

Home grown: A simple evangelistic message

by [Bruce Nolan](#) in the [April 4, 2006](#) issue

Evangelist Billy Graham seems to have closed out his 60-year career as the country's most famous evangelist. After calling thousands to faith decisions at a brief appearance in wounded New Orleans last month, he acknowledged that "this is probably the last evangelistic sermon I'll ever preach."

Frail and tentative, the 87-year-old Graham shuffled behind a walker toward the pulpit set at one end of the New Orleans Arena on March 12 as a crowd his organization estimated at 16,300 stood to give a sustained roar of applause.

His son and ministry heir, Franklin Graham, gently assisted him into place as flash bulbs sent pulsating light through the arena. Watching outside on jumbo TV screens was an overflow crowd of 1,500.

Graham preached on his feet for 22 minutes. The arena lights caught his swept-back silvery hair. His familiar square jaw was taut, but his voice has grown thin with the years. Graham told a few well-received jokes and spoke admiringly of Mayor Ray Nagin and the Herculean task of recovery facing him. ("How do you eat an elephant?" he asked Nagin rhetorically. "One bite at a time. It's the only way.")

But the core of Graham's message, much abbreviated from that of 417 earlier crusades, was simple Christian evangelism: repentance, acceptance and the assurance of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Graham preached out of his own infirmity, several times referring to his multiple ailments. He begged his audience's forgiveness in advance should he lose his way in his notes—which he did briefly, once, to no ill effect. He referred to a recent period of illness that included four brain operations. He spoke of sensing the nearness of death and the certainty of salvation.

When finished, he sat back in a lift chair that raised him to the appropriate height behind the pulpit. As hundreds filed forward in the traditional altar call, he

admonished them to “be careful of those people in wheelchairs. I’m one of ‘em.”

Buses outside the area advertised that they came from as far away as Kentucky and Georgia, but the crowd was overwhelmingly local—and badly battered by Hurricane Katrina.

One pastor, Louis Jones, said he came because he needed to be encouraged. He said he lost his church in the Seventh Ward, as well as his cars and his home in eastern New Orleans. His wife, children and grandchildren are living outside Dallas while he remains in the city, trying to assist his scattered congregation and working his job at the U.S. Postal Service.

To top it off, he said, a brown recluse spider bit him while he was gutting his house, and he was hospitalized for two days. “I’m learning patience,” he said. “But I hope to hear some words of encouragement tonight. I always find the Word encouraging. It strengthens me. Sometimes a preacher needs to be preached to.”

Many in the crowd said they came for similar reasons: to hear a bit of encouragement in familiar words from an iconic figure in American religious life.

Some had other reasons. Lesha and Michael Freeland brought their two sons. Lesha said she wanted nine-year-old Christopher to see Graham in the flesh. Though Christopher probably is too young to appreciate Graham’s appearance, she said, she “wanted him to be able to say one day that he had seen him.”

What they saw and heard before Graham’s appearance was 90 precisely choreographed minutes of Christian rock mixed with videotaped personal testimonies, bluegrass music and lusty traditional hymn singing.

Before Graham came on stage, George Beverly Shea, now 97 and a longtime, faithful Graham musical sidekick, sang “How Great Thou Art” to affectionate applause that nearly rivaled that for the evangelist.

But many said they felt the night was Graham’s, whose last words seemed to convey a sense of closure: “I’m looking forward to that big reunion up there. God bless you all.”