

All the Presidents' Man

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

On December 5, 2018, I joined the millions who watched the state funeral commemorating the life and legacy of President George H.W. Bush. As I reflected on the meticulously planned and superbly effective blend of Christian and patriotic ritual and symbol and took note of the luminaries gathered in the magnificent National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., particularly the five U.S. presidents prominent in the first rows, I could not help thinking of someone else who belonged there—Billy Graham. The famed evangelist had been a friend to every president since Dwight Eisenhower, had participated in several of their inaugurations, had preached at the funerals for Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, and had brought a healing message to a shocked nation when he spoke in this same sanctuary on September 14, 2001, three days after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. When Graham died on February 21, 2018, a few months before what would have been his 100th birthday, he was lauded as “The Pastor to the Presidents” and his body had lain in state in the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol, a high honor shared with only 31 other people, just eight of them presidents, including his longtime friend George H.W. Bush.

In the course of writing *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (William Morrow, 1991; updated edition, Zondervan 2018), I gave extended attention to Graham's relationships with each of the presidents from Truman to Trump. This report is distilled from the numerous chapters that contain these accounts. Quotations and other material not taken directly from *Prophet with Honor* are indicated by endnotes.

INTRODUCTION

Billy Graham resisted the temptations of money and sex more successfully than some of his colleagues in public ministry, but his fascination with and access to political power revealed some of his vulnerabilities and posed a greater threat to his integrity. By 1950, he had experienced notable popular acclaim, won respect in evangelical circles, and shown that he would have no trouble financing his ministry. The key realm he had yet to penetrate was politics, and since much of his preaching featured political themes, he sought to ingratiate himself with political figures with an eagerness that seemed almost desperate.

HARRY S. TRUMAN

While in Boston early in 1950, Graham told a reporter that his whole ambition was “to get President Truman's ear for 30 minutes, to get a little help” in spreading the gospel, and he worked hard to satisfy that ambition. He sent the president a series of telegrams and letters, urging him to declare a national day of repentance and prayer, assuring him he had the prayers of millions of Christians as he dealt with the crisis in Korea, and asking for the privilege of a personal meeting.

Finally, in July 1950, he was granted 30 minutes of the president's time. When he managed to get the invitation widened to include three members of his team, the four of them got so excited, one recalled, that “we were jumping up and down in our hotel room.” As they puzzled over how to make a good impression on Truman, one of them remembered that newspapers often pictured



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Truman wearing white buck shoes at his Key West retreat. Graham, who already had a pair of the shoes, loved the idea and sent the others out to a Florsheim store to get three more pairs. So, in white shoes, ice-cream suits, and hand-painted ties that made them look like hospital orderlies at the racetrack, they went in to see the most powerful leader in the non-communist world.

Truman received them cordially, listened to Graham's suggestions about a national day of prayer, and talked about the possibility that some kind of "police action" might be needed to resist communism in Korea. As their visit drew to a close, Graham asked the president if they might "have a word of prayer." Truman, not famous for piety, said, "I don't suppose it could do any harm." The evangelist put his arm around the chief executive and began to pray, with his friends chiming in with "Amen" and "Do it, Lord," all of which the president endured with bemused detachment.

When the group left the president's office, a clutch of reporters descended on them, and Graham, unaware he was violating protocol, freely related what Truman had said and acknowledged they had prayed together. He balked when photographers asked him to recreate the pose they had struck, explaining he thought it improper to simulate prayer but, not wanting to disappoint them, he said, "On second thought, my team and I were going to go out on the White House lawn and just give God thanks for this privilege of visiting with the president of the United States. I suppose you could take a picture of that."

The next morning, newspapers all over America ran a photograph of the young innocents, dazzling in white raiment and poised on one knee like a southern gospel quartet. The stories and photographs irritated Truman mightily, and when Graham held a crusade in Washington in 1952 the president instructed his aides that "when, as, and if" the evangelist made any requests for a return visit, it was to be "decisively turned down."

