



America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation

Grant Wacker

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During a career spanning sixty years, the Reverend Billy Graham's resonant voice and chiseled profile entered the living rooms of millions of Americans with a message that called for personal transformation through God's grace. How did a lanky farm kid from North Carolina become an evangelist hailed by the media as "America's pastor"? Why did listeners young and old pour out their grief and loneliness in letters to a man they knew only through televised "Crusades" in faraway places like Madison Square Garden? More than a conventional biography, Grant Wacker's interpretive study deepens our understanding of why Billy Graham has mattered so much to so many.

Beginning with tent revivals in the 1940s, Graham transformed his born-again theology into a moral vocabulary capturing the fears and aspirations of average Americans. He possessed an uncanny ability to appropriate trends in the wider culture and engaged boldly with the most significant developments of his time, from communism and nuclear threat to poverty and civil rights. The enduring meaning of his career, in Wacker's analysis, lies at the intersection of Graham's own creative agency and the forces shaping modern America.

Wacker paints a richly textured portrait: a self-deprecating servant of God and self-promoting media mogul, a simple family man and confidant of presidents, a plainspoken preacher and the "Protestant pope."

America's Pastor reveals how this Southern fundamentalist grew, fitfully, into a capacious figure at the center of spiritual life for millions of Christians around the world.

America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation Details

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From Reader Review America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation for online ebook

Matt Pitts says

This is exactly the kind of book I wanted to read about Billy Graham. Rather than an exhaustive chronological retelling of Graham's life, *America's Pastor* examines Graham and his place in American Evangelicalism from multiple angles in chapters titled Preacher, Icon, Southerner, Entrepreneur, Architect, Pilgrim, Pastor, and Patriarch.

Wacker is sympathetic toward Graham but certainly not a fanboy. He recognizes that Graham's character is unimpeachable and yet he is not afraid to call attention to Graham's missteps. The whole book is engagingly written with a winsome style, but of particular interest to me were sections on Graham's relationship with U.S. presidents, his stances on various social issues, his method of preaching, and his theology (he was more moderate than I thought).

Graham was a mammoth figure who occupied center stage of the evangelical movement in America for decades. But he was a man. A man who grew and changed and learned along the way. Wacker helps us see that and in some way that makes Graham even more admirable.

Amanda Geaney (Christian Shelf-Esteem) says

While Billy Graham was a household name for many it was not so in my home. As a child of the 80's raised in a non-evangelical denomination I knew very little about Graham prior to listening to this audiobook. *Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* by Grant Wacker was both academic and inspiring. Wacker's approach was neither flattering nor terse – it walked the fine line of being both honoring and honest.

Readers, or in this case audiobook listeners, gain a better understanding of Billy Graham as a man, a leader, a servant of God, and an impact maker on American culture. From his humble beginnings as a dairy farmer Graham built an empire of influence through the Billy Graham Evangelical Association (BGEA). Wacker attributes his success to his natural charisma, careful image management, connections to people in power, and perhaps most importantly his passion for taking the gospel to the lost. Although the author doesn't forthrightly state that God is the reason for Graham's success, to this listener it was clearly the case.

Finishing this title, I have a great appreciation for Graham. I admire how from the outset, Billy and his crusade leadership team resolved to be financially transparent, to avoid perceived improprieties with members of the opposite sex, and to admit when they were wrong – all potential pitfalls for Christian ministries. His life illustrated to me that when you have a plan you are far more likely to overcome the schemes of the devil.

I applaud Grant Wacker's research, structure, and the overall cohesiveness to this title. However, had I been reading instead of listening I probably would have fatigued and left the book unfinished. Despite the pleasantness of Bob Souer's narration, the language tended to be overly verbose. During the 12.5 hours of listening, I took frequent, sometimes prolonged breaks from listening. For this reason I believe this title would appeal more to the academic than the casual reader. As the latter, I award this title a good – 3/5 star rating.

**I received this book for free as a member of the christianaudio reviewers program. I was not required to write a positive review. The opinions I have expressed are my own. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255 "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising."

Mark Barnes says

9/10 (excellent): Not a typical biography, *America's Pastor* looks at the relationship between Billy Graham and the United States. It's well-written, seems to be fair, and it's both comprehensive (within its aims) and well-researched. What struck me most about Graham's success was the vital importance of character, particularly humility; his ability and desire to bring the gospel not just to anyone but to everyone; and, of course, God's timing in raising up the right man at just the right time. Well-worth reading if you're interested in the influence of Graham on America, or if you want to know more about 20th-century evangelicalism in the States.

Scott says

More a monograph than a biography, *America's Pastor* explores the impact that Billy Graham has had on American religious history and evangelical life. A tremendous work of scholarship of an eminently fascinating person.

Kevin Gunn says

A few of my favorite passages from the book:

...Probably Graham himself could not say precisely where he fell. Perhaps the real truth is that he remained "loyal to traditional formulations," as William Martin put it, but he also possessed the heart of a pastor. His theological training told him one thing but his encounters with real problems of real people in real situations pulled him in another direction. We might call it "emotional intelligence": the posture of a man who had talked to too many people of difference life experiences to be willing to judge them. Only God could do that. - pg 202

Sometimes it's hard to read the Bible as black and white, I can relate to Graham in this. In some circumstances, some people's experiences, I can't help but wonder if maybe specific passages shouldn't be read in a 'cookie-cutter' kind of way. Oh to have the innocence and faith like a child, to just believe....

