

Nixon and Graham, Church and State

By Louis Cassels
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Billy Graham's well-publicized friendship with President Nixon is creating a quandary of conscience for some of his admirers.

Graham has a particular appeal for evangelical Protestants. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say he is their No. 1 hero.

And evangelical Protestants have a long tradition — going back to colonial days — of being vigorous advocates of church-state separation.

Now they see their hero, Graham, serving practically as personal chaplain to the chief of state. Not only does Graham preach at the White House; he lives there, when he is in Washington. Not only does he counsel privately with President Nixon; he pronounces public blessing on the policies of the Nixon administration. For a Baptist evangelist to take on the role of "court preacher" is bound to cause a certain amount of discomfort among Protestants who are committed to vigilant maintenance of the "wall of separation" between church and state.

But that is only half the story. For the same evangelical Protestants who wince at the words "court preacher" are proud and comforted to know that one of their own has the President's ear.

Their viewpoint was expressed recently by editor Louis Benes of the Church Herald, official weekly publication of the Reformed Church in America.

Instead of criticizing Graham or being apprehensive about his close involvement with political leadership, Benes said, Protestants should thank God that the chief of the U.S. government has "sought the friendship and counsel of a man of his (Graham's) character and faith in God.



PERSONAL CHAPLAIN TO PRESIDENT?
Billy Graham and President Nixon

"Who else would we want there (in the role of confidential White House adviser)?" Benes asked. "What if our President instead sought the counsel and advice of a member of the Mafia, or a God is

dead, theologian, or someone dedicated to the 'Playboy philosophy'?"

Another evangelical Protestant magazine, Christianity Today, with which Graham has been closely associated, also sprang to his defense in a recent editorial.

The editorial took sharp issue with what it called "accusations that . . . this (Graham-Nixon) liaison demeans evangelical Christianity by identifying the leading Bible preacher of our time with a particular political outlook.

"We grant that there is risk involved when a clergyman becomes a confidant of powerful figures in the secular world," said Christianity Today. "But is not the risk far outweighed by the opportunity? Have not many evangelicals long prayed for an end without compromise into the affairs of state?"

Conceding "there are numerous examples from the Bible and in church history of false prophets who said what rulers wanted to hear instead of God's word," the magazine said it has seen "no evidence" that Graham has "watered down his convictions to gain access to the White House."

Moreover, it said, "there are ample biblical precedents" for what Graham is doing. It cited as one example the role played by Joseph, who was able to save the children of Israel from starvation because he had become prime minister to the pharaoh of Egypt.

It's a cogent argument. Whether it's consistent with a tradition of insistence on church-state separation is a question evangelical Protestants will have to settle as they've always settled all questions: each in the privacy of his own conscience.