God's Not Dead, But Billy Graham Is: Media And Mourning In American Evangelicalism

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God’s Not Dead, But Billy Graham Is: Media and Mourning in American Evangelicalism

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Bachelor of Arts, College of William & Mary, 2021

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Approved by the committee, July 2022

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ABSTRACT

This thesis traces the impact and legacy of American preacher Billy Graham through an analysis of his media in the 1950's and 60's and the mourning that followed his death in 2018. Considered one of the most important figures in Evangelicalism, Graham’s life and death are crucial to understanding the inner workings and motivations of evangelism in the U.S. during the post-war period and through the 21st century.

Graham’s position as a preacher of world renown began after a series of successful “crusades,” large revivals held under tents or in arenas, in Los Angeles in 1949. Following his rise to fame, Graham would serve as “spiritual counsel” to every U.S. president since Harry Truman, engaging in politics under the auspices of religiosity. Graham also engaged with popular forms of entertainment at this time, centering himself within the spectacle of film and television as he produced evangelical content on a mass scale for the purpose of fulfilling Christianity’s universalizing goals. Graham’s life’s work established him as an extremely influential figure in both the church and the state, a role which continued after his death.

Many intricacies of the relationship between politics and evangelicalism were unveiled in the wake of Graham’s death. The mourning of Graham as an event that was at once public, communal, and individual illustrates the influence of Graham’s preaching on the way in which he was grieved. Aspects of Graham’s funeral, from the guest list to the casket to the government honorifics he received, speak to both his relevance and to the value of spectacle in American mourning.

Each of the following sections demonstrate the value of spectacle in the life and death of Billy Graham. In centering himself among spectacular entertainment, Graham was able to achieve Christ-like prominence among a religious sector quick to associate themselves with the famed “unproblematic” preacher. This prominence allowed Graham to further religious goals within politics, a phenomenon that has continued in his honor since his death. As such, Graham and his spectacular presence serve as a bridge between Christianity and Congress.
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This Master's thesis is dedicated to my beloved big sister, Erin S. Rodgers.
Introduction

Many evangelicals consider Billy Graham to be a hugely important figure in the spread of Christianity; a preacher second only to Jesus Christ himself. Throughout his life, Graham furthered the cause of evangelicalism by preaching the Christian Gospel to over 215 million people worldwide in more than 185 countries through his 400 plus crusades. The films and publications produced by Graham for a mass audience during his lifetime helped cement Graham’s status as a figure worthy of intense mourning following his death. These appearances worked to immortalize Graham due to their spectacular portrayal of him as a Christ-like figure responsible for the spiritual salvation of millions. Evangelical spectacle connecting religion and mainstream mass entertainment compromised Graham’s activities during his long career and laid the foundation for his public mourning. Those who mourned Graham utilized spectacular remembrance to attach themselves to his “holy” likeness, allowing for the furtherance of their political goals under the auspices of divine awareness. This thesis asks how it became normal for Graham to receive wide-scale praise for spiritual work in the form of entertainment, and seeks to address what such posthumous lauding of a spiritual figure can tell us about American evangelism and politics.

The worldwide reach of Graham’s evangelism, coupled with his service as “spiritual counsel” to every U.S. president from Harry Truman on, established Graham as a prominent historical figure in both secular and religious circles. Known by many as “America’s Pastor,” Graham’s brand of Christianity was essential in facilitating the power of American Protestantism and conservatism through post-war evangelism during his rise to fame in the 1950’s and 60’s.


Such political engagement came in the form of sermons that sought to spread the Gospel while simultaneously criticizing threats of domestic lawlessness and communism abroad, demarcating Graham’s position as a force for conservatism during the post-war years. Changes at this time, including the rise of consumerism, xenophobia, and public Protestantism, coupled with an increasing fear of foreign threats, allowed for Graham to emerge as a stable celebrity who exemplified a strong moral compass. He appealed to middle-class audiences that aligned with the traditional socioeconomic status of American Protestants as a group who held the funds and ability to take time off of work in order to attend revivals. His sermons and films also appealed to this group by correlating prosperity and one’s faith in God, as well as by addressing middle-class concerns of delinquency and threats to capitalism. It was within this context that Graham was able to achieve respect among much of the American populace.

Graham was 15 years old when he committed himself to a life of faith thanks to traveling preacher Mordecai Ham at a Charlotte, North Carolina revival in 1934. After graduating from Wheaton College in Illinois and marrying Ruth McCue Bell, the daughter of a missionary who had spent the first 17 years of her life in China, Graham began preaching in Illinois and throughout the U.S. and Europe following the conclusion of World War II. In the mid-1940’s, Graham applied to the Army twice in hopes of becoming a military chaplain, but was denied on the basis of his status as “underweight” and concurrently due to a case of the mumps. He began

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3 Wacker, 13.

4 Wacker, 5.

5 Wacker, 250.


8 Wacker, 8.
his rise to fame in Los Angeles preaching a series of “crusades” in 1949 sponsored by Youth for Christ, an organization founded to minister to servicemen engaging in the war effort. These crusades were large evangelical meetings conducted under tents or in stadiums that ran nightly for several weeks, tellingly named for the Medieval wars to retake the Holy Land for Catholicism and to convert “heathens” on a mass scale. The crusades marked the first instances of Graham’s work as spectacle; they took place in venues that seated tens of thousands. By 1957, Graham had successfully become the most visible spiritual leader in the country. By 1958, he had been ranked by a Gallup poll as the fourth most admired man in the world. During the 1950’s and 60’s, Graham broke out from in-person only sermons to broadcast his crusades on television, reaching even wider audiences. Accompanying this outreach was Graham’s pivot to the silver screen; Graham founded a production company to make films that centered on his preaching and his interpretation of the gospel, placing him at the center of his works and making the spectacle of his preaching the key facet of his entertainment.

It is critical to understand Graham as the creator of a spectacle that worked to further evangelism’s universalizing goals of converting as many people as quickly as possible and to advance conservative Christian political interests in the post-war era. In this thesis, I rely on Guy Debord’s concept of spectacle as one that “presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification,” one that represents the dominant (often aspiratory)

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11 Jason Stevens, God Fearing and Free: A Spiritual History of America’s Cold War (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 44.

12 K.A. Cuordileone, Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 82.

Spectacle thus becomes a means to achieve one’s goals; Graham’s use of spectacle to present Protestantism as a part of society and as a means of unification allowed him to further the cause of evangelism through forms of entertainment intended to convey American society. Both Graham’s films and the presence of several recorded sermons within such films illustrate this use as they present an exemplary version of Protestant virtue among “real” sinner characters created to inspire audience relatability. The films then unify the audience by connecting them to a broader community of believers, united in both their faith and their encounter with Graham himself. Faith-based communities that had Graham in common worked to uphold Graham’s evangelism throughout his life and to further his goals through political interpretations of Protestantism upon his death.

Graham’s version of spectacle most often took place on a mass scale, wherein tens of thousands of people were gathered and presented to a secondary audience through the lens of film. Graham’s spectacles operated on the assumption that the sight of such masses and the experience of spectacular preaching would transform the viewer. Graham’s legacy, particularly his mass mediated spectacles packaged and sold as entertainment, had long lasting consequences. The success of Graham’s preaching lay in his ability to tailor his sermons to a mass audience, and to alter his lessons based on his audience’s composition, whether crowds full of teens or established adults. On both the big and small screens, in theaters and home televisions, Graham worked to make his audience see themselves in his sermons. By conveying the personal experience of salvation to his large audiences, Graham bridged the divide between the screen and the person by adopting methods of large-scale entertainment common in secular culture while at the same time condemning the sins of secularism. Viewers could thus transcend the mass context

and pick out individual messages of salvation to reject sinful society and accept Graham’s brand of Christianity.

The spectacle of televised mass crusades enabled Graham to finesse the scale of worship from a crowd of people down to an individual experience. Graham built community among his viewers by allowing them to see themselves as the masses through their connection with televised crusades and the stadiums full of people at these events. He maintained popularity through his personal appeals that made viewers feel individually seen despite such grand scales. Such personal appeals took the form of Graham’s reinterpretation of Biblical text to suit a modern audience, as the preacher would equate violations of the Ten Commandments with modern examples of such sins. Additionally, Graham would preach to certain groups among the audience, such as students, parents, or working professionals, in order to ensure his message was effectively communicated to various subcategories. Graham thus embodied the personal connection one could attain through acceptance of his message and acceptance of Jesus Christ, a personal appeal made prevalent in the entertainment he produced and in the mourning of Graham that often centered around the notion that “everyone has a Billy Graham story.” Such an idea connects the individual believer to both a community of Graham supporters and to Graham directly, again reflecting the importance of Graham as a preacher second only to Christ in his ability to create intimate relationships on a wide scale and among a crowd aware of its size and their individualities.

Graham himself was always centerstage, the focus of the spectacle. Whether on screen or in person, this single emphasis allowed for effective theater and persuasive performances. His centrality allowed him to garner power and influence among strong conservative evangelical circles and beyond. Additionally, his exclusive authority and the charisma he employed in his
sermons worked to frame his memory; following his death mourners drew upon Graham’s grandiose audiences and personal connections in order to conflate themselves with his popular, un tarnished reputation, allowing for them too to gain authority among the communities that Graham enjoyed prominence within.

There are two facets through which Graham's evangelical spectacles ensured his prominence among political power structures worldwide: media and mourning. Two films produced by Graham, *Oiltown, U.S.A.* (1954) and *The Restless Ones* (1965) exhibit this spectacle during his rise to fame. Both of these films demonstrate the broader historical context of America in the postwar period and elucidate conservative fears and ideologies portrayed under the veil of religion. As the “maverick in early Christian film production,” Graham’s ability to present “dramatic nonfiction” stories as a mode of entertainment helped him proselytize to mass audiences.15 Through his involvement in Hollywood productions, Graham succeeded in using entertainment, feared by many fundamentalists at the time as a “den of the devil,” to spread the gospel, thus raising his standing within the evangelical community.16 However, Graham’s films, with their at times inconsistent or melodramatic plots, reflect that despite purporting to maintain Biblical purity, even Graham had to make concessions in order to fit into secular marketplaces.17

Graham’s funeral on March 2, 2018, makes clear the power structures at play in the public mourning of Graham and demonstrates the importance of Graham as a figure untouchable by evangelical conservatives quick to relate themselves to him posthumously. The nature of his mourning as public, personal, and participatory furthered evangelical goals of conversion and allowed for the manifestation of political interests in the wake of his death. Such interests are

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16 Hendershot, 180.

17 Hendershot, 213.
reflected through the funeral’s attendees, speakers, design, and proceedings, including Graham’s
time spent lying in honor at the U.S. Capitol rotunda in a casket demonstrative of American
carceral inequities presented as the height of spiritual righteousness. Here, Graham’s position at
the core of the rotunda works to cement his role as forever holy and forever relevant to
Christians in America. As such, Graham is construed as a figure worthy of conflation with Jesus
Christ, all thanks to his personal evangelism and the mass scale upon which such evangelism
took place. Because of his influence on generations of televangelists after him, and because mass
evangelism undergirds the fundamentalist movements of American Protestantism, it is essential
that one understands the spectacular life and death of Billy Graham as key to the relationship
between power and prayer at work in 21st-century America.
Part I: A Simple Message from a Simple Man?

