

Billy Graham: America Is Not God's Only Kingdom

by Marguerite Michaels

Communism is inspired, directed and motivated by the Devil himself," railed the evangelist. "America is at a crossroad. Will we turn to the left-wingers and atheists, or will we turn to the right and embrace the Cross?"

The Rev. Jerry Falwell, 1981?
No. The Rev. Billy Graham, 1949. That was the kind of three-alarm rhetoric that catapulted Graham to super-evangelistic stardom in the '50s and '60s. He eagerly functioned—and was eagerly sought—as God's seal of approval on three Presidents' Administrations. He played golf with Dwight Eisenhower, swam nude in the White House pool with Lyndon Johnson and defended his "close friend" Richard Nixon as "a man of high moral principles and integrity" who could not have been involved in any bugging or break-in "shenanigans."

Watergate was a watershed for Billy Graham. "I am out of politics," he says now.

And Graham is frankly worried that Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority is not.

Moral Majority, Inc., a conservative political action organization led by TV evangelist Falwell, is dedicated to the return of "morality" in America. Its "agenda for the '80s" is pro-family, pro-life and against the ERA, gay rights, pornography, SALT II and defense cuts.

"It would be unfortunate if people got the impression all evangelists belong to that group," says Graham. "The majority do not. I don't wish to be identified with them."

"I'm for morality. But morality goes beyond sex to human freedom and social justice. As we clergy know so very little to speak out with such authority on the Panama Canal or superiority of armaments. Evangelists can't be closely identified with any particular party or person. We have to stand in the middle in order to preach to all people, right and left. I haven't been faithful to my own advice in the past. I will be in the future."

Billy Graham has talked with Jerry Falwell. "I told him to preach the Gospel. That's our calling. I want to preserve the purity of the Gospel and the freedom of religion in America. I don't want to see religious bigotry in any form. Liberals organized in the '60s, and conservatives certainly have a right to organize in the '80s, but it would disturb me if there was a wedding between the religious fundamentalists and the political right. The hard right has no interest in religion except to manipulate it."

"I appreciate his concern," says Falwell. "When I'm in the pulpit, my ministry is the Gospel. But I reserve the right as a responsible, concerned, tax-paying citizen to speak out on conditions of the country that have brought about frustration and terrific unrest. I'm sorry if people find the two hats I wear confusing. The alternative is to be silent. I can't do that."

The Billy Graham who preached that God was on our side during the Cold War of the '50s wants no part of a Cold War in the '80s. Thirty years and more than 50 countries later, Reverend Graham has decided that God doesn't choose countries. God chooses people. "It was a mistake to identify the Kingdom of God with the American way of life," says Graham. "I've come to see that other cultures have their own way that may be of just as great a value. I think we consume too much, and I think we have become too materialistic. I spend half my time abroad now. I feel that God has called me to a world ministry. I don't look upon myself as an ambassador of the United States, as I did at one time. I look upon myself as a world ambassador."

Graham no longer sees Communists as "disciples of Lucifer."

"I've lost some of the rigidity I once had," he says. "There are still some people who think that Christians must be in revolt against any government that is not Christian. But that's not what the Bible says: 'I became all things to all men, in order that I might



1970: The Rev. Billy Graham with President Nixon.

by all means save some.' [1 Corinthians.] I take that to mean I should adapt myself to different social conditions."

Graham has held crusades in Hungary and Poland and is negotiating to speak in the Soviet Union at the invitation of the Baptists there.

His most stunning turnabout was his endorsement of nuclear disarmament and the SALT II treaty. "I don't believe in unilateral disarmament," says Graham. "I am not a pacifist. There is a possibility in working out some sort of an arrangement of arms control and hopefully, someday, a SALT X—the destruction of nuclear and chemical weapons which can destroy the human race. Somebody said that if the '60s were the age of rebellion, and the '70s were the age of frustration, the '80s will be the decade of survival. I am cautiously optimistic."

Graham admits to a certain "mellowing" of his views at age 62. "Frankly, I wish I'd read more and spoke less," says Graham. "I've come to understand there are no simplistic answers to the exceedingly complicated problems we face as a country—and as a planet."

What hasn't mellowed at all is Graham's Biblical message. "We

evangelists believe that we have really found Christ. Something to give us security and stability in an insecure world, and a peace and joy in a country that is desperately trying to find purpose and meaning for itself. The message of Jesus Christ is: 'I forgive your sins, give you security and stability, purpose and meaning, in this life and in a life to come.'"

Graham says he never expected his public ministry to last this long. The crusades are fewer, and shorter, but still fatiguing. Thirty years of hotel rooms have taken their toll on a never very healthy Graham. The aura of electric energy that used to surround him is gone.

"I'm human," says Graham. "Sometimes I wish it were over. I thought by this time it would be. I'd like to spend the rest of my life writing and getting to know my 15 grandchildren. But as long as people are still responding—we broke stadium records in Japan last year—I'll continue to preach. There is such fear in the world—of starvation, of war. The world has become a neighborhood without being a brotherhood. I think there's a nostalgia for morality and standards. Young people want to be told what's right and wrong. The moral permissiveness has gone too far. It hasn't satisfied. There is a search for something more to life than sex or drugs."



1980: Moral Majority leader Rev. Jerry Falwell with President-elect Reagan.