After he left the presidency, Truman called Graham a counterfeit, saying, "He claims he's a friend of all the presidents, but he was never a friend of mine when I was president. I just don't go for people

like that. All he's interested in is getting his name in the paper."

Harry Truman may have regarded Graham as a rube to be avoided, but other politicians saw him either as a kindred spirit or as someone whose friendship could convey a blessing. Approximately one-third of all senators and one-fourth of House members asked for a special allocation of seats for the 1952 crusade services, and scores of congressmen attended a Graham-led rally on the Capitol steps.

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER

Graham professed neutrality in the 1952 campaign, but it became clear fairly early that his choice was General Dwight Eisenhower. In fact, he traveled to Eisenhower's NATO headquarters outside Paris to urge him to enter the 1952 campaign. After Eisenhower gained the Republican nomination, Graham visited him at the Brown Palace Hotel in Denver and presented him with a red Bible, which he reportedly kept with him and read frequently throughout the campaign.

A few days before the November election, Graham revealed to the press that his personal survey of nearly 200 churchmen and religious editors from 30 states and 22 denominations indicated that 77 percent favored Eisenhower for president, with only 13 percent intending to vote for Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson.

Eisenhower's election marked the first in Billy Graham's remarkable series of significant relationships with presidents of the United States. On several occasions over the next eight years, Eisenhower sought Graham's counsel on the mounting racial tensions of that era, including a telephone conversation on September 24, 1957, about whether to send federal troops into Little Rock to ensure the integration of Central High School. Graham said, "I think that is the only thing you can do." That afternoon, troops from the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division and members of the National Guard rolled into Little Rock. Graham also visited the White House before his foreign tours, to let Eisenhower know where he would be going and to learn if he needed to watch for any

special diplomatic opportunities or pitfalls. On return, he dropped by to report on what he had seen and heard.

NIXON V. KENNEDY

Contact with the Eisenhower White House led naturally to exposure to Richard Nixon, and Graham quickly became one of the vice president's most enthusiastic boosters. He commended Nixon for his "sincerity, strong convictions, and humility" and "all-important sense of humor" and characterized him publicly as "a splendid churchman." In private, he encouraged Nixon to attend church regularly and make a point of quoting scripture and dropping other religious references into his speeches, to assure himself of strong Protestant support in future elections, support that would be needed if Roman Catholic John Kennedy received the Democratic nomination.

Throughout the 1960 campaign, Graham regularly informed Nixon that he was on the verge of offering a personal endorsement. He never actually did so, but there was little doubt as to where he stood. He encouraged the two million families on his mailing list to organize their Sunday school classes to get out the vote, thinking that might produce a significant swing in Nixon's direction. Graham also organized and hosted 25 Protestant leaders in a secret meeting in Montreux, Switzerland, to discuss how they could block Kennedy's election. The Rev. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, one of the most well-known and respected ministers in the U.S. at the time, attended that meeting and organized a follow-up meeting in Washington that turned out to be a public relations disaster for Peale and for the anti-Catholic effort. Graham did not participate in that meeting, but as one writer put it, his fingerprints were all over it.¹

On the eve of the election, Graham accepted publisher Henry Luce's invitation to write a piece for Life magazine, commending Richard Nixon. He wrote the article, then had such severe second thoughts that he persuaded Luce not to run it. A few months after the election, Nixon ventured that, had the article run, it might well have swung enough votes to turn the election to him. He may have been right.

JOHN F. KENNEDY

Kennedy and Graham were never close friends, but Kennedy was wise enough to maintain at least a semblance of cordiality toward the evangelist. A few days before his inauguration in January 1961, he invited Graham to play golf and have lunch with him in Key Biscayne. Graham often recalled how, on the way back from the golf course, Kennedy suddenly pulled the white Lincoln convertible to the side of the road and, looking directly at Graham, blurted out, "Billy, do you believe that Jesus Christ is going to come back again?" Without hesitation, Graham said, "I do." Kennedy pondered the matter a moment, then said, "My church teaches it in its creeds, but I don't hear much about it." He also inquired, Graham recalled, about the triumph of the Kingdom of God and numerous other topics—"He must have asked a hundred separate questions"—but that exchange appears to have been the extent of theological discussion between the two men.

