The Billy pulpit: Graham's career in the mainline

by Grant Wacker in the November 15, 2003 issue

Billy Graham and I hit New York City at the same time, the summer of 1957. He was 38 and about to clinch his reputation as the premier evangelist in Protestant history. I was 12 and about to taste freedom. But not yet. Night after night my parents packed themselves and me into a steamy subway to go down to Madison Square Garden to hear the Great Man preach. Soon our first family vacation to the Northeast was over, and we headed back to the bucolic quiet of southwest Missouri. I couldn't figure out what the big whoop on Graham was all about.

If the Graham sensation left at least one adolescent bemused, it left the men and women in the tall steeple churches of the Protestant mainline divided. Many deplored the evangelist's success, but many others—perhaps a majority—cautiously welcomed it. It is the second group, the cautious welcomers, that chiefly attracts our attention. Figuring out why Graham won at least measured approval from them illumines both the complex structure and the persisting strength of the mainline in modern America.

But first the deplorers. Though the critics on Graham's theological left represented diverse voices—serious theologians, denominational leaders, academic elites and practiced journalists, among others—they sounded similar notes of dismay. As far back as 1952 the British Council of Churches, which spoke for the majority of British Christians, refused to join the British Evangelical Alliance's invitation to Graham to speak in London. When he arrived two years later, one newspaper judged that he displayed "all the tricks of the modern demagogue."

In 1956, during a trip to India, Graham suggested that the U.S. government might give Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru a "white air-conditioned Cadillac." That recommendation prompted the Christian Century to conclude that Graham "hasn't a glimmer of a notion about what is really going on in the world." A Filipino paper likened him to a religious Liberace trying "to sell American friendship to India in the

same manner that she sells, say, toothpaste or brassieres." When Graham visited Yale in February 1957, the *Yale Daily News* judged him "embarrassingly overdramatic" and "clearly underintellectualized." His insights, it said, were "banal" and his message irrelevant to the Yale undergraduate.

By then Graham was getting used to being snubbed by theologians and intellectuals, or at least he should have been. Reinhold Niebuhr's biographer Richard Wrightman Fox tells us that Niebuhr was "angry" when the New York City Protestant Council of Churches invited Graham to hold crusade meetings in the summer of 1957. Writing in March of that year, Niebuhr acknowledged that Graham was a "personable, modest and appealing young man," but he dreaded Graham's "rather obscurantist version of the Christian faith." The crusade opened May 15. After watching the preacher's performance on the job for a month, Niebuhr remained unmoved. Mass evangelism's success, he grumped in the July 1 issue of *Life*, "depends upon oversimplifying every issue," but Graham's version "offers . . . even less complicated answers than it has ever before provided." Niebuhr concluded that Graham's bland message "promises a new life, not through painful religious experience but merely by signing a decision card. Thus, a miracle of regeneration is promised at a painless price by an obviously sincere evangelist. It is a bargain." When Graham tried to meet with Niebuhr to talk things over, Niebuhr refused. "Graham Ballyhoo Cheapens Ministry, Niebuhr Says," was how a *New York Post* headline summed up the professor's view of the preacher.

Others followed Niebuhr's astringent path. Writing in 1959, William G. McLoughlin, Graham's first scholarly biographer, tried to be fair. Even so, McLoughlin found that as a "rallying center for many persons in a state of confusion, he was a typical revival figure." McLoughlin allowed that "Graham's decline might be gradual . . . or it might be precipitous." Either way, professional evangelists like Finney, Moody, Jones, Sunday and Graham were "not likely to provide the key to [America's fourth great awakening] or to stand long as a symbol of it."

Graham failed to slip out the back door as predicted, and doubts about his theological timbre persisted. In 1973 he preached to a half million people in one service in Seoul, South Korea—reportedly the largest religious gathering in history (a figure later eclipsed by John Paul II and doubled by Graham himself). Still, some pastors criticized him because, as he put it, "I did not have enough theological content to my messages."

The evangelist's perennially cozy relationship with the rich and the powerful did not help matters. In the 1970s his very visible friendship with President Richard Nixon, coupled with his ill-disguised support for Nixon's political aspirations, probably marked the nadir of his reputation in the mainline seminaries, old-line universities and establishment press. In 1990 the Catholic polymath Garry Wills charged that politicians had "somewhat cynically" manipulated Graham. That Graham was the kind of lightweight who allowed himself to be manipulated seemed plausible; elsewhere Wills described him as a creator of the "golf-course spirituality" of the 1950s.