Born in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1918, William “Billy” Graham is often understood as a man from humble origins who rose to enormous fame through his uniquely grand manner of sharing the messages of evangelism. The fame Graham enjoyed was thanks in large part to the media he and his proxy organizations presented during the 1950’s and 1960’s. Within these decades, Graham modified his evangelism to serve as entertainment to cater to mass audiences that came to understand Graham as the closest mortal connection to God himself. Graham’s adaptability to the changing needs of his listeners thus cast him as “a finely calibrated barometer” ever ready to adjust his messaging to fit the present times.  

Graham was thus able to fuse preaching with entertainment for mass audiences in the inherently spectacular form of his work. As such, Graham’s life worked to ensure the continuation of his memory by connecting Graham to large audiences and equating his evangelist message with popular entertainment that reflected the increasing importance of film and television in post-war American life. Graham’s work suggests that evangelism is not complete without the aspect of a mass spectacle, therefore embodying the notion that “the medium is the message.”

While extensive biographical literature exists on the life of Graham, this thesis differs in its focus on Graham’s media and mourning within the context of both post-war and contemporary America. In doing so, much of this thesis utilizes biographic literature and primary source data from the Billy Graham Evangelical Association (BGEA), footage of Graham’s funeral proceedings, and films created by Graham’s production company, World Wide Pictures (WWP). As both a religious figure and a celebrity, Graham’s self-making often involved a precise curation of facts and images, demonstrating the importance of spectacle in the cultivation of Graham’s righteous and uncompromised image. Existing Christian-based literature on Graham

18 Wacker, 29.
works to highlight his theory and preaching while straying from much of his political activities. Profiles of Graham on the website of his largest organization, The BGEA, as well as among other Christian media outlets, are all vetted to serve his interests by stressing his ability to convert the masses and appeal to individuals. Graham’s spectacular evangelism is rarely discussed critically among these sources. This absence suggests the success of Graham’s spectacle in cementing his image as a figure untethered to worldly matters among those who saw him as a figure second only to Christ.

This thesis makes work of existing scholarship on Billy Graham while contributing to the literature a comprehensive analysis of both the life and death of the preacher. Of such existing scholarship, I derive much of my analysis from Heather Hendershot’s *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture*, Jason Stevens’ *God Fearing and Free: A Spiritual History of America’s Cold War*, and K. A. Cuordileone’s *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*. Each of these scholars poignantly assess the impact of Billy Graham on American politics during the post-war period, forming the foundation of literature upon which I have been able to base my study of Graham as the curator of spectacle. Hendershot’s work is especially relevant to my discussion of Graham’s film production and the role of media in evangelizing during the Cold War. Her analysis of evangelical media places Graham as responsive to the period in his use of entertainment to convey God’s message. Stevens’ work elucidates the theological shift from passive to active that Graham ushered in after long periods of fundamentalist majorities in spiritual sectors. Cuordileone’s exploration of gender and masculinity during Cold War crusades against communism place Graham in the

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19 Hendershot, 147.

20 Stevens, 56.
context of politics at the time. His argument informs my interpretation of Graham’s use of films to respond to discomfort brought by cultural shifts in the 1950’s and 60’s.\textsuperscript{21} I build upon the work of these scholars by analyzing the legacy of Graham after his death through a study of his funerary proceedings in order to provide an answer to my question of “what does Graham’s life do for evangelicals after his death?”

Andrew Hartman’s \textit{A War for the Soul of the Nation: A History of the Culture Wars} and Benedict Anderson’s \textit{Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism} also exhibit concepts beneficial to my analysis of the community of Graham’s followers present in both his life and death. Hartman’s work has helped me contextualize the fears of conservatives present in the late twentieth century’s “culture wars,” a time that gave rise to the self-persecution of conservatives who echoed Graham’s desires to fight against threats to both their spiritualism and their Americanism.\textsuperscript{22} This understanding of conservative fears aids my analysis of the manifestation of such fears in film representations of Graham’s preaching. Anderson notes that the imagined community of those allegedly persecuted at this time works to pave the way for nationalism, seen in manifestations of xenophobia among evangelical rhetoric present in sermons preached by Graham.\textsuperscript{23} Such imagined communities are connected by Graham through his invocation of spectacle as a means to establish commonality among his audience and tie them back to the empire (both of America and of God) that they are meant to serve. Spectacle here refers to Graham’s productions on television and film that gave the audience a chance to see themselves as part of a community and to see that community as a

\textsuperscript{21} Cuordileone, 82.

\textsuperscript{22} Andrew Hartman, \textit{A War for the Soul of the Nation: A History of the Culture Wars} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 2.

specific facet of the nation. This interpretation of Graham’s work again derives from Debord’s concept of spectacle as something that seeks to represent society and act as a means of unification. Graham’s use of spectacle facilitated the unification of believers and the creation of a Graham-centered community for the sake of evangelism, furthering his pursuits of power both culturally and politically. This scholarship establishes Graham’s relevancy to broader functionings of American government and culture, allowing for my central analysis of Graham’s ascent to influence as “America’s Pastor.”

Without these scholars, I would have been unable to place Graham in context of Cold War era politics and culture as they related to evangelism in America. What I contribute to this existing scholarship is a rhetorical analysis of two specific films that utilizes the existing scholarship to analyze Graham as the creator of spectacle. Additionally, I analyze this spectacle in relation to Graham’s death as the culmination of such creation. My work asks how it became normal for Graham to receive such posthumous praise in conversation with the political interests present in his mourning. This question differs from that of the aforementioned scholars in that its answer lies in recent primary source data relating to Graham’s funeral. In analyzing his funerary precedings, I am able to demonstrate how the spectacle of Graham’s life manifested in the mourning that followed his death, much of which involved the blurring of church and state and the reassertion of conservative values among venues allegedly not suited for politics. Spectacular mourning furthered the political will of Graham’s mourners, all of whom praised Graham as a righteous figure untethered to earthly desires.

The theology preached by Graham during his ascent to fame and his stay atop the hierarchy of evangelism speaks to the intense care taken in the creation of Graham’s rhetoric and the historical context that governed his approach to being in the world but not of the world. As a
young preacher, Graham espoused theology that would traditionally have cast him as a fundamentalist. However, as he gained prevalence within the American religious canon, Graham altered his means of delivery to be less fundamentalist and more conservative. This shift caused Graham to move away from fundamentalism’s rigid means of delivering Biblical messaging and towards a more populist form of communicating with his audience. His conservatism marked him as a “neofundamentalist,” a member of a group interested in aligning themselves with national values in order to gain prestige and influence that would allow them to normalize the presence of their faith in politics. As such, Graham encouraged a switch from passive to active evangelism among his listeners. He did so by positioning himself as a conservative leader more than a modernist one, occupying a role that allowed Graham to espew fundamentalist rhetoric in a manner that his audience could both understand and relate to. This shift, one that saw Graham move from fundamentalist to just plain conservative, marks Graham’s ability to change his theology to better appeal to larger audiences.

Graham saw an error with post-war fundamentalism’s call for a dualistic separation between the church and the world and sought to correct this fission by actively combating dualism in his preaching. Raised with both Presbyterian and Baptist values, his 1950’s push for non-denominational Christianity cast Graham opposite the intense fundamentalists that constituted his peers among the Christian stage at this time; Graham broke convention by calling

24 Stevens, 56.
25 Stevens, 56.
26 Stevens, 44.
27 Stevens, 70.
28 Stevens, 44.
29 Stevens, 42.
for the transcendence of denominational boundaries, marking him as different from his contemporaries.\textsuperscript{30} Such breaks from tradition worked to make Graham a more “easy to swallow” ambassador for Christianity.\textsuperscript{31} Additionally, Graham’s non-denominationalism aided him in his role as “spiritual counsel” to the president, as it allowed him to provide spiritual advice to those in office regardless of their traditional denomination.\textsuperscript{32} Richard Nixon most notably espoused Graham’s non-denominational approach, taking Graham’s advice and making far more references to religion than his immediate predecessors.\textsuperscript{33} Graham’s theological stance as a humble non-denominational evangelist thus aided his propensity to share the gospel with nonbelievers; as a “man of the people,” Graham was willing and able to share the “good news” in a manner that could be understood and adopted by the largest number of people as possible.\textsuperscript{34}

The emotional appeals present in his crusades as well as the community of believers that the crusades attempted to form governed Graham’s non-denominational preaching in a way that helped him appeal to the “everyday Protestant.”\textsuperscript{35} His interpretation of the gospel was straightforward: Graham believed that we are all sinners bound for damnation, and that the only way to achieve salvation was through acceptance of Christ as one’s lord and savior.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{30} Hendershot, 26.
\textsuperscript{31} Hendershot, 26.
\textsuperscript{33} Kirby, 2017.
\textsuperscript{36} Finstuen, 125.
preached an anti-Communist message while also consistently reminding his listeners that without repentance, Americans could be just as damned as those doomed to “satanic” Communist rule abroad.\textsuperscript{37} The Communist threat as an inherently wicked one was promoted more by Graham than any other religious leader at the time.\textsuperscript{38} This theology, one that regarded communism as “satan’s religion,” elucidates the politics that governed Graham’s preaching during an era plagued with conservative self-persecution and speaks to Graham’s worldly goals hidden under the veil of religious belief.\textsuperscript{39}

Graham’s condemnation of communism in conversation with his condemnations of homosexuality demarcates the conservatism present in his theology. He once thanked God for the men who “‘in the face of public denouncement and ridicule, go loyally on in their work of exposing the pinks, the lavenders, and the reds who have sought refuge beneath the wings of the American eagle.’”\textsuperscript{40} This sweeping condemnation of liberals, (the pinks), homosexuals (the lavenders), and Communists (the reds) conflates Christianity with American exceptionalism and McCarthyism and exemplifies Graham’s inability to separate religion from Americanism. Graham’s theology was also at once in and of the world in his praise for masculine values akin to those preached by contemporary conservatives. He often spoke of the masculinity exhibited by Jesus, stating once that Christ “‘could have been a star athlete on any team. He was a real man.’”\textsuperscript{41} This characterization of Christ as at once a “real man” and a “star athlete” conflates Christianity with popular culture and appeals to the white, middle class crowds that Graham

\textsuperscript{37} Finstuen, 130.
\textsuperscript{38} Cuordileone, 82.
\textsuperscript{39} Cuordileone, 82.
\textsuperscript{40} Cuordileone, 37.
\textsuperscript{41} Cuordileone, 82.
often evangelized to. Through his discussion of masculinity and condemnation of liberalism and homosexuality, Graham made clear that deviance from conservatism constituted sin and henceforth the loss of normative humanity, especially when such deviance was sexual.\textsuperscript{42} The post-war anti-Communist fear of sexual deviance manifests in the content present in Graham’s first theatrically released film, \textit{The Restless Ones} (1965).

