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In *America's Pastor* Grant Wacker has given us an important treatment of one of the most prominent figures in American religious history. Billy Graham was the dominant force in the resurgence of evangelical Protestant Christianity in the United States, and to understand him better is also to gain a fruitful perspective not only on religion but also on American culture in general during the years in which he attracted hundreds of thousands of people to his crusades, countless readers to his newspaper columns, and a worldwide audience to his public appearances. Wacker has given us a lens through which to catch sight of America—or at least a considerable segment of America—during a period in which he became for many a representative of the nation as well as the Protestant church.

The book is not a conventional biography but rather a series of thematic chapters that focus on the intersection between Graham's public life and broader currents in American culture. While fundamentally appreciative of Graham's achievements, Wacker discusses the evangelist's shortcomings as well.

America's Pastor has received significant attention. Besides a half-dozen periodicals in the UK, it has been reviewed in scholarly journals (*Christian Scholars' Review*, *Foreign Affairs*), magazines (*Booklist*, *Books and Culture*, *Christian Century*, *Christianity Today*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *First Things*, *The Nation*), major urban daily newspapers, and numerous established blog sites (*Faith and Leadership*, *Patheos*, *US Religion*). Eight periodicals or blog sites have included *America's Pastor* on their lists of "Best Religion Books of 2014."

The panelists who comment on the book in this roundtable include some of the most innovative and productive scholars in American religious history.

Anthea Butler is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Graduate Chair in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Her most recent book, *Women in the Church of God in Christ, Making A Sanctified World* published by the University of North Carolina Press, chronicles the history of African American women's religious lives and civic engagement in the Church of God in Christ. Professor Butler's forth-coming book, *The Gospel According to Sarah: How Sarah Palin and the Tea Party are Galvanizing the Religious Right* will be published by The New Press.

Darren Dochuk is Associate Professor in the History department at the University of Notre Dame. He earned his BA from Simon Fraser University and MA from Queen's University in Canada before completing his PhD at the University of Notre Dame. Between 2005 and 2012, he taught courses in twentieth century U.S. political and cultural history at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. In 2011, Dochuk published *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (W.W. Norton), which tracks the emergence of evangelical politics from the margins of the Depression-era "Bible Belt" South into the mainstream of California's "Sunbelt" society. It has garnered a number of awards, including The Society of American Historians' Allan Nevins Prize, American Historical Association's John H. Dunning book prize for outstanding historical writing on any subject in U.S. history, and The Organization of American Historians' Ellis W. Hawley prize for best book in post-Civil War U.S. political history.

Marie Griffith is Director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis. Her current research combines an interest in religion, gender, and American politics. She has taught at Princeton University and Harvard University before becoming director of the Danforth Center. Her books include *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power, and Performance*, co-edited with Barbara Dianne Savage (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (University of California Press, 2004), and *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997; paperback 2000). She is currently working on a manuscript on "Billy James Hargis and His Partners: Mobilizing a Christian Sexual Revolution," which is under review.

Jon H. Roberts is the Tomorrow Foundation Professor of American Intellectual History at Boston University. He has written multiple articles dealing primarily with the history of the relationship between science and religion, as well as the book *Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant Intellectuals and Organic Evolution, 1859-1900*, which received the Frank S. and Elizabeth D. Brewer Prize from the American Society of Church History. He has also co-authored, with James



Turner, *The Sacred and the Secular University* (Princeton, 2001). Roberts studies the history of Anglo-American religious thought and the relationship between science and religion in Europe and North America. He is currently working on a book dealing with the "inward turn" in American Protestantism between 1840 and 1945.

Grant Wacker is Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Christian History, Emeritus, at the Divinity School of Duke University. He joined the faculty after teaching in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from 1977 to 1992. He specializes in the history of Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, World Missions, and American Protestant thought. He is the author, co-author, or co-editor of seven books, including *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* and *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (both published by Harvard University Press). From 1997 to 2004, Wacker served as a senior editor of the quarterly journal, *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture*. He is past president of the Society for Pentecostal Studies and of the American Society of Church History.

E. Brooks Holifield is the Candler Professor of American Church History, Emeritus, at Emory's Candler School of Theology and Graduate Division of Religion, where he began teaching in 1970. He is the author of seven books on American religious history, and more than 175 articles, encyclopedia entries, and book reviews. He has received research fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities (1976-77, 1983-84, 1991-92), the Louisville Institute (1998-99), the Pew Endowment (1998-99), and the Luce Fellowship Program of the Association of Theological Schools (2005-06), and he has given lectures throughout the United States as well as in Frankfurt, Göttingen, and Tübingen, Germany. In 2010 he received the Emory University Teaching Award. A former president of the American Society for Church History, he was also elected in 2011 as a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He retired from Emory in 2011.



Anthea Butler
University of Pennsylvania

It is an honor to be on this panel with all of you today, and while many people don't know this, I have known Grant Wacker since 1993. Back then, I was a master's student at Fuller Theological seminary, trying to figure out if I was really cut out for ministry. I wasn't. I first heard Grant Wacker in Guadalajara Mexico at a paper he gave at Society of Pentecostal studies, and met him later because of a book project he and Edith Blumhofer did, *Pentecostal Currents in American Protestantism*. I begged my professors at Fuller to ask him if I could just listen in on this closed meeting held at Fuller, and Grant graciously allowed me to. It is a bit weird today to think about my 1994 self who couldn't even imagine being on a panel responding to Grant's book. I just want to say thank you publically for being both open to a green grad student who was curious, as well as being a senior scholar who has always been engaged in the lives and work of those who are just starting out in this interesting, challenging world of the academy.

Discussing a book written by one of our field's top historians is a daunting task, made even more so by the topic of Grant Wacker's latest book, *Billy Graham*. Iconic figures, especially those who are alive, are always the most difficult to write about. In the case of Billy Graham, however, it isn't so much that Billy Graham is difficult, it's that parsing out 20th century America and its relationship to Billy Graham is. Consequently, I very much appreciate the careful, thoughtful scholarship of Grant Wacker that seeks to place Graham in the canon of America: that is, to understand how Graham affected the conscience of a nation, shaped its morality, and how Graham shaped American evangelicalism.

