

# Texans recall famous evangelist Billy Graham as humble servant

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Christians in Texas joined believers around the United States in reflecting on the life and legacy of evangelist Billy Graham, who died Feb. 21.

“If anyone ever deserved the commendation ‘well done good and faithful servant,’ it was Billy Graham,” said David Hardage, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. “He truly experienced a life well lived.”

He also lived a life that touched countless others. Two-thirds of Protestant churchgoers had some contact with Graham’s ministry, according to a recent LifeWay Research survey.

Nearly half of the respondents (48 percent) watched a Billy Graham sermon on television, and about one in five (18 percent) listened to one of his sermons on the radio. Others noted they read at least one of his books (15 percent), read his newspaper column (14 percent) or watched one of his sermons online (8 percent).

Graham was named among the top 12 most effective preachers in the English-speaking world in a survey Baylor University conducted in 1996.

## Frequent guest speaker at Baylor

The evangelist first visited Baylor in 1951, preaching in a morning chapel service in Waco Hall and at an evening worship service at First Baptist Church in Waco. He returned to Waco in May 1953 to speak at a memorial service for victims of the tornado that devastated the city’s downtown area.

He spoke at Baylor multiple times in the decades that followed, and in 1970, he preached at Waco's Heart of Texas Coliseum at an event celebrating the university's 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

"He spoke of the university's commitment to faith and learning and to helping our students understand their responsibility to be the hands and feet of Christ and serve others through the world, a commitment to which Baylor remains faithful," President Linda Livingstone said.

Livingstone, who called Graham "a good and faithful servant of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," noted his daughter, Anne Graham Lotz, served on the university's board of regents, and three of his grandchildren earned degrees from Baylor.

"Our deepest prayers are with the Graham family, and we join millions around the world in giving thanks for Billy Graham, for his unyielding faith in a risen Savior and his mission to bring Christ's light to the world," Livingstone said.

## **'Genuine humility'**

The secret to Graham's success was "the fact that he has never focused on success," said Jim Denison, founder of the Denison Forum.

"His genuine humility and complete dependence on God have enabled the Holy Spirit to use him in truly historic ways," he said.



Jim Denison meets evangelist Billy Graham in 2001. (Photo courtesy of Denison Forum)

In 2001, Denison was pastor of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas, and he

was part of a North Texas delegation sent to invite Graham to preach in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

"It was my responsibility to explain to him the reason for our visit and present a book containing more than 700 letters of invitation," Denison wrote in an [online column](#). "After I made our request, he asked me why I felt we needed him to come."

Denison responded by describing the spiritual lostness of the area and of its need for spiritual awakening.

"Dr. Graham listened politely. Then he explained his question," Denison wrote. "He understood why we would need a spiritual revival, but why did I feel he was the person to help? At his advanced age, with his infirmities, how could he be of help to us?

"Here was a man who had preached in person to more than 80 million people and led more than 3 million to Christ through his sermons and public invitations. He was commonly considered the greatest evangelist after the Apostle Paul. And yet he was genuinely uncertain he had the capacities to do what we were asking him to do.



Billy Graham and James Pleitz, then-pastor of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas, participate in the commencement service held on the

Dallas Baptist University campus in March 1985. (DBU Photo)

“Dr. Graham took several weeks to pray and reflect before accepting our invitation. The Metroplex Mission with Billy Graham in October 2002 was one of the largest and most effective events in the history of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.”

In 1985, Dallas Baptist University presented its first honorary doctorate to Billy Graham. Over the years, DBU partnered with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association for various outreach events and ministries.

“Few other men have run the race like Billy Graham, always hopeful and always pointing to Jesus,” DBU President Adam Wright said. “What a wonderful testimony to a life well lived.”

## **Longtime member of First Baptist Dallas**

Graham was a member—albeit a nonresident member—of First Baptist Church in Dallas more than 50 years. Pastor Robert Jeffress, who grew up in the church, recalled his mother joined First Baptist the same day as Graham.

“She said to my father, ‘If it’s good enough for Billy Graham, it’s good enough for me,’” Jeffress said. “She was saved at a Billy Graham crusade in 1954 at the Cotton Bowl in Dallas, before I was born. Simply put, I am a Christian today and pastor of First Baptist Dallas because of Billy Graham.”



Billy Graham preaches at First Baptist Church in Dallas, in this

1960 photo. Seated behind him is Pastor W.A. Criswell. (Baptist Standard File Photo / Courtesy of the Dallas Morning News)

Jeffress praised Graham as pre-eminent evangelist and man of integrity who had “unfeigned and boundless love for people.”

“Once, when he was preaching at First Baptist Dallas, I told him before the service that my barber and his family were attending, and I had been praying that they would all become Christians,” he recalled.

“I asked Dr. Graham if he would write them a note before the service began. He wrote a brief note on a card to my barber that said: ‘I’m praying for you tonight to become a Christian. Billy Graham.’ When Dr. Graham extended the invitation that night, my barber and his family were the first to come down the aisle.”

## **‘Grace and humility’**

Jack Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas, recalled people asking if he was related to the famous evangelist. He was not, but the North Dallas pastor claimed him as his “spiritual father.”

“I first heard him at a crusade in Little Rock, Ark., as a young boy, and he was influential in my life since that moment,” he said. “Getting to know him personally and spend time with him in the last few decades are among the greatest privileges of my life.

“Today I praise God for the life and message of Billy Graham. Throughout his 99 remarkable years on Earth, he never wavered to call people to repentance in Jesus. Every single one of his sermons—and he preached countless times to millions—was about the cross and the resurrection of

Jesus. And every single time, he called people to get up and make a public decision and follow Jesus. He did it all with grace and humility and without any apology.”

## ‘Person of integrity’

William Martin, author of *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story*, called Graham “the key leader and the major spokesman of the evangelical movement during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”

Martin, senior fellow in religion and public policy at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, characterized Graham as “a person of integrity.”

“Though he made some missteps, he remained free of scandal,” Martin said. “He achieved his success by hard work rather than by inheritance or luck. He used the latest technology and media, but depended on the loyalty of a small group of friends who were with him for decades.

“He hobnobbed with the famous, the wealthy and the powerful around the world, yet seemed surprised that people were interested in him. He often seemed to have the kind of wonder of a small-town boy. He was both genuinely humble and genuinely ambitious and aware of the tension between those inclinations.

“He was not a perfect man, but he was an uncommonly good one.”