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American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction (Book Review)

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American Evangelical Christianity; An Introduction, by Mark A. Noll (Malden, MA / Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2001). vii + 320 pp. Reviewed by Hubert R. Krygsmann, Professor of History, Dordt College.

This book summarizes Mark Noll's lectures given at Princeton Theological Seminary during 2000-2001. Noll's lectures provide a general introduction to American evangelicalism. They also represent the results of a generation of scholarship on the topic. As one of the leading and most prolific scholars on the history of American evangelicalism, Noll draws heavily on many of his previously published essays, but he also deftly incorporates a wide range of the latest specialized research into his description and assessment of American evangelicalism. His over-all portrayal of evangelicalism is of a movement that is far more complex and diverse than impressions might suggest. In describing that complexity, Noll seeks to dispel common caricatures of evangelicalism, and also to commend what he regards as "the best" in evangelicalism.

Noll organizes his survey into three main parts. The first part he presents as an "objective" description of the history, social identity, and main beliefs of evangelicals. The following sections offer what he describes as less objective and more analytic opinion. In part two, he examines in greater depth such topics as evangelicals' relations with Catholics, and their involvement in science and politics. Part three, subtitled "Opinion," offers Noll's suggestions for exploiting what he considers to be the best of the evangelical tradition.

Noll defines evangelicalism as "culturally adaptive biblical experientialism" (2). These terms refer to strands that evangelicals have woven together, though any particular evangelical group or activity might emphasize one of those strands. He locates the origins of American evangelicalism in European pietism, noting that the Great Awakening preaching of repentance and free grace, and especially of conversion experience, "constituted American evangelicalism" (11). Here he applies David Bebbington's four characteristic descriptors of British evangelical belief to American evangelicalism, namely conversionism, biblicism, activism, and crucicentrism (13). Although these four central beliefs link modern evangelicalism with earlier Protestant pietism, Noll rightly notes that American evangelicals departed from earlier European emphases on church-state establishments and high views of learning and the clergy. American evangelicalism, by contrast, became adaptive, diverse, and populist, and was sustained by informal and personal networks.

Noll's historical analysis focuses on changes to American evangelicalism in the twentieth century. After the divisions of the early 1900's, fundamentalists sustained evangelicalism outside of the modernist

mainstream with a surprising array of activities and networks, while ethnic confessional enclaves like Lutheran and Reformed communities increasingly assimilated into the American evangelical coalition. Since the 1940's, "neo-evangelicals" like Billy Graham and Carl F. H. Henry led evangelicals to a recovery of intellectual sophistication and renewed involvement in the American mainstream. Yet it was especially, Noll argues, the charismatic-pentecostal movement that produced typical contemporary evangelical features like televangelism, political activism, and the Republican leanings of the evangelical Right. Noll's reference to the pentecostal style's emphasis on experiential holiness and activism rather than the doctrine of justification faintly echoes the concerns he raised in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.

Without explaining why it was so adaptive, Noll suggests that it was evangelicalism's adaptive experientialism that contributed to its diversity. This diversity shows up in his efforts to identify the evangelical constituency and its beliefs—a topic of perennial dispute among scholars on evangelicalism. Noll tries to discover that identity by cross-referencing three types of polling data (self-reported identities, self-reported beliefs, and denominational affiliation), and by comparing polling data on American Christianity with data on Canadian and on world Christianity. Having cast his net so wide, Noll's conclusions are understandably cautionary. Not surprisingly, he finds America to be unique in the high percentage of people that profess evangelical beliefs and identity. Beyond this point, he reminds us that evangelical belief is remarkably diverse, and that many Christians who are not American evangelicals share at least some evangelical beliefs. Diversity is also the theme of Noll's study of region, class and race *within* American evangelicalism. Especially in contrasting white and African-American evangelicals, Noll emphasizes significant differences in social identity and concerns. There is, as he concludes, no bare "evangelicalism" (76).