Graham frequently assured his supporters that he was not engaging with “mass evangelism,” but “personal evangelism on a mass scale.”\textsuperscript{43} Graham was confident that his individualist focus could still succeed when applied in a grand manner on a large scale. This grand manner depended on stadium revivals, wherein Graham was placed centerstage atop an elevated platform while his booming voice was amplified through loudspeakers. His manner of preaching to individuals in the audience through references to one’s life as a student, parent, wife, etc. helped Graham maintain a reputation as a caring, charismatic pastor capable of “saving” countless souls through his proselytizing. Additionally useful for his public image was Graham’s “humble” origin as the son of a dairy farmer from North Carolina.\textsuperscript{44}

Graham’s rise to national prominence was aided by media mogul William Randolph Hearst, who in 1949 ordered his team to “puff Graham” due to his ability to preach an anti-communist narrative to massive audiences during his sermons.\textsuperscript{45} Hearst gave this order after attending one of Graham’s 1949 Los Angeles evening revivals while in disguise and alongside

\textsuperscript{42} Cuordileone, 82.


\textsuperscript{44} Goodstein, A1.

\textsuperscript{45} Finstuen, 126.
his mistress Marion Davies.\textsuperscript{46} The order marks a shift in Hearst’s prior beliefs, as he wrote in a letter discussing his fears of a war in 1934 that “The most dangerous things to meddle with are people’s religious beliefs… If I were a dictator…I would allow complete freedom of religious belief.”\textsuperscript{47} Hearst saw Graham as a possible ally, as the conservative businessman approved of Graham’s anti-Communist preaching; he was less interested in Graham’s theology than his ability to keep congregants loyal to capitalism in the name of God. The shift embodied in Hearst’s support of Graham suggests that the minister could gain influence from the publisher, especially because Hearst’s elite network included powerful Protestants.\textsuperscript{48} Here, post-war conservatives worked to cast Graham as a figure worthy of uniting a public afraid of newly emerging “threats” to their power strongholds in America, as casting religion against “godless Communism” would allegedly prevent leftists from reining in business power and expanding the New Deal. This episode marks one of the first instances where Graham’s work was used to further the political agenda of conservative authority figures, as Hearst had power to gain by associating himself with Graham.

Graham’s prominence as a compelling speaker with a loyal network of supporters helped place him close to the seat of power in the United States throughout the 1950s and 60s, allowing him to express politics camouflaged as theology. He was incredibly successful in doing so, gaining “access to the highest reaches of political power” during his lifetime.\textsuperscript{49} Soon after receiving support from Hearst and achieving prominence through the television broadcasting of


\textsuperscript{48} Nasaw, 220.

his “crusades,” Graham’s influence was recognized by presidents who sought him out as an ally and “spiritual counselor.” Graham’s political interests were reflected in his relationships with the presidents; he was integral in starting the longstanding tradition of the “National Prayer Breakfast,” hosted annually and initially begun by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. At the first breakfast in 1953, Eisenhower addressed a crowd representative of the post-war alliance between business and religion, including such figures as hotel magnate Conrad Hilton and Graham. Over breakfast, Eisenhower stated that “all free government is firmly founded in a deeply felt religious faith,” a phrase that worked to justify the connection between Protestant figures and presidents by articulating the holiness of American democracy and consolidating public power, in essence granting the U.S. divine approval. The following year, the phrase “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance. This instance exemplifies Graham’s desire to “[blur] spiritual liberty with political emancipation in Early America.” American “founders” Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson argued that religious institutions should not have a place in government, thus the ideas behind the Prayer Breakfast seek the re-establishment of religiosity in post-war America as fortification against a perceived threat. The presence of spirituality at the National Prayer Breakfast thus conflated church and state as driven by post-war conservative interests that manifested as Protestant political involvement.

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50 Goodstein, A1.


54 Stevens, 49.
The relationship between Graham and his closest presidential friend, Richard Nixon, further elucidates the interplay of politics and religion at work in the life of the humble preacher. Nixon received Graham’s support while campaigning against John F. Kennedy in 1960; Graham found it important to acknowledge the potential threat to Protestantism of a Catholic president, thus placing Graham on record as intolerant of other religions.\textsuperscript{55} Graham’s pursuit of political power and influence is also illustrated by his support of Nixon during and after the Watergate scandal. Such support removed Graham from strictly serving as spiritual counsel, placing him in conversations surrounding Nixon’s moral character in the face of controversy. Defending Nixon placed Graham’s preaching in conflict with his politics. After the end of Nixon’s reign, Graham was sought out by all following presidents. His service to presidents regardless of their platform helped cement his reputation as an “apolitical” public figure, yet, as his media and mourning illustrate, the pastor was far more involved in the functions of American political power than he claimed in his sermons. He consistently espoused conservative political positions relating to Christianity and aligned himself with countless politicians; his stance as a preacher allowed for this political influence to be hidden under the veil of theology.

The films produced by Graham during his rise to prominence exemplify the importance of media in evangelical religion, especially due to the thin veil covering evangelical messages within films that received broad theatrical releases during the post-war period. Biblical epics that were popular at the time were themselves spectacles that opened the door for Graham to create an alternate filmic spectacle. Their presentation as entertainment rather than Biblical storytelling allowed for greater consumption among a public interested in a different, more digestible, type of

\textsuperscript{55} Goodstein, A1.
Christian media. Two of Graham’s early films, *Oiltown, U.S.A.* (1954) and *The Restless Ones* (1965) depict Graham’s early appeals to the American public via emotional storytelling and direct engagement with the audience. Such films exemplify the process by which some evangelicals intend to further conservative political goals by hiding their pursuit of power under the veil of spiritual salvation; both films deployed the conventions of spectacle to frame Graham’s preaching.

Two feature films produced by Graham’s production company, World Wide Pictures (WWP), demonstrate the use of media as a tool to aid evangelism during the post-war period. WWP’s 1954 production, *Oiltown, U.S.A.*, worked to advance the content presented in his crusades via an accessible platform that did not require viewers to physically attend a revival. The film gave the audiences all the trappings of a revival on screen: a community intended to represent the larger society, and the unification of such a community under Christianity exclusively linked to Graham’s preaching. These elements again exemplify Debord’s concept of spectacle and its use by Graham to unite a Christian community for both evangelizing and political goals. The 70-minute film depicts a Houston-based oil tycoon, Mr. Les Manning, and his daughter, Christine, who is given the nickname “Chris” in an overt nod to “Christ,” whose salvation is shown at work throughout the film. The Mannings are wealthy enough to own a large estate and have a live-in maid, a Black woman named Sally who wears a traditional black and white maid costume and speaks in dialect. When Mr. Manning finds oil on the nearby Tyler Ranch, he and Chris begin to spend time with the Tylers, building a friendship that comes to an abrupt end when Mr. Manning grows tired of the Tylers’ religiosity. This conflict is meant to show the audience that Mr. Manning is a sinner too concerned with earthly ventures and not

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concerned enough with spiritual ones. The plot further shows the oil man to be a sinner by revealing his compulsive gambling habits. Upon the discovery of such habits, Chris runs away to the Tyler Ranch where she accepts Jesus as her savior (only forty-two minutes into the film) and vows to save her father as well. The climax of the film occurs when Mr. Manning, distraught over the disappearance of his daughter and the reminder that oil wells eventually run dry, points a gun to his head, but is saved from his attempt to pull the trigger with an interrupting phone call from Chris.

When Chris and Mr. Manning return home following his near suicide attempt, he turns on the television to a Christian singer as the camera pulls the TV in tighter until, eventually, the viewer finds themselves inside the studio with a musician and a preacher: the one and only Billy Graham. Graham begins to preach as the lens centers on him and he focuses his eyes on the camera, creating the illusion that he is speaking directly to each audience member.

As he speaks, he lists the 10 Commandments and explains why everyone is guilty of breaking them through an interpretation of the Bible that equates emotional lust with idolatry and profanity with taking the Lord’s name in vain. This presentation leaves no doubt that each
listener is indeed a sinner, and is personable as Graham appeals to every viewer by re-interpreting the commandments through a modern lens. As such, the approach encourages participation in the form of audience conversion. Mr. Manning is seen to accept Christ right before our eyes, and we as members of the audience are encouraged to do the same or else risk facing eternal damnation. As Chris saves Mr. Manning from physical suicide, Graham, through whom Christ is alleged to be speaking, saves him from spiritual death. It is supposed to be up to each member of the audience to accept Jesus and do the same.

Several aspects of the film aside from its plot bear mentioning in order to fully understand the manifestations of power via the religious spectacle of *Oiltown, U.S.A.* These aspects include the environmental implications suggested through the film’s notion of oil as a God-given asset, although it is one that should not lead to idolatry. Early in the film, a montage depicting all of the goodness of the oil industry, including the machinery, the land, and subsequent wealth for the Manning family, serves to show the audience the positive value of God-given resources as they benefit honorable families like the Tylers as well. One particularly noteworthy scene portrays the Tylers and Mannings watching with sunglasses and smiles as their freshly harvested oil is burned. The black smoke here is representative of the power of God’s creation and the monetary gain that it can produce. However, Mr. Tyler’s idea that “the white gold of cotton and the black gold of oil could never buy me peace of mind” comes to pass at the end of the film when nearby Texas City bursts aflame in an oil accident.57

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The imagery of the city on fire bears reference to Armageddon (the Biblical war at the end of the world) and the second coming of Christ, especially as Chris, a believer, is among those spared in the accident. Her survival speaks to the “miracle” in the explosion, apparently one linked to the recent conversion of Mr. Manning. Here, God saves whom he wishes to save, inspiring conversion by playing on fears of total destruction following the atomic bombings at the close of the second World War. This scene also characterizes the wages of sin as the black smoke of burning oil represents the consequences of relying on Mr. Manning’s false God: black gold. Such imagery suggests to the viewer what will happen should they fail to repent and seek God’s forgiveness by explaining damnation under the guise of entertainment.

The gender roles in *Oiltown, U.S.A.* further Graham’s interest as they work to tug at the heartstrings of female viewers, thus encouraging the participatory behavior that Graham so frequently relied on. Mr. Manning’s daughter, Chris, and Kay Tyler, Christian co-owner of the oil-rich ranch and the woman on whom Chris relies when she runs away, each represent a “good” woman by 1950’s standards. Chris is conventionally pretty with a nice smile and perfectly pinned hair, a wardrobe that cinches her waist, and a gentle manner of speaking. Her feminine
innocence is presented early in the film, as she arrives in Texas wearing a light blue dress with a white bonnet, white gloves, and a bouquet of daisies tucked under her collar.\footnote{Oiltown, U.S.A., 1954, 0:04:42}

When Chris discovers her father’s gambling habits, she does so while escorted by a suitor and wearing a glamorous powder blue dress with a matching chiffon overcoat, again with flowers pinned near her neck.\footnote{Oiltown, U.S.A., 1954, 0:05:07.} Upon the discovery of his daughter among the gambling, Mr. Manning sternly instructs Chris’s date to “take her home, immediately!”\footnote{Oiltown, U.S.A., 1954, 0:37:47.} This instance suggests that delicate women require guidance, especially when embarking on expeditions that include such sinful acts as gambling. The failure of Mr. Manning to address his daughter directly and his insistence that she be escorted home further illustrates the gender roles at play in the film. However, as Chris is the first character to find God, her conversion gives her autonomy via the responsibility of leading other sinners, most notably her father, towards Jesus as well. She saves her father’s life by calling him just before he begins to pull the trigger. As such, Chris gains agency through Christ, and her life becomes purposeful as she is now able to save others. This
spectacle of agency might work to inspire feminine viewers who also sought a purposeful life among patriarchal post-war America.

