Billy Graham gets his due in 'America's Pastor,' an even-handed biography: book review

Billy Graham
Billy Graham in 2005, the year of his retirement. (The Associated Press)

Special to The Oregonian  By Special to The Oregonian

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AMERICA'S PASTOR

Grant Wacker

Harvard University Press, $27.95

408 pages

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER/Special to The Oregonian

We should not be surprised, Grant Wacker, a professor at Duke University Divinity School suggests, that letters addressed to "Rev. Billy Graham, Evangelist, Who lives somewhere in America USA" and "God's Man, Minnesota USA," got where they were supposed to go. After all, by the time he retired in 2005, Graham had preached to more than 215 million people in 99 countries and 2 billion more in closed circuit broadcasts.

In "America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation," Wacker, who counts himself a partisan of the evangelical tradition, provides a judicious assessment of Graham's six decades as a preacher, pastor, public figure, entrepreneur, southerner, and icon. He criticizes Graham's political partisanship, his cozy relationship with prominent politicians, and a tendency to go along to get along (that may explain his anti-Semitic comments in a conversation with Richard Nixon). Wacker credits Graham with a knack for appropriating tendencies in American culture and connecting with the anxieties and aspirations of ordinary people that helped bring evangelicalism from the margins to the mainstream in the United States.

Wacker's even-handed, "on the other hand" approach is likely to frustrate readers looking for more sharp-edged assessments. On race, for example, Wacker notes that Graham was often reluctant to take a firm stand, implied that there was a moral equivalence between the concerns of whites and those of blacks, let segregationists sit on his platform, and did not understand that the rhetoric of voluntarism and equal opportunity masked the reality that "unequal access yielded unequal results." After acknowledging that Graham "could have done more," Wacker then claims that "the most important point" is that his attitudes "changed dramatically," crediting him with "a special courage" in confronting his friends and for making it difficult for Christians "publically to resist racial justice."

Recognizing that it is difficult to account for Graham's prominence on the religious landscape, Wacker calls attention to Graham's magnificent voice, rugged good looks, integrity, humility, charisma, savviness, longevity, and his offer
of a second chance to sinners. He concludes, however, where he began: admirers and adversaries, he writes, continue to disagree about whether Graham's sermons on religion, culture, morality and politics were simple-minded, soporific, mind-numbing and banal, or a consistent, coherent, mind-comforting reduction of complex issues into common sense language that shined a light on human sin and divine forgiveness and provided practical tools "for navigating the dilemmas of everyday life."

A poll taken in 2007 by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Wacker reveals, indicated that about 29 percent of Americans under the age of 30 did not recognize Billy Graham's name. It makes you wonder about the enduring legacy of the man who was once called "the least colorful and most powerful preacher of America."

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