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NOTE: This story was part of a package previewing Billy Graham’s final crusade, held in Queens, N.Y., during June.

In the beginning

‘Billy the Kid’ came to save the big city in 1957

I know that we are going to one of the strongholds of Satan.
Billy Graham, writing in his diary on May 9, 1957, six days before the start of his first crusade in New York City.

At the time, the odds seemed stacked against Billy the Kid.

The baby-faced evangelist with the tall wave of hair was already a nationally known preacher in 1957. His name had been made eight years before, in 1949, when he led a Los Angeles crusade that came out of nowhere and lasted eight weeks. It hadn’t hurt that newspaper boss William Randolph Hearst was impressed with the young preacher and told his minions to “puff Graham.”

In 1954, he preached for 12 weeks in London. The word was spreading.

But New York? Who was Billy Graham to think that he could save the big city from sin and temptation? The Apple, everyone knew, didn’t want to be saved.

The Graham team announced that he would take over Madison Square Garden for six weeks in 1957, while the Knicks and the Rangers used the off-season to heal. He would try to beat back the devil in the “World’s Most Famous Arena,” where hard-living fighters beat in one another’s skulls.

In time, Billy Graham’s New York stand would become the longest and most improbable revival in U.S. history, create “televangelism” as a force in the media age and cement Graham’s reputation as America’s preacher.

“Nobody in all history had conceived a crusade so mighty as this joint production of the evangelist, his team, the 1,500 churches that were his hosts, and Almighty God,” wrote journalist Curtis Mitchell in his 1957 book about the crusade, “God in the Garden.”
Before the first hymn was sung, opposition came from every direction.

Fundamentalists, from whose world Graham emerged, fumed that he would compromise the Gospel, rubbing shoulders with those liberal Protestants, papist Catholics and the other heathen. On the far side of the Protestant spectrum, New York's chief intellectual theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, dismissed Graham as simplistic and shallow, a diversion from the issues of the day.

Even Graham, 38 at the time, wrote in apocalyptic terms about the prospect of saving souls in the largely disbelieving city.

"Materialism, indifference and wickedness are apparent to even a casual Christian observer in New York," he wrote in his diary, which he shared with Mitchell. "This great united spiritual crusade is going to ignite the wrath of Satan. All the forces of hell will probably be turned on us."

The Ringling Bros. circus left the Garden. On the evening of May 15, 1957, Billy Graham opened. A bad first night could close the whole thing like a tuneless Broadway show.

"I remember the first night, seeing the Garden," said George Beverly Shea, now 96, Graham's vocal soloist since 1947. "I had to sing before the message. Billy teased me because the Garden was full. Then it stayed full, night after night. It confirmed for Billy that this was what he should continue doing."


After Graham preached each night, he invited "inquirers" to walk up to the front and pledge their lives to Christ. During the first month, 575,000 people came to the Garden and 18,500 accepted Graham's invitation.

"About the fourth week, we knew that God was doing something that was out of our control," said Cliff Barrows, now 82, Graham's master of ceremonies since 1949. "Normally, attendance dwindles; there are peaks and valleys. But there was this momentum. People who had sneered at Billy the Kid knew that something was going on. There was evidence that we ought not to stop something that was the work of God."

Graham kept going. He went to Brooklyn and met a shy Mickey Mantle. He took the crusade to the Forest Hills Tennis Stadium. He preached in Harlem and from the steps of the U.S. Treasury Building on Wall Street. He announced that he would preach in Yankee Stadium on July 20.

He also said the crusade at the Garden would be extended — ultimately to 16 full weeks, ending Sept. 1.
“I am willing to give my life, ready to die in New York, to see a true spiritual revival in New York and America,” Graham preached in early July.

Another milestone had taken place on Saturday night, June 1. The crusade was televised, reaching an audience of more than 6 million. Mitchell described it this way: “The New York Crusade thrust outward among shrieking kilocycles to span this continent and give Billy Graham the largest audience in the history of man’s quest for God.”

Each Saturday revival would be given a national audience. Graham began receiving thousands of letters from viewers who accepted Christ from their living room sofas. A path was set for generations of televangelists to preach the Gospel and raise tons of money for both good and bad.

Night after night, Graham continued to preach in the great arena. He was most effective when he warned of God’s impending judgment of every soul.

“Tonight I preached more on the love, mercy and grace of God, and the response is not nearly so good,” he wrote one night. “Perhaps the message for New York is judgment.”

Some 90,000 people came to the Yankee Stadium revival, filling every seat and covering much of the field, even though it was 97 degrees. Vice President Richard Nixon was close to Graham much of the night, publicly establishing what would become a long and controversial relationship.

The crusade also made history in another way. Graham called African-Americans onto his team and onto the Garden platform. He invited the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. to speak, even though many white preachers opposed the growing civil rights movement.

“And in these days of emotional tension,” King prayed on July 18, “when the problems of the world are gigantic in extent and chaotic in detail, give us penetrating vision, broad understanding, power of endurance and abiding faith, and save us from the paralysis of crippling fear.”

There was unease in the Garden. Graham received angry calls and letters, wrote Howard Jones, an African-American minister whom Graham invited to become part of the New York crusade team and who wound up staying with Graham for 40 years.

In his memoir, Jones said he received the same rough treatment, even though Graham always looked out for him.

“I remember sitting on the crusade platform on various occasions with empty seats next to me because some white crusade participants had decided to sit on the other side of the stage,” Jones wrote in 2003’s “Gospel Trailblazer.” “At other times, I would go down to counsel new believers during the altar calls only to see white counselors move in the other direction.”
Graham continued to face conflicting pressures when it came to race. Six years later, in 1963, he did not participate in the March on Washington. It was a decision he has said he regrets.