At a press conference that evening, Kennedy said, without prior warning, that Dr. Billy Graham was present and would answer questions about the religious issue that had drawn so much attention during the campaign—whether Kennedy's allegiance to the Catholic Church would pose a threat to the separation of church and state. Graham remembered, "I was scared to death, but I stood up and tried to walk the middle line as much as I could." Few men have proved more adroit at walking the middle line, and Graham's balance and agility did not fail him on that occasion. A *New York Times* article declared, "Dr. Graham hails Kennedy victory." Still, Graham must have felt, with good reason, that his return to favor at the White House would have to wait until the GOP returned to power. In feeling that way, however, he underestimated Lyndon Johnson.

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON

Graham and Johnson had met through Texas oilman Sid Richardson and had maintained polite contact, largely at Johnson's initiative. Immediately after Kennedy's assassination

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on November 22, 1963, Graham got in touch with the new president to let him know he would be praying for him and stood ready to help in any way he could during the difficult days that lay ahead. Whether for spiritual or political reasons, Johnson eagerly accepted the offer.

Within a week after he moved into the White House, Johnson summoned Graham to Washington. A visit scheduled for 15 minutes stretched to five hours, as two farm boys who had ridden their talent, ambition, and energy to the pinnacle of their respective professions found they had more to offer each other than either had ever imagined. Over the next four years, White House files reveal a continuous exchange of letters, cards, and small gifts between the two men, including a recommendation for a natural laxative.

Without question, and apart from the genuine affection he appears to have felt for Graham and the intrinsic satisfactions he found in their friendship, Lyndon Johnson understood the advantages of being Billy's buddy. If Billy Graham was the president's friend, then millions of Americans would conclude that the president must be a good man, a decent man, a noble man, perhaps even a Christian man. And if he possessed those qualities, then his causes—his War on Poverty, his Civil Rights Act, his effort to preserve freedom and democracy in Southeast Asia—must also be good, decent, noble, perhaps even Christian, and therefore precisely the causes Christian folk ought to support.

Graham understood that he served to legitimize Johnson to an evangelical constituency, particularly in the South and Southwest. "I think he was attracted to me at least partially because I was well-known in Texas. I think he was more afraid of what the *Baptist Standard* was going to say about him than of *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times*." But he also felt there was more to Johnson's religiosity. When the president announced on March 31, 1968, that, in the interest of national unity, he would not seek reelection, Billy Graham was one of few Americans not surprised. Nearly a year earlier, during a conversation at Johnson's ranch on the Pedernales River, the president

confided to Graham that he did not expect to run for a second term, because he did not think he would live out a second term, which would have been true.

During that same visit, Johnson told Graham that he wanted him to preach at his funeral. He led him over to a small grave plot and said, "I want to be buried right here. My father's grave is right there, my mother's right there." Then he stopped and looked Graham in the eye: "Billy, will I ever see my mother and father again?" Graham provided him with the promise that gives evangelical faith its greatest power: "Well, Mr. President, if you're a Christian and they were Christians, then someday you'll have a great home-going."

Johnson pulled out a handkerchief and began brushing tears from his eyes. Then he decided that others needed to hear what he had just heard. Returning to discussion of the funeral, he said, "Obviously, there'll be members of the press here. I don't know how many, but maybe they'll come from around the world. Billy, I want you to look in those cameras and just tell 'em what Christianity is all about. Tell 'em how they can be sure they can go to heaven. I want you to preach the gospel." He paused. "But somewhere in there, you tell 'em a few things I did for this country." ([At Johnson's funeral in on January 25, 1973](#),² Graham recalled and followed those instructions.)

