

Library without books: The Billy Graham Library in Charlotte, North Carolina

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [August 25, 2009](#) issue

When I told a friend I was planning on visiting the Billy Graham Library in Charlotte, he offered a warning. “There are no books. They really should call it the ‘Billy Graham Experience.’”

The library is an experience indeed—both tackier and more interesting than I had imagined. The schmaltz has been well documented in critical reviews, which have duly noted, for example, the mechanized talking cow that greets visitors with stories of how cold young Billy’s hands were before sunrise on the dairy farm near Charlotte where he grew up. (Rather oddly, the narrative is accompanied by an apparently black woman’s voice singing about how God “owns the cattle on a thousand hills.”)

But the physical artifacts of Graham’s life have an eloquence that the cheesiness can’t quite spoil. If you admire him at all, you will find something here to enjoy. I especially liked seeing the engagement ring he gave his wife, Ruth, paid for with a \$65 honorarium for preaching at Sharon Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, and “with a diamond so small you need a magnifying glass to see it,” as he wrote in a personal note on display.

But why isn’t that ring on Ruth Bell Graham’s finger, one wonders. Ruth lies at rest on the grounds of the library. A painful fight broke out in 2006 between the five Graham children over their parents’ wishes for their final resting place. Ruth had always wanted to be buried near the Cove, a retreat center in the North Carolina mountains that she helped design. Her grave marker at the library is beautiful, and shows her famous spunk; its epitaph is from a highway sign she once saw: “End of Construction—Thank you for your patience.” It also shows the Chinese symbol for righteousness, a tribute to her childhood in China as a daughter of missionaries.

The library seeks to guard a sense of reverence at the grave, but there isn't much reverence in the rest of the Disneyfied experience (Disney engineers helped design the \$25 million facility). My parking pass invited me to "help park a soul in eternity" with a donation to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. The library itself is built like an outsized barn, with a "dairy bar" for refreshment and "Ruth's attic" for souvenirs. Speakers pump hymns like "Just as I am" into your ears at all times, even outside. The urinals in the men's room are made to look like barn stalls. Nostalgia for a lost way of life is served on a platter, and perhaps that is what the visitors want. I heard one say, as he viewed a photo of the Graham children: "I dressed like that every day for work. Back when the boys looked like boys and the girls, girls."

Clips of a young, fiery preacher in the 1940s give a sense of what made Graham so successful—dazzling good looks, flawless timing, the conviction evident behind those burning blue eyes, a believable humility.

I was especially struck by one personal memento—a hand-written poem from U2's Bono to the Grahams, with a photo of him writing it out at their home in Montreat in 2002. In the poem Bono recalls hearing the voice of a preacher (presumably Graham) when he was a teenager—a "lyric voice that gave my life a rhyme."

It is no surprise that the library gives no hint of some of the critical views expressed about Graham's ministry. Presidential libraries do not include such things either, and that is essentially what this is, a library for America's presidential pastor. Former presidents Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton spoke at the 2007 dedication.

One clip from the 1960s shows Graham saying that "Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Khrushchev both think history is on their side. They're both wrong. History belongs to Jesus Christ." Many Americans wish Graham had shown more such distance from the power of the nation-state and its leaders, who frequently sought him out for a blessing (John McCain paid homage last fall). There is much in Graham's career to criticize. What made him compelling was that he was often among the first to admit his sins.

I found the altar call at the end of the tour rather sweet. It is offered by Graham himself via a montage of clips from his sermons over six decades. That's what he would want at the library. In remarks at the dedication, he himself joked about how there are no books at his library. "But I did hear a lot of gospel," he said, "and that pleased me."