

Billy Graham: Pastor to Presidents

“I do believe [Billy Graham] is America’s pastor—a man who
has been a constant radiant of light, a light of truth in a world
often cloaked in darkness and shrouded in deceit.”

—Former President George H.W. Bush

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President Kennedy (left) listened intently as Billy Graham addressed the 1963 National Prayer Breakfast.

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GRADE LEVEL

9th–12th

OBJECTIVES

- List the presidents whom Billy Graham counseled.
- Describe some of the difficulties, privileges, and responsibilities of having a personal relationship with a U.S. president.
- Provide an in-depth analysis of Billy Graham's relationship with at least one U.S. president.

NORTH CAROLINA STANDARD COURSE OF STUDY

- **H2.H.4** *Analyze how conflict and compromise have shaped politics, economics, and culture in the United States.*
- **AH2.H.5** *Understand how tensions between freedom, equality, and power have shaped the political, economic, and social development of the United States.*
- **12.H.5** *Analyze leadership in terms of its influence on the events and outcome of the Cold War.*
- **12.H.3** *Understand the influences, development, and protests of various 20th Century civil rights groups on behalf of greater freedom and equality.*
- **12.H.4** *Analyze how individuals and groups used strategy, power, and authority to oppose greater freedom and equality during the 20th Century.*
- **12.H.1** *Analyze various turning points in American history in terms of their development and implications.*

"I could tell Billy Graham anything in confidence and it would never make the public print. ... We were two people who could, in effect, let our hair down."

—Former President Richard Nixon

Pre-Visit Activities

- Read the attached documents with/to the class. Ask students to consider the following questions:
 - What significant events, if any, had happened in the 2–3 years prior to this speech/prayer? How would you describe the state of the nation at that time—unsettled, optimistic, etc.?
 - What social problems, if any, does Graham mention in these documents? How do you think this compares to today?
- Ask students to compile a list of questions about Billy Graham's relationships with the presidents. Some specific questions for consideration may include:
 - Where did he meet with different presidents?
 - What topics did they discuss?
 - Did they ever enjoy recreational activities together?

Visit to the Library

- Students may enjoy *The Journey of Faith* tour in groups predetermined by teacher.
- The gallery of focus will be The Man.
 - Ask students to carefully examine each piece of memorabilia in the gallery and point out items that reflect Billy Graham's relationship with presidents.
 - Students and teacher(s) may gather around the video monitor in the right-hand corner of the room to enjoy a brief film that recounts Mr. Graham's relationship with the presidents.
 - Ask students if they can find a photo of each president listed in the document on the front wall of The Man gallery.

Post-Visit Activities

- Students may create a list of topics that one of the presidents and Billy Graham might have discussed. For example, what might have been some of the events or issues that Mr. Graham and President George W. Bush discussed, and why?
- Students may compare and contrast Billy Graham's relationship with the president to another major figure. For example, how might a particular president's relationship with Mr. Graham have differed from the president's relationship with his vice president, secretary of state, or other advisers?
- For further research, students may read the following:
 - *God's Ambassador*, pages 160–190
 - Billy Graham's sermon at the inauguration of Lyndon B. Johnson, found here: www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/inaugural02.htm
 - President Clinton's remarks during Billy Graham Library dedication, found here at 48:00 mark: <http://www.c-span.org/video/?198399-1/billy-graham-library-dedication>

NATIONAL CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

- **Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions**—Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of interactions among individuals groups and institutions.
- **Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance**—Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create, interact with, and change structures of power, authority, and governance.
- **Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices**—Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic.

NATIONAL CENTER FOR HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS

- **Standard 2—Historical Comprehension**
 - **D:** Appreciate historical perspectives
- **Standard 3—Historical Analysis and Interpretation**
 - **A:** Formulate questions to focus inquiry or analysis.
 - **B:** Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative.
 - **C:** Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, and institutions.
 - **H:** Consider multiple perspectives.

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Pre-Visit Reading: Overview

Billy Graham is often called “the pastor to presidents” for good reason—every U.S. president since World War II through Barack Obama has met with Mr. Graham. In 2010, Obama became the first sitting president to visit him in his home in Montreat, North Carolina. Throughout Graham’s more than 60 years of ministry, the preacher offered friendship, counsel, and a listening ear to each sitting president.

Mr. Graham always made it clear that he did not have an interest in the political affiliation of any president; he was only concerned for each one as a private individual. He once said of his time with the presidents, “When a president of the United States wept in my presence, or knelt with me to pray, or privately unburdened his concerns about his family, I was not thinking about his political philosophy or his personality, but about his need for God’s help.”

Here are snapshots of Billy Graham’s history with each president he’s known:



Dwight D. Eisenhower—“Eisenhower was the first president that really asked my counsel in depth when he was sending [National Guard] troops into Little Rock, Arkansas,” said Billy Graham. Just before Eisenhower died, Mr. Graham was invited to see him at Walter Reed hospital. After talking again about spiritual matters, the two men prayed. Eisenhower then said he was ready to die. “Billy Graham is one of the best ambassadors our country has, but he told me, ‘I am an ambassador of heaven,’” President Eisenhower once said.