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"I have two primary objectives in the balance of my days of active ministry," Graham says. "One is to keep on doing what I've been doing—preaching the Gospel in auditoriums and on television all over the world. Second, I want to work for world peace. I feel that the arms race is way out of hand and that I can make a small contribution in talking to all sides on this thing."

"I think Billy Graham has lost some of his shine in this country," says Baptist minister Dr. Edmund Irvin, who nevertheless invited Graham to crusade in Reno, Nev. "But he has emerged out of Watergate as a strong worldwide figure. Besides, nobody else is taking his place. He is the only one still delivering the mainline evangelical tradition of the New Testament. We need Billy Graham. He calls us back to our Biblical roots of faith. He has changed. He is much more open ecumenically and has a greater social sensitivity. He is mature—almost gentle."

"I would hope my ministry is more effective, if less spectacular," says Graham.

The crusade in Reno was a smashing success. The crusade immediately following it in Las Vegas was not.

The Rev. Billy Graham is not America's "hot" evangelist anymore. His Evangelistic Association budget is half of TV star Jerry Falwell's \$60 million. And although establishment churchmen are more comfortable with Graham than with Falwell, Graham's mellowing seems out of step with America's politically active, aggressive, opinionated television evangelists. It is clear that Billy Graham is still admired. But more as a monument to the past than as a leader of the future.

"I'd like to continue to speak out on social issues," says Graham. "To provide some balance. We could easily be facing racial problems again. I'm not sure who's listening."

Steve McQueen died. "I spent the second to last day of his life with Steve," says Graham. "Talking to him. Praying with him. He had accepted Christ about three months before he knew he was ill. And he said that he had wanted to do it for 15 years. I was driven by one of his men from Los

Angeles out to his ranch near Ventura. I went on the plane with him before he left for his operation. We prayed two or three times, and I gave him the Testament I had used all over Japan. He was full of fire and energy, although he looked like a 90-year-old man. I think he thought all the tumors in his body had been eradicated except this big one. He told me that he only had a 40 percent chance of surviving the operation but that he was ready to go. 'I'll see you in heaven,' he said. That was a wonderful thing, coming from a fellow who had lived the kind of life Steve lived. I'd never met him before.

"Muhammad Ali came recently and spent the day with me. I think he'd like to serve the Lord in some capacity. He's had a double blow: Larry Holmes' fists and Mr. Carter's loss. I think he is in a position to be a peacemaker for the Lord between East and West, between Islam and Christianity. I'm going to talk to him."

"He's not caught up with celebrities," says his wife, Ruth Bell Graham. "He just uses their names to keep people's interest." Mrs. Graham—who advised Billy not to found a college or run for office or star in a movie when those "temptations" were offered over the years—says her husband's judgment "has matured. He's getting his priorities straight. What's important is that he bring people to Jesus Christ. That is his calling. Do I miss all those invitations to the White House? Nope. It's a relief. It is not a comfortable place."

But Billy misses it. The Billy who grew up on a dairy farm in Charlotte, N.C. The Billy who once believed that America was God's favorite country. The memories the Reverend Billy Graham has of the Presidents are still reverent.

"It was my privilege to know these men," says Graham. "I tried to steer the conversations to spiritual things. They didn't really look to me for political advice. Sometimes I gave it anyway. I wish I hadn't. You know, really, you could take all the time that I've spent with all the Presidents and probably put it in a month's period. Maybe two months. Ninety percent of my time is spent with ordinary people."

But his stories are not about those people. "You know, President Johnson had already asked me to speak at his funeral before he died. He had taken me out and showed me where he wanted to be buried—told me even what to say. 'Billy,' he said, 'someday

you'll stand under this tree. I'll be buried right here.' And he said, 'You preach the Gospel but tell 'em a little something of what I did.' Of course—he was the President. But he had been to a funeral of a former governor of Tennessee, and he said the preacher never mentioned anything that the governor had ever done. He thought that was terrible.

I've tried to be friends in politics with people on both sides. I spent more time with Johnson than I did with Nixon, but nobody ever knew because of Watergate. I would never refuse a President. I was honored.

"You know, I still admire Mr. Nixon," adds Graham. "I do not approve of some of the things he said or did. They sounded like a bunch of thugs on those tapes, sitting around planning some sort of big illegal operation. That was not Nixon. I think he was not himself. He was trying to protect some friends. I've talked to a lot of people who knew him in a different area than I did. They said they never heard him talk that way either. I think he's back now. I understand some of the memos that he gave to Reagan were the most brilliant memos on foreign policy that Reagan received."

The first time Billy Graham swore off politics was in 1956. Embarrassed by "immature" political statements, he said: "I have learned better now and remain completely outside party politics." Confusing bipartisan with nonpartisan, Billy has never been outside party politics. Although he has been mostly outside the last two White Houses, the temptation still remains to measure the meaningfulness of his ministry by his access to the Oval Office.

"Well, you know, I've known Ronald Reagan for 25 years," Graham said shortly after the election. "He is not ideologically rigid. I called the day after the election and just left a message of congratulations with his secretary. He called back himself two hours later. I'm not a confidant. But I will be a friend of Ronald Reagan if he ever asks me to come to the White House."

"I have been invited to the inauguration, but I have a previous commitment for the same day in England, at Cambridge. My wife has just quoted to me a Bible text on the sacredness of commitment. I don't know what I'll do. There are going to be so many celebrities at the inauguration... I won't even be noticed..."