



## **BILLY GRAHAM 1918 – 2018**

One of the best-known Christian evangelists of the 20th century, Billy Graham gained world attention in 1949 with a tent revival in downtown Los Angeles that was scheduled for three weeks and lasted six. In the ensuing decades, “Billy Graham Crusades” consistently drew audiences of thousands to arenas and stadiums throughout the world. He founded an association that continues those and other ministries, including an “Hour of Decision” radio program, televised crusades, a newspaper column, *Decision* magazine and films. Graham consulted and prayed with every U.S. president from Harry Truman to Barack Obama – a fact that solidified his popular status as the nation’s preacher but also opened him to criticism. At the same time, his ministry remained free of the financial and sexual scandals that marred the careers of other prominent contemporaries.

Born in 1918 Billy made his “commitment to Christ” at age 16 through the ministry of a traveling evangelist, Mordecai Ham. He was ordained as a Southern Baptist and pastored one congregation (First Baptist Church, Western Springs, Ill.), but the rest of his ministry was deliberately nondenominational. He and Ruth McCue Bell met as students at Wheaton (Ill.) College and were married in 1943, the year he graduated. She died in 2007. They had five children. The eldest son, Franklin, is now CEO of his father’s ministry, although popular culture remains undecided as to who will be the next “great American evangelist.” Graham was a co-founder of *Christianity Today* magazine.

The litany of accomplishments is familiar. Billy Graham has preached the gospel of Christ in person to more than 80 million people and to countless millions more over the airwaves and in films. Nearly 3 million have responded to the invitation he offers at the end of his sermons. He was the first Christian, eastern or western, to preach in public behind the Iron Curtain after World War II, culminating in giant gatherings in Budapest (1989) and Moscow (1992) and complemented by unprecedented invitations to North Korea (1992) and Beijing (1993). He has been a friend to the Pope, the Queen, several Prime Ministers, and Presidents. When America needed a chaplain or pastor to help inaugurate or bury a President, or to bring comfort in times of terrible tragedy, it turned, more often than not, to Billy Graham.

Age and Parkinson’s Disease have taken their toll, but they have not quenched Billy Graham’s spirit. “My mind tells me I ought to get out there and go,” he said, as he was beginning to feel the effects of his disease, “but I just can’t do it. But I’ll preach until there is no breath left in my body. I was called by God, and until God tells me to retire, I cannot. Whatever strength I have, whatever time God lets me have, is going to be dedicated to doing the work of an evangelist, as long as I live.”