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Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South

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to influence, for whom he sometimes did bidding, and by whom he occasionally let himself be used.

Graham was always more of a political creature than either those who praised or dismissed him would concede. He was more of a political creature than even he could admit. Not unlike a rather different communicator par excellence, Ronald Reagan, Graham offers a profound commentary on the underappreciated synergy between innocence and influence, along with the analytical challenge of untangling the two. In Graham's relationships with public figures, he combined an obvious degree of ingenuousness with a much more subtle dose of savvy. This book, then, emphasizes Graham as an independent actor whose actions were also open to myriad influences and applications.

The central story of the book concerns the birth of the post-civil rights era South—and Graham's contribution thereto. Ultimately, Graham represents an illuminating lens through which to consider the relationship between evangelical Christianity and sociopolitical change in the American South. As such, he suggests American evangelicalism's particular relationship to evolving social and political currents—how revivalism and evangelical public theology, while embracing traditional forms of belief, can also sanction new expressions of those same values. These dynamics have resulted in a mercurial mixture of continuity and discontinuity that has made the post-civil rights era South an intriguing and challenging region to interpret. In his simultaneously influential and circumscribed roles as evangelist, peer of political leaders, and regional spokesperson, Graham was both a nexus for, and driver of, many developments central to the creation of the post-civil rights era South. He supplied an acceptable path upon which white southern moderates could back away from Jim Crow, and his postsegregation rhetoric portended the emergence of "color blind" rhetoric within mainstream conservatism. Through both his involvement in the Eisenhower and Nixon administrations and his deep social ties in the South, the evangelist also created space for the decades-long process of political realignment. In the end, Graham suggests the peculiarly evangelical nature of the South's rapprochement with modernity. Such is Billy Graham's New South.

CHAPTER ONE

"No Segregation at the Altar"

Growing up in the rural South, I had adopted the attitudes of that region without much reflection.

—Billy Graham, 1997

The audience may be segregated, but there is no segregation at the altar.

—Billy Graham, 1952

BILLY GRAHAM ENTERED the 1950s as a nationally known evangelist who was also an identifiable southerner and a Christian fundamentalist. The following decade saw a struggle—sometimes public, often unstated—between his singular position as an evangelist and the other, seemingly more expendable, labels. While parting ways with many of his fundamentalist allies, Graham chose to retain his regional identity. This decision meant he would ultimately have to address the specifically southern problem he and his fellow moderates politely called the "race question" or the "race problem" (hesitant as they were to use the more prescriptive term "civil rights"). Graham's southern identity was evident in many things—his theological sensibilities, his political and social relationships, and his zealous Cold War apocalypticism—but expressed itself most strikingly when civil rights reemerged as a national issue in the early 1950s. As an evangelist, Graham also situated his response to race within the larger context of his ministerial priorities, which in many respects transcended matters of region. At some level, he attempted to square his inherited racial customs with his theology, his southern background with his increasingly inclusive ministry.

Graham's early response to the race issue revealed the elusive nature of his racial moderation. During the post-World War II years preceding the rise of "massive resistance" to desegregation in the South—a time when even parts of the Deep South were not yet a completely "closed society" on matters of race¹—Graham formulated views and rhetorical postures that lasted him for decades. He evolved from a tacit segregationist to a tepid critic of Jim Crow and, finally, to a practitioner of desegregation in his crusade sermons. The sources and motivations for his changing stance on racial segregation ranged from the theological to the intellectual and the political. They included his exposure to theological spheres outside southern fundamentalism, his concern about his public image, his desire to evangelize within the black community, and his burgeoning Cold War internationalism.

In his discussion of racial matters, Graham retained a familiar evangelical language buttressed by both his celebrity status and his recognizability as a southerner. He also cultivated public positions reflective of his regional affiliation: defensiveness about the South, denunciation of "extremists on both sides" of the civil rights debate, and prophecy of racial disharmony in the North. Graham's actions were never radical, and he cultivated close ties with southern politicians of all stripes. Still, he implicitly (and, with time, explicitly) acknowledged and accepted the fact that the Jim Crow system was on borrowed time—theologically and, quite possibly, politically. While not playing as visible a role in the South during the first half of the 1950s as he later would, Graham paved the ground for his subsequent regional leadership.

The Making of a Racial Moderate

Graham first entered the national spotlight in the fall of 1949 during his two-month-long Christ for Greater Los Angeles campaign. The Los Angeles revival holds a firm place in the Graham mythology. He came to Southern California as a representative, if quite successful, preacher following the well-traveled fundamentalist revival circuit. By the close of the Los Angeles meeting, held in an elaborate circus tent dubbed the "Canvas Cathedral," Graham stood as the heir apparent of Billy Sunday, the last nationally prominent male evangelist, whose career had peaked in the 1910s.

Graham arrived in Los Angeles toward the start of a well-publicized postwar national religious revival that eventually saw Congress add "one nation under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance. Churches and synagogues

boomed along with the birth rate. The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), Graham's chosen denomination, saw five hundred new churches built between 1946 and 1949, with the denomination growing by around 300,000 members during the same period. "Religion-in-general," in historian Martin E. Marty's famous phrase, gained new credence during the postwar years. "Our government," President Dwight Eisenhower flatly declared, "makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is." Such reflexive, but not self-reflexive, "faith in faith," as Marty also called it, did not inevitably portend a revival of the old-time gospel.² Yet it certainly offered an opening for an evangelist claiming that the faith of the fathers could resolve the conundrums of modern man.

The Christ for Greater Los Angeles campaign took a while to gain steam. The pivotal moment came when newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst ordered his army of editors to "Puff Graham," words that Graham supporters have happily recounted almost from the moment their effects first registered. Hearst, who was likely drawn to the strident anticommunist message of the dynamic young evangelist, had already "puffed" Youth for Christ (YFC), the evangelistic organization for which Graham then worked. This time, the instructions stuck. Word about the lanky young evangelist quickly spread from the headlines of Los Angeles newspapers to the pages of *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek*.³ Graham became a religious media phenomenon to a degree unseen on North American soil since the eighteenth-century peregrinations of English evangelist George Whitefield. The hoopla thrust Graham into a national mainstream from whose current he has rarely strayed since.