RICHARD M. NIXON

Late in 1967, when he was considering another run for the presidency, Richard Nixon asked Graham to join him at the "Winter White House" in Key Biscayne. The two men spent several days together, talking, watching football games, going for long walks on the beach, studying the Bible and praying, and, of course, speculating about whether Nixon would have a chance at the Republican nomination and, if he got it, whether he could win.

Because of his loyalty to Johnson, Graham withheld his counsel. Finally, near the end of their visit, Nixon said, "You still haven't told me what I ought to do." Billy told him all he needed to hear: "Well, if you

don't, you'll worry for the rest of your life whether you should have, won't you?" That was enough for both of them. Nixon would report on several later occasions that Graham had been more responsible than anyone else for his decision to run, and Billy began immediately to resume knitting the fabric of fellowship that would very nearly become a pall on his ministry.

Graham's efforts to help Nixon included inviting his friend to take a prominent seat in the VIP section of his 1968 Pittsburgh crusade, where the television cameras could easily find him, and calling their friendship "one of the most cherished I have had with anyone." The telecast of that service was aired just before the election. Graham was also clearly visible in the studio audience of one of the carefully managed question-and-answer shows Nixon used during the campaign.

On a later show, the moderator asked the candidate if it was true that evangelist Billy Graham was supporting him; Nixon replied that he felt safe in reporting that it was true. Then, in an interview published four days before the election, Graham provided confirmation when he revealed that he had already cast his absentee vote for Richard Nixon. GOP campaign operatives exploited that bit of good news in television ads that ran right down to the wire on the following Tuesday. The ads had been in production for at least three weeks before Graham's well-timed announcement.

After Nixon was elected, Graham visited the White House frequently and stayed in close touch with Nixon's office, particularly his Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman. In 1970, he invited Nixon to his Knoxville Crusade, providing the beleaguered president with a positive identification with middle-of-the-road Christianity. Later the same year, Graham took a leading role in Honor America Day, a religio-patriotic extravaganza in Washington on July 4. In return, Nixon served as the star attraction at Billy Graham Day in Charlotte the following year.

Not everyone felt comfortable with this cozy symbiosis of church and state. Many who criticized him were liberals, but even some of Graham's fellow Southern Baptists worried that he was "too close to

the powerful and too fond of the things of the world, [and] likened him to the prophets of old who told the kings of Israel what they wanted to hear." Without question, Graham had a remarkable talent for tickling the ears of those he admired and a strong tendency to admire the famous and powerful. In return for such care and cultivation, Nixon sought and received Graham's sincere friendship and good will, which translated into the priceless political coin of obvious approval and palpable, if coyly unspoken, endorsement.

Before the 1972 election, Nixon told Haldeman that it was "important to start an early liaison with BG and his people." Haldeman later made a note to himself: "I call [Graham] and set up date. No other level—can't have leak. Must mobilize him and his crowd." It appears that nothing Graham did during the 1972 election was contrary to his rights as a private citizen, or even as the most public of ministers, but his insistence over decades that he had never engaged in partisan politics, but had always restricted his advice to spiritual matters, was simply not true. It is both a puzzle and a disappointment that he would make that claim.

Graham fervently wanted to believe that America and Richard Nixon were also involved in "the work of God." Bedrock beliefs can withstand enormous challenge, but never in Graham's life had he been forced to deal with the cognitive dissonance posed for him by the issue that ended Richard Nixon's presidency: Watergate.

Graham's first response to the Watergate break-in and cover-up was to remind Nixon, "King David had the same experience. He said: 'They accuse me of things I have never even heard about. I do them good but they return me harm.' (Psalm 35:11-12)." He apparently believed Nixon was certain to emerge unscathed. As more evidence came to light, however, he acknowledged he was "confused and sick about the whole thing" but said he felt certain the president was not seriously involved, since "his moral and ethical principles wouldn't allow him to do anything illegal like that." When he finally read the transcripts of the White House tapes in the late spring of 1974, what he found devastated him. He wept. He threw

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up. And he almost lost his innocence about Richard Nixon. But he was more troubled by the profanity than by political espionage, suborning perjury, bribery, and other strikes at constitutional government.

