

# The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind

By Mark A. Noll<sup>1</sup>

Synopsis and [Comments](#) by William H. Gross – [www.onthewing.org](http://www.onthewing.org) May 2006

Mark Noll's basic premise is that the evangelical community has largely abdicated its role in the marketplace of ideas. This is not a new revelation, but Noll examines the underlying causes for it, and more importantly, the underlying attitudes that continue our self-imposed exile. What makes it so difficult for evangelical scholars to re-enter larger cultural discussions taking place in science, politics, sociology, ethics, philosophy, and the arts? How have we been excluded from the academic sphere in our colleges and universities? Why have we chosen to isolate ourselves and our children behind barricades of religious generalities, cliché-ridden speech, and simplistic solutions? It is a fascinating and penetrating dissection of what it has meant to be "evangelical" in a modern world. It is also a challenge: to change our thinking, our behavior, and our conversation with the world. It is an important work.

## Part 1 – The Scandal

"The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind." [With that broadside, Noll begins his self-described "incitement to action."](#) While North American evangelicalism is noteworthy for its sacrifices in spreading the gospel, generosity in providing for the needy, efforts on behalf of troubled individuals, and sustenance of countless church and parachurch communities, evangelicals are not exemplary for their thinking, and have not been for several generations. It has a popular but not serious intellectual life. Evangelicals sponsor dozens of theological seminaries, scores of colleges, hundreds of radio stations, and thousands of parachurch agencies, but not a single research university or a single periodical devoted to in-depth interaction with modern culture. P. 3-4

This is a drastic change of course from its Puritan heritage in John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, Moses Stuart, or George Monto Grant. All of these men held that diligent, rigorous mental activity was a way to glorify God. None believed it was the only way, or even the highest way, but they all believed in the life of the mind, and they believed it *because* they were evangelical.

In contradistinction to the secular mind, no vital Christian mind plays fruitfully, as a coherent and recognizable influence, upon our social, political, or cultural life... We Christians in the modern world accept, for purposes of mental activity, a frame of reference constructed by the secular mind and set of criteria reflecting secular evaluations. There is no Christian mind..., no packed contemporary field of discourse in which writers are reflecting Christianly on the modern world and modern man.<sup>2</sup> P. 4

By an evangelical "*life of the mind*" I mean more the effort to think like a Christian – to think within a specifically Christian framework – across the whole spectrum of modern learning, including economics and political science, literary criticism and imaginative writing, historical inquiry and philosophical studies, linguistics and the history of science, social theory and the arts. What does it mean to think like a Christian about the nature and workings of the physical world, the character of human social structures like government and the economy, the meaning of the past, the nature of artistic creation, and the circumstances attending our perception of the world outside ourselves? Failure to exercise the mind for Christ in these areas has become acute in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That failure is the scandal of the evangelical mind. P. 7

## Key Ingredients of Evangelicalism

*Conversionism* – an emphasis on "new birth" as a life-changing religious experience

*Biblicism* – a reliance on the Bible as the ultimate religious authority

*Activism* – a concern for sharing the faith [["a heart for the lost"](#)]

*Crucicentrism* – a focus on Christ's redeeming work on the cross<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Noll, Mark A., *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids Mich, 1994)

<sup>2</sup> Blamires, Harry, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (London, SPCK, 1963), pp. 4,7.

<sup>3</sup> Bebbington, David, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730's to the 1980's* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 2-19.

On any given Sunday in North America, a majority of those who attend church hold evangelical beliefs and follow norms of evangelical practice. Yet they do not play significant roles in their nation's intellectual life. "On the one hand there is the enormous growth in the Church, and on the other its almost complete lack of influence."<sup>4</sup> P. 8-10

Anti-Intellectualism – Richard Hofstadter writes that there was a common reasoning process by which evangelicals had *chosen* to evacuate the mind:

One begins with the hardly contestable proposition that religious faith is not, in the main, propagated by logic or learning. One moves on from this to the idea that it is best propagated (in the judgment of Christ and on historical evidence) by men who have been unlearned and ignorant. It seems to follow from this that the kind of wisdom and truth possessed by such men is superior to what learned and cultivated minds have. In fact, learning and cultivation appear to be handicaps in the propagation of the faith. And since the propagation of faith is the most important task before man, those who are as "ignorant as babes" have, in the most fundamental virtue, greater strength than men who have addicted themselves to logic and learning. Accordingly, though one shrinks from a bald statement of the conclusion, humble ignorance is far better as a human quality than a cultivated mind. At bottom, this proposition, despite all the difficulties that attend it, has been eminently congenial both to American evangelicalism and to American democracy.<sup>5</sup> P. 11.

The question for American evangelicals isn't just the presence of an anti-intellectual bias, but the sometimes vigorous prosecution of the wrong sort of intellectual life. Some intellectual activities fit better or worse with the shape of Christianity itself. The scandal has resulted as often from a pursuit of knowledge in ways not in accord with Christianity, as it has from an anti-intellectual desire to play the fool for Christ. P. 12

**Aspects of the Scandal** – the scandal has three dimensions: cultural, institutional, and theological.

*Cultural* – The evangelical ethos is activist, populist, pragmatic, and utilitarian. It allows little room for deeper intellectual effort because it is dominated by the urgencies of the moment. The evangelical mind has never relished complexity. In fact, its crusading genius has always tended toward an oversimplification of issues, substituting inspiration and zeal for critical analysis and serious reflection. *Creationism*, a theory that the earth is less than ten thousand years old, has spread like wildfire from its origins in the writings of Ellen White, founder of Seventh-day Adventism. It is now a gospel truth embraced by tens of millions of Bible-believing evangelicals and fundamentalists around the world.

The eschatological view of a pre-Tribulation rapture has likewise spread like wildfire through books like Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and Tim LaHaye's *Left-Behind* series.<sup>6</sup> Christian fascination with the end of the world has existed for a very long time, but there is now a fixation on attaching eschatological meaning to current events. Every Middle East crisis is labeled as a direct fulfillment of biblical prophecy heralding the end of the world. Such books distract the church from studying what is going on in the Middle East, but to have a Bible-study speculating about some of the most esoteric and widely debated passages of the Bible.

Two books, one by Paul Boyer and another by Ronald Numbers,<sup>7</sup> describe "how a fatally flawed interpretive scheme that no responsible Christian teacher in the history of the church ever endorsed before this century came to dominate the minds of American evangelicals on scientific questions" and "an equally unsound hermeneutic has been used with wanton abandon to dominate twentieth-century

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<sup>4</sup> Chapman, Ronald, "The Optimism of the 1840's," *Tablet*, Dec. 18, 1954.

<sup>5</sup> Hofstadter, Richard, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (NYC: Vintage, 1962), pp. 48-49, fn. 8; "The Evangelical Spirit," 55-80.

<sup>6</sup> Also John Walvoord's *Armageddon, Oil, and the Middle East Crisis*, and Charles Dyer's *The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times*.

<sup>7</sup> Numbers' *The Creationists*, and Boyer's *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*.

evangelical thinking about world affairs.” Evangelicals are bereft of self-criticism, intellectual subtlety, or an awareness of complexity. “They are blown about by every wind of apocalyptic speculation...” Although it is a culture where intense effort has been made to understand the Bible, it is not a culture where the same effort has been made to understand the world or the processes by which wisdom from Scripture should relate to our knowledge about the world. P. 12-15

*Institutional* – there is not a single evangelical periodical in North America that exists for the sole purpose of seriously considering the worlds of nature, society, politics, or the arts in the way that the *Atlantic*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, or the *Washington Post’s National Weekly Edition* do for the general public. They have all gone out of business or changed their format and content to be more popular.<sup>8</sup>

We have split our educational energies with needless duplication of effort. This spreads our resources thin, resulting in a wide scope of education with shallow depth in each area of concentration. **Funding is based on donations to popular figures, meaning we are personality driven instead of mission driven even in our academies. It isn’t just in our pulpits.** Bill Bright, Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson all assume that no previously existing educational enterprise is capable of meeting the demands of the hour. “Despite the absence of formal educational credentials, each man presumes to establish a Christian university.” Our colleges, as distinct from research universities, are designed to provide a general education, but not to do the work of intellectual leaders elsewhere. Associations like the Christian College Coalition and Christian College Consortium only represent the interests of their constituent institutions; their goal is to provide support for them, not to establish scholastic standards. Those standards are being set by secular scholars who have established the framework for advanced studies.