In a 1997 commencement address to a small college in Florida, the nearly octogenarian Graham had sage and gentle words for the young people just starting their careers: "I urge of you to invest your lives, not just spend them. Each of us is given the exact same amount of seconds, minutes, and hours per day as anyone else. The difference is how we redeem our

allotted time.... You cannot count your days, but you can make your days count." - pg ?
(Chapter 7)

That's a good thing to live by - how are you investing your time every day? I know I need to look at my priorities and shift focus.

Hank Pharis says

This is one of the 2 best biographies I have thus far read on Graham. Fair and sympathetic without being hagiographic.

(Note: I'm stingy with stars. For me 2 stars means a good book. 3 = Very good; 4 = Outstanding {only about 5% of the books I read merit this}; 5 = All time favorites {one of these may come along every 400-500 books})

Bob Hayton says

A rich, colorful portait of a warm, humble man - an insightful look at the lasting impact of Billy Graham.

An entire generation of Christians has grown up largely unfamiliar with Billy Graham and his remarkable ministry. The occasion of his death in February 2018 offers many of us a good reason to remind ourselves of Graham's significance and lasting impact on American Evangelicalism.

I want to recommend "America's Pastor" by Grant Wacker as a helpful introduction to those who may not be fully aware of the impact Billy Graham has had on our nation. Wacker's book is not exactly a biography, and Wacker himself is a self-proclaimed evangelical who sides with Graham on a number of his positions. The book instead walks through Graham's life and evaluates what it was that made him great. It asks who exactly was this man?

The chapters explore different aspects of Graham: his roles of preacher, icon, Southerner, entrepreneur, architect, pilgrim, pastor, and patriarch. The ethos of Graham's ministry amid the backdrop of the cultural and social nature of the day are stressed. A lot of time is devoted to Graham's interaction with the presidents and his own angst at Nixon's fall. Also highlighted is the key role that Graham played, early on, in helping the civil rights movement in the 50s -- including his asking Martin Luther King Jr. to pray at his 1957 New York Madison Square Gardens Crusade. Some argue that Graham could have done more on this issue and others, and Walker explores the ins and outs of that debate and situates Graham within the context of his time as a one who moved the needle in positive ways.

Wacker highlights controversial points of Graham's legacy, too. He explores Graham's departure from

American fundamentalism and his creation of a moderate position (which became known as new evangelicalism, and which is spawned the Evangelicalism most prevalent today). He pinpoints a bizarre interview with Robert Schuler, and presses into what Graham may have really believed about inerrancy and other doctrinal questions. He spent time on some newly discovered disparaging marks Graham made toward Jews in the oval office - and what that says (and doesn't) about his character. Overall Wacker paints a portrait of Graham that is rich and colorful, and yet reveals a simple and true-hearted man, who honestly attempted to introduce as many people as possible to the life-giving message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ by whatever means were at his disposal.

The final part of the book includes Wacker's own accounts of his interviews with the aged Graham, and his attempt to size up the real Graham. The aged evangelist exuded a warm humility that appealed to Wacker, and which appealed to so many throughout his decades of public ministry.

The audiobook version of this book is easy to listen to: the narrator reads in a matter of fact voice, but not with an emotional poignance that can at time distract. The format may make it an easy way to reflect on Graham and evangelical history amid the pressures of today's modern world. I highly recommend this title.

Disclaimer: This book was provided by the publisher. I was was under no obligation to offer a positive review.

Joel Gibbons says

In-depth review of Graham's legacy, both the really good and the unfortunate parts of his past. Despite missteps on some key issues, like racial relations, Vietnam and his very late turnaround from championing Nixon, God still used this genuinely humble but extremely talented and driven man to do great things for the Kingdom.

Logan says

I didn't particularly enjoy this, though I didn't know much about Billy Graham. The book was composed more of essays on various subjects (e.g., Billy Graham and Missions, Billy Graham and Presidents, Billy Graham and Racism) and there was a good bit of overlapping material. And though Graham's theology might be difficult to pin down, I wasn't sure the author was particularly qualified or very good at analyzing it.

That Graham was influential can't be doubted, but I don't know if I came away really knowing him. This could be because it was an audio book and I typically enjoy those far less than if I'd read the book.

David says

No matter what you may think about Billy Graham, most people would agree he was a good man who promoted peace, fellowship, redemption, and belief in Jesus. He would be the first to admit that he was far from perfect and had made missteps during his life and the author points many of them out. He also catalogs many of his successes. We have visited the Billy Graham Library in Charlotte, NC, and walked through the displays describing his life and mission to help people all over the world find redemption. This book

describes that life in a generally fair portrayal of Billy Graham's accomplishments and shortcomings. Regardless of your religious or political beliefs or non-beliefs, reading this book will not be a waste of your time. And you gain a behind the scenes understanding of some major historical world events.