Despite purporting that one’s God should never be money, *Oiltown U.S.A.* complicates the theology upon which the film is supposed to be based that stresses the importance of transcending earthly monetary fixation by highlighting the fiscal value of oil. Twelve minutes into the film, as Jim prepares a large steak for himself and his sister, Kay states “I don’t think I want to be a millionaire.” Her declaration occurs as the two enjoy a good meal and sing a lighthearted Christian song among a scenic background, allowing the viewer to make the connection between economic modesty and a “good” life. However, just five minutes later the viewer is presented with a montage of Chris and her friend shopping and smiling among glamorous dresses in style with upper-class 1950’s fashion, accompanied by scenes depicting the oil drill at work making them the money they are able to spend. Here, the film sets up a condemnation of a financially-driven life, but fails to follow through in such condemnation as the Mannings are later rewarded for their faith with the blessing of more oil. The film again complicates the theology it purports to uphold through the desirability of Chris, a figure so beautiful and eligible by 1950’s standards that her chastity is called into question, demonstrating the sexism at work in evangelicalism. Should a married member of the audience covet Chris, Graham would argue they have broken one of the 10 Commandments and are thus a sinner. As such, the depiction of Chris as a desirable young woman undermines the holy narrative presented by Graham during his sermon in the film. This contradiction illustrates the worldly tensions underlying Graham-produced films, demonstrating that there is more than what meets the eye in relation to politics and power as motivators behind religious media such as this.

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While *Oiltown, U.S.A.* exemplifies an early Graham attempt to wed Hollywood storytelling with evangelical preaching, no film exemplifies the public, personable, and participatory nature of Graham's evangelism more than WWP’s first theatrically released picture: *The Restless Ones* (1965). This film addresses white teenagers and their parents through a roster of different characters: Davy, a sophomore basketball star heading down a dark path; April, a senior who “gets around;” Davy’s career driven mother and prodigal son-like father, smart journalists concerned for their son; and April’s mother, a drunk whose neglect of April has led to her misbehavior. The film makes emotional appeals to the audience during its entire feature length run. Following an opening scene depicting his arrest for vandalizing a church at the start of the film, Davy reevaluates his friendships with delinquents in order to be a better son to his loving parents. This redemption of a sinner likely played to the conservative Christian audiences for whom the film was first intended. The film follows Davy and April’s schemes against his parents’ wishes for him to stay away from delinquents, and includes a strong emotional depiction of April’s struggles. In the climax of the film, she attempts to run off with yet another man, only to be rejected in a letter that prompts her to cry while hiding from Davy in the bathroom of a bar in which they were engaging in underage drinking. Following this rejection, April attempts suicide by slitting her wrists; the audience sees her body on the floor and the blood outpouring. This scene shows what happens when a life of sin catches up with you, as April’s only earthly escape is an attempt at death, while Davy still maintains the capacity for spiritual salvation.

Despite April’s punishment, woven throughout the film are references to Graham’s position on sex as something that should not be so “hush hush” but rather is an important part of Christian life. Such references offered an appeal to teenage and young adult audience members working to reframe Christian morality away from Victorian era prudery, an idea specifically
referenced in the film. Through these references, *The Restless Ones* marks a transition from the chaste narrative of *Oiltown, U.S.A.* in its assurance that Christianity is not “stuffy” and is accessible to young teens like Davy. The plot reveals Graham’s verdict on sex: “[U]sed right, it is a wonderful servant. Used wrong, it is a terrible tyrant.” At the emotional height of the film, when April is in the hospital after her suicide attempt and Davy and his parents are visiting her, Davy and his father have a heart to heart about the idea of sex and faith. The odd placement of this conversation in the film speaks to the failure of WWP to subtly depict their values to the viewer. It is clear that the filmmakers attempt to make the topic of Christianity appear natural and effortless. In this self-conscious and performative scene, Davy stands in the front of the shot with his father behind him, neither one making eye contact as they both face the viewer, reminiscent of the paternalistic nature of God himself standing over one’s shoulder.

Davy and his father discuss sex in *The Restless Ones*, 1:27:27.

Davy’s father outlines Graham’s approach to sex as he speaks to Davy, telling him “right now you don’t see it as much more than an animal urge. You’ve got a giant inside of you and that giant is stirring around, he’s testing you… but that’s what separates man from animals, Davy,

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that God given ability to say ‘no.”’ This statement alludes to temptation from Satan, and gives Davy agency in his ability to overrule the devil’s “urges” inside of him. Next, Davy’s father goes further into explaining Graham’s brand of Christian approaches to sex, stating that “God has entrusted you and me with a power to create life, and it’s pretty rough to be casual about a thing like that. Every time we misuse that gift, we throw away a little bit of ourself.” Here, Davy’s father covers all of the bases in advocating for his son to only engage in sex while married and while deliberately intending to procreate. This emotional discussion suggests to the audience that Christians don’t hate all sex, they just hate sinful, Satan-driven sex. Directly following this scene, the film cuts to a Billy Graham crusade where Davy can be redeemed in his newfound understanding of what sex should be, again suggesting to the audience that Graham is the best earthly authority on this topic.

Graham’s crusades appear in the film twice: once halfway through when Davy’s parents begin to see the light, and again at the end when Davy himself learns the good word. In both of these segments, Graham again re-interprets the 10 Commandments in order to apply them to his stadium audience and tell all attendees that they too are guilty of sin. Following this condemnation, just as in *Oiltown, U.S.A.*, Graham notes that the Bible purports that death is the price of sin, and that the only way to avoid such death is to accept Christ as your personal savior, a continuation of the theology presented by Graham in *Oiltown, U.S.A.* Graham then invites the audience to join him on the field, or when the audience is too big, to join him in standing, to recognize their newfound faith. This public acceptance of Christ encourages greater participation as audience members who do not walk to the field or do not stand up face pressure from their peers, especially as in Davy’s case it is his parents encouraging him to accept the Lord following

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64 *The Restless Ones*, 1965, 1:29:32.

the trauma he endured in seeing his sinner girlfriend bleed out on the barroom floor. This social conformity allows for new Christians like Davy to be both individual through their personal relationship with their savior, Jesus Christ, and communal through their position within a large network of believers eager to support one another in their spiritual journeys. The nature of this relationship with Christ would eventually be applied to believers’ relationships with Billy Graham following his death, as his memorialization inspired mourners to assert both his role in their personal salvation and the value of the community of his supporters.

In comparison to the studio sermon by Graham in *Oiltown, U.S.A.*, Graham’s stadium crusades showcased in *The Restless Ones* mark a change in both spectacle and conservative evangelical ideologies. In the latter, speaking to a crowd of “nearly 50,000 young people,” Graham applies the same rhetoric later adopted by Davy’s father during their conversation at the hospital: “[T]here’s nothing wrong with sex, God gave it to us for certain reasons, and it is to be used wisely, as creative energy, before you are married, that will be a driving dynamo that will take you to the top, and after marriage it is to be used for fulfillment, for communication, and for propagation, but only within the bonds of marriage.”66 The idea that sexual urges can be harvested as creative energy that will “take you to the top” again represents the complex theology that places believers both in and of the world that they seek paradoxically to transcend. Graham continues to provide Davy’s father the lessons he used in their hospital conversation by reminding the audience that “you have a will, you can say no” to the premarital sexual urges that may present themselves here.67 Graham also tells the crowd that in refusing to participate in premarital sex, they are acting as “non-conformists,” standing out of the crowd, and acting as


67 *The Restless Ones*, 1965, 0:39:02.
“the kind of young people that Christ is looking for today.” Graham thus inspires conformity while pretending to encourage non-conformance. Such a statement illustrates conservative evangelical fear of a sexually liberated generation, “the masses” to which Graham urges these teens to differ from.

The spectacle of Graham’s sermon as exemplary of the ideal life shines through his attention to the mass audience in the film. As Graham speaks, he does not look into the camera but into the crowd of people in attendance. The camera does not focus on Graham but on the individual faces of white teenagers in the crowd, speaking to its target audience of youths capable of heading down the wrong path should they not call on holy intervention. Graham then states that “I don’t believe, in this day, that a young person can live clean and pure and wholesome without the help of Christ.” This belief further symbolizes conservative fears of immorality within the context of the 1960’s, representative of the cultural shifts not yet present in *Oiltown U.S.A.* that figures like Graham saw as a reason for intervention through entertainment. Here, the spectacle of Graham’s crusade works to address threats to conservatism while positing a solution by way of spiritual salvation and evangelism.

Changes in Graham’s presentation of the gospel as depicted in both films speak to the changing priorities of evangelicals in the 1960’s and to the transformation of spectacle from a direct to indirect phenomenon. During his sermon in *Oiltown, U.S.A.*, as Graham looks directly into the camera and asserts that everyone watching, “we,” are all sinners, he argues that “everyone of us are condemned. We are lost. We are separated from God. We are bound for destruction.” Such condemnation appears to encourage the viewer to seek salvation by turning

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69 *The Restless Ones*, 1965, 0:40:19.
to God thanks to the invitation of Graham. He articulates this clearly, saying “you ask ‘but Billy what can I do about my sins? I am guilty… I’m guilty of all kinds of sins, what can I do, which way can I turn?’”

Then, Graham reminds the viewer that “there’s nothing you can do about it humanly speaking, the Bible says for by grace are ye saved… it is the gift of God, not of work… you cannot save yourself.” This reminder tries to communicate to the audience that they are not only sinners, but they are sinners incapable of redemption without faith in the God of whom Graham is speaking. In this scene, the spectacle of Graham’s preaching lies in his eye contact, pointing at the camera, and stern rhetoric, all of which work to encourage conversion.

Much as gender ideals positioned Chris as an empathetic woman responsible for her father’s salvation in *Oiltown, U.S.A.*, *The Restless Ones* plays up women’s potential for converting their loved ones, a Christian version of feminine agency. Davy’s mother finds her life has a “purpose” once she starts to live for Christ. She assigns meaning to April’s hospital stay as she proseletyzes to her drunken mother while April recovers from her suicide attempt. In this scene, Davy’s mother sits behind April’s mother as both face the audience, similar to the framing of the scene between Davy and his father at the same juncture of the film.

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As April’s mother sobs at the thought of a world alone upon the imminent death of her
daughter, Davy’s mother takes her for a walk and assures her that “He cares… I really believe
that. For April, for all of us, we’ll walk, and we’ll pray. I’m not an old hand at praying, but that
really doesn’t matter.” Here, Davy’s mother characterizes new believers as equally able to save
others as those who had been practicing the religion for years before, thus encouraging
conversion by showing how even those who have just come into their faith are able to find
“purpose” in evangelism. At the same time, this scene depicts the lack of value placed on the
lives of sinners like April and her mother, as the film does not mention whether April lives or
dies and fails to show the conversion of her drunken mother. The agency claimed by Davy’s
mother through Christianity suggests to women in the audience that they too could live a life as
important as she simply by dedicating their life to Jesus. This same phenomenon, one where
soft-hearted women are able to “find purpose” for their lives through their faith, re-appeared at
Graham’s funeral as well through the speeches given by his daughters. Each of these instances
works to advance evangelical political interests by mobilizing women for the cause.