Since imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, (and because I did this in my first book and thanked Grant for the inspiration) I want to frame my comments for today by using the one-word title convention that Grant uses so effectively. Three words struck me as a way to engage this book: modernist, Americanism, and race. Each of these played an important part in Graham's life and his influence on America. Also, I believe they will help to frame my contribution to the discussion of *America's Pastor*.

Modernist

As far as I can tell, the word modernist appears only once in *America's Pastor*, on page 26. The word modern appears, according to Google books, 30 times throughout the book. Yet the word screaming out to me like many of Graham's fundamentalist detractors throughout the book was modernist. For fundamentalists like John Rice and others who had supported Graham in his years preaching as a fundamentalist, modernist was the worst epithet you could call a preacher. After all, Graham promised in 1952 to Rice in a letter that he would not have any modernists on his executive committee. By 1956, Graham had modernist pastors on his New York crusade committee, severed his ties with Sword of the Lord, and started *Christianity Today*.

There is another way to think about Graham being a modernist, and it is crucial for the story that Wacker is nodding to in *America's Pastor*, but does not say explicitly.

What Graham did was not simply to include modernists and elide the fundamentalists beliefs about scripture, he redesigned his theology into a modernist framework palatable Christianity for the masses. In an age where public theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr had been on the cover of *Time* in 1947, Graham emerged as someone who stripped down the theological battles that had been waging internally, promoting a popular culture of Christianity ready for television, instantly translatable in many languages, and easily understood for the individualistic, yet very nationalistic viewpoints of Americans in the 1950s. If I could take the liberty of comparing Graham to the rise of the design world in homes and furniture and modernist art of the 1950s, Graham's "clean lines" and structure of the Christianity he presented starting in the 1950s had the look of the age: sturdy, forward thinking, clean, deliberate lines, and beautiful, even when it was viewed by his detractors as a messy Jackson Pollock mishmash of bad theology.

To put a finer point on it, by 1955 Graham had become an iconic figure in this so much so that he would be included in a modern painting by Jasper Johns, who was a fellow South Carolina native and a Southern Baptist, called Target with four Faces. The [image](#), a plaster cast with four plaster casts of eyeless faces, also included a collage covered up with paint and underneath the paint, within the collage, was a bird on a perch, a hotel receipt, a newspaper horoscope column, and yes, a



photograph of Billy Graham. The image of Graham in the collage was not discovered in the painting until 1977, when infrared photography [revealed](#) the contents of the collage under-neath the paint. While others have interpreted the picture to show Graham contemplating John's celestial vision and future move to the transcendental, I think it speaks to the ubiquitousness of Graham as the premier expositor of American religion. He could show up even in a modernist painting.

Graham, however, was a modernist of his own, capturing the aspects and facets of what the masses thought religion in America should be. People who came to the crusades recognized and appreciated his stripped-down message of Christianity. This ecumenical Christian-ese of Graham's "I believe" is a precursor to what we would see in the 1970s onward as people moved away from denominational constructs to megachurches, charismatic movements, and "spirituality." Graham made it easy to come to the altar, confess, and then, through the links of affiliated groups, join a church or not. It is, as Wacker points out in the chapter entitled *Architect*, "Graham's gift of being a man stretched between two poles denomi-national on one end, but independent on the other" (174). His "modernist" impulse allowed for a Christianity that looked "traditional" but allowed for room to breathe and try new forms.

That was crucial. For Graham in the 1950s, stripping down the theological issues of fundamentalism, inerrancy, and infallibility were not, I think, intentional on Graham's part. The redesign of the Christian message was largely a response to the rise of communism, which brings up the second word: Americanism.

Americanism

Americanism is the precursor to our better-known American exceptionalism. To quote President Eisenhower:

"Without God, there could be no American form of Government, nor an American way of life. Recognition of the Supreme Being is the first—the most basic—expression of Americanism."

Of course, by 1955, Eisenhower had fully embraced Graham as a spiritual advisor and exemplar. Other presidents would do so as well, but that is because of the foundation of Americanism that Graham honed in the 1950s. Morality was not only for God, but for country and civic engagement. Graham's success was linked to his ability to both articulate Americanism, sanctify it against communism using his dispensationalist views, and embody it in his own body.

We often think of Graham's morality (the setting up of the BGEA, avoiding impropriety, etc.) as a Christian and moral theme, but I'd like to suggest that this is about showing America to the world as a moral religious exemplar up against the evils of communism. Others, fundamentalists and evangelicals, were supporting Americanism as well, especially at Bob Jones University, where Bob Jones held a conference on Americanism each year. Unlike how we talk about communism today, those in the 1950's thought of communism as both movement and religion—a religion of atheism that could pull people away from God. In a dissertation by Jay Learned entitled "Billy Graham and the Messianic Cold War," Learned describes Graham's Manichaeism towards communism as making perfect sense to Americans. It was a binary good or evil. What Billy Graham did, by clearing out the theological dross, was allow his Manichaeism to permeate the American psyche about good versus evil, and this worked very well in positing communism against Christ-ianity.

Graham even authored a pamphlet in 1956 and titled it *Americanism*. In it, Graham outlines his beliefs about the place of America in world affairs, the Founders placement of God in all aspects of the founding documents, and how the most pressing issues of the day cannot be solved without the nation turning to God:

"This nation has the greatest responsibility, obligation and opportunity in the history of the world. However, we are in danger of losing our world-wide prestige unless we can turn to God in such great numbers that our divorce rate will decline, our race problem can be solved, and our crime statistics can be improved"

This could very well be said by any candidate stumping in Iowa in January of 2016, and it would still play well!

