



How Donald Trump Replaced 'the Protestant Pope'

Billy Graham towered over American evangelicalism for 50 years.
Now the fight is on to own his legacy.



Photo illustration by Alex

Listen to this article · 13:16 min [Learn more](#)

Share full article



110

By **Ruth Graham**

Ruth Graham covers religion in America. She is not related to the Billy Graham family.

Nov. 2, 2024

In the final stretch of a presidential election between two candidates who don't speak often about their personal religious beliefs, an itinerant evangelist born in 1918 has become the subject of a skirmish in the ongoing civil war over the future of evangelical Christianity in America.

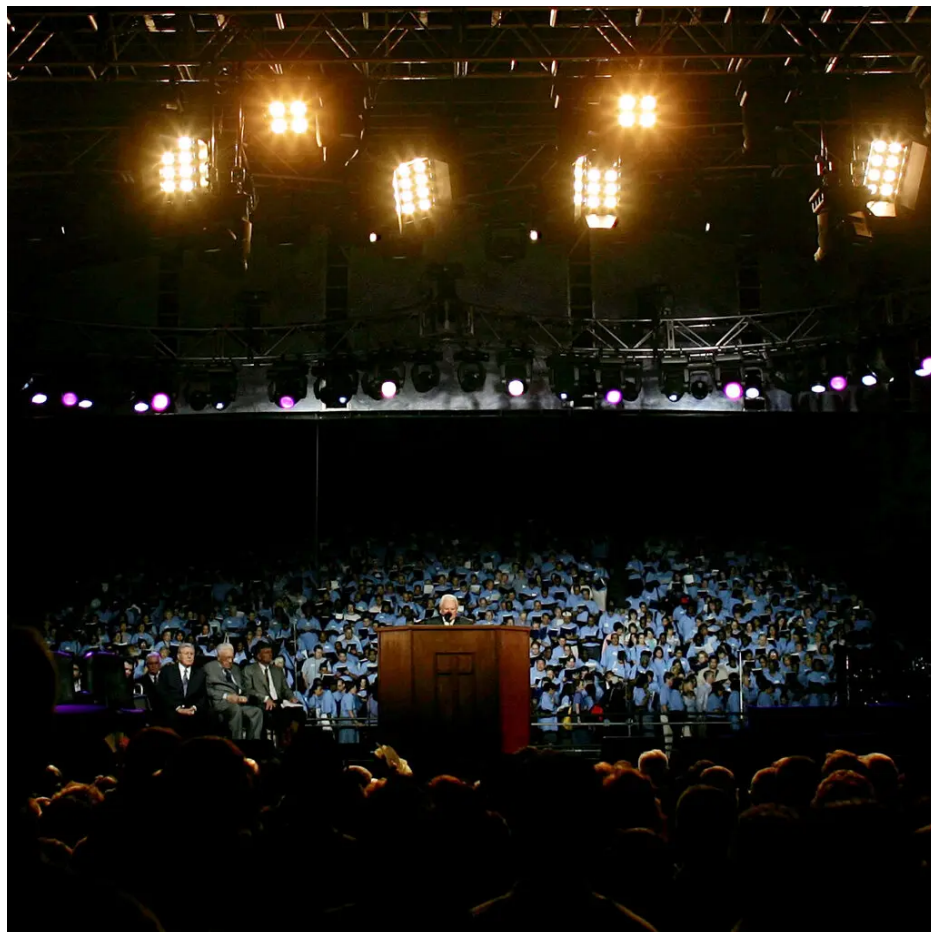
The battle began in August, when a PAC-run campaign called Evangelicals for Harris juxtaposed a 1988 sermon by the Rev. [Billy Graham](#) — the towering figure of 20th-century American Protestantism who died in 2018 — against clips of Donald Trump, who has come to dominate the movement in the 21st century.