Academic resources are widely distributed so that we cannot fund competing research facilities. A handful of national research universities act as gatekeepers, intellectual and otherwise, for most of the learned professions. If evangelicals are to be certified, they must pass through their gates. If we want to mount convincing efforts to reassess the academic landscape from a specifically Christian perspective, we must do so with resources that cannot begin to compare with the multi-billion-dollar endowments enjoyed by the major universities like Princeton and Harvard.<sup>9</sup> P. 15-18

Seminaries are still bound to their denominations, autonomous and separate from college or university. Prior to the Civil War they were the bastions of intellectual prowess, but after the war they were pushed into a backwater by modern universities. They have done their job well in providing an effective training ground for Christian workers and pastors. They specialize in theology and encourage systematic reflection on Christian interaction with the world. The problem isn’t their academic quality. The problem is the connection between theology and other forms of learning. Our colleges provide a general introduction to a number of disciplines, and our seminaries provide deeper training in theology, but we have no universities as they do in Europe at which experts in theology work side by side with those doing serious research in other academic disciplines.

Independent Bible schools, colleges, and seminaries are institutionally insulated from some of the secularizing pressures in modern research universities, but “the price is a loss of first-level cross-

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<sup>8</sup> The problem isn’t a lack of authors or scholarship, but lack of an audience. There are two quick solutions: evangelical churches and academies need to promote such publications by subscribing to them and distributing them to their congregations; secondly, they should financially support such publications beyond mere subscription. The value of these publications to the church goes beyond their immediate profitability. One other issue arises, and that is the deplorable tendency of the Christian academy to write to the academy in incomprehensible self-defined terms and not to the church at large. Believe it or not, it is possible to write at a very high level of scholarship using clearly understandable language. Genius is the ability to state the obvious, to cut through complicated matters in order to deal with them practically, so that we may glorify God.

<sup>9</sup> The major universities in America were originally founded by the Church to produce an educated clergy for the rapidly expanding country. But the emphasis was on theology, law, literature, history, and science – in general theory. Noll points out that after the Civil War the emphasis changed to science; theology was practically and physically separated from the general curriculum.

fertilization between theological reflection and reflection in the arts and sciences.” Evangelical seminaries have brilliant biblical scholars, but they are isolated from comparably brilliant Christians in the colleges (whose mandate is broad and general) and in the research universities (whose mandate is narrow and deep). All teachers in the evangelical institutions suffer from the absence of non-Christian scholars, or Christian scholars who are not evangelical Protestants. It is socially safe, but intellectually isolated. P. 18-20

Because we have neglected to nurture the life of the mind for generations, “the dominant religion in America is almost destitute of intellectual firepower.” We simply don’t have the number of Christian scholars we need to staff an entire University faculty. The few who choose to integrate their faith and scholarship in a lifelong calling must do so at their own initiative, “with precious little encouragement either from the church or from the academy.” Graduate programs to qualify individuals to teach in colleges and seminaries are not interested in the questions of Christian perspective that are prerequisite for first-order evangelical thinking. The advanced studies required must be done at secular universities.

Nowhere in the Western world is it possible to find an institution for graduate training – that is, for the training required to teach at evangelical institutions of higher learning – that exists for the primary purpose of promoting Christian scholarship defined in a Protestant, evangelical way... Even if an evangelical were convinced that deep, probing study of the world should be undertaken as a specifically Christian task, it is by no means self-evident where that task could be pursued. P. 21

Os Guinness writes,

Evangelicals have been deeply sinful in being anti-intellectual ever since the 1820’s and 1830’s... Most evangelicals simply don’t think... It has always been a sin not to love the Lord our God with our minds as well as our hearts and souls... We have excused this with a degree of pietism and pretend[ing] that this is something other than what it is – that is, sin. Evangelicals need to repent of their refusal to think Christianly and to develop the mind of Christ. P. 23

American evangelicalism has existed primarily as an affectional and organizational movement. The very character of the revival that made evangelical religion a potent force in North America weakened its intellectual power. However, that doesn’t mean it lacked an elaborate intellectual system. It added to its Protestant foundation a number of elements from the Revolutionary and democratic movements of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The result was a distinctly evangelical approach to the life of the mind in America. It featured the philosophy of common sense, the moral instincts of republicanism, the science of Francis Bacon, and a disposition toward evidential reasoning in theology. The flaws in this system became apparent when evangelicals responded to the new social and intellectual conditions of the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Fundamentalism, dispensational premillennialism, the Higher Life movement, and Pentecostalism were all survival strategies of the evangelicals. Each preserved something essential of the Christian faith, but together they were a disaster for the life of the mind in two primary arenas: politics and science. P. 24

The most thoroughly Christian analysis of the intellectual situation for modern American evangelicals comes from Charles Malik, a Lebanese diplomat, scholar, and Eastern Orthodox Christian. He gave an address to open the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College in 1980:

At the heart of all the problems facing Western civilization – the general nervousness and restlessness, the dearth of grace and beauty and quiet and peace of soul, the manifold blemishes and perversions of personal character; problems of the family and of social relations in general, problems of economics and politics, problems of the media, problems affecting the school itself and the church itself, problems in the international order – at the heart of the crisis in Western civilization lies the state of the mind and the spirit of the universities.

The problem is not only to win souls but to save minds. If you win the whole world and lose the mind of the world, you will soon discover you have not won the world. Indeed, it may turn out that you have actually lost the world.

The greatest danger besetting American Evangelical Christianity is the danger of anti-intellectualism. The mind as to its greatest and deepest riches is not cared for enough. This cannot take place apart from profound immersion for a period of years in the history of thought and the spirit. People are in a hurry to get out of the university and start earning money or serving the church or preaching the Gospel. They have no idea of the infinite value of spending years of leisure in conversing with the greatest minds and souls of the past, and thereby ripening and sharpening and enlarging their powers of thinking. The result is that the arena of creative thinking is abdicated and vacated to the enemy.

It will take a different spirit altogether to overcome this great danger of anti-intellectualism... Even if you start now on a crash program in this and other domains, it will be a century at least before you catch up with the Harvards and Tuebingens and the Sorbonnes, and think of where those universities will be then! For the sake of greater effectiveness in witnessing to Jesus Christ Himself, as well as for their own sakes, the Evangelicals cannot afford to keep on living on the periphery of responsible intellectual existence. P. 25-26

### **Why the Scandal Matters**

*Purpose* - The point of intellectual effort is not primarily academic respectability, or the mindless pursuit of publication for its own sake, as it is in the modern university. Rather, the comprehensive reality of Christianity itself demands specifically Christian consideration of the world we inhabit. It is not asking to downgrade teaching, nor is it an elitist rejection of insights from ordinary people; it is not an aestheticism that excludes all but the cognoscenti. It is asking rather that the broader and deeper reaches of the intellect be considered a complement to, rather than competition against, person-oriented, teaching-focused, and democratically inspired intellectual life.

*Cautions* – Scripture itself favors innocence over intellect. “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children;” Matt 11:25. “Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are;” 1Cor. 1:26-28. The force of such passages is underscored by the undeniable fact that higher learning has often been a snare to faith. More damaging to Christianity than the things learned is pride in learning itself. Martin Lloyd-Jones said to a group of college students in 1969, “If you are out for intellectual respectability you will soon get into trouble in your faith.” P. 30-31 [What these passages do not say is that God chose to use foolish or unwise people \(see Matt 25:1-12\). Rather, what the world values has little worth to the kingdom; what the kingdom values is foolishness to the world. God’s wisdom is far above man’s wisdom, and therefore God’s wisdom is always to be cherished above man’s wisdom. God cautions us against taking pride in our own intellect, but he never condemns knowledge of the things which the intellect uncovers, things which speak to God and his workings. “This is eternal life: to know God, and Jesus Christ whom he sent.” Jn 17:3 No one should boast of themselves before God. But in Christ we find God’s wisdom, that we may boast in the Lord \(1Cor. 1:29-31\).](#)

*Proper Place* – An appeal for Christian learning does not presume that learning is the ultimate or only value. It serves to augment and infill other gifts. Evangelical culture in America tends to be antagonistic. It often sets up choices and competition between things meant to complement one another: conversion to the exclusion of gradual growth in grace; the immediate experience of the Holy Spirit instead of contemplating God in the created realm; prizing popular wisdom over learned authorities; a fascination with heaven while slighting attention to earth; devotion to the supernatural but a neglect of the natural. Christian learning doesn’t ask to reverse such polarities. Rather, it calls for mutual interdependence of the

body, reuniting the characteristics that American experience has ruthlessly divorced, and acknowledging that Christ can be exalted by humble activity in every sphere of human life, including the life of the mind. P. 32