The pain of that perception grew even sharper as Graham confronted the possibility that Lyndon Johnson, John Kennedy, and Dwight Eisenhower might also have shown him only one of several faces. And, inevitably, he had to confront his own possible, if unwitting, collusion in helping do unto others as had been done unto him.

Although Graham acknowledged, “Maybe I was naive at that time; maybe I was used,” he continued to insist that if any politician ever exploited a relationship with him, Richard Nixon was “certainly not one of them.” He did, however, draw back from overt political involvement. Friends and close co-workers confirm that the revelations of Watergate had a profound and chastening impact on him. But one of his closest associates told me, “For the life of me, I honestly believe that, after all these years, Billy still has no idea of how badly Nixon snookered him.”

In February 1991, when furnished with a copy of the manuscript of the first edition of *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story*, to permit him to check for factual errors (but with his own explicit disavowal of editorial control), Graham acknowledged that he had been surprised by much that he had read, which included internal White House memos and talking points about how to use him for political ends. He stretched his arms along the back of a couch and said, “I knew what I had said to the president and I knew what he had said to me. But I was unaware of all those memos circulating in the background. When I read about that, I felt like a sheep led to the slaughter.”

When Richard Nixon died in 1994, Graham presided over the internationally televised services and also at the more private graveside committal of his complex and controversial old friend’s body, a fitting end to a relationship that had drawn him further into the political vortex than any other of his flirtations with power and, in the process, had shown him the dangers of trying to swim in a whirlpool.

GERALD FORD

Early in 1976, Graham announced that he planned “to stay a million miles away from politics this year.” President Gerald Ford, however, wanted his support and asked his aides to figure out ways of identifying with the evangelist. Graham declined the suggestion that Ford be allowed to address a crusade audience in Pontiac, Michigan. “I think the backlash would not only hurt our ministry,” he wrote to Ford, “but would hurt you as people would think you were ‘using’ me.” He did, however, invite the president to attend the service and be recognized from the platform, but noted that he would make a similar offer to the Democratic candidate, Governor Jimmy Carter. “In the meantime,” he wrote, “I am praying that God’s will be done on November 2, and that the man of God’s choice will be elected.” How different this was from his begging Harry Truman to grant him an audience or attend a crusade service.

JIMMY CARTER

Interestingly, though Jimmy Carter was a fellow Southern Baptist and had chaired two Billy Graham crusades in Georgia, Graham not only declined to back him, but told one reporter, “I would rather have a man in office who is highly qualified to be president who didn’t make much of a religious profession than to have a man who had no qualifications but who made a religious profession.” That did not sit well with Carter and the two men never became warm friends, but they did make some peace, and the Grahams spent at least one night in the White House during Carter’s administration.

THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

In Christianity Today’s first issue of 1980, the year in which the “religious right” was dramatically flexing its political muscles, Graham drew on personal experience to warn his newly politicized brethren to “be wary of exercising political influence” lest they lose their spiritual impact. A few days later, in a

press conference prior to a preaching mission at Oxford University, he noted that, “in my earlier days I tended to identify the Kingdom of the God with the American way of life. I don’t think like that now.” These were not just throwaway lines designed to please a British audience. In various press conferences and interviews in the United States, he warned against “the mingling of spiritual and political goals,” observing, in notable contrast to his earlier willingness to offer prescriptions for national policy, that “We as clergy know so very little to speak out with such authority on the Panama Canal or superiority of armaments. I do not intend to use what little influence I may have on [such] secular, non-moral, non-religious issues.”