The historical context of both films demonstrates changing conceptions of gender and
sexuality in the post-war period. Changes in public conceptions of morality speak to the altered
representation of femininity from *Oiltown, U.S.A.* in 1954 to *The Restless Ones* eleven years
later. Following feminist movements in the 1960’s and the introduction of the pill in the early
1960’s, conservative evangelicals felt that the traditional structure of the nuclear family was
threatened among such sexual liberation. *The Restless Ones* acts as a response to this threat.

Whereas Chris depicted the chaste and holy “good girl” of the 1950’s, April, a harlot, represented

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74 Hartman, 2.
a decade’s worth of new resentment to sexual liberation and served as a representation of what might happen to women who engage in premarital sex. This desire of Graham and WWP to portray premarital sex as a destroyer of life aligns with the threats to post-war conservatism that emerged in this period. As such, the changes between both films represent conservative interests couched as spiritual salvation, both of which are packaged and sold via the spectacle of film as entertainment. Additionally, these changes represent changing methods of controlling the bodies of women as fertility and autonomy are regarded as sinful unless they exist under the shadow of the Lord.

With the theatrical release of The Restless Ones came reviews by audience members both persuaded and disgusted by the obvious nature of Graham’s preaching in the film. On the BGEA website, the film is presented as “A hidden treasure! Billy Graham’s first theater movie. A realistic look into a teen’s life–peer pressure, dating, drugs and more. An important movie for parents and teens.” Coming from Graham’s own organization, this review represents one of the many instances wherein praise for Graham is presented as fact, and reveals the BGEA’s insistence on controlling virtually every aspect of Graham’s preaching and public image. To say the least, The Restless Ones was not universally recognized by all viewers as “a hidden treasure.” A reviewer for the London Monthly Film Bulletin wrote that the opening scene, one that showcases Davy vandalizing a church, suggests that it “won’t be long before the commercial comes in the shape of a sermon about teenage sexual urges and how God Can Help.” This reviewer’s awareness of the “commercial for Christ” present in the WWP film speaks to the

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76 Hendershot, 181.

transparency of the veil under which Graham attempted to hide his evangelism as entertainment. Additionally, the crusade scenes present in countless Graham films that followed the same formula as *The Restless Ones* led one Christian reviewer to state “‘there ought to be a way to present the Biblical message without the telltale ‘and now a word from our sponsor.’” Regardless of these critiques, *Christianity Today* (a Christian news outlet founded by Graham) reported that the film was viewed by more than two million people and was responsible for more than 120,000 recorded professions of faith, including a profession by NBC’s Today Show host Kathie Lee Gifford who came to the faith after watching the film. Notably, *Christianity Today* offered no quantitative means by which to measure whether or not those professions of faith had lasting effects or even to verify claims of conversion, but the outcome is the same: the spectacle of *The Restless Ones* made many people aware of Christian theology under the auspices of entertainment in the 1960’s.

The existence of these films as tools to further evangelism by embracing the spectacle of mass entertainment is prevalent in the theological complications that exist in each one. In *Oiltown, U.S.A.*, the notion that God will take care of you financially should you cede your soul to him is preached despite themes that suggest Christians not worship worldly idols like oil or money. Here, earthly priorities are made prevalent to the viewer throughout scenes depicting Mr. Manning’s mansion and Chris’ shopping. Although they are supposedly done “worshiping” oil at the end of the film, they are still shown to be wealthy thanks to God, thus depicting the contradictory worldly and transcendent priorities. In *The Restless Ones*, Graham’s assertion that the channeling of sexual urges into creative energy that will aid in one’s quest for success

78 Hendershot, 181.

represents the alleged fiscal blessings that might accompany one’s faith in God. Such an assertion complicates the theology that conflates desire for worldly success and wealth with idol worship, a sin explicitly outlined by Graham as cause for damnation. These films thus demonstrate how much of a construct this Christian media is, as producers like Graham have to do a lot of work to lead the viewer to believe that such stories of salvation and subsequent earthly gain are both natural and universal. These films cannot be in the world but not of the world as their plots act as bulwarks to support free enterprise.

While mourning his death years later, supporters of Billy Graham were always quick to mention his position in life as a “simple” man who preached a “simple” message. Graham’s reputation was largely unclouded by politics or controversy: it did not suffer by his power-seeking relationships with U.S. presidents nor the Christian propaganda he produced in his lifetime. Through films like *Oiltown, U.S.A.*, and *The Restless Ones*, Graham was able to tailor his preaching to fit a mass scale. The transformations between these films, including their changing sermon structure and the topic shift from idol worship to premarital sex, speak to rising political threats faced by conservative evangelicals in the context of the culture wars of the 1960’s and after. As Graham was central to each film’s plot, he was able to turn himself into the spectacle around which the story could advance and the main characters could be saved, while at the same time inviting the audience to be saved all the same. As such, Graham fulfilled his position as a “personal evangelist on a mass scale” by utilizing media and the spectacle of film to bridge the gap between individual and widespread salvation of the public. This personal evangelism on a mass scale was present in the funerary proceedings of Graham as well, all of which speak to Graham’s complexities as a character and his uniqueness as an “apolitical” figure able to serve as “the nation’s pastor” both during and after his time in the mortal world.
Part II: a Funeral to Remember

Billy Graham was as impactful in death as he was in life. His funeral, held for a large crowd reminiscent of those he gathered while alive, offers insight into the politics of grief and the value of spectacle in forming Graham’s memory. Graham’s funeral was public as it was characterized by celebrity appearances and the presence of conservative politicians and big-name evangelicals, as well as extensive media coverage and the ability to view Graham’s casket as it lie in honor, a distinction given to esteemed civilians, at the U.S. Capitol. His funeral was personable; every mourner was encouraged to share their “Billy Graham story,” the story of their personal salvation, at memorial services and throughout various publications both in secular and evangelical news outlets. The memorialization was also participatory in that it encouraged mourners to join in and tell their stories in order to become part of the broader collective. The concept that “everyone has a Billy Graham story” facilitated the creation of an imagined community of mourners that united those involved through a common thread and aided the interests of the conservative evangelical movement. The public, personable, and participatory nature of the mourning of Billy Graham suggests that funerals can serve to further the political will of the living and speaks to the value of Graham as a harbinger of conservative evangelical interests in politics cloaked in the purity of theology. Additionally, the mourning present in the death of Graham answers the question of how the legacy of Graham’s life worked to normalize his presence in secular spheres following his death.

Billy Graham rose to fame upon assertions that he was a “simple man” called to serve God by evangelizing to masses. In filling the role of “the nation’s clergyman,” Graham always made an effort to assert his apolitical status by offering spiritual counsel to mourners following tragedies such as 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina. However, I have argued Graham’s work was never

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80 Goodstein, A1.
wholly free from politics: his funeral reflects as such. Mourners were frequently reminded that
they were all connected by Graham as a common thread, a phenomenon that demonstrates the
participatory nature involved in his mourning. Aspects of Graham’s funeral, including the guest
list, media portrayals, oratory strategies, and the casket illustrate the complex political
motivations that exist in modern evangelical mourning practices as his memorialization served as
a tool to help the living advance their own agendas. Additionally, Graham’s funeral exemplifies
how participation in mourning among masses turns grief into a collective event, granting it more
relevance and further allowing for manifestations of power.

Graham died on February 20, 2018; his funeral and the public mourning that surrounded
it serve to portray the ways in which the death of a public figure can be utilized to advance the
interests of the living. Planned over a decade prior by Graham himself (a contradiction to his
status as a “simple” man), the funeral service held on March 2, 2018, took place under a tent at
the Billy Graham Library in Charlotte, North Carolina. The 28,000 square foot tent served as a
reference to Graham’s famous tent crusades in California in 1949, the instance wherein Graham
enjoyed support from Hearst’s media outlets rocketing him to fame. The funeral was an
invitation-only event scheduled to accommodate 2,300 people, including former presidents and
other big-name evangelicals. This event demonstrated the Classical oratory concepts of


“epainesis” (praise for the fallen) and “parainesis” (advice for the living) as it honored the life of Graham and urged attendees to maintain their faith in order to achieve salvation as Graham would have wanted. Elements of the funeral, including the attendees, the speeches, the media representation, and the casket illustrate the manifestation of political motivation within evangelical mourning. Such motivations demonstrate that although they might appear banal on the surface, the funerals of popular figures exist to further the power held by and interests of the living.

The first facet through which one can see politics appear in the mourning of Billy Graham is in the guests who attended his funeral. Of the more than 2,000 mourners in the crowd, several notable guests express the functions of a funeral as venues in which political interests can manifest as grief. The presence of entertainers like NBC TODAY Show host Kathie Lee Gifford illustrates this phenomenon. Gifford credits Billy Graham with her spiritual rebirth following her viewing of his film The Restless Ones (1965), and she has been associated with Samaritan’s Purse, a humanitarian organization run by Graham’s son Franklin. The presence of a figure like Gifford, a household name seen on television by many Americans regardless of their religious affiliation, allowed outsiders to view the funeral as an “American” event rather than just a Christian one.

The participatory sentiment behind the mourning of Graham, one that encourages every mourner to join in via collective grief, was articulated by Gifford on a February 21, 2018, broadcast of “Megyn Kelly TODAY.” During this broadcast, Gifford publicly thanked Graham for “saving” her soul and the souls of her family members who came to the Christian faith after

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viewing a televised broadcast of one of Graham’s crusades. Gifford articulated that her faith is what helps her mourn, stating that the presence of Heaven was “why I could hold my dead husband in my arms and rejoice, because I knew where he was.” Gifford also made an effort to stress the personal connection she was able to make with God as a result of Graham’s teachings, and spoke to his ability to be personable while sharing anecdotes about Graham ordering a Big Mac (he’s just like the rest of us) and urging those around him to call him Billy. This type of mourning, public, personal, and participatory, helps cement Graham’s legacy after his death and works to associate the living with his apparently untouchable reputation. Those in attendance of Graham’s funeral benefit from association with him because his “apolitical” reputation works to make their Evangelism implicit. When they are viewed as “American” first and evangelical second, they corroborate Protestantism and its conservative political leanings with Americanism, leaning on Graham’s legacy to justify such a relationship.

Gifford’s testimony alongside conservative television personality Megyn Kelly on the day of Graham’s death, along with her presence at Graham’s funeral, encouraged the participation of viewers who, throughout the interview, were taught the value of sharing the Gospel as Graham would have wanted. Kelly used the interview to reference 9/11, stating that the lesson Graham wanted Americans to learn from the attacks was “our need for one another.” Kelly’s reference to post-9/11 mourning as a lesson in building relationships speaks to the ability of grief to be used as a unifying tool. In the case of 9/11, grief succeeded in unifying much of the

86 NBC, “Kathie Lee Gifford Reacts to Death of Prominent Pastor Billy Graham: Megyn Kelly TODAY,” February 21, 2018, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJQ-s5damZg, 0:44.

87 NBC, 2018, 1:33.

88 NBC, 2018, 3:44.

89 NBC, 2018, 4:57.
American public in support of a new brand of conservatism. Post-9/11 America looked favorably upon collective mourning and patriotic fervor, forces that worked in favor of the mobilization of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Public opinion in support of this war in the wake of 9/11 demonstrates how grief can become a means for the advancement of political agendas, as in this case mourning was used to garner support for conservative war efforts abroad.