As the crusade came to a close, Graham needed a prominent finale. What better stage than Times Square? On the evening of Sept. 1, he climbed atop a platform at 42nd Street and Broadway. The crowd stretched down to 38th Street. Television cameras were prominent.

"Let us tell the whole world tonight that we Americans believe in God," the preacher said.

The final count: Almost 2 million people attended 100 days of revivals through 16 weeks. More than 56,000 pledged their lives to Christ, according to Graham's team.

Looking back, Billy Graham may have been in a unique position to stir the big city's soul, said William Lawrence, dean of theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, who wrote a 1996 book, "Sundays in New York," about the prominence of the city's Protestant preachers through the mid-1950s.

"New York provided this marvelous combination of a strong Protestant establishment and all the kinds of personal sin that Graham was most effective attacking," Lawrence said. "Beyond that, New York was the media and entertainment capital of the country. Graham was a compelling speaker, dramatically effective in the spoken word, and had enormous credibility. He morphed easily across denominational lines. It was what we now call a perfect storm of possibility."

In his Times Square sermon, Graham had sprinkled movie titles from the bright lights of 42nd Street marquees. When it was over, he received an appropriate adieu from the electric ticker tape on the Times Tower: "Billy Graham Crusade ends in Times Square Rally."
Hasidic circumcision rite causes shock and debate

Herpes cases prompt discussion of oral technique

The suctioning of blood by mouth during ritual circumcisions has long been dropped as a common practice by most of the Jewish world, but many Jews and non-Jews alike were shocked to learn in recent days that the practice remains standard in many Hasidic communities.

The largely unknown practice, which has been used during the Jewish circumcision ritual for thousands of years, came to public attention last week when New York City health officials said that a Hasidic rabbi and mohel from Monsey was suspected of transmitting the herpes virus to three New York City infants he had circumcised. One of the infants died in October.

Rabbi Yitzchok Fischer, a prominent Hasidic mohel, suctions blood orally during the circumcision ritual, known as a bris, in order to remove impurities. He is suspected of passing the oral herpes virus, which generally produces cold sores but can be passed to another person’s genital area.

Rockland County health officials said they would do their own investigation.

“It is very, very rare for the mohel to suck out the blood himself,” said Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, which represents Orthodox congregations in North America.

“The mohalim I speak to in our community say they use latex gloves and a glass tube for suction, and they take every precaution so they do not come into contact with the baby’s blood and the baby does not come into contact with their blood,” Weinreb said. “This is for the protection of the baby and, frankly, for the protection of the mohel, because one never knows what the baby might be carrying from the parent.”

This past August, the journal Pediatrics published a study that concluded that the oral suctioning of blood during a ritual Jewish circumcision, a practice called “metzitzah,” puts infants at risk of contracting herpes and should be eliminated. The study looked at eight cases of infants who contracted herpes after oral suctioning during a bris.

Twelve researchers, including seven from Israel, also considered the religious and cultural traditions behind the practice. They noted that the Babylonian Talmud, completed in the fifth century, required oral suctioning in order to remove health risks to the infant. But later rabbinical authorities, the study found, modified their approach as they developed new understandings of hygiene and disease transmission.
“The same consideration that led the Talmudic sages once to establish the custom of the metzitzah for the sake of the infant could now be applied to persuade the mohel to use instrumental suction,” the study concluded.

One of the researchers involved in the study was Rabbi Moses Tendler of Monsey, a professor of ethical medical practices and Talmudic law at Yeshiva University, often called the flagship of modern Orthodoxy. Tendler last week said the Talmud requires that blood be sucked from the wound during circumcision, but not that it be done by mouth.

Rabbi Gerald Chirnomas from Boonton, N.J., a prominent mohel in the Greater New York region, said the practice of orally suctioning blood was the norm for centuries.

“When a person cuts a finger, what’s the first thing they would do?” he said. “Suck out the blood so any possible contamination is sucked out. The rabbi applied the same thinking to this practice.”

Health concerns about the practice are known to have come up from time to time, Chirnomas said. During the mid-19th century, for instance, the Polish government forbade the practice when a popular mohel had a tooth abscess and an infant died.

By the time Chirnomas, a Conservative rabbi, was trained as a mohel decades ago by two Orthodox mohalim in Jerusalem, the practice of oral suctioning had been largely replaced by the use of a glass tube to suck away the blood. These days, Chirnomas, who has performed some 14,000 ritual circumcisions, uses a gauze pad to soak up the blood.

“Using the mouth was done for thousands of years,” he said. “But it is important that people realize that within the general Jewish community, this practice is not followed. Within the very Orthodox community, the Hasidic community, they do not accept this change. Traditions die hard.”

Rabbi Avi Shafran, director of public affairs for Agudath Israel of America, an advocacy group for Orthodox Judaism, said that while the practice of suctioning blood by mouth is rare, Hasidic communities that believe it is important are unlikely to give it up.

“In most communities, it is not done this way, but in many it is a religious tradition of many generations,” he said. “I understand that what may have happened in this case is exceedingly rare. Pediatricians in communities where this is done as a matter of course have told us that they have never seen a case like this, ever. Jews have been circumcising their sons for quite a while, and this is getting attention because it is so unusual.”

Two of the infants who contracted herpes after being circumcised by Fischer, including the one who died, were twins. The double bris was performed on Oct. 16. New York City health officials later discovered that another boy tested positive for herpes after being circumcised by Fischer in 2003, according to court papers.
Fischer is not accused of any crimes, but in a day when there is great concern about sexual molestation of children, many may wonder how an adult can legally put his mouth on a child’s genitals. Vincent Bonventre, a law professor at Albany Law School, said that courts often allow exemptions to general laws for religious practices.