Graham's success in Los Angeles and other areas outside his native South had more to do with his southern background than is initially apparent. In his early career, the evangelist benefited from the continuing migration of white southerners westward and northward in search of industrial jobs. The white southern diaspora, a phenomenon less explored than the related Great Migration of black southerners, left a distinct imprint on twentieth-century American Christianity. The 1949 Los Angeles revival drew strength from the many fundamentalist-inclined "country preachers" who had moved from Arkansas, Texas, and Oklahoma to the "Southland" of California. The list included Methodist fundamentalist "fighting" Bob Shuler, a Texas transplant. Long Beach radio station KGER, owned by Arkansas fundamentalist entrepreneur John Brown, was the first to broadcast news of the upcoming revival meetings. Radio host and country and western musician Stuart Hamblen, the first of several celebrity converts in Los Angeles, hailed from Texas. Simi-

lar patterns appeared elsewhere. The chair of Graham's 1952 Detroit crusade was a southern preacher. So was the powerful fundamentalist Baptist minister William Bell Riley, a Kentucky native who in 1947 appointed Graham to succeed him as president of Northwestern Schools in Minneapolis.⁴

Unlike the preachers of the southern diaspora, Graham was a "commuting southerner," rather than a migrant.⁵ Even though the evangelist built his reputation in the Midwest, especially through his partnership with Torrey Johnson—head of the Chicago-based YFC—he remained a southerner in the eyes of most of the public, as well as in his own. In 1952, Graham struck a *Time* writer as a flamboyant product of the country South whose concept of fashion entailed "a jaunty sky-blue gabardine," along with "a blue and white tie and square-folded white handkerchief, thick-soled, reddish-brown shoes, a cowboy belt with a silver buckle and silver tip." Graham also played the part in his language patterns. He closed his ABC radio broadcast with the colloquial send-off, "May the Lord bless you real good," and referred to the daughter of President Harry Truman in personal correspondence as "Miss Margaret."⁶

Newfound fame both permitted and forced Graham to address a host of national concerns beyond the purview of altar calls and gaudy garb. On one such issue, the global threat of communism, Graham never hesitated to voice his opinion. On another matter, race, he remained strikingly more circumspect. When he did address the race issue, however, he spoke not only as an evangelist but also as a southerner whose background lent him a certain amount of the authority on the subject.

Like most white southerners of his generation, Graham grew up as a *de facto* segregationist—in his own words, someone who "had adopted the attitudes of that region without much reflection." In this and other senses, his southern heritage was impeccable. As the evangelist would proudly note throughout his lifetime, he was descended from Confederate veterans on both sides of the family. In Graham's rural home area of Sharon Township, located just outside Charlotte, his Scotch-Irish, God-fearing, dairy-farming family was of a demographic type. Like the South as a whole, Graham later reflected in his autobiography, his section of the North Carolina Piedmont "had never fully recovered economically from the Civil War and Reconstruction." A successful dairy enterprise, however, put the Grahams comfortably above the economic mean, even during the Great Depression. The local African Americans whom Graham knew best were thus family employees. Later, he reminisced with unintended condescension about his childhood admira-

tion for Reese Brown, a black foreman who had "a tremendous capacity for working hard" and whose wife made "fabulous buttermilk biscuits in the tenant house that was their home." Such fond memories reflected an upbringing in which racial moderation translated as benevolent paternalism. (In 1965, during a ceremony in which Graham received an honor for his work on racial issues, Graham praised Brown and presented the aging man with a watch.)⁷

The Christian faith of Graham's youth did not challenge his racial worldview—nor was there good reason to expect it would. In 1934, as a scrawny, playful teenager, Graham famously responded to the brimstone-laden altar call of Kentucky evangelist Mordecai Ham. The hard-hitting revivalist who drew Graham down the sawdust trail was a militant fundamentalist whom Graham later felt compelled to defend against charges of anti-Semitism and support for the Ku Klux Klan.⁸ "Even after my conversion," Graham admitted in 1960, "I felt no guilt in thinking of my dark-skinned brothers in the usual patronizing and paternalistic way."⁹ His gradual racial awakening did not commence for another decade and a half, after he had attended such segregated institutions as Bob Jones College, whose tightly regimented environment he endured for a mere semester, and Florida Bible Institute, another unaccredited fundamentalist school, from which he graduated in 1940.

A key component of Graham's racial evolution was his exposure during the early 1940s to a moderate brand of northern Protestant fundamentalism then beginning the protracted but conclusive process of refashioning itself as "evangelicalism." Graham entered this world by way of Wheaton, Illinois, a town thirty miles west of Chicago that served as an incubator for the neo-evangelical project. His 1940 enrollment at Wheaton College represented one of the few times the budding preacher had crossed the Mason-Dixon line. At Wheaton, Graham remembered, "people looked at me curiously, as if my heavily accented drawl were a foreign language."¹⁰ The racial views of southerners of Graham's generation often evolved in the context of comparatively moderate racial environments.¹¹ While a city like New York or Austin more classically fitted the bill, Chicagoland fundamentalism provided an impetus for Graham's views on race to evolve.

Graham would most likely never have become the leading spokesperson for postwar American evangelicalism had he not passed through Wheaton, then, as now, a leading institution of higher education within conservative, nonmainline Protestant circles. The history of Wheaton paralleled—and, in

many respects, influenced—the trajectory of American evangelicalism itself. The college, as Graham occasionally noted later in his career, had deep roots in antebellum evangelical abolitionism. Under the leadership of President Jonathan Blanchard (who took over the newly renamed Wheaton College in 1860), the school presented itself as an abolitionist, coeducational institution in the best tradition of antebellum evangelical reform. The brother of abolitionist martyr Elijah Lovejoy served as a trustee, and early alumni included a nephew of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Blanchard made a point of admitting and granting scholarships to black students. Even though Wheaton's commitment to social reform weakened considerably into the twentieth century, the college would have contained a small number of black students during Graham's matriculation there.¹²

Importantly, Graham majored in anthropology at Wheaton. While he later struggled to explain his decision to study a subject commonly linked with agnosticism, if not outright atheism, he was interested enough in the field momentarily to consider pursuing a master's degree at the University of Chicago. He went so far as to register for classes there; but a hectic ministerial schedule precluded further dalliances in academia.¹³ By then, though, his studies had given him some awareness of the cultural relativity of race. In 1950, several years before Graham publicly identified himself as a supporter of desegregation, he noted that as a student he had "practically memorized" a textbook titled *Up from the Ape* and written by the evolutionary anthropologist Earnest Albert Hooton.¹⁴ A Harvard professor, Hooton emphasized the highly relative nature of racial categories and categorically dismissed quasi-eugenicists, calling them "ethnomaniacs." Although not denying the significance of racial differences, physical and otherwise, Hooton argued that "a 'pure race' is little more than a philosophical abstraction and that the great cultural achievements of humanity have been produced, almost invariably, by racially mixed peoples." He specifically attacked the simplistic chauvinism of arguments for Negro inferiority. Graham filtered such ideas through the net of his true focus at Wheaton, evangelism. While Hooton wrote from an explicitly secular perspective, his universalistic understanding of humanity reinforced Graham's faith in a Christian gospel open and communicable to all peoples.¹⁵

At Wheaton, Graham met his future wife, Ruth Bell, a model of piety whose prayerful coyness attracted the aspiring groom. Their marriage actually bolstered his southern identity. Ruth's father was L. Nelson Bell, a surgeon and longtime missionary in Nationalist China but also a native Virginian,

graduate of Washington and Lee University, and an influential lay leader in the conservative wing of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (which was also referred to as the Southern Presbyterian church). Bell, whom Graham ranked behind only his parents and wife as a life influence, heavily mediated the way the evangelist applied his theological views on race to the social context of the South.¹⁶ During the latter half of the 1950s, at least, Bell functioned as a conservative brake on the evangelist's opinions concerning racial policy. The well-connected Bell also strengthened the ties between Graham and a host of southern religious leaders. After the Bells moved to the Southern Presbyterian mountain retreat community of Montreat, North Carolina, Billy and Ruth followed them there in 1945.¹⁷