*Abdication* – If we do not encourage intellectual pursuits among our people, and set scholastic standards for them, and teach them, then who will? Who will be our tutors, the ones who teach us and our children about life? Who will tell us how to reason about these matters? Who will be our guides, pointing us to truth and light? The institutions of the world’s learned culture, and the great engine of the American mass media, are the two prime contenders for this task in our world. It’s the universities that nourish the thinkers who propose the grand paradigms through which we examine the world, things which bear directly or indirectly on Christian values at every point:

- Medical ethics
- equitable provisions for health care
- Principles to guide foreign relations
- Insights into human understanding
- Assessing programs that provide jobs
- Pacifying racial tensions
- Political allegiances
- Meaning of money
- Meaning of the Bible
- Effects of democracy

“If evangelicals do not take seriously the larger world of the intellect, we say, in effect, that we want our minds to be shaped by the conventions of our modern universities and the assumptions of Madison Avenue, instead of by God and the servants of God.”<sup>10</sup> P. 34

There is a second, related question, and that is how we will live in the world. How we live in it depends in large measure on how we think about the world. “It is a very easy matter simply to adopt the herd instincts of mass popular culture – to assume that life exists as a series of opportunities for pleasure, self-expression, and the increase of comfort.” It is just as easy to lose ourselves in escapism by looking at the world as “an unreal shadow” [that doesn’t need to be addressed in practical ways, as if the world of men needed salvation but not God’s order.](#)

We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer, and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion... What is today a matter of academic speculation, begins tomorrow to move armies and pull down empires.<sup>11</sup> P. 35

### **Evangelicalism’s Intellectual Heritage**

During the Reformation, it was felt that Protestantism spelled death for the mind. The new commitment to the priesthood of all believers seemed to undercut the need for intellectual experts. Belief in the activity of the Holy Spirit among the entire church seemed to deny the need for special efforts in learning. Wasn’t the “Bible alone” enough? If a person possessed the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, what need was there for learning? Martin Luther, however, considered the education of the young by their parents to be paramount. Cultivating the mind was absolutely essential, he said, because people needed to understand both the word of Scripture and the nature of the world in which the word would take root. P. 36-37

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<sup>10</sup> There are issues and challenges to which a distinctively Christian voice must be raised. If we fail to speak with a reasoned and biblical stance on these issues, then we will be abdicating the forum to others who will impose their views, without debate or challenge, just as they have for several generations. That’s no longer an option. We need to qualify our people for public debate on the merits of the issues, and not on the source of our solutions. We need to equip representatives of Christ with impeccable, acknowledged, and persuasive credentials so that they are not easily dismissed when they enter any forum to contend for the faith. Ideas are seldom separable from the person who carries them. We need to rebuild our rightful reputation as the incubator of the finest minds in the world. Paul was not unknown to the intelligentsia of his region. His reputation and credentials were as impressive as his intellect (Phil 3:4-6; Acts 22:3).

<sup>11</sup> Machen, J. Gresham, “Christianity and Culture,” *Princeton Theological Review* 11 (19131), p. 7.

In Geneva, John Calvin worked to instruct the mind and inspire the heart together. His theology was not “intellectualist;” he believed the Spirit must change the heart before the mind could accept the gospel. God manifested his sovereignty in every part of life, including the mind. He also believed that the Spirit of God had created the world so that it could be studied. He felt that non-believers were Spirit-enabled to understand the workings of nature and human relationships in the world. Because the Spirit is involved in all aspects of knowledge and understanding, his activities deserved consistent attention at home, in schools for the young, and in the academy.

By being fools, we do not mean being stupid; nor do we direct those who are learned in the liberal sciences to jettison their knowledge, and those who are gifted with quickness of mind to become dull, as if a man cannot be a Christian unless he is more like a beast than a man. The profession of Christianity requires us to be immature, not in our thinking, but in malice (1Cor 14:20). But do not let anyone bring trust in his own mental resources or his learning into the school of Christ; do not let anyone be swollen with pride or full of distaste, and so be quick to reject what he is told, indeed even before he has sampled it.<sup>12</sup>

The goal was to bring every aspect of life under the general guidance of Christian thinking, to have each question in life answered by a response from a Christian perspective, and to extract from each savant of classical or Roman Catholic learning what was compatible with Calvin’s Protestant understanding of the Bible. Protestants not only worked to make political and social organizations reflect the norms of justice they found in Scripture, but also examined the contrasting rights of individuals, kings, and parliaments, and contributed to theories about democracy and the existence of republics. They did what they could to make life in society reflect the goodness of God. P. 38-39

Protestantism’s ethos stimulated an environment for the arts in music (J.S. Bach) and a whole school of painting based on its principles. The Puritan point of view was comprehensive; it saw religious significance in public acts, and public significance in religious acts. With a clear-cut view of good and evil, they could not tolerate barriers between theological judgment and the events of daily life. The battle between good and evil pervades every aspect of life. They refused to compartmentalize life, or exempt non-ecclesiastical matters from religious scrutiny. Puritans did not pit Scripture and inspiration on the one hand, against learning and traditional knowledge on the other. They scrupulously maintained a delicate balance of “spirit and philosophy;” they pursued “the dialectic of enthusiasm<sup>13</sup> and learning.” P. 41

Hard intellectual labor has never by itself led to a healthy church. Sometimes it has been a means to escape the claims of the gospel, or the requirements of God’s law. Yet, where Christian faith is securely rooted, deeply penetrating a culture in a way that changes individuals and institutions, we almost invariably find Christians ardently cultivating the intellect for the glory of God. “The links between deep Christian life, long-lasting Christian influence, and dedicated Christian thought, characterize virtually all of the high moments in the history of the Church.” P. 43

The results of neglecting the mind are uniform: Christian faith degenerates, lapses into gross error, or simply passes out of existence. P. 44

Major Christian movements almost never arise because of intellectual efforts as such. Much more often they emerge out of deep inner responses to God’s grace. Yet, as they develop, they show great concern for the way Christians view the world at large. They are vitally interested in the Christian mind. As it was with the Reformation, it was with the earlier Monastic Movement that was responsible for almost everything of lasting Christian value from roughly 350-1400. The reforms launched by the monks at Cluny, the Dominicans, and the Franciscans, turned people inward to meditate on Scripture, and outward

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<sup>12</sup> Calvin, John, *Concerning Scandals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 18-19

<sup>13</sup> Enthusiasm doesn’t mean gleeful here; *en-theos* means God-filled; when combined with learning, it refers to spirit-driven knowledge.

to provide practical aid for the downtrodden. But the intellectual activity of the monks during the so-called Dark Ages is famous.

They preserved the texts of Scripture and other Christian writings. They kept alive an interest in the languages, founded schools that became the great universities of Europe, and preserved the life of the mind, thus preserving the church by the grace of God. The pinnacle of that intellectual activity among the monks was the work of Thomas Aquinas, ca. 1225-1274. He was a Dominican friar who composed hymns, wrote biblical commentaries, preached, prepared manuals for missionary work among Muslims, spent long hours contemplating Christ's work, and almost single-handedly reconstructed systematic Christian thinking. He adopted the teaching of Aristotle for the Christian faith. This left an important legacy. He provided a model to reconcile the knowledge we gain through the senses with the truths we discover in Scripture. He proposed a theoretical explanation for some of the mysteries of the faith like the Lord's Supper. He offered an apologetic model that respected both the intellect of non-Christians and the missionary mandate for believers. "Aquinas taught Aristotle to 'speak like a Christian'." P. 44-45

### **When the Mind is Undervalued**

We are led into difficulty when we follow either intellectuals who criticize simple piety or advocates of Christian experience who attack the life of the mind. These are meant to complement one another, not compete with one another. When piety is stressed to the exclusion of the mind, we tend to fall into non-Christian thinking. As groups in the church withdrew from the life of the mind, they fell back into a number of errors by emphasizing one over the other:

The Albigenses wanted purity of the flesh through asceticism. While highly respected and popular, they pursued a legalistic approach with no interest at all in formal learning. They fell back into Manichaeism (or dualism): the body is evil, only the spirit is good. They interpreted Scripture allegorically – Christ could not have taken on an actual body of flesh, for example. They reinterpreted and twisted Scripture to harmonize it with their beliefs, instead of drawing their beliefs from the Scripture.