"Cases are more difficult when there is a direct conflict between law and religion, like when a religion requires an act that is forbidden by law," Bonventre said. "When the government’s interest is not paramount, the courts generally hold that you can’t require an individual to violate their religion."

The bris

The Jewish circumcision ritual is the cutting of the male foreskin, symbolizing the covenant between God and the Jewish people. It is usually done by a mohel, a rabbi trained in circumcision. Mohels who suction blood from the wound generally use a glass tube.
‘Greetings New York’ from evangelical Ohio

A introduction to evangelical Christianity for tolerant, inclusive, ‘PC’ New Yorkers

About this story

• After Election Day, many New Yorkers were awakened to the religious and political clout evangelical Christians wield in much of the country. So XXXX went to Butler County, Ohio, to talk to evangelicals about their faith and their much-discussed emphasis on “moral values” in the wider culture.

WEST CHESTER, Ohio — When having a conversation here with evangelical Christians, it is understood — although it may not be plainly stated — that they are saved and will be going to heaven.

You, on the other hand, might not be.

It is nothing personal. The good people of southern Ohio who might be described as evangelicals simply believe that accepting Christ’s atonement is a must for salvation, and that saying so is an act of love and not intolerance.

They seek to become closer each day to Jesus and read the Bible as God’s very word on the journey. They also aim to introduce the unsaved to God, political correctness be darned.

Their mission is a religious one, even if liberals on the nation’s two coasts have become obsessed with the political might of evangelical America.

“This is a day we have worked for and prayed for!” the Rev. Terry Fields told his congregation one recent Sunday morning. “But don’t get caught up in this building. Get caught up in the God in the building.”

Fields was preaching for the first time in Liberty Heights Church’s new worship center, situated off Interstate 75 in a fast-growing suburban region between Cincinnati and Dayton that includes a town called West Chester. The church, which could pass for a modern medical building, features a preschool that sweeps tots away during services, a vast coffee bar, cozy sanctuaries and game rooms for children in each age group, and a
main sanctuary that looks and sounds like it should be hosting jazz trios and chamber ensembles.

Liberty Heights Church happens to be part of the Southern Baptist Convention, even though Ohio is not in the South. But for some time, evangelical Christianity, a loosely defined world of born-again faith to which Southern Baptists belong, has not been restricted to the South. It is this reality that has disoriented many liberals in New York, New England, California and other politically correct pockets of America since Election Day.

H.L. Mencken, who openly belittled Bible-believing Christians, popularized the term Bible Belt during the 1920s to describe the South. Today, the region where evangelical Christians exert religious and political influence reaches up into much of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Illinois, down from North Dakota to Texas, and out to Colorado, the door to the growing evangelical West.

These days, the Northeast and Northwest are the outcasts, culturally isolated. Call them the Believe-What-You-Like Belts.

And don’t look now, but evangelical churches are starting to nudge into the religious mix in non-heartland capitals like Boston, the Los Angeles suburbs and in Westchester and Rockland counties. They have a low profile, for the moment.

There is still tremendous disagreement over the impact that evangelicals had on Election Day, in Ohio and elsewhere. But this much is clear: Evangelicals are a political force. They emphasize their faith before anything else. And liberals just don’t get them.

On opening day at Liberty Heights Church, Fields told 900 believers who filled the plush sanctuary for the first of two services that they shouldn’t worry about their congregation growing too large or too fast.

“This isn’t our church,” he said. “It’s God’s church. He can make it as big as he wants.

“I hear people say that the nation is deteriorating,” he said. “Why doesn’t somebody do something? We’ll, we’re going to do something.”

As close to 2,000 people gathered in the church’s “ministerial mall” for a photo, 35-year-old Tom Green, a computer instructor who grew up in Nebraska, thought about what New Yorkers who haven’t met evangelicals need to understand.

“The main thing is that we believe Jesus is real in this place,” he said. “We are not playing church. This is a group of people who believe what they say and say what they believe. They genuinely believe the Bible. We’ll tell you about it, too.”

The cultural difference
Fields, 39, grew up in Gwinnett County, Ga., in a fundamentalist church, meaning that he was taught to fear the larger culture, not to try to influence it. He thought of Ohio as part of the Yankee North when he arrived nine years ago.

“I was raised to believe that Northerners are rude, unfriendly and not God’s people,” he said with a smile. “I didn’t even want Yankees in heaven with me. But Ohio is really a microcosm of the nation: blue-collar up north and rural, agricultural and suburban everywhere else. There’s a real concern for family values here.”

Butler County is north of Cincinnati, and the whole Cincinnati region is influenced as much by Kentucky to the south and Indiana to the west as by the rest of Ohio. Butler is a mix of old and new Ohio, rural and suburban. Farms, stables and cow pastures are side by side with communities of look-alike houses that have names like Stony Creek, Jericho and Cedarhurst.

The section of Butler County alongside I-75 is popular because it is within commuting distance of Cincinnati and Dayton. The townships of Liberty and West Chester (which some insist was named after the ritzy bedroom communities of New York) are just about instant suburbs. There are lots of young families in minivans going to soccer practice, coffee-carrying professionals who work for companies like Procter & Gamble, transplants from the South and holdover farmers who remember when there was no one around.

Diversity, of any kind, is not an issue. Butler is more than 90 percent white, and English is the primary language in 95 percent of households.

A polite race is on for the many new souls in town. Fields has baptized more than 1,000 people in nine years.

“People are hungry for spiritual values, for answers to life’s questions,” Fields said. “Evangelicals believe that God is not going to change his mind. That’s why most fall on the conservative side of moral and social issues. If homosexuality was wrong in the past, why should we bend our morals now?”

The Cincinnati region has long been known as politically conservative. Now, its northern suburbs are taking on a distinctly evangelical feel, with many newcomers flocking to Baptist churches, Disciples of Christ churches, Nazarene churches and the family-oriented, nondenominational churches that are all the rage in the evangelical world.