For Graham, Americanism was mixed in with the morality of the nation. If the nation turns away from God, then the nation cannot solve its most pressing issues. Graham's framing in 1956 shows his developing concerns about race relations in particular. While Graham could not be considered a leader in this regard, his words and preaching regarding racial equality were broadening from the "utopia" that he stated that communists were trying to bring previously. Graham went on to be very specific about the role of the founders in the making of the nation:



“Yes, the warp and woof of our government is founded in God. Our Forefathers put on our coins ‘In God we trust.’ They put a Bible in every courtroom in America. Our Forefathers meant that this was to be a religious country. The United States congress has recently changed our pledge of Allegiance to read: ‘This country, under God’ and this last congress also established a prayer room in the National Capital.”¹

Graham wanted to bring the nation back to God by invoking God in its ‘divine history.’ Graham’s Americanism inscribed morality to the nation, making it part of an individual’s choice for salvation. If an American citizen did not live morally and become saved, then the nation as well as the individual would suffer. Graham’s take on the linked fate of the citizens, government, and the nation was on one hand, apolitical, but also held the seeds of a nationalistic Christianity, predicated on Christian morals and beliefs as the cornerstone and foundation of the nation, despite the fact that the founders wanted religious freedom for all faiths. This message, which *America’s Pastor* shows is consistent throughout his career, is an important one in considering how Graham has influenced modern evangelicalism to not simply be concerned with the state of an individual soul, but also linking that individual American citizen’s soul to the state. While Grant points out that Graham would move away from thinking that the American way of life was the best and begin to consider other cultures as having value, I believe that because of Graham’s very physical being, he would never be able to run away completely from his own physical representation of the soul of America.

Race

This leads me to my final word—race. America’s soul will always have an original sin. The sin of slavery. Even in freedom, racism was an issue for all American churches, and for fundamentalists and evangelicals alike. *America’s Pastor* in no way shies away from Graham’s evolution on civil rights, and in his own way, Graham’s southern upbringing gives Graham a familiar proximity to African Americans, even if he did not initially question the inequalities they experienced as *America’s Pastor* points out. Grant does an excellent job of probing Graham’s civil rights and the desegregation of the crusades, and his later relationship with African American singers like Andre Crouch and his relationship to E.V. Hill, Baptist pastor and friend of Ronald Reagan. I wonder, however, if there might be another way to think about race and the effect that Graham had on America? Specifically, what does Graham’s southern “whiteness” and his embrace of Americanism and his promotion of all things Christian and American do for the setting up of a particular kind of aesthetic in which Christian America, and by virtue, evangelicalism, is always coded as “white”? I’m intrigued in part because I decided to watch *Decade of Decision*, a Graham film, along with a Christmas special from the *Hour of Decision Christmas* program. Veiling both left me wondering about how the juxtaposition between Graham and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. played out in the 1950s and forward. For Graham, his whiteness allowed him to be able to give out the message of the gospel, and push for racial equality, without the messiness of police, the KKK, or all of the things that King and other black religious leaders had to endure in their calls for justice. Graham’s good looks, his skin, his visage looked like what the definition of a WASP should be, even if he grew up anything but the kind of northeast WASP that was a dreaded modernist or mainline denominational pastor. Graham, as Wacker points out, changed his clothing style to reflect a more mainstream WASP male. And while Graham could be a little obsessed with his own image, as shown in the Charisma section of *America’s Pastor*, it reveals that Graham understood the power of his body and its relationship to the message of Christianity, and the access to the halls of power and presidents.

Finally, I cannot end my comments without going the evangelical route and mentioning Billy Graham’s family. I personally always thought that his daughter Ruth was the better preacher, more like her father than his son Franklin whom he anointed heir. I, however, am not so certain that the Graham effect has been as benign as Wacker’s book portrays him. Let me explain. An important, crucial effect on Graham’s courting of political figures and presidents has been the push since the late 1970s for major evangelical leaders to court the presidents, some lacking the moral fortitude of Graham. Ted Haggard, president of the NAE comes to mind, with his relationship to George Bush. Haggard’s moral failings found him out. Others’ desire to court presidents and power, like Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, and others, met with mixed results. Franklin Graham, Graham’s own son, is perhaps the most striking example of this desire to court power. Franklin, in all respects, is not his father. Eager to court power, he uses a samaritan’s purse to not only promote rescue operations during hurricanes and natural disasters, he lets politicians and figures like Sarah Palin join in to get the photo ops. His string of awful statements questioning President Obama’s



Christianity, birtherism, and lately saying that Obama's mother must have been a Muslim are frankly over the top statements. Also, his allegiances to the Republican Party are so removed from his father's behavior that it is quite striking. He is even responsible for his mother being buried not where she wished, but at the end of a tour of the Billy Graham Center.

I suppose my biggest question after all of this, is, what happens to Graham's legacy once he is gone? To be sure, *America's Pastor* will stand in the canon of writings about Graham as an exemplary account, but I cannot help but wonder what will happen at his passing.

¹ *Americanism* Billy Graham BGEA September 1956 p. 2



Darren Dochuk
Notre Dame University

Early in his superlative study of America's famous evangelist, Grant Wacker admits he was nervous about authoring a book that would please neither the "left" nor the "right," neither Billy Graham's most ardent fans nor his bluntest critics. Wanting to write fairly in a way he would like others to write about him, Wacker fretted about being stuck (and silenced) in the underwhelming gray zone of objectivity. Finally, he writes, "I decided that I would have to proceed as my grandmother proceeded onto freeways: buckle up, close your eyes, and just do it" (*America's Pastor*, 3).

With this playful nod to universal experience (who hasn't sat in a Chev or Corolla clutching the dash with Grandma bolting ahead!), Wacker disarms his readers, and asks them to enter into lively and constructive conversation about a remarkable individual who has meant so much to modern America.

Delivered on page 3 of his Prologue, this quip also alerts the reader to the literary genius that will animate the 314 pages that follow. Those familiar with Wacker's prose no doubt chuckled when coming across the Grandma reference, sensing that the master penman from the South was on top of his game, anxious again to deliver consequential insights in a catching homespun style.

