

Franklin Graham insists he cares more about winning hearts than votes

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BOONE, N.C. (RNS)—Franklin Graham picks up a toy stuffed animal, tattered by time and a child's love, from a shelf in his office.



Franklin Graham picks up a toy stuffed animal, tattered by time and a child's love, from a shelf in his office. (Religion News Service photo by Paul Sherar) It's a little black sheep with a music box in its belly, a gift from his mother when he was a tot. When the son of Billy Graham winds a little key, it plays "Jesus loves me."

At 63, fiery evangelist and social conservative Franklin Graham still is a "black sheep" who doesn't travel with the speak-nice flock.

- His sharp-voiced Facebook posts have 3.4 million followers.
- He's a popular to-the-punch guest on Christian broadcasting and Fox News who calls Islam a dead religion.
- He mocks gay rights and raises funds for "persecuted Christians" in the United States, like bakers who won't sell cakes to same-sex couples.
- He condemns 21st-century secularism as the godless successor to

Cold War communism.

- And in this election year, he has scheduled Decision America rallies in all 50 U.S. state capitols.

Preaching from statehouse steps

Week after week, Graham stands on statehouse steps and exhorts crowds like a biblical Nehemiah, warning people to repent to rebuild Jerusalem—with a gospel twist. He urges them to pray first and then vote for Bible-believing evangelical candidates. But don't even think about voting for him.

"No, no!" he is "absolutely not" running for office, said Graham, who tends to rat-a-tat-tat his points.

Instead, he exhorts his listeners to run themselves, starting with local city and county offices. Imagine, he says at every tour stop, the impact on society if "the majority of the school boards were controlled by evangelical Christians."

Graham—who publicly quit the GOP last year—insists he is not endorsing any person or political party. The Decision tour, a \$10 million road show underwritten by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, often is routed through states just ahead of a primary or caucus, but Graham tells every audience only prayer can save the nation.

He's not bothered that Donald Trump has reached front-runner status in the GOP nominating contest, or that Trump drew a sizable chunk of evangelical voters just days after Graham's rallies in New Hampshire and South Carolina. Indeed, Graham often quotes the ambitious, uncompromising billionaire. It's one outspoken man's appreciation for the other, minus Trump's crude language and multiple marriages.

"I'm doing this for my grandchildren," Graham said, explaining his

rationale for the Decision tour. He doesn't want them to inherit a secular nation where "all people care about is what they can get" from the government.

Leading one of the nation's largest charities



Franklin Graham long ago opened the book on his restless years before Bob Pierce, founder of a small medical mission, brought him aboard and later asked him to take it over. After Pierce's death in 1978, Graham built it into an internationally acclaimed disaster relief and development agency, Samaritan's Purse, one of the 50 largest charities in the United States.

And wherever any of his staff and 70,000 volunteers land, they share their faith. Hearing the gospel never is a condition for aid, Graham said emphatically. "But I am not going to work anywhere in the world and keep my mouth shut," he added. "I am going to tell people who we are and why we are there and what we believe."

Never keeping his mouth shut about Christ could be the refrain of his ministry, amplified now by social media.

By 2002, he was president, CEO and director of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, as well as heading Samaritan's Purse. After June 2005, his father retreated to his mountain cabin, a senior statesman of American Christianity who claimed he learned his lessons decades ago to stay out of public politics.

Taking after his mother

William Franklin Graham III may look like his father—square-jawed, tall and rangy—but his bravado in the public square “is my mother coming out in me,” he insists. The late Ruth Bell Graham “didn’t run away from anybody,” he said. “She just was never afraid. If she thought something was right, that’s where she stood.”

Her son doesn’t shy away from the “fundamentalist” tag. Reared as a Presbyterian, he worships some Sundays at “a little country Baptist Church” and a Christian and Missionary Alliance church he has attended for many years.

Labels mean little to him, however. He prefers to spell things out: Every employee of both nonprofits—1,403 workers at Samaritan’s Purse and 469 at the BGEA—signs an 11-point statement of faith annotated with 60 scriptural citations.

If one of these people echoed a controversial Wheaton College professor who said Muslims and Christians worship “the same God,” he’d tell that employee, “It’s been nice having you.” Professor Larycia Hawkins, whose comment was condemned by Graham, has since left Wheaton.

No time to worry about tone

When critics charge him with taking an offensive tone in his hard-line condemnations of liberal society, he responds: “Tone? What was it Donald Trump said in his first debate? ‘We don’t have time for tone!’”