John F. Kennedy—President Kennedy invited Billy Graham to the White House on several occasions. Shortly after he took office, Kennedy helped Mr. Graham and the team arrange a Crusade in Latin America. Kennedy joked that he would be their “John the Baptist,” as he would be visiting the region a few weeks before them. Mr. Graham was having difficulty getting the Colombian government’s approval to hold a Crusade. The president turned to an adviser and said simply, “Take care of that.” The Crusade was soon approved without any further problems. “President Kennedy endeared himself to me in several ways,” recalled Mr. Graham.



Lyndon B. Johnson—Billy Graham probably had a closer friendship with Lyndon Johnson than any other president. The preacher was invited to the Johnson family ranch several times and spent more than 20 nights at the White House during Johnson’s presidency. Every time Mr. Graham would say to him “Let’s have a prayer,” the president would get on his knees to pray. In a letter to Billy Graham, Johnson once wrote, “My mind went back to those lonely occasions at the White House when your friendship helped to sustain a president in an hour of trial.”

NATIONAL CENTER FOR HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS (cont.)

- **Standard 4—Historical Research Capabilities**
 - **A:** Formulate historical questions.
- **Standard 5—Historical Issues: Analysis and Decision Making**
 - **B:** Compare the values and interests of the various people involved.

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Richard M. Nixon—Richard Nixon and Billy Graham had been personal friends for more than 20 years before Nixon became president. Nixon was a very private and complex person, but beneath the surface, Mr. Graham found him to be warm and compassionate. President Nixon was rooted in the teachings and prayers of his Quaker faith. During his time in the Oval Office, Nixon often asked Mr. Graham to pray with him and read the Bible when they visited. Just months before Nixon's death, Mr. Graham told him, "We don't have many years left, you and I, and I pray that we're both ready to meet the Lord. The Scripture says, 'Prepare to meet God'; if either of us is not prepared, we had better get ready."



Gerald R. Ford—Answering critics of his friendship with Billy Graham, Gerald Ford said, "I've heard the comments from some sources that Billy mixes politics with religion. I never felt that, and I don't think that thousands and thousands of people who listen to him felt that. Billy dropped by the Oval Office on several occasions while I was president. They were get-togethers of old friends."



Jimmy Carter—Five years before Jimmy Carter became the governor of Georgia, he hosted a Billy Graham film outreach in Americus, Ga., and while he was governor, he served as an honorary chairman of Graham's Atlanta Crusade. Billy and Ruth Graham visited the Carter family both in the governor's mansion in Georgia and in the White House. "Who has been most influential in [my] spiritual life? ... Billy Graham. I'm just one of tens of millions of people whose spiritual lives have been shaped by [him]," said Jimmy Carter.



Ronald W. Reagan—Billy Graham and Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan befriended each other 27 years before Reagan became president. On March 30, 1981, after the assassination attempt on President Reagan's life, Mr. Graham flew immediately to Washington, D.C., to comfort and pray with Mrs. Reagan and do anything he could for the president. "It was through Billy Graham that I found myself praying even more than on a daily basis," said Ronald Reagan, "... and that in the position I held, that my prayers more and more were to give me the wisdom to make decisions that would serve God and be pleasing to Him."



George H.W. Bush—Billy Graham has said he found George H.W. Bush easy to talk to about spiritual issues. Mr. Graham was with President and Barbara Bush at the White House the night the 1991 Gulf War began. "Billy Graham has been an inspiration in my life," said Bush. "It is my firm belief that no one can be president ... without understanding the power of prayer, without faith. And Billy Graham helped me understand that."

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William J. Clinton—President Clinton once recalled, “When I was a small boy, about 12 years old, Billy Graham came to Little Rock, Arkansas, to preach a Crusade.” Mr. Graham refused to make the black and white members of the audience sit on separate sides, which was the custom back then. This made a lasting impression on the young boy. After Clinton became the governor of Arkansas, he joined Billy Graham at the Little Rock Crusade in 1989. Mr. Graham also visited Clinton in the Oval Office after he became president. “Billy and Ruth Graham have practiced the ministry of ... being friends with presidents of both parties ... always completely private, always completely genuine,” said Clinton.



George W. Bush—In his 1999 autobiography, *A Charge to Keep*, George W. Bush wrote that a turning point in his life came during a private talk with Billy Graham. As Bush explained, they took a walk on the beach in 1985, and Graham’s words planted the “mustard seed in my soul” that eventually led to a decision to “recommit my heart to Jesus Christ.”



Barack Obama—In 2010, President Barack Obama became the first sitting president to visit Billy Graham in his home in Montreat, North Carolina. The two of them enjoyed a friendly conversation and then spent some time praying together.

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Billy Graham gave a memorable address during the 1985 National Prayer Service at the Washington Cathedral, which was attended by President Reagan, Vice President Bush, and many national leaders.

Pre-Visit Reading: Excerpts from Billy Graham's sermon on January 20, 1985, at the National Prayer Service before the second inauguration of President Reagan

Last night it was my privilege to attend the gala honoring President and Mrs. Reagan. I don't know when I have laughed so much or felt such a keen sense of patriotism and pride in our country as I did last night. It also showed me that we can have a lot of fun and entertainment and keep it clean.