The rest of the book is indeed further testament to Wacker's unmatched ability to write with such an accessible blend of searing analysis and arresting flare. *America's Pastor* is packed with punchy verbs, vivid, clear-sighted metaphors, and memorable turns of phrases, all evidence of an artist in command of his craft. For instance:

- With regards to Graham's personality we observe a man whose "extrospective cheerfulness" belied serious self-reflection. "Graham," Wacker writes, "betrayed few hints that he spent much time looking inward. And when he did, he saw mostly blue skies" (295).
- Of Graham's eschatology we learn that judgment fueled only part of his prophetic jeremiads. "The other half invoked hope." "If the alarm on Graham's clock was perennially set at 11:57 PM," Wacker quips, "the backup was perpetually set at 12:03 AM. If Americans awoke and acted responsibly... as God's Word prescribed, the promise of hope would prevail" (225).
- Of Graham's homiletics, we learn "Graham did not think in metaphors" (50), and his messages "aimed to be simple [though] not simplistic" (62). Yet "simplistic" often won the day, Wacker admits, especially in Graham's prose. "Sometimes," the biographer muses, "[Graham] seemed to turn wine back into water" (32).

Wacker's colorful treatment of Graham is proof of a historian who knows how to write with creative force, and take the artistic side of our business seriously.

Yet it is also proof of a historian who takes the scientific side seriously too. *America's Pastor* is a monument to hard work, and the diligence of someone who slogged it out in the archives, and labored to assemble miscellaneous details into a chronicle of scholarly consistency and weight. Here is where Wacker's grandma metaphor fails, for nothing is rushed or pursued blindly here, or attacked with indiscriminant resolve. It is apparent that Wacker proceeded into traffic with full awareness of where he was headed, and what his maneuvers would mean to those around him.

It's worth pausing to measure what these maneuvers offer those around him. This is the difficult part where I have to decipher what is worth rehashing and reassessing about a book that is so obviously well put-together. In the remaining few minutes I would like simply to raise a few points of interest, takeaways I found particularly provocative, as prompts for Wacker to say more. Neither critiques nor gestures of unfiltered praise, I hope these takeaways will serve as nudges for further discussion, and perhaps cogitation as we continue to write the history of Graham, evangelicalism, and American culture forward.

Wacker, as you know, wrote this book with three primary goals in mind: to elucidate Graham himself and explain how he became the most powerful preacher in America; to illuminate Graham's impact on American religion, and survey how he helped thrust evangelicalism into a mainstream status; and to address the bigger picture of how Graham coasted on, flourished within, and defined the "great gulf streams of post-World War II American history" (28). In response to all three wonderings of "how," Wacker offers one overarching 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" (28).



Assessing them on their own, of the three lines of questioning, Wacker lets the first unfold naturally, with less direct emphasis. Graham, he says through layered character sketching, was an authentic and genuinely earnest but complicated man of many faces: he was, all at once, an “uptown sophisticate” and “downhome country boy”; “globetrotting absent father” and “attentive family man”; “name dropping partisan of the White House” and “humble servant of the church” (27). He was both self-effacing and self-promoting, a muscular saint who sought to save souls and win wars with evil while maintaining his trim waistline and Hollywood hair.

Wacker’s nuanced treatment will (should!) make it difficult for subsequent histories of the man to depict him as either a pawn of the powerful or a paragon of virtue, a schemer with ulterior motives (such as to champion corporate America at the rank-and-file’s expense) or a pietist with nothing but good in the heart. As a biography (which in whole this is not), *America’s Pastor* provides us with a multihued portrait of a special person who led while walking and talking, and living out life in all its vexations, just like the rest of us.

But what about the last two lines of inquiry, which Wacker sees as his most important contributions? What about Graham as the progenitor and barometer of change for American evangelicalism, and as window into post-World War II American culture? Here I’ll quickly raise four curiosities in hopes they’ll encourage Wacker to elaborate. All four have to do with Graham’s post-Nixon years, when the evangelist seemed to reach a very different pinnacle in his life and career.

1. *What Kind of “Evangelical,” which “Evangelical-ism’s” Architect?*

Wacker’s treatment of Graham’s theology is thorough and thought provoking, and adds further complexity to the age-old discussion of what the term “evangelical” actually means. Recent works by a host of emerging scholars have shown how the associations and boundaries of this term and of the movement itself grew increasingly fluid between the late nineteenth century and the late twentieth. Whereas they once leaned on comfort-able binaries (modernist-fundamentalist, fundamentalist-neo-evangelical) to parcel out differences within this orb, historians are now highlighting the vast middle range of enlivening ideas, individuals, and anxieties that make tidy bifurcations difficult to hold.

Wacker is quite nimble when navigating this tangled terrain. In one breath he paints Graham as representative of a third “broad channel” of Protestantism flowing between the liberal modernist and conservative fundamentalist currents that defined the faith at midcentury; in another he labels Graham the forerunner of “*mainstream evangelicalism*” (170). By this Wacker means that in theological terms, Graham was solidly centrist: a bible-believing, born-again Christian, he nevertheless resisted static views of scripture, preached moral theism without getting self-righteous, leaned more towards love than judgment (“a democracy of grace” over “democracy of sin”) when delivering his pastoral pleas, spoke of end-times in noncommittal terms, and focused on drawing men and women to their better spiritual selves rather than stoking their fears with talk of hell. Institutionally, he bridged denominational and independent impulses; culturally, he harbored “a measure of comfort with the surrounding culture and a measure of discomfort” (170). And temperamentally, he was aggressive neither in his belief nor action, but quintessentially irenic to the core.

Wacker’s portrayal of a man most comfortable in-between is convincing. Graham, it seems, managed to carry on a tradition passed down by D. L. Moody and a revivalistic spirit of Protestantism that has always operated between poles. Yet Graham, more so than Moody, also appeared to change over the course of his career (“Graham changed with the times,” Wacker writes on p234), so much so that the reader is left to ponder just how much more or less Graham circa 1989 was “evangelical” compared to Graham circa 1949. Wanting to steer clear of increasingly heated political and churchly fights, growing global and pluralistic, and less absolute in his awareness of the human condition, and evermore determined to privilege the “civil” in his brand of civil religion, Graham seemed to far outpace most of his colleagues when it came to adjusting to the day. And in a way, he seemed to shift directions in radical degrees, against the currents of orthodoxy that evangelicals in that moment wanted to essentialize and firm up, not adjust.