“You must realize that in the last days, the times will be full of danger,” Mr. Graham said in the sermon, reciting from the New

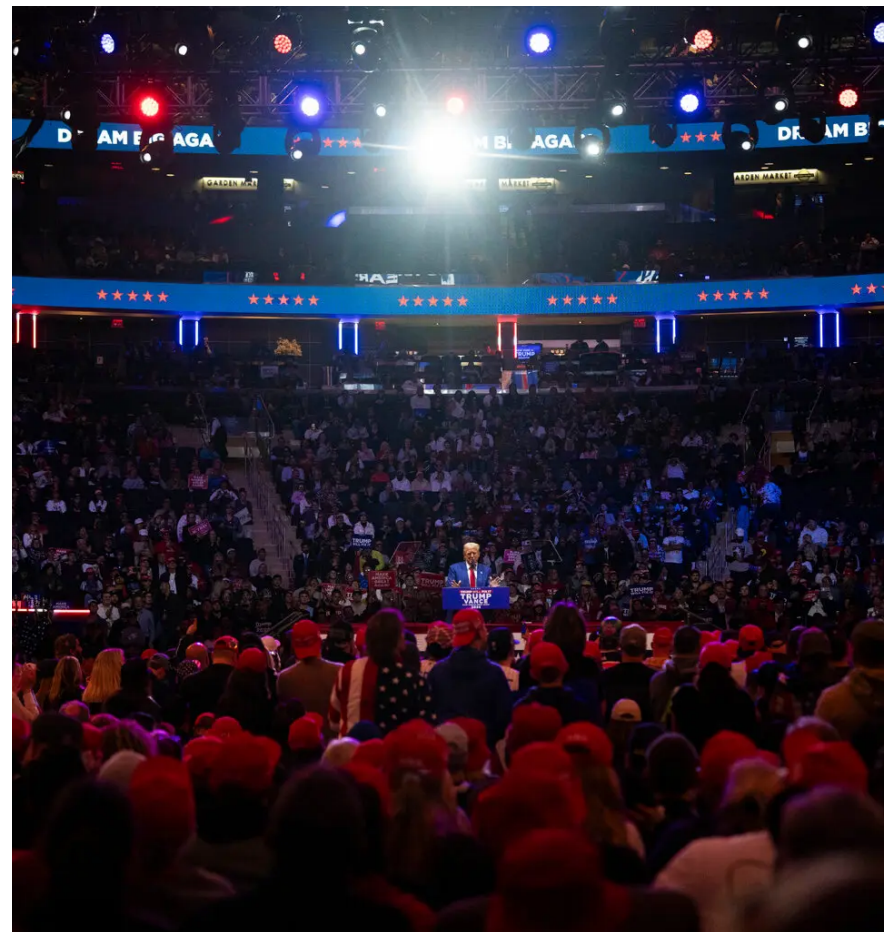
Testament book of 2 Timothy. He went on, listing the qualities that will be on display in those treacherous last days: greed, pride, violence, recklessness, pleasure-seeking.

“They will maintain a facade of religion, but their lives deny the truth,” he concluded, still drawing on the same passage. “Keep clear of people like that.”

As Mr. Graham denounces greed, [the ad cuts to Mr. Trump](#), speaking at a rally in Iowa: “My whole life I’ve been greedy, greedy, greedy. I’ve grabbed all the money I could get. I’m so greedy.” After Mr. Graham warns that people will become “uncontrolled and violent,” the video shows Mr. Trump at a rally saying, “I’d like to punch him in the face.”



Mr. Graham speaking at his Crusade at Flushing Meadows Corona Park in Queens, N.Y., in 2005. Spencer Platt/Getty Images



Mr. Trump at Madison Square Garden in New York on Sunday. Hir Masuike/The New York Times

Offering no commentary, the ad does not imply Mr. Graham or the biblical passage were making prophetic reference to Mr. Trump. But the contrast between the upstanding evangelist and the crass candidate struck a chord: The 59-second spot has been viewed to completion online more than 40 million times, a spokesman for

Evangelicals for Harris said.

Evangelicals for Harris is, of course, not a dominant force within the movement. Most evangelicals are for Mr. Trump. He earned about 80 percent of the white evangelical vote in 2016 and 2020, and appears on track to do the same on Nov. 5. His supporters include Mr. Graham's eldest son, Franklin, who heads the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, the North Carolina-based organization that promotes Mr. Graham's legacy and the evangelistic ministries of Franklin and his son, Will.