Catholic parishes in the suburbs are growing fast, taking in former city dwellers, but the Archdiocese of Cincinnati saw its membership drop by 6 percent between 1990 and 2000.

New Yorkers may have been surprised to learn that 25 percent of President Bush’s supporters in Ohio were white evangelicals, but most probably had an outdated image of Ohio as blue-collar, heavily Catholic and Democratic, said William Trollinger, a history professor at the University of Dayton.
"The popular image of Ohio as being Cleveland is not true," he said. "Evangelicals have been here, but now we know that they have been politicized in a new way. This fact and declining union strength have changed Ohio politics for the foreseeable future. It’s not the Deep South, yet."

Many of the faithful at Liberty Heights Church would certainly feel more at home in the Deep South than, say, Mount Kisco or Nyack.

One striking feature of opening day at Liberty Heights was that there were many more children, teenagers with spiked hair and young adults than senior citizens, something that is almost never the case at New York churches. In one Bible class, a children’s pastor worked the room like a birthday party magician while 150 elementary school tots, induced by prizes, yelled out the words to Matthew 7:24.

Down the hall, a 27-year-old middle school pastor with long sideburns named Nathan Wilder pumped up his flock for another round of Elevate, a program that involves worship, a full band and food.

“If you guys were here last week, you know there were tears, hugging,” he said. “It was unbelievable. Our prayer is that God sealed whatever he did in your hearts. Bring your friends. Elevate is awesome, but it is a platform to share Jesus.”

That is what makes evangelical culture different.

The northern suburbs of New York City are home to many devout and faithful people, Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants, Jews and others. But the mix of religions and attitudes makes it hard for a unified voice to rise above the fray. It’s also understood that talking about one’s faith in mixed company may be perceived as overly personal and even intolerant.

Evangelical Christians in Butler County talk about Jesus with no self-consciousness, the way New Yorkers talk about their jobs or the Yankees. The Holy Spirit seems to be with them at the breakfast table, during rush hour and at Saturday soccer practice.

When Liberty Heights started work on its new church last year, a letter from the West Chester Township Board of Trustees offered “Best wishes for continued growth as you enter another phase of God’s Plan.”

Fields, a friendly, focused preacher who has a doctorate in church growth, explained that liberals cannot understand what drives evangelical Christians unless they try to read the Bible as God’s word, a source of absolute truth.

“If you come to the understanding that the Bible is true, it really affects how you live out your faith,” he said. “If you say the Bible is inspired by God, as many liberal Christians do, man gets to define the spots where it’s true. I call it Dalmatian theology.”
The real question, he explained, is not what the Bible says, but what the Bible is.

The Woody Allen test

You don’t have to spend much time in Butler County to know you’re not in the New York suburbs.

On television, basic cable offers several Christian stations, and Billy Graham, now looking like a white-haired biblical patriarch, seems to be on all the time. One radio station plays slick contemporary Christian music when no one is preaching, and there are three country stations for every one playing rock.

Church advertisements are everywhere, including on movie screens during the previews. Some offer no-nonsense worship (“Where God’s Word is the Last Word”), others gentler messages (“A church you can relate to”), while others take a moderate approach (“A contemporary presentation of conservative principles”).

You really know you’re not in New York when a waitress behind the counter at a Bob Evans diner confuses Peter Sellers with ... Woody Allen. “Isn’t Peter Sellers the one who married his daughter?” she wondered.

The people at The River Church know what East Coast liberals think about evangelicals: that they’re uneducated country bumpkins who write checks to televangelists and have missed out on something called science.

“People in New York probably think, ‘Do you even get world news in Ohio?’” said Diane Tirakis, who coordinates Sunday services at the church. “They probably think we’re uptight and nerdy, and all the women wear dresses. The reality is that people have different beliefs about lots of things. But we share a freedom in Christ. When Christ died, he set us free from the laws. There is no black book of Christianity.”

Some stereotypes about evangelicals don’t hold up at The River Church. The congregation is almost entirely composed of super-educated, professional young families. They’re engineers, scientists and computer geeks who make small talk about their kids’ schools.

They opened a new church in September that looks like an oversize ranch-style home, right next to a cornfield. It’s decorated in muted blues and grays and centers on an open cafe that could be the setting for a TV sitcom.

Most River-goers would look right at home in downtown Rye or a Piermont boutique.

That is, until they start talking politics and morals. They mock liberals and Democrats with the same tone of confidence and bewilderment many New Yorkers direct at voters who emphasize moral values.
"The way George Bush wants to lead the country is much more in tune with how we want to lead our family," said Margaret Bush, 38, a first-grade teacher. She and her husband, Brian, 40, who works in customer service and is not related to the president, have three children, ages 12, 9 and 2.

"(President Bush) is more supportive of those values than, not just John Kerry, but the whole Democratic Party," she said.

Bush was sitting in the living room of what New Yorkers might call a McMansion, where a half-dozen church couples were taking part in one of The River's 24 small groups, called LifeNets. Contemporary evangelical churches tend to stress the importance of small-group ministry, and The River's laid-back pastor, the Rev. Chris Russell, agrees: "We're big into relationships and stuff. Kids are a big deal."

On this night, after munching on chicken wings, LifeNets members tried to find the connection between their faith-driven values and their strictly conservative politics.

"The stance President Bush was willing to take on certain issues, even though he went against popular thought, was influential to me," said Joyce Russell, 37, the pastor's wife. "I like his steadfastness. I know he is fallible, a man, but I also know he seeks wisdom."

"It's important in a world leader that you don't flinch," said Dan Stevning, 41, who works in pharmaceutical sales.