I’m not suggesting Graham lost all of his evangelical essentials, just that by 1989 he seemed less willing and able to perform his role as architect of an expansive evangelical apparatus. Indeed, if Wacker’s reading of Graham’s evolving outlook is correct, by 1989 (certainly by 2009) many, if not most, American evangelicals—those who now considered inerrancy a litmus

test, scripture as hard science, and premillennialism as the expected order—would have found reason to ask whether this man was a consistent adherent, let alone prime mover of their gospel.

2. *Mainstream or Marginal in an Age of Culture Wars?*

At very least, they may have found reason to question Wacker's claims for Graham as head of an evangelical "mainstream," which leads to a second curiosity. In Wacker's portrayal of Billy Graham, we gain appreciation of an individual whose worldview evolved in dramatic ways as the world around him changed in dramatic ways. His politics especially underwent change. Amid the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, the evangelist nudged himself into a neutral zone: no longer a willing Cold Warrior, he advocated nuclear disarmament and peace between nations and peoples, made contact with communist Europe and friends with Catholic Europe, gained appreciation of world religions, and downplayed America's exceptional status in the world order. No bleeding-heart liberal (he frustrated the evangelical left too), he nevertheless came to occupy ambiguous political space set apart from Reagan-era evangelicalism's majority view.

To be sure, it's wrong to reduce Reagan-era evangelicalism to politics; there was far more going on in evangelicalism during the 1980s and 1990s than Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and the Religious Right's crusade to entrench a "coercive moral establishment" in America (226). The challenge that arises here (I'd welcome Grant's thoughts) is one that all histories of post-1970 evangelicalism face: how to escape the pale of politics when chronicling the movement's late-century progressions. Wacker's portrayal of Graham illustrates how one of evangelicalism's most illustrious leaders managed to remove himself from the fray, and make his life and ministry about much more than partisanship.

Still, politics mattered—immensely—at this time. Our recent, flourishing historiography of late-twentieth-century evangelicalism has produced a plethora of outstanding studies that underscore the completeness of evangelical politicization in the culture war era. From family values to neoliberal economics, mega-churches to home school education, prosperity gospels to strip malls and suburban ministry: between 1980s and the 2000s, all aspects of evangelicalism were saturated with a partisan angst and discourse that made even the mundane practices of Sunday worship politically charged (see Lydia Bean's recent study).

In light of this, I'm left wondering how a humbler and cautious Graham circa 1989 or 1999 could claim (and how historians can claim for him) mainstream status in a subculture that was anything but restrained? In this "Age of Evangelicalism" (Steven Miller's apt description of evangelicalism's political hegemony), was the evangelist norm or exception, archetype of an evangelical establishment or outlier looking in on his beloved community from the outside?

3. *America's or the World's Pastor in the Age of Evangelicalism?*

It could be that greater clarity on this point is available when we no longer see Graham circa 1989 as a national phenomenon. One of the most exciting yet relatively undeveloped aspects of Wacker's study is its account of Graham's international aspirations and work. Early in his text, Wacker qualifies his geographical focus on the United States: Graham's "international ministry," he concedes, "merits a book in itself, for eventually it may prove more significant than anything else he did at home" (30). The globetrotting Graham does indeed deserve more focus, and I'd certainly welcome more of Wacker's reflections on why/how a transnational awareness can enhance our understanding of Graham, and of the widening orbs in which he operated. Several historians of evangelicalism (see David King and David Swartz) have already heeded the call for this type of consciousness, yet Wacker's is an especially suggestive declaration for why this type of scholarship must become standard practice.

Even in its national concentration, however, Wacker's book offers some tantalizing glimpses at Graham's effect beyond U.S. borders, particularly in the post-Nixon years, when he pursued international relations with full recognition of rapidly expanding religious, economic, and political systems. As he traveled to Africa, Asia, South America, "the pilgrim" literally and figuratively traveled "a long way" (247), shedding parochialisms for fresh grasp of an expansive gospel and its newest converts, and growing into a "profounder understanding of the Christian faith." "I am a man still in process," he reflected after a 1983 trip to the Soviet Union (311). Wacker observes that as he broadened his reach, Graham became "markedly less comfortable with his role as the putative high priest of American civil religion" (230) and determined to speak for an inclusive truth. In both his personal Christian walk and in the way he wanted to minister and belong, therefore, Graham's encounters with distant shores

were foundationally disruptive and redefining. In this way, we see hints of a reality and a legacy that draws into question the emphasis of Wacker's book title: "America's Pastor."

What seems evident from a glimpse at the evangelist in this moment of universal discovery is that Graham's primary identity and purpose had, by the late 1980s, been transformed into something other (and more) than "American." Working at cross purposes with the potent American nationalism of the day, Graham shepherded a larger flock of citizens of the world, who saw Christ as the answer to the violence of a humanity fueled and fractured by xenophobic divides. As the political age of American evangelicalism draws to a close, and the U.S. becomes all the more integrated in a world system, it could be that this foresight—this early envisioning of an un-American mode of boundless Christian belonging—is the American pastor's most impressive and significant legacy.

4. Which "Face" of Graham is Cover Page Material?

All of this leaves me with a final (and fairly random) curiosity, one I'll admit was generated by an initial glimpse at the book when it first arrived from Amazon: why the rather modest and undistinguished cover photo? Why use the image of a weathered, bespeckled, and avuncular Billy Graham circa 1985 when so many vibrant ones of this inspiring preacher king exist? Wouldn't a picture of the young revivalist slicing the air with his Bible have been a better pick, or a nicely cropped portrait of the smiling, sun-tanned cleric with his presidential friends?

It's likely Wacker had little say in the matter (if he did, I'd like to hear more), but whatever the case, the cover photo has grown on me as representative of how Wacker wants Graham remembered: as a modest, avuncular, and mature Christian leader whose journey through the first two phases of his life—when slashing the air with scripture and dining with presidents were routine—produced a man of greater self-reflection and wisdom, and soft, steadying presence, who could usher his church community and country toward a new dispensation of compassion and grace. Whether this is the truest representative of Graham or not is something perhaps worth questioning.

For now I'll just say that the face on *America's Pastor*, and the subtler features of the life it conveys, is—in our heated moment, with Graham's image and legacy up for grabs—a most welcomed and important one; so too the story behind the look, which Wacker tells with an equal measure of soft, steadying compassion and grace.