Pietists drew back from formal, dogmatic rigidity toward experiential living, and the priesthood of all believers. That's a good thing. But in its excesses it began to view Christian living as only a life without a concern for beliefs at all: practice, spirituality, and psychology without the objective realities of revelation. Immanuel Kant had been trained by Pietists, and vastly influenced the life of the mind by teaching that God could not act in the world in ways unknown to human experience. Schleiermacher urged that "a feeling of dependence" is the foundation of Christianity rather than the objective reality of the cross.

Pietism fell into favoring feelings over intellect. It led to the development of Liberalism and its fascination with various forms of religious experience. In fact, it sometimes led to a morbid fixation on the Christian's personal state at the expense of evangelism, study, or social outreach. Pietists' attack on self-conscious Christian thinking weakened the faith toward sentimentality, captivity by alien philosophies, and a decline toward dangerous modernisms. P. 45-49

### **Truth and Intellectual Heresy**

The study of nature, society, and humanity is justified primarily for non-utilitarian reasons. It is the nature of God and his loving work, not primarily the practical benefits, that requires cultivation of the mind. The most important consideration is not pragmatic results, or even the weight of history, but the truth. It is the implicit acknowledgement that things do not exist on their own. This is a specifically Christian presupposition; its denial characterizes much of the scholarship that shapes our lives so decisively. When we study something, we learn about the thing we are studying, but even more, we are learning about the One who made that thing.

Jonathan Edwards said that true knowledge is not an abstract correspondence of our thinking with reality. Rather, it is “the consistency and agreement of our ideas with the ideas of God.” We exercise our intelligence to know more of God and his loving ways with the world. P. 50-51

It is of small consequence – or none – that evangelicals have no research university, or that they have no Nobel laureates. It is of *immense* significance that evangelicals are not doing the kind of work for which research universities exist and which is recognized by Nobel Prizes. Why? Because the great institutions of higher learning in Western culture function as the *mind* of Western culture.

Evangelicals who think that the basic intellectual operations performed by the modern research universities can be conceded to “the world” without doing fundamental damage to the cause of Christ may think of themselves as orthodox Christians. In reality, however, they are modern-day Manicheans, Gnostics, or docetists. P. 51

*Manichaeism* – the world is divided into the children of light and the children of darkness. Evangelicals assume that we, and only we, have the truth, while non-believers, or Christian believers who are not evangelicals, practice only error. Genesis 4 and Acts 17 disprove that.

*Gnosticism* – a catch-all term for those who share a common fear of matter as inherently evil and who practice ethical extremism, whether asceticism or licentiousness. Its Greek root refers to those with special knowledge; they practice secret rituals and require initiation rites to join the inner circle of those-in-the-know. “Evangelicals display a Gnostic strand when we treat the Bible as if it were an esoteric code to be deciphered as a way of obtaining privileged information about the creation of the natural world, the disposition of historical events, or the unfolding of the future.”

*Docetism* – this group believed that the material world is hopelessly polluted. Thus, Jesus only seemed to have a real body, to suffer hunger and thirst, to touch the sick, and to suffer as a human being on the cross. “Evangelicals indulge a docetic tendency when we think, without qualification, that since ‘this world is not my home,’ it is of no importance to learn about the world, the structures of human society, and the potential of human creativity. It is similarly docetic to treat day-to-day existence as if it were only apparently real, as if it were simply a mask for the eternal, unchanging realities of an unseen spiritual world.” P. 52-54

Scholarship is not the most important thing in the Christian life. But the intellectual life is still important. It is one of the arenas that God has made in which to live out our days. It is a legitimate sphere in which Christians may be active, and which deserves respect. But evangelicals do not characteristically look to the intellectual life as an arena in which to glorify God because in America our history has been pragmatic, populist, charismatic, and technological more than intellectual. We tend to define piety as an inward state opposed to careful thought, rather than as an attitude that includes attention to the mind. Though indefensible, there are historical reasons why American evangelicals have so devalued the life of the mind. P. 55-56

## Part 2 – How the Scandal has Come to Pass

“The evangelical creed was forged in the transatlantic crucible of revival, revolution, and Enlightenment.”<sup>14</sup> As modern American evangelicals we are,

- first, the product of *revivalism*,
- second, the beneficiaries of the American *separation of church and state*, and
- third, the heirs of a *Christian-American cultural synthesis* that was created in the wake of the War for Independence.

Furthermore, our mental habits are still profoundly influenced by the fundamentalist movement at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s Univ. Press, 1991), ix.

*Revivalism* – There are two matters that are important for the revival’s long-standing impact on Christian thinking:

1. It promoted a *new style of leadership* – direct, personal, popular, and dependent more on a speaker’s ability to draw a crowd than his place in an established hierarchy.
2. It *undercut the traditional authority* of the churches – ecclesiastical life was no longer as significant as the decision of the individual close to Christ.

These two things planted the seeds of individualism and immediatism.<sup>15</sup> What accounted for the success of Whitfield’s sermons is they were marked by a democratic determination to simplify the essentials of religion in a way that gave them mass appeal. The most visible evangelicals were public speakers whose influence rested on their ability to communicate a simple message to a broad audience.<sup>16</sup> A religion defined by revivalists keeps the question of personal salvation uppermost – it is characterized by anti-institutional moralism, populist intuition, and democratic Biblicism.<sup>17</sup> This accelerated during the Second Great Awakening. These two revival movements were the means by which a largely pagan America was evangelized from 1740-1840. Traditional denominations lost their influence, while innovative revival techniques among Methodists and Baptists caused them to flourish. In 1790 only 10 percent of Americans professed membership in a Christian church. By the Civil War, this had multiplied several times. P. 59-63

Revivals were anti-traditional. They called people to Christ as a way of escaping tradition, including traditional learning. They called upon individuals to take the step of faith for themselves. In doing that, they left the impression that individual believers could accept nothing from others in the process – that everything of value in the Christian life must come from the individual’s own choices. It wasn’t just personal faith, but every scrap of wisdom, understanding, and conviction about the faith was likewise a matter of individual choice. With its scorn for tradition, its concentration on individual competence, and its distrust of mediated knowledge, American revivalism did much to hamstring the life of the mind. P. 63-64

*Separation of Church and State* – by 1800, American evangelicals were distinct because of their unprecedented degree of religious freedom. Formalized in the separation of church and state, it created the framework in which revivalists did their work. Although it was good to be free of government, this freedom from an establishment had an ironic result for Christian thinking. The end of formal ties between church and state, with its fear of government tyranny, meant that more and more Americans were affirming that religion was a matter of conscience between God and the individual. It should be exempt from the meddling of government at any level, [including church government](#).

The result was religious deregulation. Because the government refused to support any particular denomination, the churches were compelled to appeal directly to individuals as they competed for adherents. They no long had assigned parishes as in the European pattern. They had to convince individuals, first, that they should pay attention to God and second, that they should do so in *their* churches and nowhere else. This was done primarily through the techniques of revival: a fervent address to convince, convict, and enlist the individual. [Churches competed with one another in a religious marketplace in which the distinctives of the faith devolved into the distinctives of denominations](#). It was “a religious market that caters to the individual and makes religion an individual decision.”<sup>18</sup> [The line](#)

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<sup>15</sup> Or it may be that American individualism and its thirst for direct control and immediate gratification sought out this style of religious life.

<sup>16</sup> Finney, Moody, Billy Sunday, Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Kenneth Copeland, Jimmy Swaggart, Jerry Falwell, John Stott, M. Lloyd-Jones.

<sup>17</sup> Biblicism refers to a simplistic and overly literal reading of the Bible, often to obtain support for personal views or interpretations. It is akin to proof-texting, pulling Bible texts out of context in order to validate private interpretations of Scripture, circumstances, or world events. It elevates minutiae over major themes, and often becomes Gnostic in its approach. You can be a Biblicist and yet not be biblical.

<sup>18</sup> Finke, Roger, “Religious Deregulation: Origins and Consequences,” *Journal of Church and State* 32 (Summer 1990), p. 625

between sales and evangelism – consumer and believer – became blurred. It isn't a new phenomenon at all. It's Americanism.