Noll is most effective in challenging misconceptions about evangelical views of gender, science, and politics. Contrary to impressions left by the evangelical Right, Noll argues that evangelical views about gender have long been double-edged. To be sure, evangelicals who were concerned with propriety and moral purity emphasized women's separate sphere and, on biblical grounds, their subordination to male authority. Other evangelicals—especially women—found in biblical texts and evangelical egalitarianism grounds for claiming

liberation from male authority and a positive role for women in the church. Even in fundamentalist circles, women gained positions of authority and responsibility, not on the basis of liberal feminist claims, but on religious grounds. This was especially true among Pentecostals prior to World War II, where many women were active in ministry leadership. After WW II, however, and like nineteenth-century Baptists and Methodists, Pentecostal efforts to build institutions led them to reduce the public role of women. Both strands continue in contemporary evangelicalism, but Noll focuses on the efforts of women to find avenues to exercise power despite official patriarchy (97-98). He concludes, therefore, that contemporary evangelical women, while remaining quite conservative in their “religious beliefs,” appear relatively indistinguishable from most American women in their assumption of equality between the genders.

Noll also challenges the mis-perception, forged already in the 1870’s, of a conflict between science and religion. Drawing from both historical scholarship and the current renaissance of evangelical apologetics, Noll notes that Christianity made a positive contribution to modern western science. In fact, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evangelicals accepted the paradigm of modern empirical science, doing so on the foundations of Scottish Common Sense philosophy. While evangelical scholars attributed primary authority to the Bible, they were confident that the Book of Nature complemented the Bible. Even Charles Hodge, the Princeton apologist for Biblical authority, initially saw Darwin’s hypothesis as harmless; science pursued objectively, he was confident, would produce incontrovertible truth that could not conflict with the Bible. Rather than locating the conflict in science vs. religion, Noll attributes the late nineteenth-century intellectual controversy to a conflict between the older empirical paradigm and the emergence of a new historically-conscious and naturalist “critical” paradigm that came to dominate the universities. Those who became fundamentalists reacted by holding fast to the earlier empirical method and turning to something of a “Bible only” approach to science – especially in the development of Creation Science. Noll argues that fundamentalist and Creation Science responses tended to focus on concerns about the “extrinsic” significance of the new critical science (i.e., its assumptions and moral implications) rather than to engage in “intrinsic” or actual scientific activity and debate. Noll’s argument here may be over-stated: certainly nineteenth-century evangelical scientists like John William Dawson and twentieth-century Creation Science scholars like Henry Morris engaged in both intrinsic and extrinsic debate about the new science. In any case, Noll suggests that while it rightly challenged

the false neutrality of the naturalist method, fundamentalist criticism superimposed its own extrinsic concerns upon intrinsic scientific work (174). Noll takes hope from the growing number of evangelical scientists in fields like history and physics who have done sound intrinsic science while also offering what he regards as credible apologetics for seeing belief in God and the study of nature as complementary (149).

In discussing evangelical politics, Noll also debunks the popular myth that the American Founding Fathers and the Constitution were “Christian.” The Founding Fathers, he reminds us, were mostly Deists whose references to God were usually informed by Unitarianism, and whose support for a limited public role for the church was designed primarily to support the “moral calculus” that was central to their republican ideology. In this section, Noll argues that evangelicalism had little impact on American society and politics until after 1800: only during the Second Great Awakening and the expansion of a voluntarist evangelicalism in Methodist and Baptist denominations, he argues, did evangelicals become politically active—but by then their politics had adopted the liberal republican ideology as their own. Noll’s claim is surprising here, considering the growth of evangelicalism during the Great Awakening of the 1730’s and 1740’s, the role of prominent evangelical scholars like John Witherspoon as moral philosophy teacher to several founding fathers, and popular evangelical support for the American Revolution after the 1760’s. At the least, we might ask why evangelicals so readily adopted the liberal republican political ideals of the Founding Fathers.

Concerning more recent evangelical politics, Noll notes that the political mobilization of evangelicals epitomized in the evangelical Right came only from one evangelical segment (white, largely Pentecostal), and it naively supported a republican ideology that was far from evangelical. Paradoxically, this segment was “sectarian” in demanding freedom from government controls, while it was “proprietary” in demanding government to impose a public morality informed by evangelical values. Meanwhile, other evangelicals, such as African-Americans, had much different priorities for social and political action. There is, Noll concludes, no political “silver bullet” that evangelicals can appeal to: no “Golden Age” of a Christian constitution that admits a dominant public role for evangelical Christianity in America, and no suitable way to use political power to impose a Christian order, much less resolve differences about what that order should be like, by force of the sword (200-203). Rather, he holds out Richard Cawardine’s warning of how Civil War era evangelicals, who had fused religion and politics and were so sure of their political righteousness and the

demonic nature of their opposition, brought the nation to civil war.