So it went, year after year. In the late 1990s Graham's flowing white hair still did not protect him from withering critique, especially from academics and intellectuals. When his 760-page autobiography, *Just as I Am*, came out in 1997, Columbia University's Andrew Delbanco acknowledged that Graham—the "Elvis of the evangelicals"—seemed sincere, "winsome" and "genuinely enlarged by his travels." But Delbanco found the book "monotonous" and short on insight. Its humor was mostly "unwitting" and its writing never rose above "genial banality." The book was, in short, "little more than just another celebrity autobiography—the fluff one expects from most politicians, newscasters and movie stars."

And then there was 9/11. In Graham's memorial talk at the National Cathedral on 9/14, he sought to comfort the grieving by saying that many of the victims were now in heaven and would not want to come back. "It's so glorious and so wonderful," he urged. Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of the *New Republic*, pounced. "We should not have to choose between being imbeciles and being mourners," said Wieseltier. "But mourners can be imbeciles, too." He offered Graham's remark as Exhibit A. "It is not consoling, it is insulting. We are not a country of children. Nothing that transpired on September 11 was wonderful, nothing."

Such sour reactions to Graham should not surprise us. After all, for many years he came across as a North Carolina farm boy distinguished by little more than hand-painted ties, a southern accent and a degree from the (then) fundamentalist Wheaton College—not propitious credentials in midtown Manhattan. On the key doctrinal points that divided mainliners from evangelicals—miracles, atonement, resurrection, Second Coming, holy living and biblical infallibility—Graham budged hardly an inch in 50 years. Worst of all was the style. To many he personified the proverbial stump orator, always holding forth in the declaratory mode. In an era when partisans of the National and the World Council(s) of Churches consistently

favored dialogue over proclamation, Graham unflinchingly presented his own interpretation of the Good News as the most viable one.

But confrontation between Graham and the mainline forms only half the story—indeed, maybe less than half. If some theologians and leaders in the historic seminaries and churches uttered criticism, many others expressed praise. That pattern too went way back, in this case to Graham's 1949 tent revival in Los Angeles. In an event that has acquired a mythic career of its own, the newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst instructed his Los Angeles papers to "Puff Graham." Hearst, who was not notably religious, likely had his own motives, but his directive gave the unsophisticated young preacher a badly needed stamp of legitimization at a time when tent revivalists and Pentecostal faith healers seemed all the same.

By the middle 1950s Graham had established a clear policy: he would work with anyone who would work with him if they attached no strings. That ecumenism cost him dearly. When he invited avowed liberals such as New York's Presbyterian pastor John Sutherland Bonnell to step onto the platform, many of his fundamentalist supporters stepped off—and stayed off. But Graham held firm. After 1950 he declared he would not accept any invitation unless a majority of a city's Protestant ministers gave at least tacit support. The calls to speak in mainline seminaries and on secular campuses probably did not rain down as abundantly as requests to address the multitudes in urban coliseums, but they came. The record includes talks at Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, MIT, Boston College, Chapel Hill, Union Theological Seminary and Colgate Rochester Divinity School, among others.

The record also includes support from impeccably respectable Protestant leaders like Henry Pitney Van Dusen, president of Union Theological Seminary in the 1950s and 1960s when Union stood astride the mainline as no other school did. Regarding Graham, Van Dusen distanced himself from his older colleague Niebuhr. What "the masses need first," he wrote, "is the pure milk of the gospel in more readily digestible form." Van Dusen added that "there are many, of whom I am one, who . . . would probably never have come within the sound of Dr. Niebuhr's voice . . . if they had not been first touched by the message of the earlier Billy." Van Dusen meant of course Billy Sunday.

Graham's autobiography affords additional insight into his legacy in the mainline. If the book reads like *People* magazine, stuffed with tales of friendships with top

politicos, movie stars, business tycoons and sports celebrities, it also contains numerous stories of friendships with respected theologians, critics, pastors and religious leaders. The list includs Emil Brunner, Karl and Markus Barth, Martin Luther King Jr., Sidney Rittenberg, Norman Vincent Peale, Archbishop Michael Ramsey, Bishop K. H. Ting, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, Pope John Paul II and Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum. That window opened only one way, of course; Graham, like everyone else, saw what he wanted to see. But as far as I know, no one asked to be dropped from the next edition.