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Like so many of you here and millions more outside this conference room, I grew up with a lot of Billy Graham in my home. Besides the Graham books on my parents' and grandparents' bookshelves and his presence in our daily hometown newspaper, I watched countless Billy Graham crusades on TV, and the cadence of his preaching voice still booms in my head. It even turns out (as I just learned) that my mother sang in the choir each night of Graham's historic 1953 revival in Chattanooga; so, the Graham connection to my family feels deep, indeed. Reading Grant Wacker's beautifully crafted, interpretively nuanced, and affectionate portrayal of Graham's public ministry brought back many memories and put an awful lot of things in context, particularly because *America's Pastor* is not so much a book about Graham himself as it is about the long arc of U.S. history over the span of Graham's active career (roughly 1944-2005). As I read Grant's very careful and subtle rendering of different ways to interpret the making of Graham's career, the making of evangelical-ism, and the making of the nation in this period, I thought repeatedly of William Hutchison, Grant's own mentor; the methodological preciseness of the argumentation—not quite this but that, but not so that as to discount entirely the other—strikes me as “Hutchisonian,” in the very highest sense. It's a great read.

It would be glib to “sum up” Grant's interpretation of the historical era too concisely, but he condenses the big idea about mid-way through the book when he writes the following (p.168, and I'm cutting a bit):

“The six decades stretching from the end of World War II until Graham's effective retirement in 2005 were a time of paradox. On one hand it seemed an age of exceptional turmoil. Battles about war, race, women, sexual orientation, and unborn life raged. . . . On the other hand, the age also seemed marked by exceptional satisfactions. Though recessions came and went, the standard of living continually rose, at least into the early 1970s. By 2005 . . . basic expectations about comfort, recreation, travel, health, and longevity soared beyond any benchmark realistically available in 1944 . . . So, if it was an age of anxiety it also was an age of opportunity.”

Graham himself, Grant argues, sought to offer answers to the anxiety and took advantage of his own extraordinary opportunity to bring souls to Christ while also working for a better, safer, and more just nation and world beyond. Graham indeed had “the heart of a pastor” and it extended to peoples across the globe. If not a brilliant theological mind, Graham was nonetheless curious, insightful, and powerfully able to move people and help transform lives. As Grant quips, “Billy Graham was no Karl Barth. But then, Karl Barth was no Billy Graham” (300).

Graham's life and work held their own paradoxes, Grant meticulously shows—above all, a commonplace love of power, recognition, and comfort recognizable in us all but one that kept him tied to a succession of U.S. Presidents in ways that sometimes compromised his message of humility and the need to repent of one's sins. (The image of Graham and his pal Lyndon Johnson skinny-dipping in the White House pool perfectly captures that privileged closeness [210]—a particular white male privileged closeness, by the way: no women were skinny-dipping there with Johnson, and no African American men!). In Grant's telling, that failing was more than offset by Graham's admirable willingness to apologize publicly for past misdeeds (such as his comments about Jews made on secret tape to Richard Nixon), blindnesses (such as his early views on African Americans, as well as Catholics), and hubris (his eagerness to advise world leaders on complicated matters of foreign policy and military engagement in which he had no expertise). These failings too, Grant insists, pale when we consider the fact of Graham's profoundly irenic sensibility and his commitment not to judge other religions or belief systems but to leave the judging to God. In an era when un-irenic Franklin Graham reigns more publicly than Billy, xenophobic Donald Trump can attract widespread evangelical support, and a Wheaton College professor is in danger of losing her tenured position for publicly supporting Muslims, Grant is right: even secularists may weep for Billy Graham to come and make things right again.

But, not all secularists may weep. In the sharpest published review yet to appear of *America's Pastor*, David Hollinger argues for a very different conclusion than Grant does, maintaining that Graham was “evasive,” that he “blithely ignored” the challenges biblical criticism has long and successfully settled upon Graham's simplistic faith, and that on most social justices issues he “came around [only] many years after he might have made a difference.” Hollinger concludes:

“By not speaking out earlier, Graham led a life of missed opportunities. He cannot be absolved of responsibility for what his son and other religiously and political 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.”

Having received a contrarian review of my first book long ago (which Catherine Brekus publicly rehearsed at the AAR some weeks back!), I have not relished the thought of bringing up Hollinger's critique here; but I think his challenge should not be dodged, and it seems that this is one of the most important questions we can ask of Grant, surely the most informed scholar of Graham's career working today: Is there any truth to Hollinger's charge against Graham? And, if there is, then how can we grapple with that legacy using all the nuance and the humanity you have so eloquently employed in what Hollinger thinks is an attempt to pardon Graham of very grave sins? This, in two parts, is my first question for Grant.

In mulling at length over this issue, I have been thinking about a specific cultural trait, one that we might call southern gentility—with all the irony you may want to bring to that—of a particularly privileged yet deferential sort (and partly, though only partly, evangelical in nature). I'm speaking of the sort of manners that keep southerners from criticizing each other in public, as if it were sinful to do so—at least when they see others as “good people” and want to be considered good in turn. One hears that hesitation in Graham's own apologetic explanation for why he did not instantly correct Richard Nixon's appalling anti-Semitic comments (“I guess I was trying to please,” Graham told *Newsweek* in 2006; “I felt so badly about myself” [195]): Nixon was a good man, Graham believed, and he should not be rudely corrected even when saying bigoted things. “You said yes or you nodded your head or suchlike,” he told Larry King about the difficulty of “tak[ing] issue” with the President of the United States (195). It's the same hesitation that prevents many white southerners from calling out loved ones for overt racism, even when they—or we—know we should. It's a kind of hesitation deeply imprinted on me from my own southern upbringing, so that the times I speak out to “good people” in such a way that I know will cause hurt even if true—well, such times cast me in the imagined shadow of my mother's furiously arched eyebrow of disapproval, a childhood rod of discipline as effective as any I know, for it told me I was rude and banished any illusion that I was “good people” too.

