“Ladies and gentlemen, the problem of the world tonight is sin!”1 The year was 1958, and the Reverend Billy Graham had returned to his home state of North Carolina for the Charlotte Crusade. The white revivalist preacher, now Southern Baptist but formerly Reformed Presbyterian, felt that the growing southern city had vibrant signs of Christian faithfulness, but he also sensed that something was wrong with the community and that the social world beyond Charlotte was no less troubled: crime rates were soaring, the possibility of nuclear war loomed large, and conflicts between blacks and whites were not dissipating. Racial tension was especially palpable to those gathered for the crusade that September evening in Charlotte. Only a few years earlier, in 1955, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., then pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, had helped to plan the infamous bus boycott, and now that he had become president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he seemed intent on eliminating segregation throughout the South.

Interestingly, the civil rights leader had penned a letter to Graham shortly before the beginning of the Charlotte Crusade, thanking him for the opportunity to lead a prayer at the 1957 New York Crusade, congratulating him on the success of that crusade, “a literal tour de force in the area of evangelism,” and encouraging him to address race relations throughout his preaching ministry. “I am sure,” King wrote, “you will continue this emphasis in all of your preaching, for you, above any other preacher in America can open the eyes of many persons on this question. Your tremendous personality, your extensive influence and your powerful message give you an opportunity in the area of human rights above almost any other person that we can point to.”2 Clearly, King was practicing flattery, as preachers tend to do for one another, but his glowing assessment of the extent of Graham’s influence was quite accurate. By 1958 Graham was a best-selling author, a charismatic preacher who attracted overflowing audiences in massive sports stadiums, and a trusted adviser who shared confidences with business leaders and politicians, all the while preaching Christ crucified.
Graham was also one of the influential founders of an emerging and culturally significant religious group that had carefully labeled itself “neo-evangelical.” The neo-evangelicals first emerged in the early 1940s, when Graham and other young moderate fundamentalists, especially John Harold Ockenga and Carl F.H. Henry, began to be troubled by a nagging sense that the judgmental character of conservative fundamentalism had become a barrier to effective evangelism. They also felt that fundamentalism’s defiantly defensive posture had precluded serious intellectual engagement with the wider culture, and that its focus on the Second Coming of Christ had virtually undercut the possibility of faithful action in political and economic society. Disenchanted with this asocial fundamentalism, Graham and his colleagues combined forces, foreswore religious parochialism, and began to practice what Christian Smith has aptly called “engaged orthodoxy.” While expressing orthodox Protestant theology, the neo-evangelicals also committed themselves to proactive engagement with the wider culture and society.

Graham’s particular form of orthodox engagement was especially visible by the time of the Charlotte Crusade in the ecumenical approach he had adopted in organizing his crusades. At the New York Crusade, for example, the evangelist had boldly cooperated with the Protestant Council of the City of New York, effectively decreeing a divorce of sorts from the exclusivist fundamentalists, who were no less outraged by the decision to invite King, whom they saw as a dangerous communist, to lead one of the services in prayer. Beyond the New York Crusade, Graham’s social engagement was also evident in his 1954 decision to found Christianity Today, an evangelical alternative to the theologically liberal Christian Century; in his close relationship with politicians and business leaders, even ones with questionable scruples; and in his social preaching, the type that King encouraged in his fawning letter to Graham.

As Chappell has noted, the civil rights leader was deeply appreciative of Graham’s early forms of engaged orthodoxy. “I am delighted,” King wrote, “to know that you will be conducting a crusade in Charlotte, North Carolina on a non-segregated basis. This is certainly a great step.” But King was not wholly satisfied, and so he gently encouraged the evangelist to deepen his social engagement by conducting similar interracial crusades throughout the Deep South, in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Alabama, where the effects of a crusade “would be immeasurably great.” Glaringly absent from King’s letter was an invitation for his fellow southerner to join the marches, leave behind the relatively safe confines of the stadium pulpit, and become an active participant in the civil rights movement as it took form in the dangerous streets and jails of the South in the 1950s. The absence of this invitation most likely reflected not only King’s social manners, as well as his practical sensibilities about the movement, but also his awareness and acceptance of Graham’s particular vocation as a Christian evangelist.

Graham did not believe that God had called him to be a leader of a social movement dedicated to advancing human rights, however Christian such a