Dustin says

I agree with another reviewer. This is the type biography of Billy Graham biography I wanted to read. Instead of the traditional biographical format, Wacker looked at Graham's larger role in the context of American history. He tried to examine Graham's viewpoints and personal evolution within that context too, praising when necessary while showing many limitations.

I was pleased Wacker addressed Franklin's deviation from Billy's views on social issues. Billy was exceptional at unifying people towards the common goal of making a decision for Christ. And that in and of itself is worthy of respect.

Zach Waldis says

It's rare that one cries upon reading a book, but for me evangelical, Billy Graham-esque faith is close to the heart of who I am. This is an excellent book for the pastor, scholar, and generally educated reader who wants a pastiche of Graham's life and influence. My only complaints (and thus the lack of one star) of the book are that it is a bit strange in tone; it feels like multiple essays put together, and isn't as accessible as a popular biography might be. Beyond that, it's essential for the person wanting to understand the man whose influence on American evangelicalism cannot be measured.

George P. says

Grant Wacker, *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2014). Hardcover | Kindle

[NOTE: This review originally appeared in the spring 2015 issue of *Enrichment*.]

America's Pastor is not a conventional biography of Billy Graham. It does not narrate Graham's life in chronological order, in other words. If you're looking for such a book, read Graham's memoir, *Just As I Am*, or William Martin's magisterial biography, *A Prophet with Honor*.

Instead, *America's Pastor* is a biographical study that centers around three questions:

How did Billy Graham become the voice of American evangelicalism?
Why did evangelicalism become so pervasive in the second half of the twentieth century?
And what does it say about the relation between religion and America itself?

To each of these questions, Grant Wacker, a noted evangelical church historian at Duke University Divinity School, offers a single answer: "From first to last, Graham displayed an uncanny ability to adopt trends in the wider culture and then use them for his evangelistic and moral-reform purposes."

Wacker goes on to say that Graham “possessed an uncanny ability to speak both *for* and *to* the times.”

Graham’s “uncanny ability” explains why ministers would do well to read this book. We, too, need to speak *for* and *to* our times. And Graham’s life and ministry presents us with both an inspiring example … and a cautionary tale.

The inspiring example is what Christian pastors know best. In his personal life and public ministry, Graham and his evangelistic team set the gold standard of integrity. Much of this arose from a commitment to the so-called “Modesto Manifesto” of 1948, in which the Graham team set out rules of personal and organizational integrity.

Building on this integrity, Graham traveled the globe, using every available media to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. He preached large evangelistic crusades, wrote a spiritual advice column, spoke on radio, appeared on television, produced evangelistic films, and stayed in the public eye. In addition, he helped found institutions that continue to shape evangelicalism: *Christianity Today*, Fuller Theological Seminary, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and the Lausanne Movement, among others. Graham was so involved with, and so central to, the postwar American evangelical revival that it is difficult to imagine it without him. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine postwar American history without him.

This doesn’t mean Graham’s ministry — or the mainstream evangelicalism he represented — was without flaws. The most glaring was his penchant for partisan politics. Perhaps nothing discredited his ministry more in the eyes of many than his too-close relationship with, and post-Watergate defense of, President Richard Nixon. And we might also ask how America would have been better off had he cooperated more closely with Martin Luther King Jr. and led white evangelicals in a greater support for African-American civil rights.

Historical counterfactuals such as this are interesting to ponder, but we cannot change the past. We can only learn from the past in order to do better in the future.

Grant Wacker has penned an interesting, informative, and, in many ways, authoritative interpretation of Billy Graham’s influence on American Christianity and the American nation. Those of us who, like Graham, are called to minister the gospel would do well to use the book as a mirror of self-reflection, asking questions such as these:

Do we conduct our lives and ministries with integrity, and is this integrity obvious to all?

Do we lament the baleful effects of contemporary media — television, film, social media, etc. — or do we leverage them to produce better effects?

Do we exercise a prophetic ministry within our society, or have partisan interests captured us?

In an increasingly secular society, do we cooperate with as wide a circle of fellow Christians as possible, or do we retreat into small circles of like-mindedness?

Most importantly, do we preach through our words and demonstrate with our lives the good news of Jesus Christ, calling nonbelievers to faith in Him, and believers toward a closer following of Him?

America may never see another Billy Graham — an evangelist who has influenced both church and society. It will see us, however. Are we, like him, speaking both *for* and *to* it in our own, much smaller circles of influence?

P.S. If you found this review helpful, please vote "Yes" on my Amazon.com review page.

Nick Jordan says

Great, interesting analysis of the place of Billy Graham in US History, not just straight biography. I entered with no real opinion or interest on Graham but came away greatly respecting the man and wondering about his legacy and the current state of US evangelicalism.

Micah Lugg says

This biography is based only on the public records of Graham, not private interviews. Therefore it provides a unique portrait of his ministry.

I really appreciated getting a perspective on the man that influenced so many in the generations prior to mine. Today, there is no one evangelical who holds national prominence like Billy Graham, so it was instructive to hear about this man's public ministry and impact. Wacker carefully describes, evaluates Graham's ministry, providing both positive and, where necessary, negative assessments of him.
