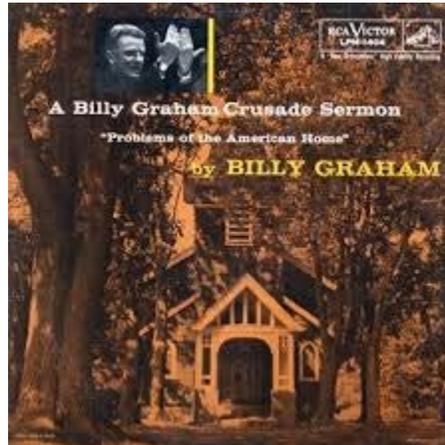


“Problems of the American Home”—Billy Graham (1957)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by William Martin (guest post)*



1957 album cover

The Rev. Billy Graham was one of the most dominant Christian figures of the 20th century. He held evangelistic “crusades” in more than 80 countries, preaching in person to more than 80 million people and live through various media to hundreds of millions more. In many of those gatherings, Graham included a sermon about the family, variously titled “How to Have a Happy Home,” “God Loves Your Family,” or, as in this recording, “Problems of the American Home.”

Though released in 1957, this recording was probably made in 1956. Graham held no crusades in the U.S. in 1955, and the jacket cover lists huge crowds in London in 1954 and 1955, but does not mention the momentous 1957 crusade that packed New York City’s Madison Square Garden almost every night from Memorial Day to Labor Day and drew an estimated 125,000 to a final service in Times Square. The only other domestic crusades in those years were in 1956, in Richmond, VA, Oklahoma City, OK, and Louisville, KY, one of which was likely the site of this presentation.

The liner notes, written by a close associate, state that Graham did not regard himself as a great preacher. That was neither false modesty nor unique opinion. Critics and admirers alike could and did point to preachers who possessed greater theological depth, crafted better sermons, and spoke with greater eloquence. But their analysis gave way in face of the incontrovertible fact: “He gets results.”

Graham’s preaching drew its strength and power from the unmistakable authority with which he spoke. The source of that authority was the Bible and his absolute confidence in its truth. He understood intuitively that, “People want to be told authoritatively that this is so.... [The world] is weary of theological floundering and uncertainty. Belief exhilarates people; doubt depresses them.” Because Graham had no discernible doubts

himself, he was able to convey, in his voice, his gestures, and his absolute forthrightness, a personal conviction that bolstered and exemplified the authority of scripture.

This sermon marks a significant stage in the evolution of Graham's pulpit manner. Though well known in evangelical circles since the early 1940s, he first attracted the attention of national media with an eight-week-long revival in Los Angeles in 1949 and a whirlwind tour of New England in early 1950.

In that period, his preaching reminded reporters of a fusillade from an automatic weapon, fired in unrelenting staccato bursts that could not be ignored but allowed no time to run for cover. He was also given to acting out the parts of characters in the Bible stories he wove into his sermons—a practice his wife Ruth later persuaded him to abandon. By the mid- 1950s, at least partly in response to a hugely successful crusade in London in 1954, followed by months of preaching in Western Europe and India where he depended on translators, he was forced to adopt a less extravagant style.

In this sermon, Graham illustrates the need for fathers to spend time with their children by quoting a short poem in which a boy speaks admiringly about “Jimmy Johnson’s dad,” who takes time to play with his son and his pals, unlike his own father “who’s always awful busy and got something else to do.” To stress the obligation to set a good example for their children, he tells of the father who turned away from the saloon when he noticed his young son walking behind him, “stepping in Daddy’s tracks.” These rhetorical techniques came to play a lesser role in his mature style, which borrowed heavily from the earliest and latest forms of mass communication in America, the jeremiad and the network newscast, lightly salted with well-worn jokes and humorous observations. These were in full evidence in this sermon and would characterize his preaching in the decades that followed.

Graham typically began his sermons by ticking off a list of individual or social problems he had observed or heard about on the news or seen mentioned in an article or commented upon by a notable authority. In this example, he declares that, “Every one of us agrees tonight that there is something tragically wrong with the American home.” He cites figures on divorce in the U.S. and calls the breakdown of the American home a greater threat to the country than Communism. He describes the ideal marriage envisioned by God intended as permanent, marked by absolute fidelity, and between committed Christians, “because only a true Christian knows what love is...and marriage partners in Christ are the only ones who can really trust each other.”

He then lays out what “the Bible says”—his trademark phrase--about the proper status and roles of wives and husbands, citing six directions scripture gives to women: “Submit to, be subject to, be in subjection to, be obedient to, and reverence and love your husband.” While stressing that husbands and wives are “equal in mind, conscience, position, privilege, freedom, happiness, and equality before God,...when it comes to the governmental arrangement of the family, there is not equality...the Bible teaches that the wife is to fit into the world of the husband.” He specifically recommends that when their husbands come home at night, wives should be prettily dressed and made-up and should

greet their husbands with a kiss, “read a little bit [to] keep up with the things your husband is interested in,” keep the house clean and attractive, curtail unnecessary expenditures, and refrain from nagging and gossip.

Turning to the husbands, he exhorts them to “remain a lover,” bringing small gifts and calling her from work to let her know he is thinking about her and how much he appreciates her taking care of the children. Husbands should also “give her a little bit of money every week, no questions asked,” and “be interested in the little things she’s interested in, not the big things you’ve got on your mind.”

Both, of course, are to read the Bible and pray together as a couple and, with their sternly disciplined children, live lives fully committed to Christ.

Over time, Graham’s preaching about the family evolved noticeably from the picture he drew in the mid-1950s, reflecting seismic changes in the culture, particularly regarding the roles of women. By the mid-1970s, he admitted that he had based his earlier views of gender roles on a misinterpretation of scripture. While he still believed the husband was head of the governing organization, instead of seeing the wife as “his chief assistant in this work,” he now regarded them as co-equal vice-presidents who managed different divisions. He decried a feminist tendency to devalue the whole role of wife and mother as “a satanic deception of modern times” but conceded that, “There are things in today’s feminist movement that I like because I think women have been discriminated against.” That was hardly radical, even in evangelical circles, but he took a more controversial step by declaring that he was leaning toward accepting the ordination of women and even their serving as pastors.

What would never change was Graham’s invitation to any man, woman, or child wanting to be the kind of husband, wife, son, or daughter they ought to be, to come forward to the strains of “Just as I Am” to acknowledge they are sinners, ask forgiveness, and give their lives to Christ, completely and fully.

Though it was not the greatest of Billy Graham’s sermons, perhaps even on this topic, this album preserves an excellent example of his preaching midway through the decade in which he became the most famous evangelist in the world, a distinction he would hold throughout the rest of the 20th century.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.