rather than depending on what were called "love offerings," a collection that would actually have brought in a great deal more money to him.

As for statistics, instead of "evangelistically speaking" (some evangelists counted arms and legs instead of heads), they took the

official count of the local police department or whoever was providing the estimate. Lastly, they vowed always to try to cooperate with and boost the local churches rather than to criticize them. So early on, they said, “Let’s build hedges to protect ourselves from these things,” and they stuck by that over the decades.

What were the highlights of his career?

Los Angeles. Graham’s ministry was a mountain range, but there were some peaks that stood out above others. He broke out of evangelical circles to the wider world in 1949 with a crusade in Los Angeles. It lasted for a number of weeks. On a now-famous night, Graham showed up at the tent and was met by a host of reporters and photographers who hadn’t been there before. When he asked what was going on, a reporter handed him a piece of paper that looked as if it had been torn off a teletype machine. It had just two words: “Puff Graham.” Those words had come from William Randolph Hearst, who was directing the editors of his chain to give Graham lots of attention. The next day, Graham’s picture and stories of his revival showed up on the front page of Hearst papers. It was then picked up by United Press, Associated Press and other syndications, and almost overnight Graham became a national figure. A few months later, Henry Luce gave him extensive coverage in Time and Life magazines, and Billy Graham became a national figure.

Harringay. In 1954 Graham held a long crusade in London at Harringay Arena. For weeks, crowds packed the stadium, leading his team to branch out by broadcasting directly over telephone lines to theaters and churches and other venues, eventually to hundreds of locations in a number of cities throughout Great Britain. That experiment with ways to expand the reach of Graham’s voice culminated in 1995, when the evangelist preached from San Juan, Puerto Rico, to 185 countries and an audience estimated to be 1 billion people heard him live. That all started at

Harrington.

Christianity Today. In 1956 Graham founded Christianity Today, the flagship magazine of evangelical Christianity.

New York City, 1957. In 1957, Graham held a summerlong crusade in Madison Square Garden in New York City, filling the arena virtually every night from Memorial Day to Labor Day. During that time, he also began preaching regularly on ABC television, live on Saturday night. That's when he became associated with Martin Luther King and when he broke with fundamentalists who criticized his accepting the support of non-evangelical churches. It was also significant in that George Beverly Shea, who sang with Graham throughout his career for nearly seven decades -- and died earlier this year at age 104 -- introduced for the first time the song "How Great Thou Art," singing it many times over that summer. Now, of course, it is one of the best-known Christian hymns in the world, but that's where it got its start.

International. In the late 1970s and on through into 1992, Graham preached in a number of difficult-to-reach countries, including the former Soviet Union and its satellite nations. Beginning in small venues and expanding gradually until, by the end of that period, he was preaching in the great stadiums and being broadcast live on state television. During that period he kept telling the Communist leaders, "You have tens of millions of believers in your countries. They're good citizens and you do yourselves harm to thwart their religious freedom. Also, people in the West, particularly in America, are very serious about religious freedom, and to thwart that is always going to be a problem for you." He would then tell the local people to say, "If you're giving Billy Graham this freedom, then why not give it to us?" One of his associates told me, "We gave them this argument, and they're using it."

Graham was not widely appreciated for that, but I believe he

played a quite significant role in enlarging the scope of religious freedom in the Iron Curtain countries. After that, he was able to speak in Pyongyang, North Korea, and in Beijing in ways that were unprecedented for a Christian evangelist.

What made him larger than life?

In a number of ways, Graham was a kind of exemplar. He represented core American values in a singular way. He had achieved his success by hard work rather than by inheritance. He was willing to use the latest technology and media, but he depended upon and had the loyalty of a small group of friends that had been with him, many of them, from childhood or certainly from early years. He hobnobbed with the famous, the wealthy, the powerful around the world, yet seemed surprised that people were interested in him. Indeed, he often seemed to have the kind of wonder of a small-town boy.

He was genuinely humble, mixed with great ambition. He said he was troubled by seeing his name up in lights and by all the attention he got, even though his organization was extraordinarily adept at promoting him.

Importantly, he was a clean-living person in a profession often tainted by scandal. He was a man of integrity. His friends told me, and others said in one way or another, "It's not that he's never made any false steps, but you split him all the way down and you see the same person." Once, as I was being driven in a Jeep from having spent the day with him in his mountain-side house in Montreat, N.C., the driver said, "You've been visiting with some mighty good folks today. Me and my wife been working for Mr. and Mrs. Graham now for 15 years, and I'm telling you they are the same inside the house as they are outside." Graham's longtime photographer, Russ Busby, who chronicled him and was with him more than just about any other person for decades, said, "It takes a big ego to be a big preacher, but Billy keeps it under control. If it

gets out of control, it lasts only briefly -- I'm not talking about months; I'm talking about a day or two -- and that's it. The big difference between Billy Graham and some of the other preachers who've gotten into trouble is that, if God has something to say to him, at least he can get his attention."

Another old friend, whose relationship had been strained over the years, told me, "Whatever you think of Billy Graham, whatever you think of his preaching, you have to recognize this: Billy Graham is a good guy." I think people recognized that throughout his life, this was a really good man.

What personal moment stands out for you?

The moment that stands out most was a poignant one. I saved asking him about his relationships with the presidents until last, because I knew that would be touchy and difficult. There were some people in the organization who thought I should not have included that material, but of course there was no choice about that. Mr. Graham and I talked about Nixon and Watergate and how he had been misled by the president and his aides. I had found memos, talking points and other things in Nixon's archives that Graham was not aware existed. In essence, they were saying, "Here's the way we're using Billy Graham." Charles Colson told me, "Well, of course we used him; that's what we did with people." And John Erlichman and H.R. Haldeman talked to me about that. At the end of that day, Graham said, "I couldn't believe some of those memos that you showed me until I saw them," including some of the things he had said. He put his arms back on the top of the couch and said, "I knew what I had said to the president, and I knew what he'd said to me, but when I read all those memos that had been circulating in the background, I felt like a sheep led to the slaughter." It was a moment when I felt like I had presented him with materials that had pained him, deeply. And instead of denying it, he was absorbing the force of it. I don't have a moment that sticks with me any more clearly than that one.

How would you sum up his legacy?

Graham's greatest legacy may be one that will be impossible to measure. It's the tens of thousands of itinerant evangelists that his organization trained. I don't think any single person will be "the next Billy Graham," in part because evangelical Christianity has become, in significant measure because of what Graham did, so large and multifaceted that no one person can dominate it, regardless of talent or dedication. It's just not going to happen. But Billy Graham is not an office in the Christian church that has to be filled, like pope or bishop. Multitudes of people inspired by him will carry on the work of preaching the Christian gospel. And that's what was most important to him.

Billy Graham was not a perfect man, but he was an uncommonly good one. He will be remembered as a person of integrity and, if results are the measure, he was the best who ever lived at what he did. He was surely, in the words of scripture, "a workman who needeth not to be ashamed."