And this is my second question, related to the first: has a culturally enforced reluctance to offend good people, a category that surely includes Billy Graham if it includes anyone at all, tempered Grant's own willingness to state publicly that Graham could have—and, if so, presumably should have—done more to convince his devoted followers of the hard justice that is the core of faith in Christ? Did the critical biblical/scholarly findings that Graham knew well make a literal reading of the Bible impossible to defend? Did Grant's several visits to Billy Graham's hospitable southern home, where Grant and Kathy were warmly hosted as welcome guests, play a role similar to that of ethnographic relationships for many of us (thinking *God's Daughters* here), perhaps making it easier to sidestep hard questions about a subject's intellectual evasions and political entanglements?

If Grant is right and Hollinger is wrong, then Graham did an admirable, perhaps even heroic job of pulling white American Christians in the direction of tolerance and holy love at the pace they were able to move (on matters of non-Christian religions as well as race and justice, though not gender equality, a topic mostly unaddressed in the book and to which I will shortly return). On the other hand, if Hollinger is right and Grant is wrong, Graham's craving for love and legitimacy in the eyes of the powerful as well as the masses made it impossible for him to check or critique the authoritarian tendencies rising in his own cohorts, effectively empowering them to flourish as they have—at Wheaton College, among other places! But is it too rude to call Graham an enabler, and should we just leave the man in peace at his age? This is a ripe topic for debate.

A third and final question follows for me (I will be brief on account of time, but it is a big one), and it returns us to gender: What would greater attention to Graham's innumerable criticisms of sexual immorality and the so-called sexual revolution have added to the analysis in *America's Pastor*? It seems to me that these themes—which carried a great deal of weight in my own family and church community, like countless others—say a great deal about the kinds of internal forces Graham believed to be just as dangerous to the nation as the external threat of communism; and they played an incalculable role in the shaping of Christian gender roles against feminist models. This is no small issue, for Christian women or men who grew up in the shadow of Graham, and I think this subject still warrants deeper analysis among historians in our field.

All questions aside, Grant has gifted us with a brilliant book on Billy Graham, one of the most consequential American personages of the twentieth century, and we will continue to read and learn from this portrayal for decades to come.





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I should probably confess that I have necessarily approached Grant's book as a consumer rather than a producer of knowledge about American evangelicalism in post-World War II America, a subject that is well outside my wheelhouse. Perhaps this is the appropriate time for me to note that some of my closest friends are evangelicals? One cannot read Grant's book, I think, without being impressed with how successful he has been in doing what every intellectual biographer aspires to do: he not only clearly explicates his subject's ideas, but he also provides a highly illuminating description of cultural, social, political, and intellectual life in post-World War II America, the period in which Graham became an icon.

One of Grant's important claims in *America's Pastor* is that while Billy Graham drew the ire of separatist fundamentalists for his willingness to cooperate with people who were to the left of him theologically, he proved to be quite successful as an evangelist who appealed to a broad cross-section of Christians and, to some extent, Americans as a whole. It would appear that in order to do this, however, Graham was forced to soft-pedal several issues that many evangelicals regarded as fundamental to their worldview. One of those issues was creationism. Graham noted in his autobiography that while at Wheaton, where he majored in anthropology, one of the most esteemed professors in that department "ardently convinced us that the origins of the human race were not up from the ape but down from the hand of God, as Genesis recorded" (65). It's also significant, I think, that William Bell Riley, who was notable for his vociferous opposition to evolution, regarded Graham as "God's man" (113) to succeed Riley as president of his educational empire centered in Northwestern Bible and Missionary Training School in the Twin Cities area. This suggests, at least, that Riley regarded Graham as theologically "safe" on the subject of human origins. Finally, in his *Peace with God*, published in 1953, and a work that Grant regards as one of Graham's two most important works, Graham makes it clear that he regards Adam as, quite literally, the first man—a man whom God created, as Graham put it, "full-grown with every mental and physical faculty developed" (44). Yet, by 1964, Graham had come to be content, as he told David Frost, to claim that the Bible was a work of redemption rather than a science book. That claim was one that most liberal Protestants would have been happy to affirm. It's consistent with Graham's reluctance to outspokenly endorse creationism, I think, that the terms "Darwinism," "evolution," and "creationism" don't appear in the index to Grant's book. Let me emphasize here that I don't think that this was an oversight on Grant's part. Rather, I think that the absence of those subjects attests to Billy Graham's determination to downplay issues that he regarded as lying beyond the purview of the most central issues—the drama of sin and salvation—in the evangelical Christian message.

On a different, and arguably more important front, Grant made a point in his book of emphasizing that while in the period prior to the mid-1950s Graham "signed statements of faith that used the word *inerrancy*, . . . he himself did not use it" (37-38). Grant notes that Billy Graham began his career committed to the fundamentalist view that a plain-sense reading of the Bible would yield an interpretation that was error-free on the subjects of science and history as well as the scheme of redemption (37). And while Grant notes that by the time his *Peace with God* was published in 1953, Billy Graham was using the phrase "authoritative" rather than "inerrant" or even "infallible" to describe the Bible without indicating why he was doing so, it's significant, I think, that he suggested in that book that the authors of Scripture "acted as channels for God's *dictation*," (24) a telling term in the history of conservative Protestant biblical theology. Grant acknowledges that even later in his life Graham's claim that the Bible was "authoritative" suggested that he believed that the Bible provided readers with a generally accurate statement of science and history. Yet, Graham's brother-in-law reported that Graham thought that the term inerrant was "too brittle." This prompted me to wonder what, precisely, this meant. It's also worth noting that while Graham consistently affirmed the authority of the Bible, he devoted virtually none of his career to actively defending that authority against its theological critics or those who were indifferent to the scriptures. In spite of the fact that Graham made it abundantly clear that he believed that the Bible constituted the final source of authority in Christian theology, he seems rarely to have chosen to describe the precise nature and scope of scriptural authority in explicit or vocal terms.