"The liberals are using anything and everything they can to promote candidate Harris," Franklin Graham wrote on social media, referring to the ad in support of Kamala Harris. His organization sent a cease-and-desist letter to Evangelicals for Harris, which went on to release a second ad juxtaposing Mr. Graham and Mr. Trump. (Franklin Graham declined through a spokesman to be interviewed.)

The fight over the ad has mirrored the fractiousness inside the evangelical movement in the decade since Mr. Trump took it over. Multiple camps, including an institutionalist minority that resisted Mr. Trump's ascent, are fighting to determine whether the church can continue to appeal to a broad base of practicing Christians — or if it will [shed some of its earlier core values](#) to bind itself more

firmly to Trumpism.

Which side will get to define 21st-century Protestantism in the way Mr. Graham's version defined the 20th?





Mr. Graham speaking at Polo Grounds before an audience of 40,000 during the final rally of his New York Crusade in 1957. Allyn Baum/
The New York Times

The ‘Next Billy Graham’?

Today it can be hard to capture Mr. Graham’s cultural ubiquity in an era in which Christianity itself was a more omnipresent part of American life. Called “the Protestant pope” and “America’s pastor,” he counseled every sitting president from Harry Truman to Barack Obama, and met with Queen Elizabeth, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Pope John Paul II.

Although he was criticized by fundamentalists from the right, and by progressive theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr from the left, Mr. Graham generally had the support of politicians and the mainstream media. He filled arenas and stadiums with “crusades” that were essentially supersize church services, culminating in an altar call in which Mr. Graham summoned those so moved to come forward and pray to receive Christ into their hearts. He is estimated to have spoken to more than 200 million people around the world, converting millions of them and strengthening the convictions of millions more. He held his last crusade in 2005 and

died 13 years later at the age of 99. Christian publications wondered at the time who would be the “next Billy Graham,” and concluded he was irreplaceable.

But the stage was already shifting under Mr. Graham by the time he stepped off it. Church attendance, Christian beliefs and organized religion in general were declining. American society has become more secular and liberal, making it increasingly untenable for a theologically conservative Christian pastor to be a uniting figure of any kind. “There is something about broader cultural change, but also specifically political polarization around religion, that makes it very difficult to imagine Graham today,” said Collin Hansen, executive director of the Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics, named for the Rev. [Timothy Keller](#), the New York City pastor once considered a potential “next Billy Graham.”

One inflection point was the rapid evolution on widespread acceptance of same-sex marriage. In the summer of 2008, the megachurch pastor the Rev. Rick Warren — another one-time “next Billy Graham” — convened both presidential candidates, Barack Obama and John McCain, at his church in Southern California. There, the Democratic candidate told Mr. Warren that “as a Christian,” he believed marriage was between a man and a woman. By 2013, Mr. Obama had “evolved” on the issue, and

Protestants were a [minority in the country for the first time](#). Two years later, the Supreme Court guaranteed the right to same-sex marriage, making it [essentially impossible](#) for anyone who opposed it to be elevated in Democratic circles.

Then came Donald Trump, who crashed through the fragile big tent of Mr. Graham's evangelicalism like a wrecking ball. He appealed to evangelicals not as a fellow Christian, but as their defender — a lion who would stop at nothing to protect his lambs. Mr. Trump promised that “[Christianity will have power](#),” and he portrayed the country without him as careening into a harrowing future ruled by liberals bent on stripping Christian values from the public square.



Attendees at the Celebration of Hope where Billy Graham preached in New Orleans in 2006. Chris Graythen/Getty Images



Supporters of Mr. Trump listened to him speak at King Jesus International Ministry in Miami in 2020. Eric Thayer for The New York Times

In recent years, Mr. Trump's most influential evangelical supporters have encouraged pastors and preachers to speak more openly about partisan political issues, including from the pulpit. Many of the pastors once seen as potential heirs to Mr. Graham's

legacy are now regularly derided by right-wing Christians as [accommodationists](#). Those pastors aimed at attracting as many people as possible through the church doors, an approach epitomized by “seeker-sensitive” megachurches that typically avoided making either Democrats or Republicans too uncomfortable on Sunday mornings. But a culture seen by many conservatives as not just non-Christian but anti-Christian demands, in their view, blunter confrontations: less winsomeness and more warfare.