I'm both honored and humbled to participate in my role as a preacher of the Gospel. And I'm reminded of the man from North Carolina who attempted to enter his mule in the Kentucky Derby. His friends and neighbors said, "You don't think he can win, do you?" And he said, "No, but look at the company he'll be in!" And this weekend I have felt that I'm in the company of great people.

But we are gathered here today because our nation and its leaders need the help of God. Here we affirm that we are not only a free and independent people, but in a far more profound sense, we are a people dependent upon God. Only if we maintain that attitude of trust and dependence will we have the strength and wisdom to fulfill our responsibilities. We are in danger if we overlook the spiritual dimensions of national leadership. ...

We have a constitution that guarantees to all of us human freedoms, of which religious freedom is foremost. In America, any and all religions have a right to exist and to propagate what they stand for. We enjoy the separation of church and state and no sectarian religion has ever and, pray God, will ever be imposed upon us. ...

Today we face new challenges that previous generations could never have dreamed of. Some are unparalleled opportunities. Some of these challenges, however, are unparalleled dangers which threaten the continued existence of civilization on this planet. ...

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It is possible for us to live in peace with ourselves, our families, in our communities and between nations. Confucius in his *Analects* gave us the Silver Rule. The Bible gives us the Golden Rule. However stated, it means I will love my neighbor as I love myself. ...

During the next four years, many of you here today will have to make decisions of state, perhaps greater than those made by any of your predecessors. Because of modern technology, you will hold in your hands the destiny not only of America, but the entire world. Christ said, "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?" (cf. Mark 8:36). I believe that that applies to nations as well as individuals, for a nation that loses its spiritual courage will grow old before its time. Even if we gain all our material and social objectives and lose our souls, it would be a disaster.

As you work to lead this nation and our world to new heights of social justice, peace, and economic prosperity, you also have the opportunity to lead the nation to its greatest moral and spiritual heights. This is a tremendous opportunity and an awesome responsibility. Jesus once said, "Unto whom much is given, of him much shall be required" (cf. Luke 12:48). Those who have the greatest power always need the greatest guidance.

In less than two hours, President Reagan and Vice President Bush will place their hands upon a Bible and take their oath of office ... , they will be putting their hands on the book from which we have received our ideas of freedom and justice and our morals and value system. ...

On this solemn occasion, as a great nation goes forward under its chosen leaders, may all of us, citizens and leaders alike, go in the strength and the wisdom and the courage which we can only receive from God. Our first president, George Washington, said, "It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible." And he was right. This is what has helped make America great. God bless President and Mrs. Reagan and Vice President and Mrs. Bush and all of those in this administration during the next four years.

**Pre-Visit Reading: Billy Graham's Prayer on January 20, 1997,
at the second inauguration of President Bill Clinton**

President Clinton, Mrs. Clinton, Vice President Gore, Mrs. Gore. I'm going to ask that we all bow our heads in prayer.

Our Father and our God, we thank You today for the privilege of coming into Your presence on this historic and solemn occasion.

We thank You for Your gracious hand, which has preserved us as a nation. We praise You for the peaceful continuity of government that this inauguration represents.

We recall that the Bible says, "*Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it*" (Psalm 127:1, KJV). You also said that "to whom much has been given, much shall be required" (cf. Luke 12:48).

We look gratefully to the past, and thank You that from the very foundations of America, You granted our forefathers courage and wisdom as they trusted in You. So we ask today that You would inspire us by their example; where there has been failure, forgive us; where there has been progress, confirm; where there has been success, give us humility; and teach us to follow Your instructions more closely as we enter the next century.

Give to all those to whom You have entrusted leadership today a desire to seek Your will and to do it.

So today we ask Your blessing on President Clinton and his wife, Hillary, and their daughter, Chelsea; and upon Vice President Gore and his wife, Tipper, and their children.

Give to all our leaders the vision of what You desire America to become, and the wisdom to accomplish it, and the strength to cross the bridges into the 21st century.

We pray also for the members of the House and the Senate; for the Supreme Court; and for all who bear responsibility of leadership in this nation which is blessed with such ethnic diversity.

We have not solved all the social problems of our time, such as drugs and racism. Technology and social engineering have not solved the basic problems of human greed, pride, intolerance, and selfishness. We need Your insight; we need Your compassion; we need Your strength.

As both President Clinton and Senator Dole urged us in the recent presidential campaign, may this be a time of coming together to help us deal with the problems we face. O Lord, help us to be reconciled first to You and secondly to each other. May Dr. Martin Luther King's dream finally come true for all of us. Help us to learn our courtesy to our fellow countryman that comes from the One who taught us that "*whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them*" (Matthew 7:12, NKJV).

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Remind us today that You have shown us what is good and what You require of us: *“To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with [our] God”* (Micah 6:8, NKJV).

We ask that as a people we may humble ourselves before You and seek Your will for our lives and for this great nation. Help us in our nation to work as never before to strengthen our families and to give our children hope and a moral foundation for the future.

So may our desire be to serve You and, in so doing, serve one another. This we pray in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.