

Graham's gift: The pure milk of the gospel

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 2, 2007](#) issue

I was not prepared to enjoy as much as I did *The Preacher and the Presidents: Billy Graham in the White House*, by Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy. Over the years, I've kept my distance from revivalist preaching and the Billy Graham phenomenon. Besides, I always wanted religious faith to manifest itself in social righteousness, and I couldn't see much of that coming from the revivalists.

My first exposure to mass evangelism came when childhood chums who were Baptist hauled me off to summer Bible school, Baptist Young People's Union and an occasional revival featuring a traveling evangelist. I found the evangelists both fascinating and discomfiting. I recall in particular one smooth preacher who played the trumpet and sang beautifully. He made his presentation with soft, full-vibrato pipe-organ music in the background. The climax was the altar call, during which he invited us to "stand up, right where you are, and walk down the aisle and accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior." My chums and I went—several times, I recall, along with many other youngsters.

I could never quite give myself to the whole experience. Something in my head—perhaps the Presbyterianism that assured me, even then, that this matter had already been taken care of by my own church, maybe even in my baptism (which is what my mother kept telling me)—was causing me to step back and reflect on the experience. I was being manipulated and I knew it, even as I was responding to the lights and music.

Given my unease with the revivalist tradition, I found Gibbs and Duffy's book enlightening and chastening. Though it focuses on Graham's relationships with the presidents, it also describes how in the early 1950s he insisted that crowds at his rallies be racially integrated, even in the South. In 1952 he argued that Southern Baptist colleges ought to be accepting black students, and in Jackson, Mississippi, he called segregation and alcohol the two biggest problems in town. I learned that

Graham later spoke forcefully and publicly about arms control and poverty. I also learned that he corresponded with Martin Luther King Jr. and that King delivered the invocation for a Graham rally in New York City.

The Christian Century was a persistent critic of Graham in his early years. Reinhold Niebuhr was another who loudly complained that Graham oversimplified issues of faith and culture. But Union Seminary president Henry Pitney Van Dusen responded to Niebuhr's critique by suggesting that Niebuhr was ignoring the "apostolic insight that there are 'diversities of gifts.'" After all, Graham was an evangelist, Niebuhr a theologian. As Van Dusen put it, people require the "pure milk" of the gospel before going on to the "strong meat" of theology. And Union theologian John Bennett was reported to have said that many of Niebuhr's own students first became interested in Christianity because of Graham's preaching.

Graham did not attack or demean Christians who disagreed with him. He did not turn *liberal* and *progressive* into pejorative terms. Unlike many of his evangelical successors, he did not denigrate or question the faith of other Christians. In their conclusion the authors cite Martin Marty, who said of Graham: "He doesn't seem to have a mean streak in him. . . . I think we've lucked out with Billy Graham."

Anyone as prominent and as close to power as Graham has been deserves careful critical analysis. That analysis has begun to happen. *The Preacher and the Presidents* serves as an engrossing introduction to this extraordinary man and his ministry.