The group was about as conservative as a Karl Rove staff meeting: wholly supportive of the war in Iraq as part of the war on terror, critical of media coverage of the war, dismissive of John Kerry as a flip-flopping stooge, and still unforgiving of Bill Clinton for reasons that hardly need to be stated.

The evening's hostess, Terri Dehner, a 41-year-old cardiologist, visited Times Square after Thanksgiving and confessed to being surprised by the lack of "personal space," but having an overall feeling of safety.

When the group's talk turned to abortion, she criticized a doctor she knows who aborted a 27-week-old fetus because he believed the mother's health was in danger.

"Even if the mother's health was at risk, there are people walking around who were born at 27 weeks," she said.

Chris Russell, 38, wears jeans and a goatee and recently signed an e-mail with "Have a groovy Christmas." He looks like the graphic-design guru he is, but he's built a 600-person congregation from nothing in six years. He said The River's mission is "to help people find God in ways that may change their lives forever."
"When I think of evangelical Christianity, I think of influence," he said. "The church ought to be an influence on the culture. We have to purify the culture, help the culture remain morally virtuous. As a church, we believe in a rescue operation. There is great harm in living unconnected to God."

Butler County went for Bush 2- to-1. But the way to rescue the culture, Russell said, is through evangelism, not politics.

The big Jesus

Even among evangelicals in southern Butler County, there are mixed feelings about the big Jesus.

You can’t miss him. If you drive on I-75, which everyone does, he appears to be reaching out to your hubcaps.

The Rev. Lawrence Bishop, who pastors Solid Rock Church with his wife, Darlene, had him built behind their church campus as another way to summon the unbelieving. It’s direct: a 62-foot-high Jesus, only from the waist up (as in mid-Resurrection), his arms outstretched to the heavens.

Other pastors in the region whisper that the big Jesus, completed in September, is a bit ostentatious. A Web site called www.roadsideamerica.com profiles him alongside the world’s largest egg and the world’s largest ball of twine.

But the Bishops are not shy about evangelizing. They founded their church with 12 people in 1980 and now have 7,000 members. The congregation is charismatic, meaning that members often feel moved by the Holy Spirit to speak in tongues or spin and writhe beneath a fluorescent dove on the ceiling of the vast sanctuary.

The message at Solid Rock is as loud as the Jesus statue is big.

"Liberals ask what we mean by ‘moral values,’ ” Lawrence Bishop said. “It’s a tragedy that they don’t know. See, we don’t believe what John Kerry believes, that you’re born a homosexual. We believe that if you put yourself in Jesus’ hands, you have the power to change. Political correctness? We go by the word of God. That’s our correctness.”

Bishop, a bluegrass musician who’s played with stars such as Ricky Skaggs and Ralph Stanley, swaggers across the church stage like John Wayne with a Bible in his holster. In a deep drawl, he urges his members to fight the culture through politics.

“If I vote for an abortionist or someone who goes against the Bible, that makes me guilty," he said.
One common criticism of evangelical Christians is that they ignore the material and spiritual needs of the larger society. This is a myth at Solid Rock, which gives away a week's worth of groceries each Sunday to needy members.

The church is strongly anti-abortion, so it recently opened a home for pregnant, unwed teens. The home, decorated like a showroom at Ethan Allen, cost $1.5 million and was stuck in the courts for four years because the community did not want it.

On one recent Wednesday evening, when many evangelical churches have services, more than 30 people in Solid Rock's prison ministry met to pray and psych themselves up for their difficult work. They minister to prisoners at two jails just down the road, past a huge flea market and several cow pastures.

"We have to keep in mind that we're doing it for the Lord," said Kevin Gay, a ministry leader. "Look at our pastors. They started in a storefront, and now they're out here on the highway."

During the frenzied service, Darlene Bishop skipped and hopped across the stage in high heels and a long skirt, looking like a Spirit-fueled Mary Tyler Moore. She pointed out a choir member who she said was saved from homosexuality — "God brought her out of that pit" — and another who was relieved of a debt by a customer service operator who wanted to help a fellow Christian.

She preached about growing up poor and how everyone is tested.

"We have a law we want to force on God; that's called fairness," she said. "If everything was fair, we'd all be in hell. Anytime God tests you, you are the blessee. You come out richer and stronger."

Solid Rock is mixed along racial and economic lines, which is unusual for a church anywhere. The Bishops are proud to be converting liberal blacks like Ayanna Moore, 25, a former Baptist.

"I was highly liberal, very in the world, always saying that everybody has a right to believe what they want," she said after services. "Then I was saved a year ago. I started looking at my family, what kind of world will I want my kids to live in. Look at abortion, gay marriage, attacks on the Ten Commandments. I voted for Bush."

Her friend, Dwayne Glanton, 39, who also grew up in the black Baptist church, said New Yorkers have to understand that it's not about politics.

"We go to church to have a true relationship with Jesus," he said. "He is involved in our lives. A relationship with Christ gives you power. Once you have it, you can't be without it."
What is an evangelical?

Most evangelical Christians do not identify themselves as such. They prefer to refer to themselves as just Christians.

The term “evangelical” is used to describe many groups of Protestants, including fundamentalists, charismatics, Pentecostals and those who have simply been born again. Many evangelicals are members of nondenominational churches; others belong to evangelical denominations. Still others are the more conservative, Bible-focused members of mainline Protestant churches, including Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Baptists.

What holds the evangelical world together are several basic beliefs, including:

• That one must acknowledge sinfulness and accept Christ as redeemer.

• That the Bible is God’s infallible word.

• That the Holy Spirit is actively involved in people’s lives.

• That believers must spread the “good news” of Christ’s redemption before he returns.
The legacy of John Paul II: 
Decades of milestones overshadowed by the power of one man’s faith

For Catholics in their 20s and early 30s, John Paul II was the only pope they ever knew, certainly the only one they really remember. To the world, he was the most visible and traveled religious leader in memory, the first pope who always mattered.