The transformation of grief into a tool for conservatism in this case is a testament to the ways in which mourning works to serve the political interests of the living. The morning of the interview, as Gifford brought up several times on air, she had been offering spiritual counsel to a man on Twitter who had been threatening to commit suicide. Gifford claimed to have “talked him off the ledge” at 4:30am by sharing the Gospel as Graham would have. In doing so, Gifford made clear the evangelical desire to universalize, and by discussing this exchange on a national news broadcast in memoriam of Billy Graham, Gifford made a personal appeal to the viewer. Following her Twitter exchange with the downtrodden at four in the morning, Gifford tweeted about the passing of Graham. Gifford’s tweet, which stated she was “so grateful that [she was] among the millions that [Graham] led to faith in Jesus and the promise of eternal life,” again exemplifies the urge for one to assert their direct connection to Graham within their public displays of grief, and to associate oneself with the powerful just as Graham did. This aspect of mourning, a call for the public sharing of personal anecdotes and the notion that “everyone has a


91 NBC, 2018, 2:15.

Billy Graham story,” serves to maintain the relevancy of Graham after his death and to associate the living with the man to whom they owe their salvation.

While Gifford’s public bereavement following the death of Graham and her attendance at his funeral speak to the collective and participatory nature of mourning, the funeral attendance of prominent figures illustrates how Graham’s death presented grounds for the assertion of political interests hidden under the veil of grief. Many expected that all healthy living presidents would be in attendance at the funeral, as Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and George H.W. Bush spoke at the opening of the Billy Graham Library in 2007, and George W. Bush and Bill Clinton came to Charlotte to pay their respects prior to the funeral. However, Donald Trump was the only president in attendance during the ceremony. Alongside Trump were Vice President Mike Pence and First and Second Ladies Melania Trump and Karen Pence, as well as several other conservative politicians, including Sarah Palin, Ben Carson, and Rudy Guiliani. The presence of these politicians, who at the time of Graham’s death were in control of both the Executive and Legislative branches, along with the absence of liberal policy makers, illustrates how politics was at work under the auspices of grief in the wake of Graham’s death. Less surprising is the list of evangelical leaders in attendance at Graham’s funeral, including those such as disgraced televangelist Jim Bakker and megachurch leaders Rick Warren and Joel Osteen. These figures, gathered in the same room as the sitting president and several other political powerhouses, represent a conjunction of church and state, both of which were brought together under the umbrella (or, in this case, tent) of Billy Graham.

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93 Goodstein and Shear, A13.
94 Goodstein and Shear, A13.
95 Goodstein and Shear, A13.
96 Goodstein and Shear, A13.
The public, personable, and participatory nature of mourning Billy Graham, alongside testaments meant to further the will of the living, appear among the speeches given at Graham’s funeral. Graham’s five children gave remarks during the service. His eldest son, Franklin, delivered the eulogy. Franklin began the eulogy by addressing the presence of Trump, Pence, and their wives, a nod to the earthly authority in the room. Throughout the eulogy, Franklin drew on typical Graham sermon structures to appeal to his audience and inspire their conversion. This participation-based approach, one that asked the audience to ask themselves “if this were your funeral, would you be in Heaven? Are you sure?” and sought to save the souls of sinners, represents the purpose of the eulogy as a call to action for the living.\(^{97}\) The speech demonstrates that both life and death must be at work to create a successful eulogy and ensure remembrance; in Franklin’s eulogy, there was no better way to make mourners remember Billy Graham than to save their souls at his funeral.

The brief remarks made by Graham’s other children, Gigi, Anne, Ruth, and Ned, further exemplify the communal and participatory rhetoric of mourning and reaffirm the calls for salvation ushered by Franklin moments prior. Anne Graham Lotz stated that she believed “that my father’s death is as significant as his life… I think that when he died that was very strategic from Heaven’s point of view.”\(^{98}\) She then referenced the book of Exodus and equated the death of Graham to the ascendance of Moses to Heaven.\(^{99}\) This statement assigns spectacular Biblical value to the death of Graham, serving to solidify Graham’s reputation as an extraordinarily holy man and representing the aspect of funeral oration that focuses on the life of whomever has


\(^{99}\) 11 Alive, 2018, 6:07.
passed. Additionally, this statement demonstrates the desire of the living to align themselves with Graham’s hallowed, uncompromised reputation. After establishing her father’s righteousness, Anne gave an energetic promise to Graham, stating “I pledge to you Daddy… in front of all these witnesses, that I will preach the word.” Anne’s public display of emotion and promise to use her life to evangelize others represents the other aspect of successful funeral oration: lessons for the living. It was through Anne’s emotional storytelling and powerful rhetoric that mourners in the crowd could see Graham’s legacy at work, and it was Anne’s desire to evangelize that was expressed in her remarks. As such, the will of the living was furthered during Graham’s funeral, as both Franklin and Anne used their time to appeal to any lingering “malignancies of the soul” that existed in their audience.

While the will of the living was certainly advanced through oratory practices at Billy Graham’s funeral, the participatory facet of mourning, one that encourages the masses to connect themselves to Graham, appeared most prominently in the remarks made by Graham’s youngest daughter, Ruth. Ruth began her brief speech by stating that memorial services for her father had reminded her that “everyone has a Billy Graham story,” even first-row attendee President Trump who went to see Graham at a crusade with his father in 1957. In asserting this sentiment during Graham’s funeral service, Ruth, following in Kathie Lee Gifford’s footsteps, reminded everyone of the extent of Graham’s reach. Additionally, she encouraged mourners to think back to their own encounters with Graham or his media content, linking one’s personal “Billy Graham story” with personal salvation. This participatory facet appealed to mourners by connecting them via a common and holy thread. These community building appeals work, as argued by Benedict

100 11 Alive, 2018, 8:35.
Anderson, to further nationalism within the evangelical arm of Protestantism, illustrative of how the participation encouraged at funerals can serve the interests of those wielding power or attempting to gain more of it.\(^\text{102}\) Ruth’s emotional speech is also reminiscent of the depictions of women in Graham’s films, *Oiltown, U.S.A.* and *The Restless Ones*, wherein a woman is shown to have the softest heart, a heart most open to receiving the word of the Lord. The onus placed on women furthers the occurrence of audience engagement among evangelical women seeking to fulfill their spiritual purpose as those before them, including Ruth Graham, had done. As calls to share one’s personal “Billy Graham story” illustrate, when people feel the need to relate themselves to others, it is easier for them to come together in support of a goal that works to advance the work of their religion. In this case, that goal is political power gained via conservatism and the Republican Party.

Media coverage of the funeral, produced both through Graham’s own foundation and secular news organizations, further speaks to the fact that funerals exist to serve the political interests of the living. The emphasis on attendees represents the importance of an audience in contextualizing the life of the dead. In this sense, the presence of important entertainers, evangelical leaders, and political powerhouses works to build community and authority among those mourning Billy Graham. Additionally, moral authority is granted to mourners through pieces such as those produced by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) as they often place Graham on a pedestal and liken him to Jesus for his work in spreading the Gospel. The Graham-run news outlet *Christianity Today* reported that Graham’s followers “prayed that the funeral itself and coverage by hundreds of reporters in attendance would lead more people to believe the gospel message the late evangelist preached—across the globe and across media

\(^{102}\) Anderson, 7.
formats—for decades,” demonstrating the potential for the funeral and subsequent virtual memorialization as tools to further evangelical interests.\textsuperscript{103} Even secular media outlets, like The Washington Post and The New York Times, characterized articles surrounding Graham’s memorialization under the heading of “politics,” asserting that in Graham’s case, not even death occurred apolitically.

Most notable among media produced following the death of Graham are online resources published by the BGEA that actively point mourners towards scripture and footage of Graham in an effort to inspire their conversion. Christianity Today reported on resources such as the BGEA sponsored online memorial, claiming that in the month following his death, the website received over 1.2 million visits.\textsuperscript{104} Embedded within the online memorial are opportunities for viewers to indicate that their visit has caused them to profess or renew their faith; one month after his death, the site had gathered over 10,000 indications of faith, demonstrative of how the death of Graham was used to advance the goals of evangelism.\textsuperscript{105} The BGEA had previously used online platforms to encourage viewers to “dedicate their lives to Christ” via the “Search for Jesus.net” site launched in 2011, which provided a model for the BGEA’s digital memorialization of Graham.\textsuperscript{106} In fact, as of December 1, 2021, the site reports to have had 95,274,383 visits and 17,576,211 indications of a profession of faith, recorded thanks to a real-time tracker that increases in numeric value as more visitors click to “indicate a decision for Christ.”\textsuperscript{107} The BGEA claims


\textsuperscript{104} Shellnut, 2018.

\textsuperscript{105} Shellnut, 2018.

\textsuperscript{106} Shellnut, 2018.

without proof that the virtual Billy Graham memorial and other BGEA sponsored digital content are responsible for “the equivalent of one successful Graham crusade per day online;” these platforms represent the potential for spiritual conversion seized by evangelists following Graham’s death.\textsuperscript{108}

BGEA financial interests manifest as well in Graham’s memorialization through the frequent encouragement of users to donate to the cause. The memorial website asks, “in lieu of flowers, please consider a memorial gift to BGEA,” directing visitors to the “memorial gifts” page.\textsuperscript{109} The BGEA website provides options for donors to give a $25, $50, $100, and $250 gift, with the option of $50 pre-selected for the visitor, and gives the donor an opportunity to subscribe to monthly gifts.\textsuperscript{110} Because of the BGEA’s status as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, the organization is exempt from federal taxes and donations given are largely tax deductible. As such, content produced by the BGEA via the memorialization of Billy Graham serves the interest of the living by aiding in monetary gains for the organization and advancing the evangelical will to universalize by whatever means necessary.

The final element of Billy Graham’s funeral representative of the power structures that shape evangelical mourning is the casket in which Graham was buried. Graham’s casket, purchased in 2007 in anticipation of his passing, was not ornately decorated nor extensively adorned. The casket was made of pine, plywood, and mattress pads from Walmart, and was repeatedly referred to as “a simple casket for a simple man.”\textsuperscript{111} However, this casket

\textsuperscript{108} Shellnut, 2018.

\textsuperscript{109} “Give to the Ongoing Ministry,” Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 2021, \url{https://billygraham.org/donation/the-ongoing-ministry/}.

\textsuperscript{110} “Give to the Ongoing Ministry,” 2021.

demonstrates that nothing of Graham’s death was “simple.” Burned into the wood are the names of the three men who built the casket: Richard Liggett, Paul Krolowitz, and Clifford Bowman.112 These men were portrayed by Graham’s family as “the least of these,” a Biblical reference to those whom Jesus was said to have valued the most, because of their status as inmates in the Louisiana State Penitentiary.113 Ligget and Bowman, both sentenced to life for murder, and Krolowitz, sentenced to thirty years for armed robbery, handcrafted Graham’s casket while incarcerated. This use of incarcerated labor marks an instance wherein America’s carceral system exploits its inmates, the majority of whom are people of color, and upholds the authority of powerful groups like the white evangelicals with whom Graham was associated.114 Graham’s casket thus symbolizes how American evangelicalism works to further conservative political interests under the guise of spiritual salvation for all.