The reviews of the volume in secular and in mainline organs were telling too. Though some were cheerier than others, the civility of the response to what, by any reasonable measure of things, must be regarded as a very long, very sunny and very nondisclosing book invites explanation. “You don’t run for office,” quipped Yale’s literary critic Harold Bloom, “by deprecating Billy Graham.” While no reviewer intimated that Graham’s reputation rested on scholarly accomplishments, more than one acknowledged that intelligence could take multiple forms. What radiated from the pages, they suggested, was a kind of theological street smarts that showed a shrewd grasp of human nature and sensitivity to the temper of the times.

Graham’s perennial ability to win the admiration of the broad middle band of the American people stands as another measure of his legacy in the mainline. Obviously Center Street U.S.A. is not the same as Tall Steeple Square U.S.A. We cannot automatically assume that Gallup poll data on what the average person thinks about Graham necessarily represent what the average mainline Protestant thinks. Nonetheless, a variety of indicators suggests that the overlap is substantial. Journalists’ accounts of Graham’s crusades recurrently have noted the number of attendees from mainline churches and the high level of cooperation from mainline pastors. Crusade counselors are instructed to return the favor by sending “inquirers” back to mainline churches when requested. Most important, perhaps, when the letters to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association perennially tally in the hundreds of thousands, and the listeners and viewers of his radio and television programs perennially number in the millions, common sense suggests that evangelicals and Pentecostals cannot be the only ones supporting him.

However parsed, the statistics and awards pile up like snowdrifts. By one scholar’s tabulation, Graham has addressed 80 million hearers in person and another 130 million through the media (the majority presumably being Americans). HarperCollins’s first printing of Graham’s autobiography ran a cool million. The U.S.

government has given him the two highest awards a civilian can receive: the Presidential Medal of Freedom (1983) and the Congressional Gold Medal (1996). Just rehearsing the list of “firsts” and “largests” would fill an essay in itself. For present purposes two illustrations provided by Graham’s biographer William Martin suffice. First, between 1950 and 1990 Graham won a spot on the Gallup Organization’s “Most Admired” list more often than any other American. Indeed, in 1970 he even made the “Best Dressed” list—a revealing factoid in itself, for the preacher is no fashion plate. The second anecdote comes from the postal service. In all likelihood Graham is, along with whoever happens to be president, the only person in the United States who needs no address beyond his name. Just “Billy Graham (World Citizen) c/o American Government” will do (or at least has done).

So why so much acceptance in the mainline? Thoughtful observers have offered a variety of reasons. Graham’s sincerity, honesty, civility, planning, media savvy and sexual and financial integrity rank high on most lists. Clearly at some deep level, Martin suggests, he represents Americans’ “best selves,” what they want to believe about their dedication to “fundamental verities.” Americans also admire his willingness to apologize for his mistakes. These include his onetime inclination “to identify the gospel with any one political program or culture,” as he himself admitted after the Nixon debacle. More troubling were Graham’s aspersions about Jews’ “stranglehold” on the media, privately uttered in Nixon’s office in 1972 and brought to light in 2002. Though the context of the conversation remains disputed, Graham’s own unqualified repudiation of his words seemed to blunt the anger, if not the disappointment, many felt.

Though all of these explanations for Graham’s influence in the uptown churches hold merit, I see three additional factors especially worth noting. The first is that the mainline is not monolithically liberal. Many local congregations are evangelical from top to bottom, and many others present a mixed package of evangelical theology, connectional polity and high-church liturgy. Graham once remarked that he found himself most at home among evangelical Anglicans. In 1956 he helped found *Christianity Today*, partly to provide a voice for evangelicals in the mainline who did not find themselves represented in the Christian Century.

That theological commonality reflects a deeper one. The latter might be described as a determination to take seriously things that matter. In *New Wine in Old Wineskins*, the sociologist R. Stephen Warner deftly describes a moribund historic congregation experiencing rejuvenation from within. Charismatic moments occur, to

be sure. But in the end, the lightning-in-the-night experience delivers less than a clear-eyed resolve to live a Christian life. The mainline knows this, and so does Graham. His own tearless decision for Christ in a Mordecai Ham revival in Charlotte in 1935 set the pattern. Significantly, he called his magazine *Decision*—not *Insight* or *Suddenly from Heaven* or *Heart Strangely Warmed*. Equally significant, the thousands who stream forward in the crusade meetings are dubbed “inquirers,” not “converts.” Counselors direct them to permanent homes of worship, preferably evangelical, but often mainline, Catholic or even Jewish. The point is clear. Both Graham and the mainline know that the nurturing of faith takes time and care. Kissing might kindle a marriage, but cooking keeps it going.