Wheaton may have planted seeds for Graham's subsequent doubts about the racial norms of his home region, yet their public sprouting was a while in coming. In his subsequent telling, the climax of his years-long struggle to reconcile a tacit acceptance of Jim Crow with a strident promotion of the gospel message came at the start of a March 1953 crusade service in Chattanooga, Tennessee. There, Graham personally removed the ropes separating the black from the white sections of the audience.¹⁸ This was the first time he had not followed the dictates of the local crusade committee regarding segregated seating. The Chattanooga incident served as a key moment in Graham's "racial conversion narrative," to use a literary scholar's term for self-styled accounts in which "products of and willing participants in a harsh, segregated society . . . confess racial wrongdoings and are 'converted,' in varying degrees, from racism to something approaching racial enlightenment." Graham himself spoke of his own "racial conversion" on at least one occasion.¹⁹

Graham's racial development paralleled his theological and temperamental transition from Protestantism fundamentalism to neo-evangelicalism. During the 1940s, as noted above, an influential group of moderate fundamentalists associated with the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) and hailing mostly from Reformed backgrounds began embracing the label "evangelical," the source of its most common current American usage. While not departing from core fundamentalist doctrines, these "neo-evangelicals" projected an evangelistic optimism not seen since the irrecoverable era before World War I when Protestants of all stripes could speak of "the evangelization of the world in this generation" (the motto of the Dwight Moody-inspired Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions). They sought to revive the influence of a conservative Protestantism that, at least according

to popular perceptions, had retreated from public view in the aftermath of the 1925 Scopes "Monkey Trial." In response to the so-called Second Disestablishment of the 1920s and subsequent decades, fundamentalism (the name given to the sizable minority of Protestants who adamantly rejected liberalizing trends within mainline denominations) became synonymous with theological and cultural separation from secular society. As critics of fundamentalist separatism, neo-evangelicals tended to prioritize evangelistic outreach over defenses of the pure faith.²⁰

More than any other figure, Graham came to embody the neo-evangelical posture: a greater willingness to witness to secular society and, by doing so, to offer a relevant conservative alternative to the overt or latent liberalism of mainline Protestantism. The shift toward neo-evangelicalism was a gradual process for Graham. As early as the late 1940s, though, he had sermonized against sectarian proponents of "so-called 'ultra-Fundamentalism' whose object is not to fight the world, the flesh and the devil, but to fight other Christians whose interpretation is not like theirs."²¹ Neo-evangelicals hoped to restore their brand of Christianity to its rightful place in American—indeed, Western—culture. They evinced an overarching concern for, in the words of NAE founder Harold Ockenga, the "rescue of western civilization by a . . . revival of evangelical Christianity."²² The publication *Christianity Today*, founded in 1956 with vital assistance from Graham, reflected this mission.

The line between militant fundamentalists and more culturally engaged neo-evangelicals, to be sure, did not fully harden until the mid- and late 1950s. Even after the 1949 Los Angeles crusade, Graham still moved comfortably within separatist fundamentalist circles. He received numerous accolades from fundamentalist leaders, including an honorary doctorate from his abortive alma mater, Bob Jones University, where he spoke on several occasions.²³ From William Bell Riley, Graham had already netted a more burdensome mantle: the presidency of Northwestern Schools, which the evangelist reluctantly accepted in 1947.²⁴ Despite maintaining his home in North Carolina, Graham nominally occupied the college presidency until 1952. The school's Minneapolis location explains why the city served as the longtime headquarters of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA), incorporated in 1950.

Whereas Riley's fundamentalism was partly a product of the southern diaspora, early neo-evangelicalism was an overwhelmingly northern phenomenon. Southern Protestants, for the most part, had not experienced the doc-

trinal splits that tore apart northern denominations, especially Baptists and Presbyterians, after World War I.²⁵ In this sense, Graham introduced neo-evangelical assumptions to his crusades and social relations in the South. There, departing from the doctrinal dogmatism of fundamentalism potentially also meant departing from its racial assumptions.²⁶ As a result, Graham faced the prospect of criticism from the many southern fundamentalists who, like the eponymous patriarchs of Bob Jones University, advocated a strict, two-kingdom separation between saving souls and reforming societies, while also avowedly supporting the institution of segregation.²⁷

Educational and theological influences aside, an evangelist who sought to witness to all of society had to worry about his public image. In the years following the Los Angeles crusade, Graham's audiences widened beyond the spheres of fundamentalism or even neo-evangelicalism. The new constituencies included a secular press ever conscious of the Elmer Gantry type—of the synergy between hucksterism and soul saving. As early as 1950, Graham faced criticism in New England for tolerating segregation down South. Censure came from within Dixie as well. A letter to the *Atlanta Constitution*, a liberal paper by regional standards, chided the evangelist for holding segregated meetings during his 1950 crusade in that city. "Is he implying that God Almighty has room for segregation and discrimination in His work?" the writer wondered. A columnist for the same paper continued on this theme, asking, "Will you preach, Sir, on the sins of violent sectionalism and hatred, with brother pitted against brother? . . . And will you, in all humility, state your position on the greatest thorn in the brow of Southern clergymen . . . the puzzles of race, white supremacy and segregation?"²⁸

Graham also drew fire from African American leaders. Black attendance was extremely low at the Atlanta crusade, even though Graham recalled that black congregations were among those that had officially invited him to the city. In Atlanta, he came under fire from prominent African American ministers, as well as the South's leading black newspaper, the *Daily World*, for offering to hold a special service exclusively for blacks.²⁹ Morehouse University president Benjamin Mays, a foremost theological critic of Jim Crow and an early mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr., chastised the evangelist publicly and in print.³⁰ Similar tensions were evident in New Orleans, where a prominent African American Congregational minister took out advertisements urging blacks to shun the 1954 crusade there. (He later learned that those services would, in fact, be desegregated.) Outside the South, at least one black newspaper reported that Graham had held segregated services during his 1953

Dallas crusade. His immediate response to the reports about Dallas—sermonizing, from the relatively safer confines of Detroit, "that there is no [racial] difference in the sight of God"—revealed his caution, but also his sensitivity to criticism.³¹ Graham viewed African Americans as part of his broader constituency, although not the core of it.