These days, the line from many of Mr. Trump’s evangelical supporters is not just that their fellow Christian should again support Mr. Trump but also that there is no such thing as a Harris voter who is a true evangelical. Some Christians who reject Mr. Trump’s politics, meanwhile, are dropping the label “evangelical” as its brand has become increasingly — and perhaps by now inextricably — tied to Mr. Trump’s.

That has left less room for Mr. Graham’s style of statesmanlike rhetoric in times of national tumult. It was Mr. Graham, Mr. Hansen pointed out, who delivered a [somber, hopeful and distinctly Christian address](#) to the nation on Sept. 14, 2001, from Washington’s National Cathedral at the invitation of President George W. Bush. In the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, Mr. Trump

convened no such moment for the spiritual interpretation of a national crisis — and perhaps there was no leader by then who could have delivered one.



Franklin Graham delivered the invocation to the Republican National Convention in 2020. He has continued to link the Graham brand

to Mr. Trump's. Pete Marovich for The New York Times

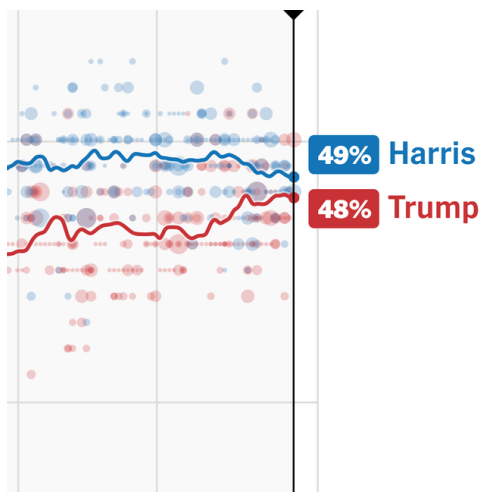
'Jesus Invites Us to the Middle'

For those outside evangelicalism, it may be hard to understand why anyone is fighting over Billy Graham's theoretical political allegiances.

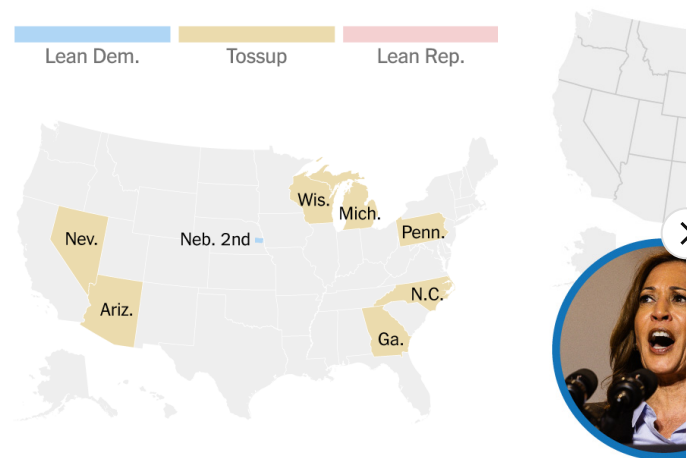
2 0 2 4

Keep Up With the 2024 Election

The presidential election is **2 days away**. Here's our guide to the run-up to Election Day.



Tracking the Polls. The state of the race, according to the latest polling data.



Swing State Ratings. The presidential race is likely to be decided by these states.

On the Tra
Trump and campaigni

On Politics Newsletter. Get the latest news and analysis on the 2024 election sent to your inbox. [Sign up here.](#)

More than a year after Mr. Graham's death, Franklin Graham said that his father voted for Mr. Trump in 2016. He has continued to link the Graham brand to Mr. Trump's. The October 2024 cover of Decision magazine, published by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, announces "America's Future in the Balance," with the word "socialism" under Ms. Harris's photo and "freedom" under Mr. Trump's.

Mr. Trump himself has played up his role as the Graham family's choice. Speaking at a memorial service for Mr. Graham in 2018 as his body lay in honor in the Capitol Rotunda, Mr. Trump praised the sizes of his crowds. At a gathering of conservative faith leaders in North Carolina last month that included Franklin Graham, he said that "Billy Graham's looking down, and he's very proud of his son and his family."

