

Ruth Bell Graham's adjustments

Anne Blue Wills highlights the complexity of a woman convinced by her Christian culture that she was created by God to support her husband.

by [Kendra Weddle](#) in the [May 2023](#) issue

In Review



An Odd Cross to Bear

A Biography of Ruth Bell Graham

by Anne Blue Wills

Eerdmans

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“An odd cross to bear” is an odd but apt phrase that Ruth Bell Graham used to describe her life. Historian Anne Blue Wills effectively argues this point in her biography of Billy Graham’s spouse, which draws on Ruth’s published writings and “observers’ accounts.” While additional material by Ruth’s own hand would lend a more complete portrait, the letters and diaries remain in possession of the Graham family and have not been made available to the public. Despite this limitation in source material, Wills provides a clear lens through which to see the chronology of Ruth’s life and offers key contextual clues, especially related to race and gender.

In a well-paced narrative, Wills traces Ruth’s Presbyterian missionary childhood in China, where she saw the 19th-century idea of Western women evangelizing Asian women up close and embraced this experience as one she would likely emulate. Her formal education mirrored that of other missionary children who were sent to boarding schools. For Ruth, this meant going to Pyeng Yang Foreign School in Korea, where she was “desperately homesick.” Later, Ruth traveled to the United States to study at Wheaton College, at which point she believed her future was determined. “I would never marry,” she wrote. “I would spend the rest of my life as a missionary in Tibet.”

Instead, Ruth met Bill Graham and, after a period of questioning her missionary calling, accepted his marriage proposal. In her journal, she wrote, “Somehow I need Bill. I don’t know what I’d do if, for some reason, he should suddenly go out of my life.” While Bill traveled extensively throughout most of their marriage, Ruth reared five children and maintained their homes, including purchasing land and overseeing building construction.

Even as Ruth encouraged Bill’s public work, believing this was God’s call for them as a couple, she felt the cost of being left behind. Wills writes, “This sensitivity persisted in Ruth Graham’s adulthood, as husband and children came and went, literally and figuratively.” Ruth was 87 when she died at home, surrounded by family, with Bill acknowledging that they had been called to ministry “as a team” and that she was “the greatest Christian I ever knew.”

Wills skillfully employs Ruth's metaphor of an odd cross to bear to illuminate how often and deeply Ruth believed she needed to adjust, especially in her marriage to Bill. By framing Ruth's life this way, Wills highlights the complexity and nuances of a woman convinced by her Christian culture that, as a woman, she was created by God to play the part of supporting her husband. Resisting feminism, even of the evangelical ilk, Ruth hewed to the more conservative vision of Marabel Morgan's 1973 best seller *The Total Woman*.

Still, within this limitation, Ruth exercised independence and agency that blurred these gender lines. She once quipped about marriage, "Where two people agree on everything, one of them is unnecessary." And, when Bill instructed her to forgo wearing makeup when she traveled with him to London for extended meetings, she acquiesced—but only for a while. Eventually, she changed her mind and resumed her use of lipstick. Perhaps the clearest illustration occurred each time Bill and others exerted pressure on her to relinquish her Presbyterian bona fides in exchange for Baptist ones. She refused.

I found two surprises about Ruth in Wills's account of her life. The first is that Ruth was a prolific writer, especially drawn to poetry. More importantly, she was the voice behind Bill's breakout booklet *Steps to Peace with God*. Apparently she researched and wrote a substantial portion of the book, without credit. (Wills cites Bill's biographer Grant Wacker, who claims that Ruth was a coauthor.) In addition, Ruth entirely revised a new edition published in 1983.

The second surprise, which appears less frequently in the book, is that Ruth displayed undertones of racial prejudice. For example, while at Wheaton in 1936, Ruth and a friend attended a Halloween party in blackface. Wills sets this action "in a context of white privilege and white supremacy that was still the norm in the 1930s." In another instance, Ruth decided to include in her 1989 book *Legacy of a Pack Rat* a quotation from an author whose work was racist, despite being advised against it. Wills notes, "Ruth's politics, too, were conveniently southern, given her upbringing."

An Odd Cross to Bear is an important contribution to religious history in America, especially as it provides a window on someone who has not received the attention she deserves. Wills's depth of research, including especially her analysis of many of Ruth's poems, bolsters an understanding not only of one woman but also of the religious movement in which she lived. This work augments our understanding of

conservative evangelicalism, a reality that continues to hold significant power in contemporary culture.

Some readers will find this book a nuanced telling of a faith hero's life. Others will find it a testimony to one of the challenges of religion: mistaking culture for wisdom. One wonders what the world missed because Ruth adjusted rather than embracing all she was meant to be.