The Cold War represented a final, if delayed, influence on Graham's development on racial matters. Graham may have been the quintessential Cold War revivalist. From the very beginning of postwar tensions with the Soviet Union, he linked his evangelism to the destiny of the United States and its leaders.³² His warnings of pending national disaster surpassed the tone of his evangelistic predecessors, including Moody, Sunday, and Charles Finney.³³ When Graham advocated "Christ for This Crisis" (the motto of his 1947 revival in Charlotte), the crisis he spoke of entailed the specter of communism, in addition to moral degeneration. His sermon titles ("The End of the World," "Will God Spare America?") reflected an apocalyptic interpretation of the times.³⁴ Graham offered an emphatically spiritual interpretation of the Cold War. Communism was "Satan's religion," a "great anti-Christian movement" whose gains had been "masterminded" by that same force.³⁵ The evangelist viewed communism as a rival faith, complete with its own trinity (to quote the 1952 book *Communism and Christ*, which Graham mailed to every member of Congress, along with President Harry Truman and his cabinet): "Marx the Lawgiver, Lenin the Incarnate Truth, Stalin the Guide and Comforter."³⁶

For Graham, though, the fight against communism needed to be won by might as well as by the spirit. His Cold War bellicosity resided well to the right of the emerging liberal anticommunist consensus and, as such, held complex implications for his stance on racial matters. In 1950, he castigated the reds who "stole China" and predicted that communists would bomb the United States within two or three years—"and not five years."³⁷ That same year, he personally urged President Truman toward "total mobilization to meet the Communist threat." South Korea, the evangelist had earlier informed the president by telegram, contained "[m]ore Christians . . . per capita than any part of world." The situation, he declared, necessitated a "show down with Communism now."³⁸ Following Truman's dismissal of General Douglas MacArthur for desiring just such a confrontation, Graham praised the general as "a great man and a great Christian."³⁹ After the U.S. Senate censured another anticommunist icon, Joseph McCarthy, in December 1955, Graham likened the legislative body to a fiddling Emperor Nero.⁴⁰

The preoccupation of Graham with the Korean peninsula pointed to his association with an anticommunist right fixated on the reddening of Asia and, indeed, the United States itself. In early 1953, he introduced friendly congressmen to right-wing Australian activist Fred Schwarz, then in the process of creating the influential Christian Anti-Communism Crusade.⁴¹ Moreover, Graham possessed a number of social ties with the broader "China Lobby," which urged an aggressive policy of "roll back" in Asia. His father-in-law, Nelson Bell, had left his missionary post in China on the cusp of the Maoist ascendancy. Early Graham supporters included publishing mogul Henry Luce, who was born in China to missionary parents, and Minnesota congressman Walter Judd, whose background as a medical missionary in China resembled that of Bell. Other conservative anticommunists who admired Graham from a distance included Alfred Kohlberg, the leading spokesperson for the China Lobby, and Albert Wedemeyer, who as a special representative to China had warned President Truman about the impending collapse of the Nationalist regime.⁴² Bell himself corresponded with Madame Chiang Kai-shek, met with the Formosan ambassador to the United States, and warned throughout the 1950s and 1960s of Americans "in high places who consistently helped the Communists" and who exaggerated "the weakness and shortcomings of the Nationalists and General Chiang Kai-shek."⁴³ For the most part, to be sure, Graham did not associate with the right's hardest edges. Still, none of the above anticommunists was known for taking moderate positions on either foreign policy or domestic issues—not was Federal Bureau of Investigation director J. Edgar Hoover, a Graham supporter who declared in *Christianity Today* that "an America faithful to God will be an America free and strong."⁴⁴

As Graham expanded his international outreach, though, his interpretation of the Cold War shifted in a more moderate direction. His image abroad, as he surely recognized, was keenly intertwined with that of the United States itself. The success of his overseas work, which blossomed after his 1954 London crusade, depended in no small part on the degree to which the rest of the world saw the United States as a goodwill ambassador. Graham resembled the many foreign missionaries within his Southern Baptist denomination whose experiences abroad led them to reconsider the domestic racial status quo.⁴⁵ His early travel to Europe only reinforced his hawkish Cold War sentiments.⁴⁶ By the mid-1950s, though, as he began to travel through the non-white majority of the world, Graham came to see his nation's poor reputation

in the area of racial relations as a potential propaganda tool for international communism and his numerous critics alike.

Graham thus suggested how the first two decades of conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union simultaneously expanded and limited the national discourse on civil rights. The United States Information Agency and similar governmental outlets sought to advance America's image as the leader of the free world. Such efforts (in the words of one legal historian) made "civil rights reform . . . *in part* a product of the Cold War."⁴⁷ Southern conservatives, to be sure, eventually launched a "southern red scare" that readily merged rabid domestic anticommunism with opposition to altering the racial status quo.⁴⁸ Graham, though, increasingly viewed the Cold War through an international lens, even while he remained on friendly terms with many southerners who clearly (or conveniently) viewed civil rights activism as a front for communist subversion. By the latter half of the 1950s, Graham routinely linked anticommunism with a critique of segregation. The nation, he declared in 1957, resided "in a fish bowl with the whole world looking in," and "our racial tensions are causing some of the people of the world to turn away from us."⁴⁹

In keeping with his move toward a more nuanced understanding of the Cold War, Graham gradually cultivated a clear, if adaptable, declaration of racial moderation.⁵⁰ His status as a religious celebrity who was also a southerner made his decision to address the race issue at some level not entirely surprising. Less predictable was his public position, at a reasonably early date, as a moderate desegregationist. When he occasionally addressed racial matters while speaking in the South during the early years of his ministry, his comments were limited in nature. At a 1950 crusade in Columbia, South Carolina, he flatly declared that "revival will also solve the race question by causing both races to be fair toward each other."⁵¹ Graham team member Grady Wilson explicitly defended the residual nature of this formula. "What's the point of attacking a cause when you're after sinners?" Wilson asked an interviewer that same year. "If a man's a sinner and he's a member of the Ku Klux Klan, we're not going to lose the chance of saving him by attacking the organization he belongs to."⁵²

Graham began to use somewhat stronger language during his many appearances at ecclesiastical and denominational gatherings throughout the South and the nation. In 1952, he told members of the NAF that the "Church is on the tail end—to our shame!—of progress along racial li[n]es in America today. The Church should be leading instead of following."⁵³ In an address

delivered that same year at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, he advocated opening denominational colleges to academically qualified blacks.⁵⁴ Some media outlets took notice. For example, the liberal Protestant magazine *Christian Century* published an editorial titled "Sewanee Says No, Billy Graham Yes," favorably contrasting his early criticism of segregation (for which "many think he will pay dearly") with the resistance to desegregation at a leading southern Episcopal seminary.⁵⁵

By late 1953, Graham had worked out much of the racial reasoning that he would voice in response to countless media questions over the next decade and a half. In October 1953, he wrote a telling letter to *Atlanta Constitution* editor Ralph McGill, who had asked the evangelist to clarify his views on racial segregation after reading an interview Graham had given to the *Michigan Chronicle*, an African American newspaper. The renowned, future Pulitzer Prize-winning editor was in the midst of his own shift, reflective of the broader swath of southern liberals, from tolerance of separate-but-equal segregation to acceptance of, and eventual support for, its legal demise. As a critic of the role of southern Christianity in abetting racial injustices, McGill surely wrote to Graham with some skepticism. (Within a year, though, the editor would praise Graham in print as an effective evangelist and an asset to anticommunist efforts overseas.) "In my study of the Bible," Graham replied, "I can find no verses or chapters to support segregation." He affirmed that "Jesus Christ belongs neither to the colored nor the white races" and repeated a sentiment he had already voiced in Detroit: "In race relations the church has been lagging far behind in certain areas and allowing the sports world and political world to get ahead of it." Graham's chariot of justice slowed at the Mason-Dixon line, however. The South, he wrote to his fellow southerner McGill,

presents a problem particularly all its own that many times our Northern friends do not understand. It is going to take a long process of education rather than legislation to ultimately bring about better relations between the races. We have extremists in both races who cause 90 percent of the trouble. In many parts of the South it is my observation that the race situation is better than in many parts of the North. For example, the sharp divisions between races, and racial tensions, are very strong here in Detroit. Non-segregation thus cannot be forced or legislated. There must be a process of education and faith in Christ.⁵⁶

Most of these sentiments—a color-blind Christology, defense of his home region, embrace of the South's relational culture, and denunciation of "extremists"—would stay with the evangelist for at least the next quarter of a century. The remaining view—a moralistic but chronologically noncommittal gradualism regarding the ultimate abolition of Jim Crow—would wane, without vanishing altogether, during the late 1950s and early 1960s as Graham grew more appreciative of the need for civil rights legislation.