John Paul II’s impact on the Catholic Church, on the world, was so vast that it is tempting to boil down his legacy to what is most measurable.

His 26-year, six-month pontificate was the third-longest among the 264 popes, trailing only St. Peter himself (34 or 37 years, depending on interpretation) and Pius IX of the mid-19th century (31½ years).

He made 104 foreign trips and set foot in 129 countries, making him the church’s first truly global leader.

He canonized 482 saints, more than all his predecessors combined during the previous 400 years, and beatified 1,338 additional church heroes.

He faced up to the past, apologizing to Jews, Protestants, Orthodox Christians, Muslims and others for the Inquisition, the Crusades, inaction on the part of some Christians during the Holocaust and other long-ignored chapters of history.

He laid down his thoughts and teachings for future generations in a powerful body of writing, including a best-selling book and 14 encyclicals, or church white papers.

But John Paul II’s legacy is much deeper and more complex than a listing of his records and achievements, far greater than what could go on the back of his papal baseball card. Through his encounters with fascism, communism, ongoing war and oppression, an assassination attempt, and the West’s enduring fascination with secularism and science, he was powered by an undeniable, uncompromising faith that touched every word he said and every step he took.

“They try to understand me from the outside,” he once told George Weigel, his primary biographer. “But I can only be understood from the inside.”

A singular vision

John Paul II’s burning faith and steadfast belief in the orthodox teachings of the Catholic Church provoked strong reactions from the faithful and his critics, who were often one and the same. He was universally admired for standing up for the oppressed, for seeking
to build new bonds with Jews, Orthodox Christians and others, and, among people of faith, for pleading that spirituality never give way to a man-made system for understanding the world.

At the same time, his insistence on conformity in matters of doctrine, which grew more stern through his pontificate, irritated many liberal and moderate Catholics, particularly in the United States and Europe. Each time John Paul II clamped down on theologians, on Catholic universities, on priests and nuns wanting to minister to homosexuals, on anyone wanting even to raise the question of female priests, he made himself seem a relic to those who think differently.

Through it all, the man born as Karol Wojtyla was widely respected, even by critics, for preserving his pure vision of Catholicism's place in the world, for not giving in to a culture of compromise.

Even as Parkinson's disease broke down his body, he traveled the globe to deliver his message. After seeing fascism and communism fall, he critiqued capitalism for leaving too many without. He rarely sought to avoid political controversy during his travels, visiting Orthodox Christian countries where many did not want him, and completing a dream trip to the Holy Land, despite the inevitability that his every move would be seen through a political lens.

In one of his most enduring images, he met with his would-be assassin in a prison cell and offered his forgiveness.

The Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, editor of First Things, a conservative religious journal, believes that John Paul II stood out among all world leaders for his moral guidance. John Paul II, he predicted, will go down as John Paul II the Great.

"He was really the only one offering a compelling vision for the future of the human project," Neuhaus said. "Two hundred years after the Enlightenment, he was the only one asking the big questions like, 'Why are we here?'"

The little-known archbishop of Krakow came to the papacy Oct. 16, 1978, ready and eager to provide answers. His Polish name (pronounced Voy-TEE-wah) was a temporary shock to a Catholic system that had not seen a non-Italian pope since 1523. His background — who was this poet/actor/theologian/philosopher/skier? — seemed almost radical.

By the following year, John Paul II was visiting his native land, giving new life to the Solidarity workers' movement and helping to set in motion the unraveling of the atheist Iron Curtain. A historic pontificate was under way.

"John Paul II will go down in history as the most important world leader in the second half of the 20th century," said the Rev. Thomas Reese, editor of the Jesuit magazine America. "His role in the fall of communism in Eastern Europe cannot be
underestimated. I think he was more important than Ronald Reagan. With his support of Solidarity and the Polish independence movement, he began the landslide that wiped communism out of Eastern Europe and, eventually, the Soviet Union. "He, of course, could not have done it on his own without (former Soviet leader Mikhail) Gorbachev and the economic collapse of communism," Reese said. "But he was the right man at the right time and right place to make a difference."

Wojtyla was shaped, of course, by growing up in Poland during a unique, horrific time in history. He saw the Nazis and then the Soviets tear apart his people and clamp down on his church. He knew firsthand about oppression and suffering (he also lost his mother and brother at a young age), as well as what faith could offer to get one through the worst times.

He also saw, with his own eyes, what happened to the Jews. He was raised in an environment of anti-Semitism and watched as Jews he knew were persecuted and removed from his hometown of Wadowice.

At the Second Vatican Council, Wojtyla, a little-known bishop, spoke out in favor of no longer blaming the Jews for Christ’s death, which became the central point of a statement that changed the Catholic Church’s relationship with Judaism.

John Paul II later recognized Israel and was the first pope to visit a synagogue. In 2001, the Vatican quietly released a document affirming the sacredness of Jewish scripture and stating that the Jewish wait for the Messiah is valid.

That John Paul II would fundamentally change his church’s perceptions of Judaism and the Jewish people came as no surprise to Jerzy Kluger, a Jew who was Karol Wojtyla’s closest boyhood friend. Their friendship has been widely credited with setting Wojtyla on a path toward improving relations with the Jews, whom John Paul II called his “elder brothers.”

"'One must realize that Karol Wojtyla is an exceptional personality,'" Kluger said in 1998. "'He has done more in 20 years than all other popes did in 1,800 years, not just for the Jews, but for others. He is a complex personality. Do not oversimplify or underestimate him.'"