In turn, this led to an explosion in diversity. It reflected the diversion of the population, the lack of religious regulation, and the needs of the market. Churches required results – new adherents – or they would go out of business. Producing results overrode all other considerations. Positively, it produces a new dynamism and effectiveness in fulfilling the Great Commission. Negatively, it produced a modified gospel: questions of truth became questions of practicality. What message would be most effective? What do people want to hear? What can we say that will both convert and draw people to our particular church? Little time was left for deeper questions or the shaping of the mind. Subduing a wilderness and civilizing a barbarian society were primarily important. In the wake of deregulation, a number of cult movements were also free to arise. P. 64-67, 73

*A Christian-Cultural Synthesis* – Evangelicals were successful in the early United States because they successfully adapted [or compromised] their Christian convictions to American ideals. Alexis de Tocqueville was struck by the character of American Christianity. “In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country.”<sup>19</sup> Why evangelicals identified so thoroughly with American ideals is involved, but its cause has four basic dimensions. The way evangelicals adopted for Christian purposes,

1. republican theories of politics
2. democratic theories of society
3. liberal views of the economy
4. the principles of the Enlightenment

Speaking the language of their culture, they adopted its concepts in order to evangelize or reform their culture more effectively. They were able to present the gospel in such a way as to see individuals converted in order to see changes in society. But it cost them.

1.A *Republican theory of Politics* - The arbitrary exercise of unchecked power must by its very nature result in the demise of liberty, law, and natural rights. Therefore Americans favor separation of power rather than concentration. Good government must mix elements of popular influence, aristocratic tradition, and executive authority, rather than be simply democratic, simply aristocratic, or simply monarchical. Because the beliefs of American Christians paralleled these cultural beliefs, it led to the widespread assumption that republican principles *expressed* Christian values, and that they should be defended with Christian fervor.

Puritans and republicans defined virtue, freedom, and social well-being in similar terms. Virtue was defined in negative terms. For Puritans, it was the absence of sin, for republicans, the absence of corrupt and arbitrary power. Puritans saw freedom as liberation from sin, republicans as liberation from tyranny. Puritans defined a good society as one in which sin is vanquished and people stand guard against its reemergence. Republicans defined it as one in which political freedom from tyranny was preserved and citizens stand guard against corruption of power. To Puritans, good and evil were represented by Christ and Anti-Christ. To republicans, by liberty and tyranny.

A lively tradition of millennialism forged a link between political freedom and Christian liberty. The great conflict between God and Satan was somehow being played out in the struggle between America and Britain, and a victory over Parliament might signal the near approach of God's rule on earth, the millennium. The effect of melding religious doctrine with political principles is that the American system of politics seemed beyond reproach. It could simply be assumed that the American

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<sup>19</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Thomas Bender (NYC, Modern Library, 1981), pp. 182,185

way was the Christian way. But this created difficulties for missionary efforts in other political cultures, and it led to confusion in how non-Protestants were treated in the United States. P. 67-72

2. *A Democratic Understanding of Society* – Out of the American Revolution sprang a spirit of liberty, a perceived opportunity to remodel the externals of religion. One of the things affected by this passion for liberty was Bible reading. New denominations sprang to life, as well as new beliefs, such as Adventists, Mormons, and Cumberland Presbyterians. This happened in large part “because there were so many unfettered interpretations of Scripture.” *Sola Scriptura* in America resulted in a blend of Christian fervor and democratic fragmentation, an individual declaration of independence. The leaders of the new denominations were successful “because they had translated the Christian message into an indigenous American idiom.

The assumption that Christian faith can only be expressed in a democratic setting was not conducive to shaping a Christian mind. The assumed harmony of Christian faith and a democratic America meant that evangelicals did not think comprehensively about very real problems using a Christian foundation: the conflict between North and South, the impact of growing numbers of immigrants from non-European and non-Protestant countries, domestic slavery and racism, [the lack of ethics in economic and regulatory law that would later produce the robber barons and the Great Depression, etc.](#) P. 73-74

3. *A Liberal View of the Economy* – The language of liberalism emphasized the freedom of individuals from hierarchical restraint, and community based on the unfettered choices of free individuals joined by contract. These became the dominant assumptions about proper economic life as well. The American System promoted internal trade through government financing of roads and canals. Market capitalism became the favored means of producing goods and services, reflecting “the scrambling, individualistic, acquisitive society.”<sup>20</sup>

The predominant form of action for religious causes was also the voluntary society, where individuals joined together of their own free will to influence others toward the good. The believers’ church was defined as the sum of its members, whose own choices brought it into existence. And so the evangelical church benefited from the liberal themes in American life. It isn’t that it embraced these themes so much as how it embraced them.

The most important economic questions dealt with industrialization. What obligations did capital and labor owe each other? How would the growth of large industries affect community life or provisions for the disabled, aged, and infirm? Such questions posed a threat to Christian witness and public morality. They could only be answered by those who had “thought through the principles of Scripture, who had struggled to see how the truths of creation, fall, and redemption applied to groups as well as individuals.” P. 74-76

In the period from 1740 to 1840, there is one dominant evangelical mind who addressed such larger questions, and that mind belonged to Jonathan Edwards. To him there was no antithesis between heartfelt devotion and the most recondite labors of the mind. He refused to accept the Enlightenment assumption that fundamental reality was simply matter in motion, or that the pursuit of happiness was the highest purpose of human life. He did not believe that human understanding depended ultimately on humans. Instead, God was a more basic reality than matter in motion. The glory of God was a higher goal than human happiness. Human understanding depended on God’s ordaining that the human mind could grasp the nature of things. For Edwards, God is the source of reality, truth, intellect, and the world itself – all of these depend on him. Though a pastor and theologian, he also delved into psychology, philosophy, ethics, and the sciences. His extraordinary career shows us that “it is not simply advantageous to love the Lord with the mind; it is also good, sweet, holy,

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<sup>20</sup> Wood, Gordon S., “Ideology and the Origins of Liberal America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 44 (July 1987), p. 635.

beautiful, and honoring to God. The last reward to be had from the exercise of a Christian mind is to know God better, and that reward requires no other justification.” P. 79-80

4. *The Evangelical Enlightenment* – Jonathan Edwards was an “enlightened” evangelical, but he was not an “evangelical of the Enlightenment.” Most evangelicals who studied science, philosophy, history, politics, and the arts adopted the procedures of the Enlightenment, using them to study and to express their thoughts in these areas. Of these habits of mind, the most important was a commitment to objective truth and a “scientific” approach to the Bible. Americans in the 18<sup>th</sup> century perceived several Enlightenments, and not just one:
  - a. The *moderate* Enlightenment of Isaac Newton and John Locke
  - b. The *skeptical* Enlightenment of Voltaire and Hume
  - c. The *revolutionary* Enlightenment of Rousseau, Godwin, and Thomas Paine
  - d. The *didactic* Enlightenment of Scotland: Hutcheson, Reid, and Adam Smith

American thinkers struggled to restore intellectual confidence and social cohesion to the Enlightenment ideal. They argued that all humans possess, by nature, a common set of capacities through which they may grasp the basic realities of nature and morality. Moreover, these capacities can be studied as scientifically as Newton studied the physical world. A rigorous study of consciousness, they believed, would yield laws for human behavior and ethics as scientific as Newton’s laws of physics. This Scottish form of the Enlightenment came to dominate intellectual life for the first half century of America’s history. [It led to what we now call the “social sciences,” a term that has been proven to be an oxymoron.](#) The influence of the didactic Enlightenment stretched into the population at large, from Jefferson and Madison in the White House to professional scientists and literary pioneers.

But the most articulate spokesmen for the common-sense principles of the American Enlightenment were Protestant educators and ministers. These principles provided the basis for collegiate instruction at Unitarian Harvard, Baptist Brown, Congregationalist Yale, Presbyterian Princeton, and the rest of the nation’s rapidly growing network of colleges. P. 83-85

They defined the mental habits of intellectuals and non-intellectuals alike, across the scholastic board for both religious and secular colleges of a rapidly expanding nation. “How did a Protestant tradition rooted in the Reformation and recently renewed by the revivalism of John Wesley, George Whitfield, and Jonathan Edwards, come to express itself so thoroughly in the language of the Enlightenment?” P. 86. How indeed.

All major evangelical leaders of the mid-1700’s, including Edwards, defended the Reformation’s view of human nature. They denied that people had a natural moral sense, that they are inherently good. They rejected the idea that people naturally understand what is both true and in their best interests. Yet this idea of man’s inherent goodness was critical for the didactic Enlightenment. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, it became a widely accepted assumption of America’s evangelicals. How do we explain that?

The Scottish Enlightenment offered evangelicals and other Americans exactly what they needed to justify the Revolution and its radical aftermath. It offered an intellectually respectable way to establish public virtue in a society that was busy repudiating the props on which virtue had traditionally rested – tradition itself, divine revelation, history, social hierarchy, an inherited government, and the authority of religious denominations. It gave a way to justify the break with Great Britain, to establish principles of social order, and to preserve the hereditary position of Christianity in a culture that denied absolute authority.