On the face of it, Noll's tripartite organization would seem helpful as an introduction to evangelicalism, and it does offer many astute observations. However, it also leaves nagging questions. For example, despite tracing the roots of evangelicalism to seventeenth-century European pietism, Noll minimizes the presence of evangelicalism in America prior to 1800. His brief discussion of evangelicalism prior to 1800 leaves crucial developments unexamined: what led American evangelicals, unlike European pietists, to abandon church-state establishments and a high view of learning and clergy? And why was American evangelicalism "culturally adaptive" rather than, say, culturally formative? Arguably, evangelical involvement in politics, especially in the revolutionary era, was formative, but nowhere does Noll explain why evangelicals tended to adopt Enlightenment liberal ideas rather than forging a more biblically-grounded view of politics or science.

Noll's analysis, despite his emphasis on diversity, also tends to level differences by decontextualizing beliefs from the historical and institutional setting of those who hold them. For example, in attempting to claim and compare widely-held evangelical beliefs, Noll includes confessional traditions that hold to doctrinal orthodoxy, a high view of church, or church-state establishments, all of which give their "evangelicalism" a very different meaning from the experientialism, biblicism, or activism envisioned by American evangelicals. Here Noll's wide net comes close to rendering the term "evangelical" indistinct. It also tends to make American evangelical priorities the standard of evangelical belief while excluding other nuances. For example, he uses the term "true believers" to describe non-American Christians whose beliefs are most analogous to American evangelical beliefs, even though high church Anglicans or Catholics, or even Muslims or Hindus, may be no less "true believers." In another case, Noll attempts to gauge commitment to "activism" by identifying it with answers to a polling question whether respondents support missionary work. Whether the problem is with Noll's use of polling data, or the limits of the pollsters, such an identity misses the fact that even Canadian evangelicals—American evangelicals' kissing cousins—envisioned activism as something that included social reform and close relations with the state in matters like education and public health.

When combined with his desire to sift out "the best" in evangelicalism, Noll's wide evangelical umbrella produces an eclectic selectiveness, as is evident in his discussion of gender issues. On the one hand, Noll

affirms the "religious good" in the traditional "patriarchal schema" (97). Yet he counters those traditional views by emphasizing the efforts of women to acquire power, without explaining why this is to be preferred, and without presenting male evangelical affirmations of women's equality. And to provide an example of an evangelical feminist alternative to traditional patriarchal views, Noll cites Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, whose Reformed confessional identity and critical scholarship is some distance from representing revivalist, adaptive evangelicalism. Yet when Noll wants to identify "typical" common evangelical beliefs, he examines primarily Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal, rather than Reformed (or Lutheran), confessional statements.

Noll's search for a commendable "essential" evangelical faith is most apparent in his discussion of Billy Graham, and of evangelical hymnody. By avoiding political controversy, he argues, Graham gained access to virtually all the American presidents, and by his willingness to cooperate ecumenically was able to lead mass revivals around the world. Noll acknowledges that Graham naively supported Nixon, and that his political quiescence limited his message, but according to Noll it was Graham's "moderation" that enabled him to minister to the nation and the world. Graham "minimized offence" in order to preach the gospel, and despite its limits his message centered on Christ (50-53), though the reader may wonder whether presenting an inoffensive gospel is true to the meaning of the gospel. Noll's assessment of evangelical hymnody is similar: for all of its faults, at its best it tells of the Christ-centered hope of evangelical faith.

Noll's picture of evangelicalism moving between essential Christian faith and quite pragmatic cultural adaptation leads him finally to call for retreat from the Calvinist emphasis on the kingship of Christ over all of life that briefly gained currency among some evangelicals after the 1960's due to the contribution of Reformed Kuyperians. That emphasis, Noll claims, has become excessive in its triumphal use of a "power"-image of God and in its acquiescence to dominating and unjust powers, as in the case of Afrikaners who supported apartheid in South Africa. Echoing other leading evangelical scholars in the last two years, Noll suggests that evangelicals need to recover a Lutheran emphasis on the suffering Christ of the cross, to balance their emphasis on the Christ of the scepter.