In the South

In his crusade services in the South, Graham did not initially fulfill his professed desire for the church to catch up with the secular world in the area of race relations. Still, he had plenty of opportunities to demonstrate the racial views he voiced to McGill and others. The growing urban South provided a strong base for many early Graham rallies and crusades, beginning with Charlotte (1947) and including Shreveport (1951) and Houston (1952). During the 1950s, a significant majority of Graham's domestic crusades, as well as a substantial portion of his guest sermons and one-day rallies, took place in southern cities, where the local media treated often him like a visiting head of state.⁵⁷ His influence was particularly palpable in the South. Atlanta and Chattanooga were among the few cities to construct special tabernacles in which to hold crusade services.⁵⁸ His 1950 address to a joint session of the Georgia legislature inspired one house of the state legislature to pass a prohibition law (which the other chamber quickly let die).⁵⁹

However, Graham hesitated to use his cachet in the South to address racial issues. During his first six years of holding solo revivals, he allowed segregated seating arrangements in his southern crusades. He moved only fitfully toward a policy of desegregated seating, which his organization did not standardize until after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. At the 1951 Greensboro crusade, recalled BGEA staffer Willis Haymaker, blacks sat in "special sections of seats reserved for them as was customary in all Billy Graham crusades [in the South] at that time."⁶⁰ The racial separation, presumably, did not extend to the area around the crusade platform where respondents gathered during the invitation. Atlanta city police chief Herbert Jenkins recalled segregated meetings during the 1950 crusade there, with exemptions for a few black ministers whom Graham knew. High-resolution BGEA photographs from the Atlanta crusade (generally, a more trustworthy

source for crowd shots than southern newspapers, which tended to conceal the presence of blacks), show only two African Americans, maintenance workers at the crusade stadium. BGEA images from the Columbia crusade, held earlier that year, reveal similar results, despite an official claim that the audience for the final service contained "solid blocks . . . of Negroes."⁶¹

Jim Crow was thus an expected part of Graham's 1952 crusade in Jackson, Mississippi, capital of a state commonly considered the deepest part of the Deep South. The generally glowing coverage from the city's two daily newspapers—one of which ran a "Billy Graham Boxscore" listing the decision tally from the latest service—captured the routine thrust of his social commentary during that presidential election year. The evangelist lamented President Truman's firing of "star quarterback" Douglas MacArthur (who had just spoken at the Republican National Convention in Chicago) and, in a comment easily interpretable as an endorsement of Dwight Eisenhower for the presidency, urged citizens to vote in the upcoming elections for candidates who possessed moral integrity. "Christians Must Be Devoted to Their Cause to Combat Communists," alliterated a headline recounting a Graham sermon.⁶²

Then, in the final days of the crusade, a less typical headline appeared in the *Jackson Daily News*: "Billy Graham Hits State Liquor System, Scores Segregation in Church." The paper ran an interview Graham had given in Jackson to the United Press news syndicate. "There is no scriptural basis for segregation," the evangelist declared, even while he admitted to following local racial customs in his services. "The audience may be segregated," he added, "but there is no segregation at the altar." Likewise, there should be none "in the church." Those who come forward during his services, he stressed, "stand as individuals. And it touches my heart when I see white stand shoulder in shoulder with black at the cross."⁶³ Graham balked at issuing such bold language from the crusade platform, although he did declare in his nightly sermon that God's love was "unlimited racially." The gesture drew expressions of approval from the black section of his audience.⁶⁴

Graham's United Press interview represented his first definitive public statement about Jim Crow given in a southern setting. His comments were sandwiched between less surprising condemnations of obscene book sales and Mississippi's tax on illegal liquor sales. The following day, most likely after Graham had received a concerned phone call from Mississippi governor Hugh White, an article in the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* emphasized Graham's opposition to legalized liquor before adding the following clarification con-

cerning "another subject": "I feel that I have been misinterpreted on racial segregation. We follow the existing social customs in whatever part of the country in which we minister. As far as I have been able to find in my study of the Bible, it has nothing to say about segregation or non-segregation." Graham emphasized that he "came to Jackson to preach only the Bible, and not to enter into local issues," a statement that rested uncomfortably within an article detailing his prohibitionist pronouncements. (Two days after this retraction, though, Graham passed along an account of his initial critique of segregation to the head of the Detroit Council of Churches.) Neither of the ultrasegregationist Jackson papers further explored the matter of the United Press interview. Following the crusade, the *Daily News* returned to a more comfortable Cold War theme, arguing that Graham's efforts "might not only prove to be our best, but our only real defense against communism."⁶⁵ The Jackson crusade, then, featured only a premature expression of antisegregationist sentiments that had yet to congeal.⁶⁶

In his 1953 crusade in Chattanooga, Graham took a more forthright stand against segregation in religious settings.⁶⁷ Before the start of the crusade, he personally removed the ropes separating the black and the white sections of the audience. "Either these ropes stay down," Graham recalled telling two ushers, "or you can go on and have the revival without me."⁶⁸ Chattanooga thus became Graham's first strategically desegregated crusade in an unambiguous Jim Crow environment.⁶⁹ The seating policy went unreported in Chattanooga's major dailies, which gave more attention to Graham's proficiency on the golf course, although the evangelist later claimed that his action "caused the head usher to resign in anger right on the spot (and raised some other hackles)."⁷⁰ A photograph attributed to the Chattanooga crusade and later used in a BGEA promotional booklet shows white and black audience members sitting together. Graham made sure to hedge the ramifications of his move. As an Upper South industrial city, Chattanooga was certain to be more tolerant of a policy change than cities in neighboring Deep South states; it housed one of the more liberal newspapers in the region, the *Chattanooga Times*, owned by the Ochs family of *New York Times* fame. Besides, Graham predicted to the crusade ushers, blacks in the audience would probably continue to sit together. According to an early biographer, the evangelist was correct; moreover, the black attendance was disappointingly low.⁷¹