The same train of thought that justified the break became the reasoning by which political and religious leaders sought a stable social order: “self-evident truths,” the “unalienable rights,” and “the laws of nature” that the Declaration of Independence proclaimed meant there was no need for a careful rebuttal of authorities, or a careful perusal of Scripture, to justify rebellion. The evangelicals could now rely on the “moral sense” in place of the traditional props for ethics, including the special revelation of the Bible.

Consider John Witherspoon, president of Princeton College. He claimed that when we study our own minds, we end up with the proper principles for a just and stable society. He hoped that “a time may come when men, treating moral philosophy as Newton and his successors have done natural [philosophy], may arrive at greater precision” on ethical matters.<sup>21</sup> P. 86-90

### The Shaping of Evangelical Thought

The incorporation of the Enlightenment into evangelical thinking was useful not just to influence the moral direction of society, but it had an enduring effect on apologetics and theology. Among both the elite and the common people, it provided a framework for appropriating Scripture. In apologetics, American evangelicals had been able to align faith in reason with faith in God. The French revolutionaries were unable to do that. The goal of American evangelicals, in the words of Witherspoon, was “to meet [infidels] upon their own ground, and to show them from reason itself, the fallacy of their principles.”<sup>22</sup> Such an apologetic relied heavily on the methods of the didactic Enlightenment. Grounded on scientific rationality and demonstration, the Presbyterians excelled in this Baconian approach to the faith. Rigorous empiricism became the standard for justifying belief in God, revelation, and the Trinity. In the moral sciences, it marked out a royal road to ethical certainty. It provided a key for using physical science to demonstrate religious truths: the evidence of facts would enable deductive conclusions from them. The harmonization of the Bible with science was on its way. P. 90-92

Closely linked to evangelical reliance on scientific reason, was dependence on intuitive common sense. Nathaniel William Taylor urged, “Let a man look into his own breast, and he cannot but perceive... inward freedom – for if freedom be not in the *mind* it is nowhere. And liberty in the mind implies self-determination.” Archibald Alexander of Princeton said, “Our faculties are not so constituted as to misguide us...<sup>23</sup> We are as certain of these intuitive truths as we can be... Besides, we must be sure that we exist, and that the world exists, before we can be certain that there is a God, for it is from these *data* that we prove his existence.” P. 92-93

*The Bible* – Traditional interpretations of the Scripture may have come under attack, but there was no retreat from the Scripture itself. Traditions of biblical exposition and elitist assumptions about how much study was necessary before a man or woman could publicly preach the Bible were gleefully disregarded. But *sola scriptura* survived the assault on tradition. Nonetheless, the methodology of study moved from the traditional hermeneutic to the scientific method. Leonard Woods said in 1822 that the best method of study was the one “pursued in the science of physics.” Robert Breckenridge wrote in 1847 that theology derived from the Bible could be a science as incontrovertible as geometry. This style of Enlightenment Biblicism was epitomized in Charles Hodge’s *Systematic Theology*. P. 96-97

*Theology*: Hodges wrote, “The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his store-house of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches, is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain what nature teaches...” Unfortunately, this led to what was called the Common Sense rationalist approach which spawned the Campbell and Restorationist movements. Restorationist Tolbert Fanning asserted that “the Scriptures fairly translated need no explanation.” Another restorationist, James S. Lamar, published the Inductive Method of Biblical Interpretation in 1859. [That opened the floodgate to personal interpretations which quickly came into conflict with traditional teaching. American individualists embraced such conflict with delight – everyman would be his own teacher and theologian. The Bible would mean whatever its readers thought it meant. After all, they too had the Spirit of God.](#)

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<sup>21</sup> Witherspoon, John, “Lectures on Moral Philosophy,” in *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon*, (Phila, Wm Woodward, 1802), 4 vol, pp. 109-110.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:368

<sup>23</sup> Princeton was a Presbyterian college, founded on reformation doctrine, subscribing to the Westminster Confession and the Five Points of Calvinism. Yet here, Alexander rejects the total depravity of man, and the corrupted nature of his mind.

In France, the Enlightenment led to the people rising up against the state and the church. While in America, the Enlightenment led to the people and evangelicalism melding church and state – a synthesis of Enlightenment thinking, republicanism, democracy, economic liberalism, and manifest destiny – clearly seen by Alexis de Tocqueville. P. 98-99

After the Civil War, the academy had grown inhospitable to the alliance between science and Protestantism. Seminaries were separated from the rest of the university and marginalized, as mentioned earlier. Their traditional religious framework was replaced with a secular one. The Enlightenment mentality continued to shape the intellectual life of evangelicalism, splitting it into liberal and fundamentalist camps. Views of science were changing from static and mechanistic to developmental and organic, academic work from teleological and doxological to progressive and functional, perspectives on religion from particularistic and theistic to universalistic and agnostic.

In the end, there was a threefold division of 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelicalism. Liberals moved with the times, conceded the hegemony of the new science, and sought to preserve its harmony with the American Protestant Enlightenment. The populists who would later become the fundamentalists adopted the new applied technologies of mass media and public marketing, but resisted the migration from the old to the new science. The majority of evangelicals took the middle road with its nostalgia for the clarity and simplicity of the past, but unclear whether to embrace the old harmony between science and religion, or the new division between them.

The new view of the Bible was uniformly scientific in character. Evangelicalism moved from textual criticism into higher criticism, from relying on the texts alone to using scientific and literary analysis to challenge established opinions concerning their validity and even content. The conservatives (A.A. Hodge, B.B. Warfield, et al) were just as determined to enlist science to support the existing texts and their content: “impartial examination of all the sources of evidence, i.e., the claims and phenomena of the Scriptures themselves.” In the end, questions on biblical criticism divided evangelicals. The struggles were over the facts, and who would control the schools and denominations. Yet neither the liberals nor the populists challenged the self-justifying authority of Scripture, and the dictates of common sense. P. 100-105.

Little need was felt to exercise the mind for Christ since evangelism and fervent moral activism seemed so successful in engaging the culture. But having failed to intellectually defend the Bible, and coming attack by science advocates, atheists, and agnostics, the Bible was increasingly portrayed “as a largely irrelevant, mythological book; and new views in biology challenged both divine creation and the uniqueness of the human species... Habits of patient study were far less well exercised than habits of quick quotation. Proof-testing did not cause great damage so long as the culture as a whole held to general Christian values, but when those general Christian values began to weaken, the weakness in evangelical theologizing – ...thinking like a Christian about the world in general – became all too evident.” P. 106-107

### **The Intellectual Disaster of Fundamentalism**

The evangelicals who had dominated college life until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were utterly displaced as the intellectual arbiters of the nation. Colleges and universities began to proliferate, and the funding was now coming from wealthy entrepreneurs, not Christian communities. Where 1 percent of college-age people attended college in 1860, by 1930 that had risen to 12.4 percent. As money from businessmen increased, so did the businesslike functioning of the colleges. Industrialists and bankers replaced clergymen as trustees, and laymen replaced ministers as college presidents. For the curriculum, the new universities took a German model of education rather than the British standard. Research instead of character, innovation instead of tradition, and science instead of morality, became the watchwords of the campuses.

The reason the new class of wealthy Americans were funding education was to encourage more of practical science and managerial theory, and less of moralism, more on academic reputation than preserving orthodoxy. They became increasingly naturalistic in science and pragmatic in philosophy, with little criticism of the new materialism and industrial power. The old synthesis of religion and science was melting away, and the Christian mind with it. P. 110-113

In response, rather than raise the level of our thinking, we raised the level of our spirituality. The Holiness (or Keswick) movement, Pentecostalism, and premillennial dispensationalism became the defenders of traditional beliefs against the onslaught of scientism. Darby's "scientific" approach to systematic theology (dispensationalism) became popularized in the first study Bible of 1909, the Scofield Bible. It then became embedded in the fabric of evangelicalism at Dallas Theological Seminary, promoted by Chafer, Ryrie, and Walvoord. "Dispensationists have stressed the decline and apostasy of institutional churches, the consequent degeneration of civilization, and the need for Christians to separate from institutions of ungodliness." They have traditionally seen their task as "rescuing unbelievers from sin and keeping themselves unspotted from the world." There is a very intense and distinct supernaturalism in it that splits the world into good and bad, light and darkness, God's activities and Satan's activities. [That's called Manichaeism, as explained earlier \(see p. 140-141 as well\).](#)

These three movements were never aligned, and often at odds with one another. Yet they shared a stress on the dangers of the world, the comforts of separated piety ([come out from among them](#)), the centrality of evangelism, and an imminent expectation of the End. Each of them emphasized features of Christianity that were increasingly being called into question by the cultural elites. "Where learned elites were proposing pragmatic, democratic, and social-scientific solutions to the gravest modern problems, Holiness advocates offered the Holy Spirit." In a world of alienation and powerlessness, where the world seemed ever more out of control, these movements not only claimed that the Bible predicted it all, but that God was still in control. Where people were increasingly disregarded and depersonalized in the age of technology, these movements insisted that God breaks into the life of the most ordinary person [and assigns him individual meaning, value, and worth](#). P. 115-121

The problem arose not with the goal, but with the assumption that to be spiritual one must no longer pay attention to the world. Fundamentalism hurt the effort to use the mind for the glory of God, indulging in new forms of anti-intellectualism. Lloyd-Jones suggested that fundamentalist expectations concerning the imminent return of Christ and the availability of the gift of prophecy lessened their need for scholarship. "If you teach that sanctification consists of 'letting go' and letting the Holy Spirit *do all the work*, then don't blame me if you have no scholars!"