A second factor that explains Graham’s roomy share of the mainline market in the last quarter century is his reconstructed relation to national politics. In this respect Graham himself seems to have come to Jesus—not the Jesus of the hard liberationist left, but the Jesus of the soft compassionate left. In many ways the mature Graham has embraced the warmhearted liberalism represented by Mark Hatfield, Jimmy Carter, Marion Wright Edelman and the younger Martin Luther King Jr. If the fiery youthful Graham worried about lawlessness at home and communism abroad, the reflective older Graham has worried more about loneliness at home and AIDS abroad. His increasingly progressive record on civil rights and nuclear proliferation, two of the most momentous challenges of the late 20th century, has placed him in the moderate forefront of American Christians’ social conscience. He has avoided unseemly entanglements with the Christian Right and gingerly sidestepped son Franklin’s post 9/11 disparagement of Islam.

This is not to say that the seasoned Graham does not desire a more Christian America, or that he doubts the necessity of Christ for humans’ salvation. But it is to say that an enriched store of experiences—much of it purchased the hard way in a punishing schedule of evangelistic meetings abroad—has brought with it a deepened awareness of life’s complexities.

And finally there is the clarity of Graham’s message. A steady focus on the essentials—which for Graham might be summarized as the assurance that God has taken care of the brokenness of our past, so the future is up to us—has marked his ministry from the beginning. Over the years two or three theologians outside Graham’s own evangelical tradition, and possibly one or two within, have suggested that things might be, well, a bit more complicated than that. And clearly Graham himself, like most preachers, believes more than he says from the pulpit. But in the

approaching darkness (or glorious light) of the end of history, there is, he insists, no time to trifle with subtleties or fuss about matters in dispute.

The aim is as simple as it is profound: keep the big picture in view. Corny jokes, mispronounced words and butchered facts have harmed Graham's reputation just about as much as they harmed Ronald Reagan's or Lyndon Johnson's before him—which is to say, except in Cambridge, Madison and Berkeley, hardly any at all. Like most truly charismatic leaders, they all knew the power of a single, luminous vision that could organize the whole of experience, be it patriotic, legislative or spiritual. And they all felt, in words Paul Varg applied to 19th-century China missionaries, "the lure of playing life's role on the world stage." Both Graham and the mainline sometimes failed themselves by getting lost in the thickets of sectarian controversy. But on the whole both kept their gaze firmly fixed on the amplitude, not the parsimony, of God's involvement in history.

Time takes its toll, and Billy Graham has won no exemptions. I have not seen him in person since that memorable summer 45 years back, but adroitly edited television specials suggest that the stabbing gestures and electrifying delivery have slowed to folksy conversations with appreciative audiences. The voice falters, the hands shake with Parkinson's disease, and the angular body now sometimes speaks from a wheelchair. "I am a man who is still in process," he told a biographer not long ago. And so he is. This month Graham rounds out his 85th year. Though there is talk of another crusade in London in May 2004, apparently he spends most of his time these days at home, high in the Great Smoky Mountains near Montreat, North Carolina. One senses that Graham's era is soon to pass, and no one, including son Franklin, will replace him.

In the end, assessing Graham's legacy for his own evangelical subculture may be less important than assessing his legacy for the mainline. Despite all the talk about a new evangelical America dominated by fundamentalists, Pentecostals and Mormons, or of a new plural America dominated by secularists, Jews and Muslims, the plain truth is that the old Protestant establishment still exerts enormous influence on the culture-shaping agencies of our society. Discerning Graham's role in that process will require a discriminating touch. Neither debunking nor romanticizing him will take us very far. What is needed, rather, is a careful effort to see how an array of historically specific personal ingredients—talent, ambition, charisma, stamina and integrity—combined with an array of historically specific social ingredients—militarization, suburbanization, internationalization and

diversification—to create a man and a legacy of exceptional proportions. That said, the hardest challenge might be to remember that the man and the mountain were not the same.