RONALD REAGAN

Given this express reticence, Graham declined to jump on board Ronald Reagan’s campaign train, but he did manage to give it a well-publicized friendly wave in 1980. Fortuitously for the candidate, Graham was holding a crusade in Indianapolis at the time of the Indiana primary, and he gave Reagan a nice boost by joining him for breakfast, during which he congratulated him warmly on his strong showing in the Texas primary the day before. Reagan was duly appreciative, and all three major television networks suggested that the meeting had given him a remarkably well-timed boost.

Graham claimed to have visited Reagan in the White House more times than with any other president, with the possible exception of Johnson, and to have exchanged numerous private telephone calls and letters in which he offered Reagan encouragement, spiritual counsel, and assurance that he remembered him regularly in his prayers. They sometimes discussed items in the news, but in an early conversation with me during the president’s second term, Graham chuckled and said, “Reagan isn’t really interested in politics. All he wants to talk about is the old days in Hollywood.” He did acknowledge that the president or members of his staff had occasionally asked him to speak favorably about or appear alongside a candidate in a race, but that Reagan had responded

graciously when he declined those requests, explaining that it would harm his ministry.³

The friendship was sufficiently close that when Reagan was shot on March 30, 1981, the White House sent out an emergency call for Graham, who came immediately to the capital to comfort and pray with Nancy Reagan. He also contacted the father of John Hinckley, the president’s assailant, and prayed with him over the telephone. In 1983, Reagan honored Graham by awarding him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Graham maintained his friendship with Reagan after he left office, visiting him on occasion and noting with regret the toll Alzheimer’s disease was taking on another Great Communicator.

GEORGE H.W. BUSH

Billy Graham and George H. W. Bush had met and become friends through Bush’s mother, who had invited the evangelist to their Long Island home during his summer-long 1957 Madison Square Garden crusade. In later years, the Grahams spent several short vacations at the Bush family’s summer home in Kennebunkport, Maine.

In 1988, Graham attended the Democratic convention, giving rise to speculation that the Democratic Party was once again acceptable to the white evangelicals who had so largely deserted it in the two previous presidential elections, but that interpretation did not last long. Republicans were not about to concede Billy Graham to the Democrats. He led a prayer and sat next to Barbara Bush throughout her husband’s acceptance speech, looking every inch as if he felt quite at ease in the Republican box, even though he told the Associated Press, “I always stay politically neutral.” Five months later, he would again look comfortable as he mounted the platform at the inauguration and thanked God that “in Thy sovereignty Thou has permitted George Bush to lead us at this momentous hour of our history for the next four years.”

Graham took no public—and, as far as is known, no private—role in the campaign, but he never claimed he had no favorite in the race. “Interestingly,” he said, “George and I have never talked politics. Not one

Calling them “a great couple” Graham recalled having told President Clinton that, “when he left the presidency, he should be an evangelist, because he had all the gifts and he’d leave his wife to run the country.”

time. Never mentioned them. He’s never asked me to do anything for him.” Despite that insistence, on the evening of January 16, 1991, when American and allied forces launched a devastating air attack on Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait, Graham’s invited and well-publicized presence in the White House and his leading a worship service for key political and military leaders the next morning lent powerful symbolic legitimacy to the president’s claim to be conducting a just war.

BILL CLINTON

When the nation proved unwilling to choose his old friend to fill a second term in the White House, Graham found much to admire in Bill Clinton and was pleased to lead prayers at both of his inaugurations, giving him the distinction of participating in eight inaugurations for six presidents — more than any other figure in American history except John Marshall, who was Chief Justice of the Supreme Court from 1801 to 1835. In another manifestation of his role as the “people’s pastor,” Graham joined Clinton in a moving prayer service in the aftermath of the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal office building in April 1995.