The hard biblical literalism of millenarianism and prophetic speculators left evangelicalism wide open to the mid-century attacks from biblical criticism and science. P. 123-124

For example,

- treating the verses of the Bible as pieces in a jigsaw puzzle that needed only to be sorted and fit together,
- a tendency to think that a specific formula can capture for all times and places the essence of biblical truth for any specific issue,
- the neglect of forces in history that shape perceptions and define the issues that are important to a given age, and
- the arrogance ("self-confidence bordering on hubris") manifested by an extreme anti-traditionalism that discounts the possibility of wisdom from earlier generations P. 127

Scofield's self-confidence was legendary, as when he asserted, "any study of the Word which ignores those Divisions [including the dispensations] must be in large measure profitless and confusing." Chafer reportedly felt that his lack of formal theological training was an asset to his work as a theologian, "because by not examining what others had done, he was preserved from their errors." Craig Blasing, a

contemporary dispensationalist, “looks back regretfully over several generations infected by ‘a methodological deficiency in the very hermeneutic that [fundamentalism] proposed.’ He notes, “like most of fundamentalism and evangelicalism at the time [into the 1960’s], [dispensationalism] possessed no methodological awareness of the historicity of interpretation...” as embodied “in its advocacy of clear, plain, normal, or literal interpretation.”

Fundamentalism’s methods of studying the Bible, and the results it produces, are defined by naïve and uncritical assumptions about the way to study or think about anything. Thus, Christian thinking about the world is likewise marked by naïveté and an absence of rigorous criticism. “If this analysis is correct, it means that fruitful evangelical thinking at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century must come to grips not only with the excesses of the fundamentalist past, but with the compounded damage done when those excesses were grafted on to even longer-lived intellectual weaknesses.” P. 128-130

The supernaturalism of dispensationalism in its extreme forms (which are easiest to promote among the populace), “tend toward a kind of Gnosticism in its communication of truth.” The Gnostic tendency was most evident in its elaborate charts and diagrams outlining the whole future of the world. They amounted to interpretations of the times that were “produced without going to the inconvenient work of every looking at the times themselves... Evangelicals pushed analysis away from the visible present to the invisible future, almost totally replacing respect for creation with a contemplation of redemption... It was the Word of God pure and simple, not the Word of God as mediated through the life experiences and cultural settings of the biblical authors, that was important.” P. 132-133

Under the midwifery of fundamentalism, “the evangelical community gave birth to virtually no insights into how, under God, the natural world proceeded, how human societies worked, why human nature acted the way it did, or what constituted the blessings and perils of culture.” They had firm beliefs about each, backed up by Scriptural citations, but they lacked a profound knowledge of the divinely created world in which those beliefs were applied. P. 137 When faced with a social crisis, evangelicals either mount a public crusade, or retreat into an inner sanctum ([retreat often follows such one-shot crusades](#)). There are either the clanging gongs as with the Christian Right and the Creationists which testifies to the first, or the profound silence on complex real-life issues which testifies to the second.

Specifically theological convictions have intellectual consequences. Any theology that encourages Bible reading as puzzle solving, instead of an occasion to examine one’s soul, or that encourages Bible reading primarily to understand a “world out there” instead of a “the world for me,” is not only bad theology but a theology prejudicial to the intellectual life. Nathan Hatch wrote, “The heritage of fundamentalism was to Christian learning for evangelicals like Chairman Mao’s ‘Cultural Revolution’ [was] for the Chinese. Both divorced a generation from mainline academia, thus making reintegration [into larger worlds of learning] a difficult, if not bewildering task.” P. 142-144

### **Part 3 – What the Scandal Has Meant**

*Political Reflection* – The career of William Jennings Bryan, Presbyterian layman and three-time nominee for president of the Democratic, provides an apt illustration of the evangelical engagement with politics at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His Chicago “Cross of Gold” speech did not have a biblical text, but its style resembled a sermon: “If they dare to come out in the open field and defend the gold standard as a good thing, we will fight them to the uttermost. Having behind us the producing masses of this nation and the world, supported by the commercial interests, the laboring interests, and the toilers everywhere, we will answer their demand for a gold standard by saying to them, ‘You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.’” It is a fine example of evangelical immersion in Scripture. Adapting 1Sam 18:7 to his purpose, Bryan exclaimed, “If protection has slain its thousands, the gold standard has slain its tens of thousands.”

Leonard Sweet once said of 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestantism that it “created a de facto establishment of evangelicalism whose security lay in a common ethos, a common outlook on life and history, a common

piety, and common patterns of worship and devotion.” This particular speech exemplified the evangelical habit of exaggeration, of regarding each new national crisis as a cataclysm of historic and world-wide importance. Also in typical fashion, it championed the common man the audience for whom its populist theology was directed. “The man who is employed for wages... the attorney in a country town... the merchant at the cross-roads store... the farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day... [and] the miners who go down a thousand feet into the earth... are as much businessmen as the few financial magnates who, in a back room, corner the money of the world.”

In another common speech of his, “The Prince of Peace,” Bryan would declare, “Christ has given us a platform more central than any political party has ever written... When he concluded into on commandment those of the ten which relate of man’s duty toward his fellows and enjoined them with this rule, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,’ He presented a plan for the solution of all the problems that now vex society or hereafter arise. Other remedies may palliate or postpone the day of settlement, but this is all-sufficient and the reconciliation which it effects is a permanent one.” To Bryan, modern secular thinking wasn’t an attack on Christian doctrine, but an attack on mankind: it demeaned individuals.

Bryan’s approach was not the privately written word, but the publicly delivered speech. It was revivalism in action. Political persuasion as well as experiential religion was primarily a matter of public speaking. George Whitfield’s sermonic power defined much of what American evangelicalism became. After the sermon-speech, evangelicals looked to the popular press for inspiration, instruction, information, and guidance on public issues. And so Bryan earned his living as a newspaper editor. Throughout its history, the most visible evangelicals, those with the broadest popular influence, have been public speakers. Those in the 20<sup>th</sup> century carried on the tradition in radio and television. P. 152-155

The enduring contribution to evangelicalism of the republicanism of the Revolutionary era was the undermining of hereditary trust in institutions. The enduring contribution of the Great Awakenings in the colonial and early national periods was to substitute the voluntary society for the church. These, along with Finney’s revivals, Weld’s abolition, Willard’s temperance, and Bryan’s silver standard, resulted in the transformation of the mechanism of Christian social action. Insight for analyzing the public sphere and guidance for political action did not come from authoritative pronouncements from on high, but from inner conviction springing up from within. The great men and women of evangelicalism have been those who both recognized this reality and knew best how to persuade. P. 156-157

Evangelical churches and the volunteerism associated with them are democratic in style. Authority has transferred from being hereditary to being charismatic, from a popish power that *commands* assent to an egalitarian power that *elicits* assent. Bryan epitomized the American tradition that was populist (preferring spoken arguments over written treatises), activist (protecting community values through individual efforts), and myth-making (preferring ideals from the past over patient examination of the course of history that has led to the present circumstances – finding in every current event the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and the advent of the millennium). P. 159