While Graham had personally come to oppose segregation in his services, he did not formalize that position until after the 1954 *Brown* decision against

public school segregation.⁷² Less than two months after the Chattanooga crusade, the BGEA reluctantly acquiesced to a Dallas crusade committee's request for segregated seating. An instruction sheet for Dallas ushers described a section to be set aside for black attendees until the start of the service, after which seating would be open to all comers.⁷³ The May 17, 1954, *Brown* decision broke while Graham was crusading in Great Britain. The author of the unanimous decision, Chief Justice Earl Warren, had led a public gathering of Washington officials who bade Graham farewell before he crossed the Atlantic.⁷⁴ In the aftermath of *Brown*, Graham conducted desegregated crusades in Nashville (1954), New Orleans (1954), Richmond (1956), and Louisville (1956), as well as one Deep South city, New Orleans (1954). With the exception of the New Orleans crusade (which had been scheduled before the *Brown* decision), Graham intentionally avoided the Deep South, turning down most invitations to preach there during the mid- and late 1950s.⁷⁵

In the immediate aftermath of *Brown*, the BGEA's policy on desegregation remained in a formative stage. Ten days after the decision, a BGEA associate informed a New Orleans crusade executive committee that Graham "feels very strongly that we must abandon the idea of segregation in our meetings, especially since secular organizations have taken the lead. I hope this will meet with the Committee's approval there in New Orleans."⁷⁶ In July of that year, Graham himself wrote to Southern Baptist pastor James M. Gregg of Nashville recommending that "Negroes be allowed to sit anywhere they like . . . and that nothing be said one way or the other about it." Graham also advised having a black pastor lead prayer at the crusade once a week. He did not link these requests with Christian morality but rather stressed the increasingly "world-wide" nature of his ministry: "The Nashville crusade will be written up quite extensively in the British press, and of course our work in England would suffer tremendously if they thought we were having a segregated meeting. They have no conception of the problem and would blame me for anything that would happen . . . I have been in prayer on this point almost more than any other point concerning our Nashville and New Orleans meetings. So much is at stake. I personally think the less said the better."⁷⁷ The evangelist went on to predict that few blacks would attend the Nashville crusade anyway. Gregg recalled that African American attendees tended to sit apart, while another crusade leader remembered more mixed seating.⁷⁸ During one sermon in Nashville, Graham did offer an uncharacteristically direct denunciation of white racialism, although not segregationism

per se: "We have become proud as a race—we have been proud and thought we were better than any other race, any other people. Ladies and gentlemen, we are going to stumble into hell because of our pride." These words represented a theological restatement of Hooton's warning in *Up from the Ape* against racial presumptuousness. Despite this forceful, if politically ambiguous, declaration, the crusade received glowing coverage in the strongly segregationist pages of the *Nashville Banner*, which published every sermon delivered during the four weeks of services.⁷⁹

With the Nashville crusade, as well as the New Orleans crusade held later in 1954, desegregated seating became a requirement for crusade hosts. Graham gradually grew more direct in his description of this policy. "Naturally," he wrote to Richmond minister James Appleby in 1955, "I am assuming that the meeting in Richmond would be non-segregated." In Richmond, the Graham team began addressing criticisms that it included black ministers in the crusade planning process only as an "after thought" (as one New Orleans minister saw matters), if at all. Haymaker sought assurances from Appleby that tensions did not exist among the ministers of Richmond, whose Integrated Ministers' Association was led by John M. Ellison, president of the historically black Virginia Union College.⁸⁰ During the crusade, Graham delivered a well-attended convocation address at Virginia Union, where he said the race problem lay at "the heart of man." However, he received criticism for not addressing racial matters in his Richmond crusade services. Such gestures, or lack thereof, did not strike the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, a moderate segregationist paper, as particularly radical. Without specifically addressing Graham's racial views, a *Times-Dispatch* columnist favorably contrasted public figures of his stripe with those "ultra-liberals" who promoted such agendas as "compulsory integration." The even more staunchly segregationist *Richmond News Leader* offered similarly favorable coverage, noting Graham's intention to visit the Museum of the Confederacy while in town.⁸¹ In light of the political sensibilities of the two Richmond newspapers, their editors conceivably may not have chosen to highlight moments during the crusade where the race issue did surface. Many readers of the papers might not have known about the desegregation policy.

The 1956 Louisville crusade offered a better indication of how residents of a Jim Crow city perceived an evangelist who was beginning to be identified with desegregation. The *Louisville Courier-Journal*, published by Mark Ethridge, stood as one of the leading white liberal voices in the greater South. The Louisville crusade took place just as Graham published an article in *Life*

magazine, titled "Billy Graham Makes Plea for an End to Intolerance," in which he dismissed biblical arguments supporting racial segregation and hierarchy, and called for the church to speak out in favor of racial tolerance. He also declared that all of his services were desegregated.⁸² Already Graham had begun to catch flack from headline segregationists who accused him of selectively quoting scripture on racial equality.⁸³ The Louisville crusade revealed that his comments about race relations did not resonate as clearly as his altar calls. After the *Courier-Journal* announced that all Graham crusades were desegregated, a member of the local Citizens' Council requested a meeting with the evangelist. "We think we can convince him to change his views on this integration," he said. That avowed segregationist thought of Graham as a possible ally was attributable both to the halting, episodic nature of his public statements on race and to the desire of Jim Crow partisans not to "lose" a renowned figure they may have assumed was either in their camp or at least not an enemy. Graham did not accept the offer to meet the council, and his comments on Jim Crow during the crusade did not parallel the confident tone of his *Life* article. When a caller on a local television show asked him a question about segregation, the evangelist reaffirmed the primacy of the conversion moment. "I believe the heart of the problem of race is in loving our neighbor," he declared. "But man must love God before he can love his neighbor." As for the crusade itself, the *Courier-Journal's* religion editor expressed surprise that the "completely desegregated" services had attracted so few black attendees. Graham had earlier observed a decline in black attendance contemporaneous with the desegregation policy. In Louisville, this pattern appeared in spite of a thoroughly integrated crusade steering committee.⁸⁴ Still, low black attendance had been a reality at many Graham crusades even before the change in seating policy.

While Graham's desegregated services during the mid-1950s represented notable accomplishments within the closed (and still closing) societies of the South, they hardly qualify as landmark events in the civil rights struggle. The gatherings straddled an ambiguous line between church services and public meetings. Only the latter was clearly subject to local segregation laws. As historical phenomena, racially separated churches were initially a product of freedmen leaving white-dominated congregations, and thus preceded the formalization of Jim Crow. Attendance expectations at all-white congregations, to be sure, quickly became intertwined with the rules, rituals, and power structures of that system. Technically, though, the pervasive segregation within southern congregations was more customary than official. Biracial

worship was not unheard of even during the height of Jim Crow. Graham himself recalled attending a black church service in Florida during his Bible school days in the late 1930s. At the start of the civil rights era, blacks occasionally attended services at white congregations without incident (although black membership was far rarer); not until the mid-1960s did desegregating whites-only church services emerge as a strategy for civil rights activists.⁸⁵ In holding his first intentionally desegregated crusade in 1953, Graham was slightly ahead of his time in comparison with his fellow white evangelists in the South. By the end of the decade, independent mass revivals in the region had begun integrating their services; earlier in the decade, their meetings were largely biracial, yet segregated.⁸⁶