The origin of the inmate casket construction, their experience in meeting members of the Graham family, and the purchase of the casket speak to the ways in which Graham’s funeral illustrates the sinister nature of money, power, and religion in America. Louisiana State Penitentiary has a brutal history of exploitation and inhumane living conditions representative of the toxicity of America's carceral system. Formerly an 8,000 acre plantation populated by enslaved workers from Angola, the penitentiary, referred to by most as Angola State Prison, was founded in 1880 when inmates were housed in former “slave quarters” and forced to work on the

plantation to sustain the prison’s cost of operation.\textsuperscript{115} The state of Louisiana took control of the prison in 1901 following reports of brutality under the previous private owners.\textsuperscript{116} Unfortunately, despite the shift to state ownership, brutality remained at Angola. Inmates have continued to work in the fields to produce crops for sale despite the fact that during the Great Depression labor and living conditions became so bad that 31 inmates publicly slashed their Achilles tendon in protest.\textsuperscript{117} Angola, now the nation’s largest maximum security prison, now exists atop 18,000 acres (the size of Manhattan), and has earned a reputation as the “bloodiest prison in the South.”\textsuperscript{118} Its inmate population is comprised almost completely of Black prisoners, while its guards, referred to as “Freemen,” are overwhelmingly White.\textsuperscript{119} Modern slavery is alive and well at Angola, and it was at this prison, using this labor, that Billy Graham’s casket was made.

Angola State Prison’s power dynamics are represented in the events that led to casket building among the inmates. As most of the 5,000 inmates die behind bars, and many of their families cannot afford funeral expenses themselves, those incarcerated in Angola prior to the late 1990’s could expect to be buried on its property in makeshift cardboard coffins.\textsuperscript{120} However, in 1995, new Warden Burl Cain set out to alter this tragic practice by allowing inmates resources to construct wooden caskets as part of his “reform” of the prison. Cain “revamped” Angola by pumping it with “Christian values” and utilizing resources from the Graham family to pay for

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
  \bibitem{116} Sullivan and Drummond, 2008.
  \bibitem{117} Sullivan and Drummond, 2008.
  \bibitem{118} Sullivan and Drummond, 2008.
  \bibitem{119} Sullivan and Drummond, 2008.
  \bibitem{120} Douglas, 2018.
\end{thebibliography}
chapels and religious education. While these chapels were largely paid for by the Graham family via donations amounting to more than $200,000, they were constructed using the labor of the inmates. Cain’s “remodel” of Angola also resulted in the emergence of a casket building program to be led by trusted inmate Richard Liggett. In reference to the “progressive” changes made under his tenure, Cain went so far as to state that Angola “was blessed because of [the Graham family],” crediting them with the evangelization of inmates who were rewarded for adherence to Protestant behavior while those who opposed were punished. For Cain, the ultimate rehabilitation was only possible “through Christ,” thus his goal was not to improve life for inmates on earth but rather to prepare them for “eternal salvation” via religious education. Such appeals among a state-run prison clearly violate separation between church and state, but because there is money in Protestantism and power in evangelical politics, it is not surprising that figures like Cain would buy into the exploitative structures that allow for people like him to maintain their social dominance. Graham’s casket is representative of the “moral rehabilitation” tactics used by Cain to further his own evangelical interests at Angola.

The conditions that led Franklin Graham to purchase the inmate-constructed casket for his father in the early 2000’s are equally as troubling as the history of Angola that led to the creation of the program in the first place. Angola is the site of the longest running prison rodeo in the country as it has put on this special event since 1965, the same year as the premiere of The


At the Angola Prison Rodeo, inmates compete in dangerous events where they are placed in close proximity to angry bulls in front of a crowd that has recently grown to exceed 10,000 people. Events include: “Convict Poker,” where inmates play poker near a loose bull and the last one seated wins; “Prisoner Pinball,” where inmates are instructed to stand in a randomly placed hula hoop among a loose bull and the last one standing wins; and “Guts and Glory,” where inmates compete to snag a poker chip that has been fastened to the head of “Angola’s toughest bull” in order to win a $500 prize. The money brought in from ticket sales for the event is put towards inmate religious education.

Although the Angola Prison website states that “many offenders see the rodeo as a rare opportunity to feel a part of society outside of the gates and take pride in showcasing their talents,” the event is seen by some as exploitative entertainment that puts lives on the line akin to gladiator shows of the Roman age. In 2005, Franklin Graham attended the rodeo and was given a tour of Angola; it was on this tour that Franklin heard about the casket building program and the craftsmanship of the inmates involved. The fact that Franklin Graham was brought to Angola because of the rodeo speaks to the capital-driven corruption in the American carceral system that led to the existence of such exploitative events. His purchase of the casket at this event, which itself constitutes a spectacle, speaks to the underlying manifestations of power and politics among the death of Billy Graham. The association of Graham with Angola State Prison


allows the prison to build a positive reputation among American evangelicals, allowing for the continuation of the carceral system that furthers the interests of the white Protestants who benefit from the structural inequities of penitentiaries like Angola. The convicts tasked with building Graham’s casket and attending Protestant programming at Angola are captives, and their presence in Graham-inspired proselytizing is not voluntary.

Billy Graham’s casket again depicts how American evangelicalism can manifest as a wolf in sheep’s clothing. It was built using incarcerated labor by inmates held captive within a system that constantly exploits them. Additionally, it represents the participatory incentive of mourning Billy Graham as those who helped make it were able to feel connected to the broader, free evangelical community through their ties to Graham himself. John Liggett, the brother of lead casket craftsman inmate Richard Liggett, believes that Richard became religious because he was able to attend moral rehabilitation at Angola by way of attending services in the chapels paid for by the Graham family; “‘my brother,’ he said, ‘was probably saved by Billy Graham.’” This statement reflects the ability of Graham to bring together mourners while avoiding discussion of the negative implications of the prison’s focus on moral rehabilitation. The casket was purchased by Franklin for $215, just enough to cover the cost of the materials and the labor of inmates paid $0.02 an hour for their work. Such low wages demonstrate the capitalist intent behind prison labor in the first place, again at work to further the worldly interests of the living. Richard Liggett died behind bars ten years prior to the death of Billy Graham. He was buried in the last casket that he built.

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On February 28, 2018, Graham’s “simple” casket was brought to the U.S. Capitol Rotunda to lie in honor, the civilian equivalent of lying in state, among the seat of power, making Graham the fourth private citizen to have ever been given this honor.\textsuperscript{134} This event reflects both the manifestations of power among funerary remembrance and the participatory aspects of mourning as tools to advance the political will of the living. Prior to Billy Graham, the only other private citizens brought to lie in honor at the Capitol were Rosa Parks in 2005 and two Capitol police officers killed in the line of duty in the late 1990’s.\textsuperscript{135} Graham was recognized in this manner due to his influence on America as the “savior” of millions of souls. Senator John Cornyn, the number two Republican in the Senate at the time, supported the honor, stating that Graham was “somebody who’s had such an influence on America and America’s leadership in such a positive way” because of his service to the presidents.\textsuperscript{136} This justification of federal memorialization on the grounds of spiritual salvation (Protestant at that) reflects a conflation of church and state in a manner that normalizes evangelism in politics and serves the interest of conservative Christians in government.

The memorialization of Billy Graham inside the Capitol rotunda began with a private service representative of the power structures that shaped the mourning. At the time, the three most powerful people in government were President Trump, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, and Speaker of the House Paul Ryan. As such, the three Republican men were given a platform to speak at the service upon the arrival of Graham’s casket to the Capitol. Each speaker articulated the importance of Graham as a spiritual leader and described him as the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[134] Pulliam Bailey, February 2018.
\item[136] Stolberg and Shear, A14.
\end{footnotes}
backbone of the nation because of the work he had done to spread the Gospel. McConnell spoke to Graham’s interpretation of the work of the Senate, “the secret to which, [Graham] explained, is God… I would be nothing without Him. That’s what made Billy Graham America’s pastor.” This statement exemplifies the work of politics among memorialization. In asserting that Graham made clear that the “secret” behind the work of a Senator is God, McConnell directly linked his federal job to Protestantism in America, directly ignoring the Establishment Clause. In calling Graham “America’s pastor,” McConnell further classified Graham’s spiritual service as vital to the success of the nation, again linking America with Protestantism and advocating in favor of the sharing of the Gospel among governing bodies. This rhetoric normalizes evangelism in government and works to advance the goals of conservatism in America.

Remarks made by Speaker of the House Paul Ryan further reflect the ties made between church and state via remembrance of Billy Graham at the Capitol rotunda. Ryan stated that “when we felt weak in spirit, when our country was on its knees, [Graham] reminded us, he convinced us that is exactly when we find our grace and our strength.” In connecting American resilience with Christianity as presented by Graham, Ryan’s remarks serve to further establish Graham, and the God he served, as vital to the functions of democracy and the success of the nation. While there is nothing wrong with turning to religion in times of personal crisis, it is when religion makes its way into governance that lines between church and state are blurred. Graham himself was supposedly against such blurring of lines, thus his posthumous stay in the

137 Stolberg and Shear, A14.
138 Stolberg and Shear, A14.
139 Stolberg and Shear, A14.
Capitol rotunda illustrates the political interests of mourners at play in the honoring of Billy Graham.

Finally, the speech given by President Trump again displays the ways in which political power was mobilized through the death of Billy Graham in order to further the interests of evangelical conservatism. In his speech, Trump recalled his personal Billy Graham story: the time he and his father attended a crusade at Yankee Stadium in 1957.\footnote{Stolberg and Shear, A14.} Trump exclaimed that “Americans came in droves to hear that great young preacher,” who was 39 at the time, equating the Billy Graham experience with the American experience.\footnote{Stolberg and Shear, A14.} Trump’s remarks further represent the participatory nature of the mourning of Graham in that sharing his personal story helped him appeal to broader remembrance and connected him to those with similar stories. Two years after providing remarks for the lying in honor of Graham, there would be another private citizen given the same honor: Capitol police officer Brian Sicknick. Sicknick was killed in the January 6th insurrection that was incited by President Trump and was the fifth private citizen to lay in honor at the rotunda on February 3, 2021.\footnote{Brakkton Booker, “Lawmakers Honor Slain Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick in Rotunda,” National Public Radio, February 3, 2021, \url{https://www.npr.org/sections/insurrection-at-the-capitol/2021/02/03/963598638/lawmakers-honor-slain-capitol-police-officer-brian-sicknick-in-rotunda}.} The insurrection demonstrated the power of Trump’s rhetoric to mobilize his supporters, many of whom subscribed to the same evangelical ideals articulated by Trump and his allies in the wake of Graham’s death.\footnote{David Folkenflik, “A Look At The Rhetoric Around The Storming Of The U.S. Capitol,” National Public Radio, January 6, 2021, \url{https://www.npr.org/2021/01/06/954149242/a-look-at-the-rhetoric-around-the-storming-of-u-s-capitol}.} Trump’s funeral oration, one that allowed him to attach his name to Graham’s and make a plea for the evangelism of the country, sacralized American politics in a manner not lost on his supporters.
The optics surrounding Graham’s casket, made by incarcerated laborers and placed in honor among the classically inspired architecture of the Capitol rotunda, visually represents the relevancy of Greek revivalist tradition among funerals and its uses as a tool for the living. Just as Athenians used public funerals to tell a romantic history that centralized the glory of the city itself, memorializing Graham in the rotunda equated Protestantism with American exceptionalism. As in Athens, the funeral oration given by the three most powerful men in government among imposing Neoclassical architectural structures serves the interest of conservative Republicans by glorifying the particular vision of America that exists under their rule. The structure of the U.S. Capitol, derived from Greco-Roman influence, is said to “evoke

144 Stolberg and Shear, A14.

the ideals that guided the nation's founders as they framed their new republic.” These ideals, federalist and grand, assert authority among the infrastructure of the city and represent the governing power of those given platforms within them. The neoclassical style of the U.S. Capitol also serves to reference the public usage of Greco-Roman architecture, again representing the participation integral to federal mourning at this site. At the service to honor Graham, the juxtaposition between the casket made by Angola inmates and the authority presented by Trump and the nature of the rotunda served to reaffirm the power of evangelical conservatism. Graham’s memorialization among neoclassical architecture again connected spiritualism and the federal government in a manner illustrative of the purpose of funerals as events that serve politics of the living.

