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Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys (Book Review)

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The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys by Mark Noll (A History of Evangelicalism: People, Movements and Ideas in the English-Speaking World, vol. I), Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003, ISBN: 0-8308-2581-9, 330 pp. incl. bibliography. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Professor of History, Dordt College.

Mark Noll is McManis Professor of Christian Thought at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois. He is the author of many books and articles. He first achieved a wide readership with works such as *Christians in the American Revolution* (1977), *Between Faith and Criticism* (1986), and *One Nation Under God? Christian Faith and Political Action in America* (1988). His *Princeton and the Republic, 1768-1822* (1989) rightly commands continued respect. Since then, now familiar territory has been repeatedly traversed in works such as *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (1992), *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (2001), and *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* and *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (both 2002). In 1994 he published *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, with its bold opening statement: "The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind." The works of Mark Noll and George Marsden exhibit close affinities. Both are evangelicals who disavow fundamentalism with its attendant obscurantism. Both are indebted to the other, and both have stood as examples and have provided encouragement to many evangelical historians.

Back in the 1970s and again in the early 1990s, the pages of *The Christian Scholars' Review* included extended discussions on the origins and character of evangelicalism. Was it at root Methodist-Holiness or was it Presbyterian-Reformed? As one born in old England and living at the time in the Southern Hemisphere, I was repeatedly struck by how these discussions were cast in primarily "Americo-centric" terms. My prior reading of earlier works such as G. R. Balleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* and E. J. Poole-Connor, *Evangelicalism in England* (both 1951) had led me to conclude that the historical roots of evangelicalism lay in German-speaking Europe, and specifically in Lutheran pietism. This broad thesis is amply confirmed by William Reginald Ward's magisterial *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (1992).

The volume before us is doubly welcome. Not only is it the first in a five-volume series on the "History of Evangelicalism," but it inevitably touches upon the seminal question of the origins of evangelicalism. Noll endorses David Bebbington's now widely accepted formula for characterizing evangelicalism – Conversionism, Bible-centeredness, mission-oriented revivalist activism, and crucicentrism (19-20). This formula is significant because it correctly reflects evan-

gelicalism's failure to recognize the order of creation or the significance of human culture.

Noll presents evangelical religion as closely resembling "what Europeans describe as 'Pietism'." He acknowledges that "the Continental pietist movements played a significant role in the beginning of evangelical movements in Britain, and the main themes of pietism anticipated the main themes of evangelicalism" (18). So why cannot Noll simply write of the pietist origins of the evangelicalism that emerged in the 1730s? The answer is that the story is more complex. Evangelicalism is pietism plus. Noll discerns three primary contributing streams.

The first stream is what I would call late-Puritan early Protestant Dissenter post-1660 pietism (53-8, 100-1), where Bunyan, Doddridge, and Watts play their part. Second, there are the Moravians, led by von Zinzendorf (60-5). The Moravians in turn were shaped by the Lutheran pietism of men such as Arndt and Spener. Noll acknowledges the great work of Ward in this context (60). It was von Zinzendorf and the Moravians who combined pietism with revivalism and missionary urgency to give evangelicalism its particular character and resonance (63, 65, 69-70, 154). Third, (and this might catch some contemporary evangelicals by surprise), is Anglican high church spirituality (65-8), which formed the immediate context of the "Holy Club" at Oxford.

Perhaps some brief comments are in order on each of these. First, it would be appropriate to explore the relationship between Puritan pietism and Puritan scholasticism. Late Puritan pietism cannot be explained wholly in terms of the political and cultural disempowerment that followed the "Great Ejection" of 1662. Second, German pietism (unlike radical Puritanism) tended to be deeply submissive towards the (Protestant) state – a stance most acceptable to the new Hanoverian monarchy of Great Britain. Third, the "Holy Club" input, when joined with other strains, helped to impart to evangelicalism its strongly moralistic flavor.

Of course, the big question might be put as follows: "How much of the Great Awakening, or Evangelical Revival, was generated by its proponents?" Or, in other words, "Were these movements a genuine work of the Holy Spirit?" Here Noll moves with consummate care. He writes as an evangelical (290), and is of course well aware of the responses to Harry Stout's *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (1991), and of the arguments of Frank Lambert in *Inventing the "Great Awakening"* (1999).