Graham doesn’t say much about Trump’s politics, beyond noting the candidate’s much-touted call for investigating all, particularly Muslims, who seek to enter the United States, is “copying me.”

Where Graham sees himself standing by biblical truth, others see his words

turned into ammunition for discrimination, particularly toward Muslims and toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Wants to lead Muslims to truth

“I have been very careful to say that I love Muslim people, and I care for them,” he said. “Islam isn’t going to save anybody. It can’t keep you from the doors of hell. It won’t open the doors to paradise. I want people to know the truth.”

At camps in northern Iran and welcome stations for refugees on the move across Europe, run by Samaritan’s Purse, “many are on the run because of Islam,” Graham noted. They have seen indescribable death and destruction in the name of that religion and “they need to know someone loves them—that God loves them and he hasn’t forgotten them,” Graham said. Accepting the gospel is never a condition of aid, he said emphatically. “But I’m going to tell them (the gospel), whether they want to hear it or not.”

‘Sick, sick, sick, sick’

The same is true for LGBT people.

“I don’t wish (them) ill,” he said. But he will tell them their lifestyle is sinful and “if they don’t repent, God will one day judge them, and they will spend eternity in hell. Is that hate speech because you love somebody enough to warn them that they are getting ready to fall off a cliff?”

Graham opposes the social normalization of same-sex marriage and efforts to pass nondiscrimination laws to protect the rights of gays and lesbians in housing and employment and public accommodations.

“If you try to exercise your faith in a public setting (LGBT activists) come after you to sue you,” he said, citing the bakery owners who were fined \$135,000 in 2015 for refusing to produce a wedding cake for a gay couple.

Samaritan Purse's "fund for persecuted Christians" provides the owners financial assistance.

Transgender people who say their gender identity doesn't match their biology are defying biblical concepts of manhood and womanhood, Graham asserted. Allowing them to use a bathroom suitable to their self-definition would be "putting our children in danger and opening doors to sexual predators," he said.

Graham is not even sure there are enough transgender people to merit attention. So why, he demanded, "would we change all of our bathrooms so that some weirdo can say, 'I feel like a woman today, and I'm going to go into a girls' locker room.'

"That's sick," he said. "It's just sick. Sick, sick, sick, sick. I think I said that four times. So make sure you got all four times."

The Billy Graham the public didn't see

That's no Billy Graham quote. The renowned evangelist turned away from fundamentalism in the 1950s and "went to great lengths to make the gospel as appealing to as many people as possible. He avoided deal-breakers," said Grant Wacker, Duke University professor of Christian history and author of *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation*.

However, Wacker also observed, "Billy Graham believed a lot of things he didn't emphasize because he knew they would offend or divide people."

Franklin Graham knows these things, and he insists he's following in the footsteps of the Billy Graham people didn't see.

"My father has not changed his views. He's 97. You can go back and read his first book, and it says the same thing: No one comes to the Father except through Jesus," his son said.

He also insists he did not write his father's 2015 book, *Where I Am*, which is full of hellfire warnings. If it seems different than many earlier of the elder Graham texts, his son has an explanation: "There are some books he wrote where he wished he'd been more clear."

Mission to save lives

Clarity is not Franklin Graham's weakness. He has one mission—to save lives, spiritually and materially. He flew missionary physician Kent Brantly back from Liberia when he was near death with Ebola. He worked for the release of Pastor Saeed Abedini, imprisoned in Iran for three years, and brought him to recover at The Cove, the mountain retreat run by the BGEA. Samaritan's Purse planes and truck convoys often are first on the scene of earthquakes, floods and other natural disasters.

If those moments are overlooked when he's calling forth the Christian civic soldiers to battle at the ballot box, it's irrelevant to Graham's goal—to make America Christian again, as he understands it.

"He doesn't have to run for office to be 'political,'" said Susan Harding, an anthropologist of religion at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She's the author of a book on the late Jerry Falwell, who ran a 50-state-capitals tour in the 1970s.

"Franklin is vying for leader of the hard-right evangelicals," succeeding Falwell (whose son endorsed Trump). They long for "an old-fashioned triumphalist Christian world where Christianity is Truth with a capital T," she said.

So far, he's pulled in around 50,000 Decision America pledges to "take a stand."

Rile people up? "That's my mother in me," said the man with the little black sheep on his shelf.