It remains to be seen whether John Paul II’s defense of Pope Pius XII, the church’s wartime pope, will hurt Catholic-Jewish relations in the future. John Paul II contended that Pius XII tried to protect Jews during World War II, a view that some scholars do not share. Pius XII’s beatification, delayed during John Paul II’s pontificate, may still come.

**Reaching out**

As part of what some called his “ministry of reconciliation,” John Paul II also tried to close the 1,000-year rift with the Orthodox churches of the East. It was a theme he
repeatedly stressed at the start of Christianity’s third millennium and pursued with
passion during the final years of his life.

He made historic visits to Orthodox lands like Greece, Romania, Ukraine and Bulgaria,
offering friendship and the promise of cooperation, even as some Orthodox bishops
opposed his presence and protesters feared he was trying to expand Catholic influence.

Neuhaus said that the pope’s inability to reconcile with the Orthodox “undoubtedly
constitutes the single greatest disappointment of the Holy Father.”

John Paul II also reached out to Protestants and Anglicans, often stressing the need for
Christian unity. But he repeated again and again that Catholic interpretations of Christ’s
word are beyond debate, leaving Protestant leaders frustrated and unsure how relations
could be improved.

At times, he seemed to struggle to reconcile two of his strongest impulses — defending
orthodox Catholicism and improving relations with other Christians. A 2000 Vatican
document that sought to curtail any movement toward “religious relativism” by
reaffirming Catholic teachings about salvation confused and angered many non-
Catholics.

He was also the first pope to visit a mosque, and he regularly met with Muslim leaders on
his trips. It was widely believed that one reason the Vatican strongly opposed the war in
Iraq was that the pope and others did not want to be seen by the Muslim world as
supporting a Christian war against Islam.

John Paul II was never shy about sharing his views, and enforcing them, particularly to
reel in those he believed were challenging the church’s authority. He prohibited
rebellious theologians such as the Rev. Charles Curran, a former Catholic University
professor who questioned the church’s ban on contraception, from teaching Catholic
theology. He banned a Maryland priest and nun from ministering to gays and lesbians
because they refused to condemn homosexuality.

He defined certain church teachings, like the ban on female priests, as definitive, and
promised that theologians who dissented too strongly would be punished. The Vatican
also sought to force U.S. Catholic colleges back to tradition by, among other things,
requiring theology professors to get permission to teach from their local bishop.

“The church is not a democracy, and no one from below can decide the truth,” John Paul
II once told a group of bishops in Austria.

Jude Dougherty, dean emeritus of philosophy at Catholic University, who knew Karol
Wojtyla when he was archbishop of Krakow, said in 2000 that John Paul II had
toughened up during the latter stages of his pontificate, taking the necessary steps to
protect and advance authentic church teachings.
“He detected a drift, starting with theologians deviating from orthodoxy,” Dougherty said. “He speaks with firmness and clarity and endorsed those at the Vatican who speak unequivocally. The pope is a teacher. In the ecclesiastical order, he did not invent the Periodic Table, but mastered it and set out to teach those who have to learn.”

Only time will tell whether John Paul II was aggressive enough in addressing the sex abuse scandal that shook the American church during the twilight of his pontificate. John Paul II was widely seen as providing slow and uncertain leadership during the crisis, but then called all American cardinals to Rome for an unprecedented and symbolically important summit.

He gave the cardinals clear directions to prevent abuse by priests, but said nothing about the role his bishops played in allowing abusive priests to continue to serve. Critics had little doubt that John Paul II was horrified by the scandal and by the behavior of a minority of fallen priests, but many wondered if he had become too physically weak to rise to the occasion.

John Paul II’s health was a major topic of church-wide talk and debate ever since the early 1990s. It will be up to historians to determine just how active and involved he was during his final years and how much work he delegated to, or was merely picked up, by his aides. He may well be remembered as two popes, the “young John Paul II,” strong, athletic and a bit mysterious, and the “old John Paul II,” physically broken but familiar to all, a seemingly translucent being who could communicate much without saying a word.

A man of the people

What both popes, old and young, had in common was the ability to step out into great crowds of people around the globe and change hearts. John Paul II touched thousands of outstretched hands during his travels, blessed many infants and looked out on millions of faces from his popemobile and makeshift altars.

He was the first pope of the information age. Cable and satellite television, the Internet and countless religious and secular publications brought not only his words of hope, but his serene, knowing smile to the world. His squinting eyes and almost playful grin conveyed comfort with his role as St. Peter’s successor, a purity of heart and mind that said more than any Vatican document could.

Even when his body became stooped and brittle, John Paul II pressed on, unconcerned about shaking or slurring his words before the world’s mightiest leaders. It was not up to him to decide to stop.

Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete first met Karol Wojtyla in 1976, when he was assigned to lead the Polish archbishop through the Polish neighborhoods of Washington, D.C. They had several stirring talks, the kind restricted to intellectual theologians, about the relationship between faith and culture, between spirituality and science.
When Wojtyla emerged two years later from a balcony in St. Peter's Square as Pope John Paul II, Albacete knew that the centrality of faith would take center stage.

"Faith for him is not a collection of beliefs, like 'I believe there is a God,' " Albacete, a prominent theologian from Yonkers, said in 1999. "Faith for him is a lifestyle. It is a way of situating yourself in front of reality, starting with your own self. It is a judgment, a position, a stand that you take, with respect to everything. If you fail to take that stand then, at best, you are superficial. You have no depth. Therefore, you are at the mercy of whatever power comes along to move you."

John Paul II probably spent little time wondering whether he got his message across, whether he succeeded in a conventional sense. He said what he was sent to say. "He is too much of a believer to think of legacy," Albacete said. "He does not think he is running the church. The Lord and Spirit are."
The case of a theologian censored

Jesuit knows about new pope’s concerns on relativism

In what may have been a history-changing homily, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger railed against the army of “isms” that failed to sink the “small boat” of Christian thought: Marxism, liberalism, libertinism, collectivism, radical individualism, atheism, vague religious mysticism, agnosticism, syncretism.