Rightly understood, Christian historiography is a disciplined endeavour, not an exercise in uncritical hagiography. Noll acknowledges Whitefield's deliberately "dramatic preaching" (115), and writes of the organizers and "promoters of local revivals" (137, cf. 38, 44, 70). For Noll, Whitefield was an "expert marketer" (153) amongst a generation of evangelicals who challenged both over-regulation and under-supply in the religious market place (148). All of this cries out for further analysis on the relationship between evangelical decisionism and the ever-expanding place of market-driven consumerism in the Anglophone world of the eighteenth century onwards.

All the same, "Were these movements a genuine work of the Holy Spirit?" This is a tough question. Whatever theology is, it cannot be a "science of God." Science can address only those creatures to which it has access; God is not a creature. We may address the text of scripture in a variously qualified manner. We may scientifically examine belief and beliefs as we can also examine language and languages. But the Holy Spirit is not a creature, and the historian cannot subject the Holy Spirit to analytical scrutiny. So also, we cannot reach the depths of the Holy Spirit's working in the human heart (24). The Spirit may indeed move according to His Sovereign will – what we can perceive, if we are given the discernment, are the effects of its moving (John 3:8). The truth is that we are responsive – ever responding to the Word of God. What the historian may do is ascertain and assess those responses.

Noll's answer to the big question is that the late 1720s to early 1740s witnessed genuine works of the Holy Spirit that were of an exceptional character. Something spiritually important and non-contrived was happening at disparate locations (75, 101). This activity defies simple explanation (153). At the same time, as a Christian *historian* he is bound to consider the "agency" of the men, women, organizations, and endeavors "on the ground." This is where historical study comes into its own. Reference here should be made especially to Chapter 5, "Explanations" and particularly to the section on "Agents and Agency." It is here especially that every sentence and phrase needs to be weighed with care. The section concludes with a pivotal paragraph:

It is not excessive to claim that the early evangelicals created evangelicalism. What they made it out of, for what ends, in response to what conditions, and in what relation to God and his ways are all questions worthy of the most serious discussion. Yet create it they did, and the human agency must always be a large factor in interpretations of early evangelical history. (142)

For some evangelicals this claim is contentious because of their failure to recognize the order of creation and the significance of human culture mentioned

previously. The truth is that our responses to the gospel are always *our* responses *as* creatures. Evangelicalism's tendency to ignore or neglect the order of creation has resulted in an immense range of problems. If we are convinced that a genuine movement of the Spirit took place at a particular juncture, does that legitimize every response by believers thereto? Those who answer "yes" tend to impute divine authority to what is a human response to the movement of God's Spirit. And responses by believers may be confused, defective or contradictory. Time and again a lack of clarity in such matters has left a revival-seeking evangelicalism dangerously exposed to subjectivism, pragmatism, and a wide range of resulting aberrations.

Because Noll explicitly recognizes the reality of human agency, he is able to confront the strengths and weaknesses of evangelicalism in human, and therefore creaturely, terms. Certainly, evangelicalism made great headway in insisting on "the new birth," and by being flexible as to doctrinal detail and ceremonial requirements (25, 100-01). Yet it is possible to argue that the four leading characteristics formulated by Bebbington and recognized by Noll represented the narrowing of an integral biblical standpoint, a narrowing that gave rise to a number of serious weaknesses and deficiencies.

Evangelicalism, while holding certain important doctrines to be inviolate, nevertheless tended towards doctrinal minimalism. It could never resolve the conflict between Wesley's version of Arminianism and the more Calvinian understandings retained by Whitefield (122-3, 159, 269-72, 281). Eventually, evangelicalism tried to live with the sort of *via media* espoused by Charles Simeon. In the longer run Anglo-American evangelicalism was to be characterized by a broad and generally unexamined Arminianism, which chimed in well with varieties of moralism and legalism.