In a more private role, he counseled privately with the Clintons during their marital trials. He surprised many during the Monica Lewinsky scandal by saying, on NBC’s Today show, “I forgive [Clinton] ... because I know the frailty of human nature and I know how hard it is—especially a strong, vigorous young man like he is ... He has such a tremendous personality that I think the ladies just go wild over him.” I am unaware of Hillary Clinton’s response to this comment, but the friendship endured. During his June 2005 evangelistic campaign in New York City, both Clintons joined Graham on the stage. Speaking of them as his “wonderful friends of many years,” he said, “They’re a great couple” and recalled having told the president that, “when he left the presidency, he should be an evangelist, because he had all the gifts and he’d leave his wife to run the country.” The Clintons took the remark quite positively;

Hillary turned to Bill and they exchanged high fives.

No surprise, this statement drew a considerable and mixed reaction from the audience. Some clearly shared the sentiment; others were at least amused at recognizing it was sure to make the news. The next day, Graham’s son Franklin, by this time president of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) made it clear that people should not take his father’s statements literally. A few days later, he issued a formal statement saying, “President Clinton has the charisma, personality, and communication skills, but an evangelist has to have the call of God, which President Clinton obviously does not have, and my father understands that.” His father, he said, had been joking and “certainly did not intend for his comments to be an endorsement for Senator Hillary Clinton.”⁴

GEORGE W. BUSH

George W. Bush has said many times that a private walk on the beach at the Bush compound in Kennebunkport in 1985 turned his life around and moved him to recommit himself to Jesus Christ. “He led me to the path and I began walking.” Though Graham took pleasure in that development, he said he does not remember the specifics of that conversation and they had little contact during the run for the White House in 2000. But on the weekend before the election when Graham was holding a crusade in Jacksonville, Bush and his wife Laura joined Billy and Franklin for a private breakfast and then spoke to a small group of reporters to make brief statements. Graham said, “I don’t endorse candidates, but I’ve come as close to it I guess now as at any time in my life because I think it’s extremely important. I’ve already voted. I’ll just let you guess who I voted for. And my family—the same way.”⁵ The Florida vote was decided by 542 votes, five of them by members of the Supreme Court.

Were it not for that fortuitous 1985 conversation with Billy Graham, George W. Bush might not have become governor, then president.

BARACK OBAMA

Graham followed the 2008 presidential campaign on television and welcomed Republican candidate John McCain to his home. A temporary health episode forced cancellation of a similar visit with Democratic candidate Barack Obama. Graham himself gave no public indication of his preference between the candidates. Franklin also professed not to be offering an endorsement, but noted that the differences between the two candidates were substantial and “the choice Americans make in November will affect our nation for years to come.” A mass BGEA mailing that contained this observation included a picture of Senator McCain seated between Billy and Franklin.

In April 2010, at a request from the White House, the elder Graham received President Obama, marking the first time an incumbent president had ever visited him at his Montreat, North Carolina, home. With Franklin present, they met for half an hour and prayed together, president for preacher as well as preacher for president. After the meeting, Graham issued a statement expressing pleasure at the visit. Franklin later described Obama as “a very nice man” and “very gracious,” but indicated he was not sure if Obama was a true Christian and told Fox News host Sean Hannity that he wished “the president could come under some good, sound biblical teaching.”

Perhaps as a caution to his less circumspect son, Billy had told Christianity Today in early 2011 that if he had a chance to “go back and do anything differently, I would have steered clear of politics.” Though grateful for the opportunities to minister to powerful people, he admitted that, “looking back, I know I sometimes crossed the line, and I wouldn't do that now.” But in 2012, he appeared once again to cross that self-drawn line. In October, with the election only weeks away, Franklin brought Governor Mitt Romney to Montreat to visit his father.