The overall degree or meaning of interracial fellowship at Graham's early desegregated crusade remains difficult to ascertain. Graham crusades did not approach the countercultural environments common to genuine expressions of southern religious "racial interchange," particularly within the Holiness and Pentecostal traditions.⁸⁷ Few locations for his early desegregated crusades—with New Orleans being a possible exception (although that demographically distinctive southern city possessed a certain multiracial Catholic tradition)—had a reputation for intractable segregationism akin to a Birmingham or a Jackson.⁸⁸ A Graham aide marveled at the ease of ensuring desegregated seating for the 1956 crusade in Oklahoma City, a Jim Crow city located on the southern rim.⁸⁹ Still, while Graham's meetings usually reflected community norms, they could sometimes help to change them. A black newspaper in New Orleans described the opening crusade service there as "the first time in recent times that Negroes have been permitted to attend a huge public Protestant gathering, or otherwise . . . without restrictions."⁹⁰ This was unquestionably a notable achievement. According to the evangelist, his desegregation policy extended to the hotel restaurants where he met with local ministers.⁹¹ The relatively low black attendance, however, suggested that the Graham team remained most effective in reaching whites. Over the years, Graham and his supporters recounted a number of stories, usually told in an apocryphal manner, of white attendees who experienced racial conversion moments during crusades.⁹² While these stories did not indicate a change of heart regarding the larger legal structures of Jim Crow, they suggest that some southern whites no longer thought those structures needed to apply to at least one staple of southern society, public revival services.

Graham's early southern crusades are best seen as emblems of the many, largely unnoticed forms of public desegregation that occurred in the period

immediately preceding and following *Brown*. During the early postwar years, as black voter registration grew in some parts of the urban South, a number of southern cities saw modest amounts of desegregation in such areas as police departments, public parks, libraries, and even city councils.⁹³ The years before the *Brown* decision also saw the nominal desegregation of three SBC seminaries, as well as several other leading seminaries in the region.⁹⁴ Graham's desegregation policy thus drew from the momentum of existing trends.

Moreover, Graham's general unwillingness to discuss the race issue beyond the levels of individual decency and Christian neighborliness limited the impact of his early desegregated crusades. For Graham, desegregation had appropriately expanded from the altar into the audience; but the proper Christian understanding of its status beyond the revival service remained less certain. The question of legalized Jim Crow stood outside the sphere over which Graham consciously exerted influence—the quasi-congregational environment of the crusade service—and, hence, still remained classifiable as a separate "political" or "social" question. In light of the *Brown* decision, Graham appears to have viewed his desegregated crusades as violations only of local customs, not of enforceable laws. The BGEA felt uncomfortable using language that might imply an agenda other than evangelism. Haymaker suggested that crusade committees "use the term 'non-segregated'; we like it much better than using the word 'integrated.'"⁹⁵ Graham's simultaneously passive and politic attention to language, combined with a constant reassertion of his evangelistic priorities, no doubt allowed him to retain an audience that an established civil rights crusader would long since have lost. "Our concern since God laid the matter [of racial prejudice] on our hearts some years ago," wrote Graham in 1957, "has not been so much to talk as to act, to set an example which might open new paths and stir the consciences of many."⁹⁶ To a prospective crusade host in Charlotte, Graham phrased this logic differently: "We have found that if you say nothing about it and just allow the colored people to sit wherever they like, therewith [sic] be no difficulties and no problems."⁹⁷ In the comparatively moderate Upper South during the immediate post-*Brown* years, though, actions did not necessarily speak louder than words. There, the line separating leadership through unannounced policies from a kind of moral quietism was thin indeed. In those cities, Graham would have exerted greater influence had he declared his position more openly and, by doing so, encouraged a public response from religious and civic leaders.

Politics at the Altar

As Graham grew more active on the race issue, he began to assume authority not just as a renowned evangelist but also as a southerner with particular knowledge about the region's populace, black and white. However, he was not yet the regional leader he would become later in the 1950s and into the following decade. His most significant southern relationships remained largely private in nature and often did not reflect his emerging views on race. What they did often indicate was the periodic disconnect between Graham as racial commentator and Graham as political intimate.

Many times throughout his career Graham admitted a deep interest in, and attraction to, the world of politics. Were it not for his calling to the ministry, he declared in 1950, he might have chosen a career in public service.⁹⁸ In practice, the evangelist never kept these vocations as far apart as his membership in the SBC, a denomination long friendly to the Establishment Clause, might have suggested. Graham evinced an almost magnetic attraction to political power. He placed a high value on access to elected officials and was willing to wield his growing ministerial credentials toward that end. Besides the sheer thrill of such access—a far from negligible factor for a product of a modest North Carolina farm and an obscure Florida Bible college—Graham possessed a desire (common to neo-evangelicals) to reestablish the cultural credentials of conservative Protestantism. He also aspired without shame to enhance the profile of his own evangelism. Graham was deeply convinced of the reciprocity between public faith and revivalism—between the piety of elected leaders and the size of crusade crowds. This conviction led him routinely to propose such Christian-friendly policies as national days of prayer. For his preferred politicians, he went a step further and offered strategic advice.

The coolness of President Harry Truman toward Graham is usually remembered as the one exception to the evangelist's close comfort with the White House. Yet their relationship also revealed how, from an early date, the evangelist combined assertiveness with attempts at diplomacy when approaching political leaders. In 1950, Truman consented to a brief meeting with Graham and several evangelistic associates. Immediately afterward, the young ministers proceeded to recount the details to eager White House journalists, going so far as to stage a reenactment of their closing prayer with Truman.⁹⁹ In doing so, they violated the custom of respecting the confidentiality of White House meetings. The breach perturbed Truman, who de-

clined further communication with Graham during the remainder of his term.¹⁰⁰ Seemingly unaware of the flap, Graham followed up the meeting with a letter to the president. Besides urging him to call for a "national day of repentance and prayer," Graham touted his possible value as a confidant. "I believe I talk to more people face to face than any living man," wrote the evangelist. "I know something of the mood, thinking, and trends in America can thought. . . . If at any time I can be of service to you personally or to our country, please do not hesitate to call. Also, I follow political trends carefully and would be delighted at any time to advise you on my findings among the people."¹⁰¹ While Graham's inflated tone revealed his political innocence, his tactlessness did entail an effort, however bungled, to push a politician's button. Graham's self-evaluation was in the process of being fulfilled. After Truman left office, the evangelist no longer needed to pitch his services.