And now, he said, clear faith is somehow labeled as fundamentalism.

“Whereas, relativism, which is letting oneself be tossed and swept along by every wind of teaching, looks like the only attitude acceptable to today’s standards,” he said Monday before the opening of the conclave.

The next day, he became Pope Benedict XVI.

To better understand the new pope’s longtime battle against relativism — the view that Christian truth is not absolute and that other belief systems may be true in different times and places — one might consider the case of the Rev. Roger Haight, a veteran Jesuit theologian. Only two months ago, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which Ratzinger led, told Haight that he no longer could teach Catholic theology.

“I have been surprised by the lack of notice in the States,” said the Rev. Joseph Komonchak, a theology professor at Catholic University in Washington. “It’s been widely discussed by theologians.”

‘Symbol of God’

In 1999, Haight published a book, “Jesus Symbol of God,” that suggested that in the modern, pluralistic world, the Catholic Church should be willing to see God’s presence and the possibility of salvation in other religions. In doing so, he also explained the Trinity as one “symbol” of God — language that would not sit well with any branch of Christianity.

Haight’s thesis likely represents one form of the relativism that Ratzinger detests, as it seeks to create a new understanding of Christianity for a new world.
The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith soon began what would become a five-year investigation. Haight stopped teaching at the Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass., and moved to the nondenominational Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan.

In February, the Vatican published an official notice, signed by the future pope, that said Haight’s book contains “grave doctrinal errors against the divine and Catholic faith of the Church” and forbade him from teaching Catholic theology.

Haight, who has not talked publicly about his reprimand, was not available for comment.

**Book inspires debate**

His book has inspired great debate among theologians and much criticism. In the liberal Commonweal magazine, Notre Dame theologian John Cavadini wrote that Haight’s argument left him little reason to remain a Christian.

“If Jesus is merely a symbol, I have no burning reason to invest the time and energy it takes to pass this faith on to children,” he wrote.

But “Jesus Symbol of God” was named theological book of the year by the Catholic Press Association in 2000. And many theologians have come to Haight’s defense, saying he produced a sincere and gutsy work of faith that did not deserve Ratzinger’s reprimand. The often-liberal Catholic Theological Society of America, which held a spirited forum on Haight’s book in 2002, issued a statement of its “profound distress” over Haight’s treatment by the Vatican.

“Ironically, rather than promote greater criticism of the book, the Congregation’s intervention will most likely discourage debates over the book, effectively stifling further criticism and undermining our ability as Catholic theologians to openly critique our colleagues,” the group said.

**Defining relativism**

Such debates over the proper boundaries of Catholic scholarship are not uncommon in theological circles. But Haight’s case may offer insight to lay people on what Benedict XVI means by the “dictatorship of relativism” and on the steps he is willing to take to stem its growth.

No one knows what kind of pope Benedict will be, but Ratzinger’s track record indicates that he may not always agree with the sweeping cultural and religious pluralism that so many Americans prize.

“I think Ratzinger and John Paul II asked the question of how we tell the truth of the Gospel in the face of all these ‘isms,’ many of which they rightly critique for damaging the human person,” said Elena Procario-Foley, the Driscoll professor of Jewish-Catholic
Studies at Iona College in New Rochelle. “But then you get to Roger Haight’s book, which addresses the centrality of Jesus and the future of interreligious dialogue, and it gets difficult.”

Procario-Foley said Haight raises questions that others ask.

“I have students today who want to know about other religions and how they interact with their own,” she said. “It can be hard to tell them that for the last 40 years, the church has been saying that there is truth in other religions, but only fragments of the complete truth we know through Jesus.”

‘Shadows of doubt’

The historic 1965 Vatican II document “Nostra Aetate” said that the Catholic Church “rejects nothing that is true and holy” in other religions, while holding that the fullness of religious life can only be found in Christ.

In 2000, a controversial Vatican document signed by Ratzinger, “Dominus Iesus,” reaffirmed that interreligious and ecumenical dialogue cannot be allowed to morph into relativism. It warned of theological ideas in which “Christian revelation and the mystery of Jesus Christ and the Church lose their character of absolute truth and salvific universality, or at least shadows of doubt and uncertainty are cast upon them.”

This concern would explain the action against Haight and, according to the Jesuit magazine America, more than 100 theologians who have been reprimanded by Ratzinger’s congregation.

“The fear is that some of what is being said dismisses the uniqueness of Jesus,” said Bernard Prusak, theology chairman at Villanova University in Pennsylvania. “Roger Haight takes a position that raises this question, and he’s really pushing the envelope. Vatican II recognized truth in other religions, but when do you diminish the nature of Jesus?”

The Rev. Benedict Groeschel, a Catholic thinker who grew up with Haight, said Ratzinger was quite patient with Haight, giving him several years to change his words.


Ignoring doctrine

Monsignor William Smith, academic dean at St. Joseph’s Seminary in Yonkers, said Haight cannot simply ignore core Christian doctrine, the “golden oldies” of who Christ was and the divinity of the church.
“This does not sit well with people who have a secular notion of academic freedom,” he said. “But if you’re teaching in the church, there is an obligation to conform. That doesn’t mean we explain things the same way, but there are core things we have to agree on.”

A 2001 editorial in America sharply attacked the investigative methods and motives of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith.

“The inquisitorial methods of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith are out of date and do not respect human rights,” the Jesuit editors wrote. “They should be dismantled without delay. There is enough intelligence in the Catholic community, created and sustained by God’s Spirit, to find better ways to safeguard the faith.”

Cardinal Ratzinger certainly disagreed. Pope Benedict XVI will, as well.