"It's very clear that President Trump is no exemplar of what Billy Graham espoused," said the Rev. Lee Scott, an ordained minister in Pennsylvania who is on the board of Evangelicals for Harris. It's "preposterous," Mr. Scott said, to think Mr. Graham would not have rebuked Mr. Trump for his [recent suggestion](#) that "one really

violent day” would resolve the problem of property crime, for example.

A Graham granddaughter, Jerushah Duford, endorsed Ms. Harris in October, highlighting an [ongoing split in the family](#). “Looking at my grandfather’s legacy,” she [wrote in Newsweek](#), “it’s clear that his values centered firmly in unity, justice and compassion.”

Both sides of the family have good reason for being able to lay claim to their patriarch. The wide array of lanes he shifted between means that pastors and other religious leaders who landed on either side of the post-Trump divide still find encouragement in his example. He was conservative, he was moderate, and he was ecumenical. He was a bold truth-teller, and he wanted his message to appeal to everyone in the world. He was engaged with politics, but he was (mostly) not a partisan activist, and in his later years said he should have “[steered clear](#)” of politics.

“There’s a real misunderstanding and almost a rewriting of history when it comes to Dr. Graham’s involvement in politics,” said the Rev. Robert Jeffress, a Trump supporter and the pastor of First Baptist Dallas, the church where Mr. Graham was a member for decades, despite never living in the city.



Mr. Graham's messages highlighted on a car outside one of his crusades in 1970. Larry C. Morris/The New York Times



Mr. Trump has appealed to evangelicals not as a fellow Christian, but as their defender. Tim Gruber for The New York Times

Mr. Jeffress sees Mr. Graham as deeply involved in political and social questions, while avoiding petty partisanship. He pointed to Mr. Graham's newspaper ad in 2012 supporting an amendment defining marriage as between a man and a woman in his home state, North Carolina, and his speaking to integrated crowds in the

civil-rights-era South. (Mr. Graham also [edged up to endorsing](#) Mitt Romney in 2012, when he was 94.)

Many high-profile evangelical supporters of Mr. Trump discern no conflict with their own political allegiances and their reverence for Mr. Graham. Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, the president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, says that Mr. Graham “inspired me to do what I do.” “He’s the one we all really strived to be, the GOAT,” he said of the evangelist.

Mr. Rodriguez said he finds fault with both political parties and he believes Mr. Graham would, too. “Billy Graham’s ethos would be to do away with rhetoric that demeans, that condemns, that’s empty of grace,” he said. Still, he has described himself as a supporter of Mr. Trump’s policies, which he views as more aligned with Christian values.

Since Graham’s passing from the scene, even the job title of “evangelist” has come to seem slightly outmoded. The new voices shaping Christian consciences outside of church settings are podcasters and online influencers, who may make appearances at large-scale conferences and revivals, but build their audiences online. Their audience is divided, not just by political and cultural differences but also by a fragmentary media landscape.

Nick Hall, an evangelist based in Minnesota, started preaching as a teenager, and became serious about Christian ministry in college.

“I went from wanting to be like Michael Jordan to wanting to be like Billy Graham,” Mr. Hall, 42, recalled recently. He eventually became a contracted speaker and trainer with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, and founded his own ministry, now called Pulse Evangelism.

Early in his career, Mr. Hall maintained a spreadsheet where he kept track of how many people Mr. Graham had spoken in front of at what age, and measured himself against it. Eventually, he stopped trying to keep up.

But he still considers Mr. Graham a touchstone, and one whose absence is felt in a landscape where Christian leaders are defined and identified by their political views and their stances on a narrow set of social issues. Mr. Hall sees his primary job as “calling people to Jesus.” His organization does not oppose gay marriage in its statement of faith, for example, and he has not spoken in favor of either presidential candidate. He has paid a price in invitations to speak and in donations, he said.

“The world forces us to the fringes, but Jesus invites us to the middle,” he said. “If Billy Graham was around today, I don’t know how popular he would be.”