That visit led immediately to a report that the elder Graham had said he would do all he could to help Romney in the campaign “and you can quote me on that,” adding that Franklin had pledged to help turn

out evangelical Christians to vote for the governor. Soon after, BGEA produced full-page ads bearing Graham's iconic visage and signature alongside copy urging voters to support “those who protect the sanctity of life and support the biblical definition of marriage between a man a woman.” The ads appeared in *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and newspapers in battleground states, with smaller versions sent to churches to insert in their Sunday bulletins. Graham representatives note that the ads do not mention a specific candidate or party, an observation surely intended more for the IRS than for the target audience. Given that Romney opposed same-sex marriage, that Obama supported it and that by doing so had, to use Franklin's words, “shaken his fist” at God, the ads left no doubt about their intent. To clarify matters further, Franklin wrote a piece in the October issue of *Decision* explaining “Why evangelicals can vote for a Mormon” and the BGEA website deleted a long-running item identifying Mormonism as a cult. The explanation offered for the latter action was that BGEA did not want “to participate in a theological debate about something that has become politicized during this campaign.”

Because of Graham's reentering the political arena “out of due season” by offering an endorsement of Romney and focusing on a topic that had never been central to his ministry when he was active, some observers charged that Franklin had steered his father in that direction, perhaps against his will or at least without full enthusiasm. Skeptics, including former and then-current BGEA employees, wondered if Graham actually made the pro-Romney statements attributed to him or had much to do with the advertising campaign. Franklin turned away reporters seeking direct confirmation or clarification from Billy Graham himself, on the grounds that his father's infirmities made that impossible. A disappointed insider familiar with the ministry for decades suggested that, in the absence of a definitive statement by Billy Graham, or even if one should be forthcoming, perhaps the best course would be “to remember him as he was for most of his ministry.”

“[If I had a chance to] go back and do anything differently, I would have steered clear of politics. Looking back, I know I sometimes crossed the line, and I wouldn't do that now.”

DONALD J. TRUMP

In an April 2011 interview for ABC News, Franklin Graham told Christiane Amanpour that he found much to admire in Donald Trump's political and economic views. Trump liked the sound of that and contacted Franklin. Their exchange obviously went well. In 2012, BGEA received a \$100,000 donation from the Trump Foundation; Samaritan's Purse, an aid organization headed by Franklin, received \$25,000. On November 7, 2013, Donald and Melania Trump sat alongside News Corp. chairman and CEO Rupert Murdoch at a table next to Billy Graham as more than 800 people gathered in a hotel ballroom in Asheville to celebrate the evangelist's 95th birthday.

In keeping with his determination to light a fire under lukewarm Christians during the 2016 election campaign, Franklin led a "Decision America Tour" that featured rallies at the capitols of all 50 states. He professed to be nonpartisan and insisted that the aim of his campaign was "to put God back in the political process." He left little doubt, however, as to how he thought God wanted people to vote "according to His will and purpose." He also opined that, despite the widely publicized blots in the candidate's copybook, "I think Donald Trump has changed. I think God is working on his heart and in his life." And when a substantial minority of voters elected Trump president, Franklin professed not to be surprised. The explanation was simple: "God showed up."

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Because he was basically a trustworthy man of deep integrity, Billy Graham found it difficult to believe that not all people seeking or holding high office shared those traits in similar measure, even when evidence of their faulty character was no secret. But I think he did learn. We can never know for sure, but hypothetically, should he ever have been asked to support a candidate, male or female whose amorality, bigotry, corruption, pathological narcissism, total disregard for truth, and fundamental meanness were apparent to all with eyes to see and ears to

hear, I choose to believe Billy Graham would have withheld his approval and suggest that other evangelicals follow his example, lest they incur an indelible stain.

ENDNOTES

1. Shaun Casey, *The Making of a Catholic President—Kennedy vs. Nixon 1960* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

2. "Billy Graham preaches at LBJ's burial service in Stonewall, TX in 1973," YouTube video, 13:34, January 30, 2012.

3. Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy, *The Preacher and the Presidents* (Center Street, 2007), 279.

4. I was present at this service. Most accounts of the event had Graham saying, "let her run the country," which was the clear meaning of "leave." Peter Boyer, in "The Big Tent," *The New Yorker*, August 22, 2005, got it right. I was looking at a large section of Graham relatives and team members to observe their reaction and did not see the Clintons "slap a high five," but I trust Boyer's account.

5. *Ibid.*, 337.

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