

**Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism*\***

2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991)

Bernard Bell, 4 March 1996

Noll's book, subtitled "Evangelicals, Scholarship and the Bible in America," is a study of the response of American evangelical scholars to academic biblical criticism over the past century. It could not be said to be an interaction because only very rarely has the academic world responded to evangelicals. This second edition leaves the body of the text unchanged, while a twelve page Afterword notes developments since the publication of the first edition in 1986.

Given his avowed intent, Noll inevitably has to define the term evangelical, which he does in his introduction. After examining some possible theological definitions, he adopts Marsden's sociological classification of evangelicals as those who self-consciously belong to a transdenominational structure. In other words, evangelicals are those who identify themselves as such and have a sense of belonging to the family. If there is a single objective criterion for defining evangelical, it is that of believing the Bible to be the Word of God. Evangelical biblical scholars are caught between two worlds, the world of professional scholarship which demands intellectual neutrality and the world of the church in which the same scholars abandon their professionalism for a child-like faith.

Noll classifies his survey of the past hundred years into five partially-overlapping periods: full participation in professional biblical scholarship by those whom we would now identify as evangelical scholars (c. 1880–1900), withdrawal in the face of liberal biblical criticism (1900–1935), realization of the value of involvement in the professional field (1935–1950), concerted effort to re-enter the academic world (1940–1975), and, finally, success in that world (1960–present).

In chapters 2 and 3, Noll examines the first two periods, then turns in chapter 4 to a consideration of the same era in Britain. In chapter 5 he describes the return of evangelicals to the academic world of professional biblical scholarship (1935–1974), followed in chapter 6 by a description of their present success. Chapters 7–9 deal with general issues in contemporary evangelical scholarship.

Critical biblical scholarship in the US arose alongside the professionalism of academic life and the rise of the university dedicated to a scholarship that was rigorous, objective, specialized,

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\* Book Review for Elmer Dyck's class, BIBL 600 Biblical Criticism, Regent College, Vancouver BC, Winter 1996.

progressive and peer-oriented. Noll takes as his symbolic starting point the founding of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) in 1880. Evangelicals were divided in their response to the new German criticism that was eagerly adopted into the US universities. Some scholars, headed by Briggs of Union Seminary, cautiously incorporated it into their studies. Others, represented by A. Hodge, Warfield and Patton at Princeton, though not averse to criticism, insisted that it be consistent with their doctrinal affirmations and with the Bible's own testimony to itself. Through the end of the century these conservatives were able to hold the fort, taking action against the more progressive evangelicals who adopted the German criticism.

By 1910 it had become apparent that the conservative scholars were withdrawing from the world of academic scholarship with which they felt increasingly at odds. Turning from writing for professional journals to writing for the church, they entered into uneasy alliance with an evangelical world which, heavily influenced by dispensationalism and fundamentalism, distrusted academics while yet being very interested in the study of Scripture. At the same time, the progressive evangelicals, censured by their churches as liberal, but rejected by the academy as conservative, lost their influence as mediators of the new scholarship to the evangelical world, further deepening the gulf between the two communities. An exception were the Princeton scholars who pursued their work in isolation from both the evangelical world and the academic world. Noll believes American evangelical scholarship reached its nadir in 1930-35 following the liberalization of Princeton in 1929, for the Princeton faculty members who founded Westminster and could have continued the Princeton tradition of conservative scholarship chose to devote their attention to other matters.

Noll's choice of 1860 as the starting point for his analysis of events in Britain is predicated upon the publication in that year of *Essays and Reviews*, in which seven anglican ministers appealed for open, unfettered biblical study. Though the church establishment responded censoriously to the book and its authors, the authors won the day, for over the next eighty years British scholarship was marked by an increasing accommodation of evangelical views to critical results, what Noll terms "believing criticism." Truly conservative work, as practiced at Princeton, was unknown in Britain. Noll identifies as a turning point for British evangelical scholarship the first theological colleges

conference held in 1937 by InterVarsity Fellowship (IVF), at which conservative evangelical scholars dedicated themselves to coordinated biblical scholarship. This was quickly followed by the organization of the Theological Students Fellowship (TSF), the institution by TSF of the Tyndale Lectures in NT and OT in 1942, and the acquisition by IVF of Tyndale House in Cambridge in 1943 as a conservative study center. A confident evangelical scholarship quickly emerged, among which the Plymouth Brethren played a prominent role. The differences between evangelical scholarship in Britain and America are widely acknowledged. Noll digs beneath this recognition to identify four root causes. Firstly, the established nature of the churches in England and Scotland meant that most ministers were trained in the universities rather than in seminaries, and were thus exposed to academic scholarship. Secondly, unlike their American counterparts, the British universities themselves never became fully secular. Thirdly, the continuing importance of classical studies in British secondary schools exposed budding scholars to the critical examination of ancient cultures and literature. Finally, Britain never experienced the sharp divide between spiritual piety and biblical scholarship that fragmented the American evangelicals.

