



The Legacy of Billy Graham: Critical Reflections on America's Greatest Evangelist, Michael G. Long, (ed.), Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, pp. 229, ISBN 978-0-664-23138-5. £9.99

'I'm going to ask you to get up out of your seat.' With these dramatic words a typical Billy Graham rally comes to its climax. For more than half a century the format has hardly changed. There are gospel songs sung by superb choirs and soloists. There are testimonies by celebrities, whether from politics, sport, entertainment or some other area of human achievement. Then Billy preaches directly, simply and with great conviction. Finally he invites individuals to come forward to signify that they have invited Christ into their lives.

The great evangelist, now aged ninety, is in retirement and battling with ill health. He has preached his last crusade. The time is now ripe to evaluate his contribution to the Church and the world.

Billy Graham's achievement is truly amazing. He has preached Christ to hundreds of millions throughout the world. He has been a friend of every U.S. President since Harry Truman. He has made friends with global business and labour leaders. He has advised politicians during world conflicts. He has rubbed shoulders with stars of stage and screen and popular music. He has proved to be remarkably open-minded and willing to engage in dialogue with church leaders who do not accept his theology.

Furthermore Billy Graham is a good man. He practises what he preaches. He lives the gospel in his personal life. Not for him the celebrity lifestyle of flamboyant evangelists who have become so blinded by their own ego that they have gone sadly off the rails.

All the contributors to this volume respect Graham's achievement. Although they have criticisms to offer, they do so recognising that in a career spanning decades Graham has listened to his critics and responded generously to them. Moreover, unlike so many fiery preachers from the Deep South, Graham has moved far away from extremes of



political fanaticism, racial hatred and anti-ecumenical theology. The essays in this book assess Graham's legacy from various viewpoints: there is a feminist critique; his impact on political and social matters is evaluated; his theology is carefully scrutinised. Especially worthy of note is Thomas G. Long's evaluation of Graham's preaching. Long analyses the typical Graham sermon, observing four stages, firstly the grave crisis of our time, secondly the restless and captive soul, thirdly God's response and call, and finally the invitation to get up out of your seat. Long, like many other teachers of preaching, is astonished by the dramatic results achieved by Graham's sermons, since they are so different from the text book assessment of what great preaching should be. He concludes that a Graham sermon is part of a Billy Graham event, a gospel 'happening' in which timeless truths are repeated with great conviction and authority in order to provide consolation in the face of a world of rapid change and declining standards.

Every public figure from the American South needs to make clear where he stands on the race issue. In the beginning Graham preached to segregated audiences, as was the custom at all public events in the South. In his autobiography he makes a great deal out of his action before a rally in Chattanooga, Tennessee, when he personally tore down the ropes separating blacks from whites. However, he did backslide, preaching to segregated audiences thereafter. It was not until the 1954 Supreme Court ruling outlawed all segregation that Graham spoke only to integrated audiences.

Graham's friendship with the great prophet of integration, Dr Martin Luther King, was never plain sailing. In 1957 King gave the opening prayer at Graham's rally in Madison Square Garden. 'A great social revolution is going on in the United States today,' said Graham to the audience, 'Dr King is one of its leaders.' However, Graham's theology made him basically unsuited for political action. Focusing only on the individual, Graham was sceptical about King's campaign of protest marches and civil disobedience. He was slow to recognise that God could also work in the world of politics; that changing evil structures is as important as changing evil hearts.

When Dr King was alarmed that Graham had invited the racist governor of Texas to introduce him at a rally, he wrote asking Graham to cancel the invitation. One of Graham's lieutenants replied, claiming that Graham did not take sides in politics. This is truly astonishing, since Graham had often advised President Eisenhower on how to maximise the Protestant vote.

It is surely sad that King's suggestion of a joint Graham-King crusade was never taken up. The spectacle of the evangelist, who sought to save the individual soul, teaming up with the prophet, who sought to save the soul of the nation, would have made a powerful impression on America and the world. Despite his intense experience of Christ, Graham lacked an intense experience of what Christ proclaimed, the dawning Kingdom of God. It is Martin Luther King's vision of the Kingdom which makes his prophetic witness so powerful. The Kingdom of peace and justice is God's gift now and its nearness demands that people co-operate with God now in establishing justice on earth.

The Christian theologian who launched the most strident attack on Graham in the fifties was Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr accused Graham of recycling the catchphrases of an outmoded individualism and literalism. Knowing that Graham was charming, Niebuhr refused to meet him and be charmed. He claimed that Graham's rallies employed 'all the high-pressure techniques of modern salesmanship', selling Jesus in the same way that businesses sold soap and televisions. He asked why Graham's call to repentance did not feature a condemnation of race prejudice. In fairness to Graham it must be pointed out that during the fifties, while Niebuhr was sitting in an armchair in a leafy suburb, Billy was on the preaching trail in the middle of the hotbed of prejudice that is the Deep South.

Graham's friendship with politicians has always grabbed headlines. He was especially close to Presidents Johnston and Nixon. There is no doubt that he was naïve about these contacts. Politicians always use celebrities to enhance their image. A close friendship with the great

evangelist was bound to make the President seem squeaky clean. After the Watergate scandal Graham emerged a sadder and wiser man. He continued to have contacts with the great and the good, but was careful not to have his fingers burned again. 'I learned my lesson the hard way,' he said, 'I no longer think we are a Christian nation.'

Perhaps his most lasting influence will be seen in the evangelical churches. The evangelical world is always in danger of being led to extremes by the preacher with the loudest voice. Since he was that preacher, Graham was in a position of great responsibility and he used it to guide evangelicals away from uncompromising positions on many issues. It is surely remarkable that such a conservative preacher should have embraced so many liberal causes. He supports the ordination of women to the ministry and has called for nuclear disarmament. He admitted to having changed his mind on the inevitable lostness of pagans who had never heard the gospel. He attacked America's Christian Right, accusing these ultra-fundamentalists of being obsessed with theological purity. He distanced himself from the fundamentalist description of the Bible as 'inerrant'. He even joined the ecumenical movement. In 1962 Harvey Cox encountered him at the New Delhi conference of the World Council of Churches and asked him what he thought of this gathering of church leaders, many far removed from Graham in theology and liturgy. 'I love it' replied Billy with enthusiasm, 'All these people praising the name of Jesus Christ.' It is not surprising that Graham's most outspoken critics are the extremists of the evangelical camp. Fundamentalists such as Jerry Falwell and Bob Jones never ceased to condemn him.

So what is the legacy of Billy Graham? Despite their criticisms the contributors to this volume manage to raise two cheers for the great evangelist. His preaching has been a vital first step from many on the road to Christ. In addition to his powerful pulpit ministry, Billy will be remembered for being a big man with a big heart. Despite his origins in a very conservative brand of Christianity, Billy was always big-hearted enough to take seriously the insights of those from other

Christian traditions and to admit that he, like all believers, has still more to learn from the limitless wisdom of God.

Denis Campbell,
St Andrew's Church,
Blackrock,
County Dublin