Evangelicalism sought to overcome the "polity wars" of the seventeenth century by side stepping certain issues. In Scotland, this was the brunt of Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine's "Succession Presbytery" objections to Whitefield as a clergyman of the English established church (109, 111, 145, cf. 36). Yet the pragmatism of the latter hardly resolved the principled objections of *The Nonconformist's Catechism* (1773) any more than did John Newton's well-intentioned *Apologia...by a Minister of the Church of England* (1784). Questions of order are not religiously indifferent. Polity is not neutral. The way we do things is of religious significance (cf., 203-4). Lacking an adequate ecclesiology, the development of evangelicalism (156 f.) gave rise to a multiplicity of divisions that the merits of diversity do not begin to justify (192 f.).

Evangelicalism never knew exactly what to do with the fact that the saints lived on *earth* (236). William Wilberforce and the campaign against slavery may

have provided evangelicalism with its “finest hour” of social involvement (253), but it is symptomatic that Wilberforce’s first inclination as a Christian was to resign from Parliament (251). And evangelicals were not the first to take up the cause of Abolition. They did not immediately learn to hate slavery. In matters of social justice, and when driven by moral outrage, evangelicalism was ameliorative rather than reformatory (247f.), so that established structures retained their powerful hold. Noll rightly acknowledges Wilberforce’s disposition to neglect the causes of poverty and the conditions under which the masses labored. Evangelicalism did not contemplate the reformation of social structures (254); it was deeply paternalistic.

Civil society, as such, was never a prime concern of evangelicalism (185-7). Characteristically, evangelical outlooks were acquired by reaction and default. In the American Colonies, much of John Locke was assumed and absorbed by evangelicalism. It is hard not to come to the conclusion that there is something distinctly *reactionary* about evangelicalism. If George III’s administration drove American evangelical colonists one way, into the arms of revolutionary patriotism (186-7, 210, 213), the French Revolution drove British evangelicals to be increasingly supportive of the British crown and established institutions. The War of 1812 also drove Canadian evangelicals in the latter direction (195). Samuel Marsden, who preached the first Christian sermon in New Zealand, is known as “the flogging parson” in Australia (230).

Was not the individualism of Evangelicalism already derived from tendencies deeply ingrained in Anglophone culture, and to which it unintentionally gave additional leverage by bestowing upon it a kind of spiritual legitimacy? And there is the fascinating question of the rise of romanticism. To its own version of individualism, evangelicalism added a characteristically subjective and emotive emphasis. Referring to his “Aldersgate Experience,” Wesley reported that “his heart was strangely warmed.” This was more the language of subjective emotion than intellectual conviction. He was not to be delivered from subsequent doubts (97-8). And further down the historical track we have to reckon with an evangelicalism that unintentionally gave leverage to romanticism – which itself

inspired movements as diverse as the Catholic revival and the rise of historicism. These both were to eventually challenge evangelicalism on grounds that served to expose its weaknesses.

Hence Noll’s concerns for an evangelicalism that had “coexisted with the enlightenment” (150) and that was “weak in its formation of worldviews” (261). Intellectually, evangelicalism never surpassed Jonathan Edwards, who remained partly indebted to Locke (257). It “did not fashion worldviews, push towards fundamental intellectual insight or show great understanding of the structures of British and North American life” (256). Yet this is not to say that the evangelicals had no worldview. They certainly did, though they may not have examined it too scrupulously. In this sense they were far from mindless. Arguably, the scandal of the evangelical mind is not that there was not much of an evangelical mind – it is rather that there was and is an evangelical mind, but it is nothing as scriptural as evangelicals believe it to be. There lies the scandal. As it is, an increasingly subjectivist evangelicalism directed Bible-believing Christianity down anti-intellectual paths that ill prepared it to face the mounting challenges of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This book is very well worth reading. Some episodes are a little too abridged for my liking, but the author was doubtless working to prescribed limitations. Noll tells the story as evangelicals would have it told (23). At its very best evangelicalism was magnificent, and this volume does evangelicals justice without lapsing into hagiography. For some, this book, and perhaps also the succeeding volumes in the series, will acquire the status of being definitive. For others it might function in the manner of the “whig interpretation of history” – a retrospective that can be very creatively unlearned as it is replaced by a scholarship of even greater depth and nuance. Certainly, Noll points to great achievements as well as to certain structural and systemic failures. The consequences of the latter should become more apparent in later volumes in the series. Evangelicals need to re-assess their initial starting-point. And we all need to reflect on the condition of Bible-believing Christianity in the English-speaking world.