Neoclassical architecture has also been deployed to further conservative ideals at the World War II memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., a structure which reaffirms the importance of architecture in national mourning. Memorials such as these both create and celebrate “an imaginary national citizen: the representative American, the ‘good’ citizen that all American citizens aspire to become.” Graham represents that “good” citizen; he devoted his life to his spirituality and “saved” countless souls along the way. He also represents the national citizen, as rhetoric surrounding his death affirmed his role as “America’s pastor.” As such, his memorialization in the rotunda, like the memorialization of World War II veterans among Neoclassical architecture on the national mall speaks to assertions of federal power in conversation with divinity. However, as these monuments overwhelm the national infrastructure,

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they tend to become inconspicuous to the common citizen.\textsuperscript{148} This phenomenon can also be seen in the honoring of Billy Graham as the architecture of the Capitol was contrasted against the simplicity of the casket, causing viewers to focus less on the imposing, authoritative structures surrounding them and more on the man whom they believed to have secured divine approval for the nation.

The American urge to seek out sites of loss and engage in collective mourning is present in the federal memorialization of Billy Graham and representative of the value of communal grief in advancing a political goal. The opening of the rotunda for citizens to view the casket for themselves again represents the participatory nature of grief that worked to situate Graham as a Christ-like figure worthy of mass spectatorship. Americans embarked on pilgrimages to see the casket during his tenure at the rotunda as reported on by the BGEA, resulting in the sacralization of Graham. The BGEA claimed there were “thousands” lined up to view the casket, and reported on testimonies provided by those in line to portray the legacy of Graham and the extent of his work.\textsuperscript{149} The public mourning of such an important figure, one who inspired Americans to travel far and wide for the “once in a lifetime opportunity” of viewing his casket in the Capitol rotunda, demonstrates how collective grief among crowds of people worked to reaffirm Graham’s influence and reputation as “the nation’s clergyman.”\textsuperscript{150} Graham’s grandson also testified to the size of the crowd as represented in a New York Times piece regarding the honorific in the Capitol rotunda. In the piece, Will Graham is quoted as stating “‘It’s overwhelming to see the love that


\textsuperscript{150} Jothen, 2018.
my grandaddy has,” a sentiment that expresses the extent of collective mourning wherein the Capitol serves as the primary site of public remembrance.\textsuperscript{151} Crowds “filed past the plain pine plywood coffin in the grand Capitol Rotunda,” the former representing the alleged simplicity of Graham juxtaposed by the latter’s representation of state power and influence aided by Graham’s work.\textsuperscript{152} Such large crowds again represent how the participatory nature of grief surrounding Graham formed a community of mourners. This participation also reaffirmed the reach of evangelism among a community that assumes universality achieved via the sharing of the Gospel should be one’s primary goal.

During the days when Graham’s casket lay in honor in the rotunda and viewing was open to the general public, he became a symbol for the cause of evangelicalism. One mourner stated, while viewing Graham’s casket, that he was “the Martin Luther King of our day.”\textsuperscript{153} This statement is extremely important as it at once reaffirms the cultural significance of Graham and reasserts the politically repackaged view of Martin Luther King as a pro-American, pro-establishment figure, all while denying the fact that King was killed for his beliefs while Graham flourished for his. Additionally, it supports the lying in honor of Graham at the Capitol rotunda despite his position as a religious leader rather than a civil rights one, and ignores that King was not given the same honor. Statements such as this do not exist in a vacuum; additional character references made about Graham during his time in the Capitol further illustrate the authority given to him and his associates upon his death.

More so than the statement likening Graham to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., statements that place Graham on a divine pedestal work to reaffirm his influence and maintain his relevance

\textsuperscript{151} Stolberg and Shear, A14.

\textsuperscript{152} Stolberg and Shear, A14.

\textsuperscript{153} Stolberg and Shear, A14.
among an increasingly conservative evangelical support network. One mourner viewing Graham at the Capitol stated “he was like Jesus for us,” representing the reputation of Graham as the “good” American, the “perfect” preacher who could do no wrong.\textsuperscript{154} This appeal, one that likens Graham to whom Christians believe to be the son of God, again gives validity to the lying in honor of Graham and to the national mourning that such an event calls for. Furthermore, it grants authority to political leaders like Trump, McConnell, and Ryan as their association with Graham asserted upon his death reaffirms their power both politically and spiritually, granting them points among their networks of evangelical supporters. The will to evangelize was also furthered during the public viewing of the casket, as the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association reported that “thousands” had lined up to view the coffin, and testified to the “rededication of [one’s] life to Jesus” among several attendees.\textsuperscript{155} The marketing of this event as a celebration, an occasion for one to “rejoice” as Gifford did, additionally represents incentives to participate in the mourning of Graham. One viewer claimed to be “happy for him. He’s gone home,” reminiscent of Graham’s message that death is “an exchange of our earthly dwelling to our Heavenly home.”\textsuperscript{156} As the Capitol rotunda served as a stop on Graham’s journey “home,” this memorialization worked to further the interests of evangelicalism in politics. However, this ceremonial display of power did not occur without controversy.

Despite the claims of Graham’s universal appeal in the coverage of his death and memorial, the honor given Graham at the Capitol rotunda was met with pushback among Americans. Many were aware of the political motivations behind the lying in honor and the violation of the Establishment Clause that such an event supported. \textit{Americans United}, a

\textsuperscript{154} Jothen, 2018.

\textsuperscript{155} Jothen, 2018.

\textsuperscript{156} Jothen, 2018.
religious liberty watchdog group advocating for the separation of church and state, slammed the
politicians responsible for honoring Graham in the rotunda. The group argued that the honor
given to Graham in recognition of his evangelism “offends the spirit of our First Amendment’s
guarantee that government will not take actions that endorse or promote religion.”

In addition to addressing the violation of the Establishment Clause that such an honor
represented, Americans United critiqued the honor given to Graham on the basis of his history of
anti-semitic and homophobic comments. These comments, such as a conversation with Nixon
wherein Graham asserted that “liberal Jews controlled the media and were responsible for
pornography,” and statements made in opposition to same-sex marriage, demonstrate the
politicization of Graham’s work beyond simply the sharing of the Gospel. Prior to his death,
Graham asserted that he should have “steered clear of politics” throughout his life, especially
since his involvement with figures like Nixon and the publication of private problematic
conversations at times resulted in public upset towards Graham and compromised the integrity of
his “simple” and “universal” message. The pushback against Graham’s lying in honor at the
rotunda shows that his message was not universal nor did it include all Americans. The fact that
Graham regretted his involvement with politics also shows his own awareness of that
exclusivity. Because the honor was given to Graham against his wishes and against the advice
of groups advocating for the separation of church and state, it is clear that this funeral served
only the living, all of which support the cause of evangelicalism.

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158 Hassanein, 2018.
159 Goodstein, A1.
161 Hassanein, 2018.
Conclusion

Anne Graham Lotz was correct in asserting that her father’s death would be as significant as his life. Billy Graham’s death in 2018 at the age of 99 allowed for the furthering of evangelical Christianity both in the private sphere via the conversion of thousands and in the public sphere via the strengthening of religion in conservative politics. Graham’s funeral encapsulates this dynamic. Attendees such as Kathie Lee Gifford, an evangelical who uses her platform on daytime television to spread the Gospel as told by Graham as well as her personal story of salvation speak to the ability of Graham to find value in the spectacle of Christianity through television. Other guests, such as President Trump and other political and evangelical leaders proved the authority of Graham and his work and classified mourners among a privileged and powerful group. Guests and viewers were also encouraged to think back to their own personal “Billy Graham stories,” inspiring participation that resulted in a community of mourners. The rhetoric of funeral oration sought to convert any lingering sinners in the crowd and encourage participation throughout the service. Media representations of this event, especially those sponsored by the BGEA, further demonstrate the evangelizing goals behind the funeral service and digitized memorial content. The financial motivations of the organization in marketing this content also represent the deep ties to capitalism that existed in the service. The BGEA itself stated that its intended purpose in memorializing Billy Graham through his funeral and subsequent online mourning material was to inspire further conversion and lead more sinners to “salvation.” These factors demonstrate that Graham’s funeral worked to further the political interests of the living.

The will of the living and the desire to perpetuate the power held by evangelical conservatism is additionally represented by Graham’s casket. Made by incarcerated laborers at
the historically brutal Angola State Prison in Louisiana, the casket represents the ways in which “the least of these” are exploited in order to serve the interests of the privileged who, in this case, align with the religious identity of Graham. When the casket was brought to D.C. for Graham to lie in honor at the U.S. Capitol rotunda, the potential of funerals to serve as public tools that advance the interests of the living was represented yet again. Political power holders like Trump, McConnell, and Ryan used this service to relate themselves to Graham and play up their religiosity among an increasingly evangelical conservative support network. This event blurred the lines between church and state in a manner unlikely to have been supported by Graham during his lifetime, again representative of the fact that funerals are meant to advance the interests of the living through the creation of spectacle and the drawing of connections between earthly authorities and divine ones. The public, personal, and participatory facets of Graham’s memorialization demonstrate the normalization of Graham’s spiritualism in secular spheres, answering why and how Graham is unique in his curation of spectacular fame.

Debord’s characterization of spectacle as a phenomenon that “presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification” once again offers insight into the inspiration behind and intended purpose of the spectacle of Billy Graham. Graham’s work sought to convey evangelicalism through the spectacle of entertainment, allowing him access to large audiences through his ability to cater to their desires and unify them as a community of believers. The Christ-like centrality of Graham within such spectacles reaffirmed the community of believers by linking them under the preaching of just one man, elevating Graham to celebrity status and allowing him to gain influence among other like minded power holders of the post-war period. Through film, Graham was again able to convey his evangelical message to mass audiences, blending popular culture with Protestantism in new ways.

162 Debord, 7.
and more mainstream ways. Such overlap between entertainment and religion was achieved through a carefully crafted spectacle that cemented Graham’s reputation as a “simple” man, allowing for his political involvement to thrive under the veil of religiosity. This same reputation was maintained by Graham even in death, wherein mourners focused on their personal connections to the Christ-like figure of Graham in order to justify the blurring of church and state lines within their own lives and careers. As Graham’s death demonstrates, the camouflaging of politics as evangelism works to further inequity in the form of the American carceral state, white supremacy, and violence as seen in the January 6th Insurrection. Graham’s life and death buttress a relationship between politics and religion. One can only hope that in years to come, presupposed divine guidance ceases to masquerade the politics of inequity in America.
Bibliography