Although Noll's warning against triumphalism is fitting in a time when the Christian Coalition has floundered, and even moreso today when it would be easy to identify God's Kingdom with American culture and power, his proposal may be questioned in at least two ways. First, Noll gives no instances where Calvinist

triumphalism has functioned in American evangelicalism. In fact, the Kuyperian emphasis on the kingship of Christ over all of life is hardly typical of American evangelicalism, and is notably absent from the list of what Noll presents as common, typical evangelical beliefs (60-61). Indeed, as scholars like William G. McLoughlin have suggested, the late eighteenth-century shift from Calvinism to Methodism may help to explain the *lack* of a distinctly biblical approach to politics and society among American evangelicals. Secondly, Noll's generalization about "Calvinist" and "Lutheran" views is vastly over-simplified. Calvin never minimized the suffering Christ or the necessity of the cross, and was quick to alert us to the reality of the continuing struggle against sin; our subjection to God in all our vocations was part of that struggle against sin and the process of sanctification. And though Calvin affirmed the God-given character of authority, he by the same token insisted that all legitimate human exercise of authority was limited. Luther's Christ of the cross, by contrast, was the hidden and transcendent Word whose redemptive

work was a tangent into creation and the realm of nature. Notably, it was Luther who called upon the German princes to slaughter rebellious peasants.

Noll's turn to a Lutheran emphasis is consistent with his search for an "essential" evangelical faith. His effort to find that essence is understandable in a diverse, post-modern world that presents immense challenges to living out the claims of Christ's Kingdom. But in the end, his prescriptions give us little guidance about living that faith as Christians in the world. In his description of possibilities for "intrinsic" evangelical science, he refers to the Bible and nature as two distinct books (152-154)—presumably suggesting that intrinsic science will focus exclusively on the book of Nature (162), and only be "intersected" by faith. Noll is even more wary of seeking an obedient political order; at best, he suggests only that Christians keep their distance from politics. Noll's search for "the best" in American evangelicalism seems finally to seek a spiritual Kingdom abstracted from the redemption of a groaning creation.

Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs, by Rodney Clapp (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2000). 224 pages. \$16.99. 1-58743-003-7. Reviewed by Tim P. Vos, Instructor of Communication, Dordt College.

The sacrament of baptism teaches us that our Heavenly Father has adopted us as his children and made us co-heirs with Christ. But how do we understand what it means to be adopted and part of God's family? Are we guilty of seeing baptism through the eyes of our own cultural stories? Perhaps we envision baptism as little orphan Annie's adoption into a life of opulent leisure by Daddy Warbucks. Are we guilty of seeing family through the eyes of our own culture or experience? Might we see family as little more than a collection of individuals and the home as little more than a hotel, where all members have their own room with their own television, their own keys and their own schedules? To be made co-heirs with Christ means, among other things, that children are expected to grow up and join the family business. No more hanging around the house, or worse, sitting in our rooms apart from the family. We need to cross the threshold and engage the larger world.

Rodney Clapp wants Christians to "take baptism seriously" (14) and thus to take their new family, the church seriously. Clapp believes evangelical Christians haven't taken baptism as seriously as they should because they have done a poor job of negotiating borders; they have not crossed borders as Christians. Clapp introduces *Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs* with the claim that Christians

should engage popular culture and public affairs "first and foremost as Christians. Thus, (Christians) cross borders supposedly closed to the explicitly Christian" (15). Clapp makes his argument in support of that claim through nineteen loosely connected essays grouped in four parts: The Inevitability of Borders; Inside Christian Borders; Trespassing Secular Borders: Politics and Economics; and Trespassing Secular Borders: Popular Culture.

In part one, Clapp laments that Evangelicals have been too enamored with foundationalism: the modern, liberal epistemology that holds to rationally attainable, universal truth. Clapp devotes much of the first chapter to arguing with evangelical scholars such as Ronald Nash and Kenneth Kantzer, whom he sees as clinging to vestiges of foundationalism. Christians fail to be explicitly Christian, in Clapp's argument, when they appeal to universal truths. Christianity can be kept within borders. Instead, Clapp sides with Alasdair MacIntyre, arguing that "all inquiry is tradition-constituted and tradition-dependent." Clapp concludes, "We do better, I think, to come down from the foundationalist slide, recover an eschatologically informed epistemology, and place that epistemology firmly in the bed of ecclesiology. It is the community called 'church' that teaches people the language and culture that enables them to know Jesus as Lord" (29). Clapp wants the