As Graham grew in national stature, he befriended a wide range of political movers and shakers from both parties. His early connections, though, ran deepest among southern Democrats, including Tennessee governor Frank Clement, Mississippi senator John Stennis, South Carolina representative Mendel Rivers, Virginia senator A. Willis Robertson, and Alabama representative Frank Boykin. "I had more friends in the Democratic Party than I did in the Republican Party," Graham recalled; "being a southerner, I knew most of them."¹⁰² The process leading to Graham's 1950 meeting with Truman began with a request from Representative Joseph Bryson of South Carolina.¹⁰³ Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn, a Texan, permitted Graham to hold the final service of his 1952 Washington, D.C., crusade on the steps of the Capitol.¹⁰⁴ That crusade strengthened Graham ties with southern politicians, including Boykin, who threw several of his famous House Dining Room lunches for Graham during the 1950s.¹⁰⁵

Graham's political friends in the South ran the ideological gamut from pious moderates to staunch segregationists. Stennis clearly fell into the latter camp, as did two other friends, South Carolinians Strom Thurmond and James Byrnes. The benefits of associating with a popular figure like Graham easily overrode the complicating factor of his emerging support for desegregation.¹⁰⁶ The evangelist's self-described electoral philosophy actually paralleled that of the many ambivalent southern Democrats who grew increasingly comfortable with the thought of voting for Republican presidential candidates: "Though a registered Democrat (a sort of birchright in the part of the South where I came from), I always voted for the man and not the party."¹⁰⁷

During the early 1950s, Graham's links with politicians who would soon

stoke the political flames of massive resistance were tighter than his relationships with southern moderates. These connections were prominently on display during his 1950 crusade in Columbia, South Carolina, where the Graham team first employed the term "crusade" (rather than "campaign").¹⁰⁸ In addition to staying in Governor Strom Thurmond's mansion, Graham inspired an outbreak of civil religion in the state capital. Thurmond, less than two years removed from his presidential run as a segregationist Dixiecrat and more than a decade away from his trend-setting switch to the Republican Party, officially declared the last day of the crusade "South Carolina Revival Day" and signed a proclamation calling the event the "greatest religious gathering ever held in South Carolina—if not the South." Thurmond and his bitter political rival, U.S. Senator Olin Johnson, posed around a Bible with Graham. In Columbia, the evangelist addressed the state general assembly and befriended conservative *Time* magazine publisher Henry Luce, an encounter one scholar has described as "an important event in the marriage of southern fundamentalism and northern anticommunism." While in South Carolina, Graham found time to spend a weekend at the Spartanburg home of James Byrnes, a former secretary of state under President Truman who soon carried the segregationist banner as Thurmond's gubernatorial successor.¹⁰⁹ At a time when Graham rarely spoke about race in public, he evinced little desire to step on the toes of the southern political establishment.

During the year of the Columbia crusade, in fact, Graham received overtures about potentially joining that establishment. Several Democratic Party officials from North Carolina approached him about challenging the state's sitting senator, former University of North Carolina president Frank Porter Graham, a childhood neighbor and friend of the evangelist's father. Byrnes surely had a hand in the offer.¹¹⁰ Even though the evangelist did not seriously consider entering the race, the incident offers insight into his perceived political usefulness. His suitors saw him as an alternative to the sitting senator, a prominent and well-respected southern liberal who held racial and others views purportedly out of step with the region.¹¹¹ (Senator Graham would go on to lose a primary runoff that featured overt race-baiting.) One year later, in 1951, Louisville lawyer James T. Robertson (who, not coincidentally, represented evangelist Mordcaai Ham) wrote to David Lawrence, the conservative editor of *U.S. News and World Report*, proposing the evangelist's service on behalf of an ideologically parallel cause: an effort to nominate conservative Republican Walter Judd for the presidency, with Byrnes as his running mate.¹¹² Graham did not join that unlikely cause, although either he or an

associate was undoubtedly aware of the offer. Later, the right-wing, anti-Semitic magazine *American Mercury*, published by Graham supporter Russell Maguire, suggested the evangelist as an ideal presidential nominee; the magazine's other recommendations included Strom Thurmond and Mississippi senator James O. Eastland.¹¹³ In 1957, an Eisenhower-supporting Democrat from Oklahoma organized a quixotic and short-lived "Graham-for-President club" movement.¹¹⁴

Even as Graham moved away from theological fundamentalism and latent segregationism, then, he maintained close ties with many southern conservatives. They included not only politicians but also religious leaders, such as W. A. Criswell, pastor of the mammoth First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. Criswell later became known as a leading ministerial proponent of Jim Crow. Before the *Brown* decision, though, the rising SBC star was a much less controversial figure. His downtown church had mushroomed into the largest Southern Baptist congregation in the world. Graham and Criswell's relationship dated back at least as far as 1948, when Graham held meetings at First Baptist, and the two dined together two years later during a Graham revival in Charlotte. In 1953, in the midst of his Dallas crusade, Graham publicly requested membership at First Baptist. The evangelist explained his decision by postulating that Criswell's church would not place the same demands on his time as would a congregation closer to home. (In reality, Graham could have said the same of his previous church, Curtis Baptist in Augusta, Georgia.) Taking membership at First Baptist represented a savvy move for Graham, who admired the swaggering style of Texans and often wore a cowboy hat during the early 1950s.¹¹⁵ The membership of First Baptist later included oil baron H. L. Hunt, an eccentric multimillionaire and rabid right-wing activist who became a fan of the BGEA, especially team member Grady Wilson. Graham's connections in Texas stretched beyond First Baptist and extended deep into the pockets of, to name a few major supporters, defense and energy magnate Russell Maguire, industrialist and evangelical philanthropist R. G. LeTourneau, and most significantly, Dallas-area oilman Sid Richardson, who introduced the evangelist to two rising politicians, John Connally and Lyndon Johnson. The titles of the BGEA's first two feature films, *Mr. Texas* and *Oiltown, U.S.A.*, drew from the well of this Lone Star prospecting.¹¹⁶

Graham's growing embrace of desegregation thus stood in tension not only with his white southern roots but also with a substantial portion of his support base. Accordingly, his moderate comments on race often lacked

discernible coordinates on the political spectrum. Throughout the mid-1950s, observers assumed that his politics leaned well to the right. His strong support for President Eisenhower, along with the social ethic he increasingly voiced on behalf of racial tolerance, suggested a somewhat more complex dynamic. By the mid-1950s, Graham had moved toward a type of regional leadership.

CHAPTER TWO

Evangelical Universalism in the Post-Brown South

Christ was not so much a reformer as he was a transformer.

—Billy Graham, 1963

We must respect the law, but keep in mind that it is powerless to change the human heart.

—Billy Graham, 1958

THE BRAND OF REGIONAL LEADERSHIP Graham adopted required that he convincingly differentiate himself from leading figures on the southern right. One such person was W. A. Criswell, his pastor at First Baptist Church in Dallas. In February 1956, the firebrand Criswell delivered a well-publicized address to a joint session of the South Carolina legislature in which he endorsed segregation in both society and the church. Elsewhere in Columbia, Criswell castigated integrationists as “a bunch of infidels, dying from the neck up.” Echoing many of his fundamentalist peers, he blasted the “spurious doctrine” of the “universal Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man.” Graham was soon pressed for a response to this rhetorical gauntlet. He averred that Criswell and he had “never seen eye to eye on the race question. My views have been expressed many times and are well known.”¹

In truth, Graham's views were only beginning to enter public consciousness during a time when the 1955–56 Montgomery bus boycott and the contemporaneous school integration crisis grabbed the headlines. Such developments cast a spotlight on his identity as a southerner. National politicians,