America's Pastor, by Grant Wacker

reviewed by David A. Hollinger in the October 15, 2014 issue

In Review

America's Pastor

By Grant Wacker
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Let it be said at once: this is the best book ever written about Billy Graham. I found this an absolutely captivating book and have read every word, including the footnotes.

What most obviously distinguishes *America's Pastor* is Grant Wacker's relentlessly analytical approach, combined with his determination to address each and every skeptical concern ever raised about the great evangelist. Although generous to a fault, this book engages issues that comparably generous studies of Graham usually avoid or leave to the side. One of the nation's most accomplished historians of American Protestantism, Wacker aims to clarify Graham's significance as a historical figure by taking into honest account every aspect of his public career. Biographical details abound in these pages, but always in the service of points that Wacker enumerates in helpful lists that remind the reader how different this book is from a biography or from a popular study in any genre.

A second, less obvious distinction of *America's Pastor* is even more important. Wacker provides abundant evidence for an interpretation of Graham's role in history that is quite different from the one Wacker himself defends. What is Wacker's view? And once that is understood, why does his book invite a different set of conclusions?

Wacker's argument comes in two parts. The first part he announces in italics: *"Graham displayed an uncanny ability to adopt trends in the wider culture and then use them for his evangelical and moral reform purposes."* But this sentence does not do justice to the detail with which Wacker develops the claim. The salient trends and purposes were quite specific and deserve to be named. What Wacker actually demonstrates is that Graham was a genius at reinforcing and repackaging a variety of classically middle-American ideals and self-conceptions, then presenting them as imperfectly enacted by most people and therefore in need of the extra inspiration that Graham's version of the gospel could provide.

"Accepting Christ" thus became a means of remaining within the confines of the inherited culture for which Norman Rockwell's paintings were an emblem while simultaneously promising to be better at it—better, that is, at living up to that culture's self-image. Practicing the Golden Rule, being faithful to one's spouse, eschewing pornography and homosexuality, steering clear of alcohol and drugs, being ready to lend a helping hand to those less well off, and supporting the essentials of the American economic and political order were not reliable marks of God's grace. But these behaviors were expected of those who had answered Graham's altar calls. Graham's selection of cultural trends to "adopt" and "use" reflected his core constituency: whites of moderate education from the small towns and small cities of the South and the Midwest who had been born into families at least nominally Protestant and usually in evangelical rather than confessional

denominations.

Graham reached others, too, but he remained “unknown, little known, unappreciated, or disliked,” Wacker notes accurately, “among great segments of the American population,” especially non-Protestants, ethnic minorities, industrial workers, impoverished farm dwellers, big city inhabitants, secularists, academics, and even “a good many Protestants.” The “America” of which Graham was the “pastor” was much less commodious than the America that came to recognize him as a celebrity, to appreciate his personal integrity in comparison to evangelists known for their sexual and financial transgressions, and to pay him the respect due to someone known to have the ear of presidents.

Wacker never states the second part of his argument in a single sentence, but he articulates it countless times as he analyzes one episode after another in Graham’s career. Graham moved his followers in moderately progressive directions, diminishing their racism, their biblical literalism, their indifference to economic inequality, and their biases against non-Protestants, while enabling these followers to find their way theologically and politically between the right and the left. Graham did as much of this as could be reasonably expected, given the circumstances of his audience and the limits of his own skill set. Graham worried that if he got too far ahead, he would lose his following and thus his capacity to lead.

Graham was not a theologian or an intellectual, and he cannot be expected to have contributed in the ways that a better-educated preacher might have. He made some appalling mistakes: in a taped conversation in 1972, he accepted and even abetted President Nixon’s guttersnipe anti-Semitism, and year after year he threw his support unmistakably to Republican candidates while disingenuously claiming to be politically neutral. But the conscientious Graham, Wacker’s line of interpretation continues, later admitted to many of his failings and apologized sincerely for his most egregious errors.

Overall, this second part of Wacker’s argument holds that Graham’s chief historical significance is that he courageously moved millions of American Protestants away from obscurantist and reactionary postures and toward styles of evangelicalism that could function in a pluralistic society in which ecumenical Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and secularists were all to be respected for what they were rather than treated as potential converts or as passengers on an express train to hell. *America’s Pastor* thus expresses a powerful disagreement with Graham’s son, Franklin, who now

supervises the legacy of the great evangelist and persistently associates that legacy with Sarah Palin and other figures who are decidedly to the political and theological right of the position that Wacker believes Billy Graham himself arrived at before weakening in old age.

Yet while developing this second part of his argument, Wacker calls ample attention to two realities that invite a different interpretation of Graham's historical significance. This alternative view is that Graham perpetuated more than challenged the obscurantist and reactionary postures that were common within his core constituency, and that he was capable of doing much more than he did to liberate his followers from those limitations.

