

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

Billy Graham has iconic status as one of the greatest evangelists of all time. This book re-examines the pedestal on which he stands. It is a warts-and-all critique. Too seldom has this been done for the towering Billy Graham – and that while he is still alive!

The avowed aim of the fourteen scholars is to ‘take Billy Graham seriously – to acknowledge his historical significance’ (xiii). The difficulty, however, in doing this, ‘exploring the strengths and weaknesses of his lifelong ministry’ (xiii) is that the critics tend to come theologically from the centre-to-left spectrum of the church. This means that their overall inclination is to look for a ministry that deeply engaged with society and sought its transformation. The result is low levels of enthusiasm for preaching that largely called for personal conversion (with societal transformation more to the periphery of Graham’s concern).

A book of this nature thus raises the question of the nature of the Christian gospel –its core and its totality. Douglas Sturm helpfully categorises responses to societal problems such as poverty as either conversionist or prophetic (65). Clearly Billy Graham’s approach is conversionist. At a press conference in 2005 he indicated that the greatest societal problem was poverty and that the gospel of Christ was the answer to poverty, ‘not part of the answer but the whole answer’ (63). Graham’s largely not taking a ‘prophetic’ approach results in a low score card in this book.

Graham is given credit for his stand on racism, particularly his refusal to speak before segregated audiences in the American southern states in the 1950s. However, Graham was not consistent for a couple of years around 1950 on the segregated audience issue (150) and he was still bringing prominent segregationists onto his platforms to provide endorsements of his ministry into the late 1950s (152). Thus praise for Graham’s stand on racism is muted, partly through recognition that Graham did not get fully behind the civil rights campaigns of Martin Luther King (151-52) and ‘did not burn for racial justice’ (147). The book does, however, provide greater endorsement to Graham for his stance from the 1980s urging full nuclear disarmament (93-94).

In my view Graham’s being weighed from a ‘prophetic’ perspective results in inadequate credit given to his ‘conversionist’

influence. Graham preached to at least 210 million people in over 185 countries (3). At his famous 1954 Greater London crusade, seventy per cent of the 38,000 who responded publicly to Graham's appeals were for first-time commitment, with only forty per cent being church members (usually nominal) at the time, and sixty-four per cent of the converts were attending church one year later (132-33). Overall, however, there is relatively little focus on this aspect of Graham's ministry – and little acknowledgement of its value.

Perhaps the harshest criticism of Graham is his political involvement, his getting involved with virtually every president from Truman onwards and his getting too close to some of them. This is especially the case with Nixon, whom he encouraged to run for president in 1968 (29, 102). Graham followed this up by announcing prior to voting day that he had already voted for Nixon by absentee ballot – doing the same for George W. Bush in 2000 (113). No wonder that there were guffaws in 1970 when Graham claimed that he was 'totally nonpartisan' (xi).

My focus on the lack of sufficient credit for Graham's role in vast numbers of individual conversions may suggest that I am largely negative towards the book. By no means is this the case. This book very helpfully highlights the weaknesses of preaching that is reductionist in its solutions (*all* problems are solved by coming to Christ) and that fails to address the issues of the day and declare the whole counsel of God. God bless old Billy Graham. Hopefully he will be pleased with a book that causes deeper reflection on the nature and task of the gospel. For it is to that that he devoted his life.

Laurie Guy

Frank W Rinaldi. *The Tribe of Dan: The New Connexion of General Baptists 1770-1891: A Study in the Transition from Revival Movement to Established Denomination*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008. (xxi + 264pp.) [ISBN 978-1-84227-143-8]

This book, based on the PhD thesis of its author, provides a comprehensive examination of the history of the New Connexion of the General Baptists. It thematically examines that movement from a number of angles including its theological emphases, sociological composition, organisational structure, evangelism and ministry patterns.