

American Council of Christian Churches  
Statement on the Death of Billy Graham

The death of Billy Graham at the age of 99 is the passing of one of the most well-known religious figures of the last hundred years in America. From every conceivable source, praise is flowing for a figure who seems universally admired and whose life seems to be remembered as an uninterrupted march of faithful Christian testimony. His books are numerous, and his public appearances at various evangelistic crusades during his long career made Billy Graham a figure whose voice and physical presence commanded ready recognition around the world. We add our condolences to the members of the Graham family as they mourn the death of one who was dear to them.

But like the displays of the Billy Graham Library and Museum in Charlotte, N.C., the extensive reviews of Graham's long life and career reveal significant omissions of key events that suggest that Billy Graham was also a powerful threat to the historic orthodoxy and separatist practice of Biblical Christianity. As demonstrated in the 1957 publication, *A Ministry of Disobedience*, a publication to which some members of the ACCC contributed, Graham's introduction of ecumenical compromise into evangelism, seen in the decision to open his crusades to sponsorship by liberal and modernist Protestant ministerial associations beginning with the New York crusade in 1957, showed that he was in lock step with the recently named religious strategy of the New Evangelicalism.

Graham's early career during the post-World War II years reflected the influence he felt from leading Fundamentalists from the first half of the twentieth century. As late as 1950, Graham's television broadcast, *Hour of Decision*, staged one of its programs in the newly constructed facilities of Bob Jones University in Greenville, SC. Dr. Bob Jones, Jr., then the president of the university, appeared as a special guest in that program.

During the 1950s, as Graham's appeal grew, he moved toward the strategic decision to make his crusades' organization teams more diverse ecclesiastically, leading to the 1957 New York crusade, in which well-known modernists appeared on the crusade platform to receive Graham's recognition of them as Christian brothers. In *Reforming Fundamentalism*, George Marsden observed that Graham's new approach was "cooperation with a group that was predominantly non-evangelical and even included out-and-out modernists. It also meant sending converts back to their local churches, no matter how liberal those churches might be" [*Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 162]. For many Fundamentalists, this was the step after which they were not willing to support Graham any longer. Bob Jones, Jr., and his father, Bob Jones, Sr., a leading evangelist of the first half of the twentieth century, along with other Fundamentalist leaders, rebuked Graham's compromise openly and publicly and announced that they must separate from him.

The American Council of Christian Churches joined in that separation and observed the great harm that Graham's new evangelical approach was bound to cause in the field of evangelism and in the ranks of churches that continued to preach the Bible. Some predicted that Graham would prove to be one of the most destructive and divisive forces in the history of American Evangelicalism.

His message appeared to remain the same, but as the years passed, his crusades began to introduce more elements of the popular culture, and Graham himself began to speak of greater cooperation with a whole array of what he called “Christian” denominations, including Roman Catholics. Eventually, he widened his view to include full-blown syncretism. In a May 1997 interview with Dr. Robert Schuller on Schuller’s *Hour of Power* television program, Graham agreed with Schuller’s view that people could be saved without any reference to the name of Christ at all.

During the years that followed the 1957 watershed decision, events continued to vindicate predictions by Fundamentalists that Graham’s approach to evangelism was going to lead to increasing accommodations to liberal Protestantism and to blurring of the lines that separate Protestantism from Roman Catholicism. In receiving an honorary degree in 1967 from Belmont Abbey College, a Roman Catholic institution near Graham’s North Carolina home, the evangelist said of the gospel, “That gospel has founded this school, that gospel has brought me here tonight.” Two years earlier, the executive vice-president of the college, Cuthbert Allen, wrote, “Billy Graham is preaching a moral evangelical theology most acceptable to Catholics.”

The legacy that the late Dr. Graham has left is an evangelical movement bereft of any unyielding theological moorings. By embracing the strategy of compromise with those who denied the faith of the Scriptures, he, like his new evangelical colleagues, did not influence the liberals to a more Biblical position. Instead, the liberals dragged Graham farther and farther from the message with which he began his ministry.

Therefore, the American Council of Christian Churches, while joining in expressing sympathy to Dr. Graham’s family on the occasion of his death, must remain steadfast in defense of the faith by urging the rejection of Billy Graham’s compromising strategy and the repudiation of his legacy of vacillation that has provided encouragement to those who despise the truth of the gospel as we find it in the Scriptures. We resolve to remain true to the position to which our Lord has called us—to come out from among those who refuse the truth and to be separated unto Jesus Christ.



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