One reality inviting this alternative conclusion is Graham's sharp intellect. Wacker convincingly depicts Graham as a smart and savvy man who could hold his own with any loquacious talk-show host and who proved to be a lively and resourceful interlocutor with academic audiences. Hence when Wacker finds "little evidence that Graham clearly understood" the basics of "biblical higher criticism or related critical methods taught in mainline Protestant seminaries," one can respond that such basics are not hard to learn and that anyone with Graham's mind could have informed himself about them if he cared to. Graham "simply assumed that the Bible said what it meant and meant what it said," and he displayed no sense whatsoever of the "mystery, paradox, and the contingencies of interpretation" that have been vibrant components of faith for many Protestants, even those lacking the benefits of a seminary education. Graham "streamlined" the gospel, Wacker correctly observes, while affirming "traditional verities" and offering "a large but simplified message of salvation" that contained "a few exportable, stripped-down, time-tested principles."

Wacker struggles with the possibility that all this was "simple-minded." He dutifully resists this conclusion while admitting that Graham's preaching invariably achieved its appeal by avoiding hard questions and that it sometimes entailed "preposterous" representations of scripture. "The Bible says" this or that, Graham constantly intoned, invoking biblical authority for his own ideas without reflecting even minimally on the context in which statements ascribed to Moses or the apostle Paul or Jesus of Nazareth might have been composed.

Wacker credits Graham with thinking "seriously about things that mattered" instead of about theological niceties, as if such issues as the scope of providence, the nature of the church, the intended meaning of scriptural texts, and what was entailed in

being “saved” did not matter. They did matter, and Wacker seems uncomfortable with his own implication that they did not. Innumerable clergy and Sunday school teachers, respecting the intellect of their audiences, have led the faithful through hermeneutic challenges that Graham had the capacity to understand and to explain. But “America’s pastor” blithely ignored these challenges from the beginning to the very end of his ministry.

Wacker also shows that most of Graham’s departures from extreme conservatism were concealed behind evasive language or did not become visible until well after Graham had achieved his authority, or both. This is the second reality that invites the alternative interpretation of Graham’s career. Wacker reveals this reality to have been equally prodigious in Graham’s theological pronouncements and in his political utterances.

“The Word of our God stands forever as an unchanging source of answers to all of life’s problems,” Graham proclaimed as late as 1988, long after Wacker credits him with having endorsed nonfundamentalist perspectives on many issues, including the epistemic status of the Bible (it had become “authoritative” rather than “inerrant”) and the end of history (he continued to discern in current events signs of the end but spoke in “broad terms such as wars and famines” rather than connecting highly specific events to the book of Revelation). When asked if he was a literalist, Graham liked to quip that nobody was—thereby dodging the question.

As to the Genesis story of creation, Graham acknowledged that the Bible was not a “scientific” book, but he did little to counteract the ignorant and antiscientific ideas about evolution that were rampant within his constituency. Wacker is surely correct to insist that Graham’s implacable fundamentalist critics noticed these distinctions, but Wacker is also correct to remind us that most of Graham’s followers were not interested in these distinctions and were happy with Graham’s “real-life answers to real-life questions.” Meanwhile, Graham gave a quiet pass to many ideas that could not possibly meet modern standards of cognitive plausibility.

Regarding racial issues, Wacker offers as painstaking an exploration of Graham’s vigorously contested record as we are likely ever to see. The takeaway message from his often agonized pages is that Graham did too little too late. At a time when his support for African Americans could have made a difference, Graham confined himself to integrating his rallies and prioritizing the changing of “hearts” rather than supporting the vigorous use of civil authority to fight racism. The same applies to

Vietnam, which even Wacker calls “a stain on his record” because Graham came around so many years after he might have made a difference.

Wacker emphasizes Graham’s willingness after 1974 to treat the diminution of poverty, inequality, and other social injustices as a Christian obligation, but here Graham and his cohort of evangelicals were merely falling into line at long last with an outlook the hated ecumenical Protestants had advanced for several generations. Graham never pulled back from his early-career assertion that the Bible declared same-sex relationships to be so sinful that those guilty of this sin must “repent and change if they wished to be welcomed into the church,” but Wacker appears relieved that the mature Graham came to describe this sin as “just one sin among others” and that in 1997 he welcomed all members of a San Francisco audience “whatever your sexual orientation.”

So this is the enlightened Graham that *America’s Pastor* asks us to recognize as the historic figure who “reshaped the waterways of American Protestantism.” Graham’s progressive steps, such as they were, risked his standing only with the most extreme conservatives in politics and religion, while many of his ecumenical contemporaries risked much more, traveling way beyond their constituencies and often paying a terrible price within their own churches for their prophetic stances.

By not speaking out earlier and more forcefully, Graham led a life of missed opportunities. He cannot be absolved of responsibility for what his son and other religiously and politically reactionary voices are doing with the legacy. The obstacles the elder Graham left against these uses of his name are flimsy. Billy Graham was an enabler, facilitating the very strands in American evangelical culture from which Wacker tries to distance him.