

Billy Graham and the fracture of American evangelicalism

By [Molly Worthen](#)

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[Billy Graham's 95th birthday party](#) last week was a heartwarming event—and a media spectacle. Most accounts of the celebration emphasized the star-studded guest list: Donald Trump, Sarah Palin and Rupert Murdoch rubbed elbows with Ricky Skaggs and Kathy Lee Gifford. It's hard to imagine that any preacher of old-time religion has enjoyed such a high celebrity head-count. Even in his golden years, Graham has not lost his golden touch: an aura of wholesome Christian patriotism that appeals to entertainers looking to transcend showbiz as well as to culture warriors on the make.

The [reporters who covered the party](#) provided a window into Graham's lasting power as a cultural icon, but they largely missed his significance to American Christianity. For the second half of the 20th century, Graham was more than an evangelist who led millions to Christ and hobnobbed in the White House. He was the public face of resurgent post-war evangelicalism, the best-known representative of a movement that compelled many conservative Protestants to ponder what it means to be an “evangelical”—and whether they wanted anything to do with that label.

Billy Graham and his colleagues came of age in the wake of the fundamentalist-modernist battles. They shared conspicuously similar backgrounds in Reformed churches and seminaries, but they disavowed the fundamentalist commitment to doctrinal purity in the hopes of launching a “neo-evangelical” revival of hearts and minds. They wanted not only to win the world for Christ, but also to rejuvenate conservative Protestant intellectual culture and earn the respect of the secular intelligentsia. These were the core aims of organizations like the National Association of Evangelicals (founded in 1943), Fuller Theological Seminary (1947), the Evangelical Theological Society (1949) and *Christianity Today* (1956).

Graham's massive crusades offered the illusion of evangelical consensus. Reality was less harmonious. Far more conservative Protestants stayed out of the NAE than joined. Some balked at *CT*'s claims of evangelical ecumenism, detecting a strong Reformed bias. Yet increasingly Graham's face beamed out from American

televisions, and journalists turned to *CT* for the “evangelical perspective.”

Nazarenes, Southern Baptists, Churches of Christ, Pentecostals, and a host of others felt ambivalent about the neo-evangelicals’ call to unity. They admired the cultural prominence of Graham and *CT* editor Carl Henry, but they worried about their casual rejection of denominational authority and tradition. Some were attracted to the certainty of neo-evangelicals’ claims about scripture, particularly the Reformed theology of inerrancy, but many valued their own churches’ teachings about biblical authority, too.

In the Mennonite Church archives in Goshen, Indiana, I stumbled upon an account of a Mennonite effort at dialogue with Graham—the evangelical equivalent of a diplomatic summit. After months of planning, in 1961 leading Mennonites met with Graham for a breakfast meeting in Philadelphia. [J. C. Wenger](#) assured Graham that his community was

an evangelical body with the usual fundamental doctrines generally accepted by other evangelicals...a daughter of the Reformation but actually a bit ahead of Zwingli and Luther in setting up a church which they considered a true believers’ church.

After a detailed presentation of Anabaptist beliefs—particularly nonviolence—the Mennonites asked for Graham’s advice. How did evangelical leaders view Mennonites’ pacifism? How might they improve their evangelistic outreach?

Graham was gracious. This wasn’t the first time he had heard of [Christian nonviolence](#); civil rights activists had been living and preaching it for years. Graham told the group that he “could easily be one of us in about 99% of what has been said,” the secretary recorded. He expressed willingness to discuss the doctrine of nonviolence in the future, but warned of the “historical danger of a denomination putting undue emphasis and overweighting ourselves on one particular point.”

Afterwards the Mennonites felt hopeful. Graham was “open to be led and to be taught,” and they planned to pursue more contact with evangelical leaders. Yet Graham was wary of appearing too easygoing in his theology. He insisted that no press release quote him directly.

In exchanges with neo-evangelicals, the Mennonites—like all good diplomats—continually revised their approach. They stressed common ground but

grew more confident in their distinctive doctrines.

Years later, when a new generation of young evangelicals grew disillusioned with the Christian right and went looking for alternative models of discipleship, the Mennonites were ready. [John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*](#)—a closely argued defense of Christian nonviolence—enjoyed a long life beyond its 1972 publication. In 1976, ethicist Stephen Charles Mott called it “the most widely read political book in young evangelical circles in the United States.”

Graham was hardly the first evangelist to cast himself as an ecumenically minded apostle. But his role as “America’s pastor” had unique power in a time when Christians of all stripes battled over God’s desires for their country. The neo-evangelical movement gave fellow believers a mirror in which to reflect on their own traditions. If Graham has been the symbol of evangelical unity, he is also part of the reason why today’s evangelicalism is more fragmented than ever.

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