Grant Wacker


This newest book about Billy Graham is an interpretive profile rather than a standard chronological biography. Grant Wacker, professor of Christian History at The Divinity School at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, seeks to understand the meaning for the American nation of the most renowned American evangelist of the twentieth century. By examining Graham’s eight roles the book takes a fresh look at how America’s traditional Protestants—the Evangelicals—re-entered the American mainstream. The author reconstructs Grahams growing inclusiveness by following his role as Preacher, Icon, and Southerner. He covers his practical innovations as Entrepreneur and Bridge builder among various organizations. Wacker delves into the development of Graham’s inner world as Pilgrim, and his Pastoral relationship with his constituency, both of which resulted in his status as Protestant Patriarch, on a par with Martin Luther King and Pope John Paul II. Wacker, along with most of Graham’s biographers, is convinced of Graham’s honesty and humility. His book demonstrates the hard work Graham put in to achieve this status and maintains that it is unlikely that anyone will succeed him in this role anytime soon.

Moreover, Wacker points out that the conditions for Graham’s advance were fairly unique. There were innovations in mass communication that Graham skilfully used to build an ever-growing ministry as a professional revivalist—a role he made acceptable. He connected to a new youth culture, mastered the airwaves, and learned to handle mass audiences. He kept the attention of his constituents through frequent books, films, campaigns, and endless news items about his activities and celebrity meetings. He delegated tasks to a loyal group of friends and co-workers from Wheaton College, and invited businessmen to organize his enterprise, leaving himself free to launch large-scale global operations. Graham’s hallmark personal integrity made him trustworthy as a traditional Protestant interpreter of a series of crises in America and the world. Graham proved flexible. He held the Bible in high esteem, yet did not resort to explicit claims of full inerrancy. This flexibility helped him to shift his original antithetical message of anti-Communism to include appeals for cooperation in redressing global problems, such as poverty, AIDS, and the arms race. His presentation was accessible because of his use of humour and his references to current headlines. His message had conviction, the result of carefully practicing and memorizing his text. His practical approach helped him to loosen ties with the fundamentalists whose views he mostly shared. Perhaps his strongest attraction was his effectiveness in awakening a desire among his listeners to
reach a decision (for Christ) and express their change immediately. He had the aura of a gentleman, rooted in an authentic and distinct culture that could be exported.

Among the best parts of the book is the description of Graham’s natural constituency, the middle part of the middle class, whites from European descent living in the U.S. South and Midwest, mostly in small towns, a majority of them young and female. They had a sense of purpose, as well as the means and time to come to his rallies. He spoke their language, offered them a view of a better life, and connected them with people beyond their natural comfort zone. Thus he created a large constituency of mainstream Evangelicals, who collectively carried a sense of moral obligation for the nation.

Wacker’s book is about the public Graham in the United States, his international achievements viewed as a trophy which he could use to bolster his reputation at home. This is the strength and weakness of this book. The most intriguing part of Graham’s life is how his catering to the American middle-class helped him create a universal appeal. The tension between being an icon for Americans and yet an emblem for others around the world would make Graham even more intriguing.

Wacker presents the building blocks for such an approach as growing out of the weaknesses in Graham’s strategy, such as his fateful involvement in partisan politics, which lead, for example, to his defence of Vietnam and Watergate. His approval of the establishment made him ignore the legitimacy of protest. And he had a blind spot for ambiguity. Occasionally Wacker claims too much, such as that Graham’s denominational loyalty was overwhelmed by his independence. Moreover, Graham as a budding liberal, who included an ever-larger circle of Christian traditions, is progressive only if compared with his fundamentalist moorings in the American spectrum.

Wacker spends much time rescuing Graham from the wrong side of the civil rights movement. And this touches on the core of Graham’s conviction that real change was personal. That simple assumption justified his closeness to heads of state. Only gradually did he learn that social change does not happen spontaneously. His experience eventually made him more sympathetic to initiatives for social justice.

The title of the book identifies Graham as America’s pastor, but that does not fully define his key role. It was his movement towards inclusion, his broadening horizons, and the change from a traditional catalogue of sin as private behavior to encompass deeper levels of greed, racism, and faithlessness that stood as the most significant part played by Graham. By opening the eyes of American Evangelicals to the universality of justice, he opened the larger world to them. To a wider public, he presented a vision of a better life, a second chance, hope.