On the face of it, the relative silence of Billy Graham on the subject of biblical inerrancy, like his reluctance to address the question of where he stood with regard to the theory of evolution, might well appear to lend credence to the claims of those on the theological left who tended to regard Graham as an intellectual lightweight or those on the right who denounced him as a theological coward, for those two issues have been among the most highly charged intellectual issues that evangelicals in the



twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have addressed. At the very minimum, it suggests that Graham devoted relatively little attention to what Molly Worthen has described as “the crisis of authoritarianism in American evangelicalism.” I’d be fascinated to hear Grant tell us why he thinks that Graham was relatively silent in the face of that crisis. In particular, I’d like to hear him say a little more about what he means when he claims that Graham’s view of the Bible “both registered and portended an important shift of emphasis in the evangelical subculture,” (39) for I would have thought that throughout Graham’s career, biblical authority remained as one of the issues that was most central in separating evangelical Protestantism from the liberal mainline.

My own view of Graham’s relative “flabbiness” on this issue is based at least in part on one of Grant’s persistent contentions in the book, namely that Billy Graham consistently acted on the principle that his vocation as a Christian evangelist attempting “to win people to Christ” (32) took precedence over everything else. That principle prompted him—as Grant put it—to seek “an evangelical style as irenic and as broadly based as possible without giving up the identifiable evangelical core” (181). I would interpret that to mean that Graham repressed any inclinations that he might have had to serve as an outspoken apologist for controversial conservative evangelical Christian doctrines that did not explicitly relate to his emphasis on the need for individuals to be born again. While that decision prompted many fundamentalists to regard him as a sell-out, for Graham himself, it doubtless seemed to be nothing more than a case of maintaining a clear-eyed view of appropriate priorities.

Grant indicates that Graham was willing “to work with almost anyone who would work with him as long as they did not ask him to change his message” (29). I think it should be emphasized, though, that Graham was also quite intent on designing the message that he preached to accord with his commitment as an evangelist to appeal to as broad a cross-section of people as he could while remaining true to what he regarded as core Christian principles. It could certainly be argued that in refusing to make a sustained argument for the idea that the Bible had been divinely inspired in a period that witnessed, by Graham’s own admission, a tendency among many people to dismiss the value of the Scriptures, he was guilty of forfeiting an opportunity to convince some people that Bible reading was a compelling enterprise. On the other side of the coin, however, it could also be claimed that Graham’s refusal to make hard-edged, potentially divisive claims concerning the precise nature of biblical authority and his looser, more ambiguous appeal to what Grant has called a “faith-based approach” to the Scriptures (40) effectively enabled him to convince an even larger group of individuals that the Bible, in Graham’s words, “embodies all the knowledge man needs to fill the longing of his soul and solve all his problems” (*Peace*, 26). I think that Graham’s refusal to get too specific on questions such as the nature of biblical inspiration also lends credence to Grant’s point that Graham was an evangelist rather than an apologist and spoke primarily to people who already, in a loose sense, at least, “agreed with most of what he said” (51).

All of this is not to suggest that Billy Graham was utterly indifferent to large issues relating to the Christian worldview. A good case can be made, I think, for the idea that historically, evangelicals have almost always chosen to take on ideological adversaries against whom they can set themselves off. In Graham’s case the worldview that he singled out as the most formidable adversary during the course of much of his career was not theological modernism but communism, a position that he once described as “a religion that is inspired, directed and motivated by the Devil himself” (Graham in *Carpenter*, 224). Grant provides very useful context for understanding Graham’s antipathy to communism, but perhaps the most succinct explanation of that antipathy came from Graham himself, when he noted in his autobiography that he “couldn’t preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ without clashing head-on with the various philosophies and ideologies that were vehemently opposed to Christianity—especially Communism” (382). I would suggest that until the late 1970s, communism played for Graham and for that matter, most Christians in America, a role that was broadly similar to that which evolution and biblical criticism had earlier played for conservative evangelicals: it served as a challenge to the preeminence of Christian culture and civilization. And precisely because it did play that role for most Christians, Graham could focus on the evil of communism with little fear of alienating potential converts. Rather, his decision to single out communism as a dangerous threat to the Christian worldview served to unite Americans rather than to create boundaries between them.

I’d also like to make a couple of brief observations concerning Graham’s treatment of the themes of sin and salvation—the themes that were central to his pastoral and homiletic concerns throughout his career. Grant is unquestionably correct in emphasizing the moralistic thrust of Graham’s conception of sin during the early stage of his career. Still, even as early as 1953, I think one can detect clear indications that while Graham was quite intent on denouncing “sins,” he was equally concerned with the more existential problem of “sin,” the state of being that, as Graham put it, “prevents man from being happy.” From this

perspective, one could say—and Grant certainly doesn't ignore this dimension of Graham's message—that there was a therapeutic dimension to Graham's approach to the issue of sin. I would also suggest that there was a therapeutic dimension in Graham's discussion of salvation. It's unquestionably true that Graham placed primary emphasis on God's promise of eternal life in his discussions of Christian salvation, for as Grant notes, he was unwilling to "whitewash" (285) the reality of death, and, I might add, he was acutely aware that eternity lasts a long, long time. That said, though, I would maintain Graham was also intent on stressing that conversion to the Christian gospel would result in a more abundant life here on earth in the sense of the attainment of greater inner peace, more satisfying relations with family members, friends and even strangers, and more meaningful day-to-day lives. It should also be said—and this is another recurring theme in Grant's work—that Billy Graham's message of sin and salvation prompted him to stress the importance throughout his career on the need to reform individuals one at a time and from the inside out. This certainly does not mean that Graham was oblivious or indifferent to social problems. As Grant points out, Graham supported Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, the civil rights movement, and a number of other structural changes in the social order. Nevertheless, he was consistent through-out his career in believing that renewal of the hearts of individuals constituted the most promising route to reforming the larger society.

My final point would be that Grant's work provides a salutary reminder to those of us who are interested in the history of thought that ideas are not the exclusive property of members of the intellectual community. Billy Graham was no intellectual, but he certainly managed to provide members of his constituency with a rich stock of religious ideas, some of which, as Grant demonstrates, changed significantly over time, while others remained constant throughout Graham's career.

Let me conclude my remarks by stating explicitly what I hope will be obvious by now. I think that Grant's biography of Billy Graham is a model of historical scholarship, destined to be the book-of-record on that influential evangelist for decades to come. It is a book that is well worth the herculean efforts that Grant made to research and write it. Well done, my friend!

