

The Preacher and the Presidents: Billy Graham in the White House

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Book Review

The Preacher and the Presidents: Billy Graham in the White House

by Nancy Gibbs & Michael Duffy (Center Street)

A deadly trio of temptations—money, sex and power—have ruined the lives of many influential people, including ministers. When he still was young, evangelist Billy Graham wisely created rules that would safeguard his ministry against any appearance of sexual or financial impropriety. He pledged never to be alone with any woman other than his wife, and he instructed his evangelistic association to place him on a salary no greater than the income of an average large-church pastor.



But as Gibbs and Duffy—veteran reporters for *Time* magazine—note, Graham learned lessons about succumbing to the temptations of power the hard way.

For more than 50 years, Graham received unprecedented access to the White House, serving as pastor, counselor and even political adviser to presidents. Along the way, the evangelist grew in his understanding of how a close relationship with the nation's chief executive could either benefit or blemish his ministry—open doors for the spread of the gospel or tie the

kingdom of God too closely to the kingdoms of this world.

The authors faithfully record innocent missteps such as when the young evangelist naively told reporters the details of a meeting with Harry Truman and then Graham and his associates, in their pistachio-green suits and white bucks, kneeled to pray on the White House lawn at the request of news photographers. Truman became incensed at what he saw as Graham's grandstanding, and he did not reconcile with him until Graham visited his home in Independence, Mo., 18 years later and apologized profusely for the blunder.



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Gibbs and Duffy also detail Graham's close and complex relationship with Richard Nixon, beginning when Nixon was Dwight Eisenhower's vice president and extending beyond Watergate and Nixon's resignation. They tell how Nixon often was protective of Graham and—at least sometimes—surprisingly reluctant to capitalize politically on their friendship. They also honestly report the occasions when Graham seemed too quick to please the president, such as a meeting when Nixon blamed Jews for the woes of America. Like a straight-arrow high-school boy awkwardly trying to fit into a lewd locker-room conversation, the evangelist uncharacteristically echoed many of Nixon's sentiments. Thirty years later, when the tape of the meeting became public, a mortified Graham—whose entire public life refuted any charges of anti-Semitism—begged forgiveness from Jewish leaders.

While the authors unflinchingly record those times when Graham stepped over the line and became seduced by power, they also tell inspiring stories about his remarkable opportunities to provide a pastoral presence and Christian influence in the White House.

Essentially, Gibbs and Duffy have written a love story. Presidents genuinely loved Graham because he was an internationally known public figure and man of action—someone as influential in his own sphere as the presidents were in their own. They could relate to him, and they knew they could trust him. For his part, Graham demonstrated genuine Christian love and forgiveness to people at the pinnacle of power in an unforgiving world.

In their concluding chapter, the authors describe Graham's ministry to the presidents as a story of "grace under pressure." Perhaps that's true. It certainly wasn't grace in the sense demonstrated by a gifted athlete or unerring dancer; the evangelist stumbled plenty of times. But in the New Testament sense of grace as unmerited favor, Graham unfailingly preached by word and deeds a message of God's unconditional love.

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