

Book Review:

Billy Graham: An Ordinary Man and His Extraordinary God

By Lon Allison

Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2018. 157 Pages.

Reviewed by Rich McLaughlin

Across his career, Billy Graham was called by a range of titles including “God’s messenger to the little guy,” “America’s Pastor,” “Pastor to Presidents,” “Evangelist to the World,” and “God’s Ambassador.” However, in any era, new figures arise, and earlier landmark individuals become less familiar; even someone like Billy Graham.

Lon Allison’s background included serving in youth ministry, in church planting, as the Evangelical Covenant Church’s Director of Prayer and Evangelism, as the Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, and as Teaching Pastor and Pastor of Evangelism and Development at Wheaton Bible Church. Allison’s purpose in writing this book involved not only helping a reader to understand Billy Graham from a closer vantage point than most people had, but in the process to understand the message that captured Billy’s life and the extraordinary God of the Bible who called and used Billy Graham on historic national and international levels. In Chapter One “First Impressions”, Lon Allison recalls how he was immediately and personally impressed by Billy Graham’s gentleness, humility, and warmth during the search process which led to Lon becoming the Director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College in Illinois.

Then, this book follows Graham’s life historically for the next six chapters. Chapter Two “How It All Began” provides essential background for understanding Graham through his family’s impact on his life and through his growing years outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. Chapter Three “The Tipping Point” recounts how as a teenager Billy took the Christian faith to heart personally as a result of evangelist Mordecai Ham’s weeks of meetings in the fall of 1934. Chapter Four “Preparing For His Future” walks back through Billy Graham’s training received from three different

institutions and relationships with key mentors across his academic journey. Chapter Five “Intimate God Connection” points back to critical crossroads when Graham cemented commitments to the Bible, prayer, and ongoing personal time with the Lord. Chapter Six “All Heaven Breaks Loose” looks at turning points in the ministry of the Graham team that catapulted Graham to unprecedented national and international prominence – including times in Los Angeles, Boston, Great Britain, Germany, and New York, and into mass media through print, radio, and television. Chapter Seven “Racial Justice, Peace Not War, Human Suffering” opens up Graham’s unexpected opportunities and wise responses to critical societal issues in his day that continue to speak to current days.

Allison’s work closes by summarizing central aspects of Graham’s life in the final three chapters. Chapter Eight “Weaknesses and Regrets” helps one see a real person who was learning meaningful lessons by observing others and by experiencing his own trials and errors. Chapter Nine “A Soul Mate for Life” offers insights from the life he shared with his wife Ruth Bell Graham. Chapter Ten “The Message of the Man” looks once more at the message that Billy Graham carried so faithfully.

While others have captured Billy Graham’s life in books, photos, and films, Lon Allison is particularly attentive and successful at unfolding what is found in the sub-title: an ordinary man and his extraordinary God. Lon Allison had the privilege of interacting personally with Dr. Graham through kindred spirit ministry, and, across time, was granted access to many others who shared life and ministry closely with Dr. Graham. This book’s strengths lie in keeping the life and message of Billy Graham clearly visible and warmly accessible.

If any weaknesses may be addressed, it would be the flip-side of this book's strengths. This concise treatment of Graham's life cannot help but omit what potentially could be explored regarding evangelistic strategy or its historical impact when delving into such full life and ministry. For further biographical background, explore John Pollock's *Billy Graham: The Authorized Biography* (1966), or Billy Graham's own *Just as I am* (2nd ed., 2007). For helpful summaries of ministry insights, *A Biblical Standard For Evangelists* from the International Conference for Itinerant Evangelists Amsterdam '83 or Harold Myra and Marshall Shelley's *The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham* (2008) would serve as fitting next resources. Yet, if one is desiring a recommended entryway to understanding the world's most famous evangelist of the last century, an insider's look at how God raised up an example to carry the Christian good news message, or a companion text to an evangelism course in order to flesh out how evangelism can and has been embodied, Lon Allison's closing life work would serve very well.