It is not clear why Noll picks 1935 as his starting date for the renewal of American evangelical scholarship. Beginning in the 1930s, evangelical students, dissatisfied with the lack of opportunity for serious study within their community, ventured into the academic world of the university in search of higher degrees, returning to seminaries as professional scholars. New seminaries were founded and existing seminaries expanded into serious advanced study, previously the province of Westminster alone. They found common cause in the Dutch Reformed churches, who had all along maintained both piety and serious scholarship; Westminster drew half its faculty from this community. Even more important was the work of Dutch Reformed publishers in Grand Rapids, for it was one of these houses, Eerdmans, that brought the rising tide of British scholarship to American shores. By 1974 American evangelical scholarship "had reached a takeoff point," marked by the publication that year of Lane's commentary on Mark in the NICNT series, the first commentary in a serious academic series by a scholar born and bred in the US.

Noll sees this assessment born out in the success of American scholars since 1974, as documented in chapter 6 through statistics culled from seminary catalogs and from a survey of three groups of evangelical societies, the Evangelical Theological Society, the Institute for Biblical Research, and the Wesleyan Theological Society. Though the British influence is still strong, both in publications and in the training of young scholars, an increasing number of American evangelical scholars have contributed to the major scholarly commentary series; seminaries and even colleges are staffed with scholars trained to the doctoral level, many at first-rank secular universities; and there is greater evangelical participation in professional bodies such as SBL.

From historical survey, Noll turns to a consideration of current issues in evangelical scholarship. In chapter 7 he outlines the standpoints of evangelical scholarship, examining evangelical beliefs about the nature of the Bible, truth, scholarship and the broader community. Despite minor differences within the scholarly community on these matters, it is still possible to talk about a community, because what ultimately unites these scholars is not their academic pursuits but their shared convictions. Having explored the common ground that unites evangelicals, Noll turns in chapter 8 to examine the tensions evoked by the new scholarship. The emergence of a “believing criticism” as practiced in Britain for the past 100 years has brought American scholars onto a narrow path between faith and criticism. Some walk too close to the critical edge and face censure from their colleagues, as evidenced in the response to Gundry’s commentary on Matthew and Ramsey’s book on Jesus.

Assessing the situation in chapter 9, Noll sees that despite an unprecedented flourishing of American evangelical scholarship, challenges still remain. Though the seminaries have fostered this return to scholarship, therein lies a problem, for the seminaries are divorced from the wider world of the university and even among themselves often see themselves in competition with one another rather than in concord. Noll rues the absence of evangelical scholars from the faculties of American universities where they can study but not teach, and rues the absence of anything like the British Tyndale House, in which evangelical scholars cooperate in research.

Noll has given us a valuable survey of evangelical scholarship over the past hundred years, showing the fluctuating response of evangelicals to the results of modern criticism. Obviously central to

his work is the definition of evangelical. While many will consider Noll's definition inadequate theologically, it does have the great advantage of incorporating disparate groups which are not always in mutual agreement, a fact which any unbiased observer of the evangelical scene must admit as a feature of evangelicalism even though he may not be able to define it. Any attempt at theological definition tends to exclude groups who consider themselves evangelical and who other groups consider evangelical. Noll's definition is a pragmatic and realistic one which allows him to proceed to his real work, that of considering the interaction of this amorphous group with what is clearly a different group, the world of professional biblical scholarship.

In his introduction, Noll states that "[m]any evangelicals now share with their academic peers the conviction that professional writing benefits from a fiction of religious neutrality" (p. 7). This is surely a statement that begs for comment, yet Noll never does so. Why is it that evangelicals have come to this conviction? Is it out of a sense that they will not be accepted in the academy if they appear to be religiously partisan? But that, in turn, begs the question of why they want to be accepted in the academy. Surely a central conviction of evangelical belief is that one does all for the glory of God. Where then is the glory in intellectual neutrality? What of the older generation of scholars who were recognized for their academic excellence despite their avowed faith? What of the current generation of scholars who are not afraid to be avowedly evangelical while maintaining the highest standards of scholarship, knowing that their scholarship stands in the community according to its own merits. Noll assumes professional neutrality for all modern evangelical scholars, perhaps because his own discipline of church history has energetically pursued such neutrality. One of Noll's colleagues in the academy has written that "A practical problem confronts the Christian historian. If he makes plain his religious commitment in his writing, will he not be excluding it from general notice and certainly from academic attention? The canons of ordinary historical scholarship have not permitted references to God for nearly 200 years. It is therefore entirely understandable that a providential framework for history is seldom thought acceptable outside the pulpit."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Noll himself elsewhere writes that modern evangelical historians "have accepted the standards of the professional guild as the

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<sup>1</sup>David Bebbington, *Patterns in History* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 186.

framework for their writing. They have, at least for professional purposes, abandoned the providentialism that characterized most earlier studies of evangelicals."<sup>2</sup> What enables Noll to still consider himself and other such scholars evangelicals? No doubt they are evangelicals on Sunday, but during the week would anyone recognize them as such? Such an analysis would have required Noll to do a hard self-analysis of his own methods of study. While not engaged in biblical studies he is working at the interaction of evangelical faith and professional scholarship.

One senses that Noll and his historian colleagues are searching for academic respectability. This attitude carries over into his analysis of biblical scholarship where he favours the search for academic respectability and acceptability. Is there any place for the scholarship practiced at the old Princeton and the young Westminster, where conservatives pursued work of the highest order without being concerned about their acceptability in either the academic world or the evangelical world? Is it not this approach that comes closer to the evangelical ideal of giving glory to God in all things?

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Noll, David Bebbington and George Rawlyck eds., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America and Beyond, 1700–1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 411.