Evangelical political reflection has depended on a moralism apart from the church, in fact, a moralism that has stressed moral activism without providing a major role for the church. It is oriented in a populist direction because evangelicalism has been a populist movement. It has drawn upon intuitive conceptions of justice because evangelicals tend to trust their “sanctified common sense” more than formal theology, a systematic study of history, or academically trained ethicists. Political reflection is nurtured by common-sense Biblicism for the same reasons that a “Bible only” mentality prevails among evangelicals. That does not mean that evangelical political action has been uniform or predictable; indeed, it is not and that is specifically because its worldview is individualistic, activist, populist, intuitive, and Biblicist. P. 160

### **The Five Stages of Evangelicalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

*The Age of Bryan* – Evangelicals rely instinctively on the Bible to provide ideals of justice. They believed in the power of Christ to expand the kingdom of God through the efforts of faithful believers. They were

reformers at home and missionaries abroad who felt that cooperation among Protestants signaled the advance of civilization. They were thoroughly and uncritically patriotic. They suspected Catholics were anti-American, promoted public schools as agents of a broad form of Christianization, and united behind prohibition as the key to a renewed society. They began to make a distinction between the application of the gospel to society, and a gospel defined by the social needs of the period (i.e. they were becoming suspicious of the Social Gospel). They expressed their Biblicism passionately, but also vaguely in a theology that was Reformed in outline, Methodist in practice, and perfectionist in piety. P. 161-164

*The Age of Fundamentalism* – This period began with the death of Bryan in 1925. Presbyterian and Baptist defenders of traditional evangelical beliefs were marginalized or driven out altogether. The Keswick Holiness movement and premillennial dispensationalism assumed a new prominence. Those who were public speakers took to the airwaves to adapt the old-time religion to mass communication, spreading hope to millions suffering during the Great Depression. Concern for political involvement was replaced with an almost exclusive focus on personal evangelism and personal piety. Current events evoked interpretations of prophecy instead of reform or political analysis. The rise of dictatorships in Europe, the League of Nations, the National Recovery Administration, and the Interchurch World Movement were all seen as signs of the end of the Age. Zionism in the North and anti-Semitism in the South emerged together under the umbrella of evangelicalism in the 1930's. P. 165-169

*An Era of New Beginnings* – In 1941 the National Association of Evangelicals was established, marking a transition from Fundamentalist withdrawal to a more thoughtful engagement with political thought. The biblical and evangelical themes of the Revivals were beginning to take root in the Black Community that would later lead to the civil rights movement – but not in the 1940's and 1950's, not in the white evangelical community. Nonetheless, the postwar years were moving evangelicals toward a new view of their culture. [Jews and Blacks had fought beside white Christians against an atheist foe. It was now time for a more inclusive view of American society, one in which minority members could be embraced as equals.](#) The traditional balance between activism and Biblicism was re-emerging, as well as political engagement. P. 170 [The 1960's spawned the Civil Rights Act and the anti-war movement, both of which were populated by peace-and-love flower children and the "Jesus freaks" who shared the slogan "make love not war." Popular songs were heavy-laden with biblical themes and images: "He's not heavy, he's my brother," "Michael row the boat ashore," and "Anybody here seen my old friend John?"](#)

*Era of the New Right* – The evangelical response to *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 ushered in a distinct period of political thought and action until the Moral Majority was dissolved in 1989. Moral activism was reasserted in response to the perceived crises of the day. Injustice to the unborn replaced injustice to debtors, but some classes of unrepresented oppressed were again respected as Christian service. Mass mailings and mass demonstrations before the TV cameras replaced whistle-stop tours to enlist the public, but evangelical politics still depended on mobilizing the masses. It was still "intuitive politics in which the mythic virtues of an Edenic past and the self-evident responses of a born-again people were the bases for argument. P. 171-172

*After the Christian Right* – If this is a post-Christian Right period, what will characterize this phase of evangelical politics? It's possible that in-fighting over the nature of biblical authority, the role of women in the church, and Creationism could so splinter evangelicalism that it loses its vestiges of theological cohesion. The Southern Baptist Convention might arise from its slumber to become more influential among evangelicals – or the Pentecostal-charismatic surge may come to dominate the evangelical mosaic if its spirituality takes a new shape. Then again, the New Right might regroup. Evangelicals could be co-opted by Republican leaders who have their own agenda, or they might influence Republican strategy. They might even be heard among the Democrats, or persuade more Americans to support a pro-life policy. It's also possible evangelicalism will be swamped by new waves of pietistic anti-intellectualism.

If evangelicals continue to be influenced by historicist dispensationalism which goes in for identifying specific current events as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, then there is little intellectual hope for the

future. There is a strong resemblance between speculating on prophecy and conspiracy theories. Both depend on the mind of the observer to understand the world. Neither takes seriously the information presented from the world itself. Both have much more confidence in their minds than in the evidence of their senses. By contrast, Scripture teaches us, first, to respect God, his sovereignty, and what he has created and, second, to mistrust our own deceiving hearts. P. 172-175

### Thinking About Science

In the decades after the founding of America, evangelicals were convinced that we should harmonize the most respected results of modern science with the traditional interpretations of the Bible, show how scientific conclusions affirm Scriptural truth, and use scientific methodology as the best general method to address intellectual questions, even in theology. “Baconianism,” or the belief that strict induction from verified individual facts to more general laws offered the best way to understand the data of any subject.

Up to the point that the American scientific community embraced organic evolution – new species evolving out of existing species – Protestant leaders of various theological persuasions were united in rejecting Darwin’s hypothesis as simply *bad science*. When the scientific community in the 1870’s did accept the broad outlines of Darwinism, the religious community split into three groups:

- Many Conservatives rejected evolution out of hand because 1) it did not square with their understanding of the Bible, 2) it led to unfounded speculation about origins, and 3) it dismissed any argument from design.<sup>24</sup>
- Other Conservatives like James McCosh of Princeton University, George Frederick Wright of Oberlin College, and B.B. Warfield of Princeton Seminary thought it possible to affirm evolution within the boundaries of historic Christian doctrines.
- The majority who embraced evolution, however, also embraced higher criticism of the Bible, trusted in religious consciousness (Schleiermacher’s transformation of Christian belief into metaphysics and morality – relying on intuition and feelings), and were confident that the human race is getting better and better every day and in every way.

Whether opposed to or in favor of evolutionary theory, evangelicals failed to question their commitment to the bond between Enlightenment notions of science and traditional conceptions of Christianity. They were committed to science, but specifically to Baconian science. The debate over evolution was also a debate over the role of Protestantism in a culture that no longer embraced traditionalism. P. 178-181

Archibald Alexander in his 1812 inaugural address as the first professor at Princeton Seminary, spoke of the apologetic and explanatory utility of the natural sciences. In 1863, Joseph Clark contended that the Christian strategy in dealing with science was twofold: first, maintain the full trustworthiness of the Bible and second, allow scientific pursuit without judging its conclusions according to some fixed Biblical interpretation such as a flat earth. An editorial writer for the New York Observer thought that went too far toward accepting science over revelation. In response to the editorial, Charles Hodge, who succeeded Alexander at Princeton, held firmly to Biblical inerrancy, but he also urged that scientists not advance any cosmological speculations that contradicted the central teachings of Scripture. Even so, Hodge thought that the Bible must be interpreted by science.

Nature is as truly a revelation of God as the Bible; and we only interpret the Word of God by the Word of God when we interpret the Bible by science... Of course, this rule works both ways. If the Bible cannot contradict science, neither can science contradict the Bible...

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<sup>24</sup> Darwinism was more and more defined as a purely mechanistic system without any need for a Creator – it quickly became an atheistic belief system, a modern Creation Myth. Largely in response to Darwinism and Liberalism in the 1930’s, Fundamentalists arose but split into two camps: those who despised education, intellectual pursuits, and science, and those who advocated them hoping to show that science affirms Christianity. Where they agreed was on the infallibility of the Word of God.

Hodge felt there were two errors to be avoided: forcing unnatural interpretations on the Bible to accommodate the opinions and theories of scientific men, and refusing to allow those opinions or science itself to have any voice in the interpretation of Scripture. P. 182-184

Fundamentalism arose in response to the rapid secularization of the modern academy. Those who believed that God had made the world were ill at ease with Darwinism. In response, modern Creationism intended to construct an alternative, fundamentalist science based on a literal interpretation of the Bible.

On the positive side, they have shown that,

- Vast cosmological claims about the self-sustaining, closed character of the universe cannot arise from scientific research itself
- Such grand conclusions are as much an act of faith as any other large-scale religious claim
- It is unfair and unwarranted to buy textbooks or support teachers who champion a supposedly neutral and up-to-date science as a better path to ultimate truth than traditional religions.

In other words, they have shown that Scientism is practiced, funded, preached, and prescribed in our culture [as if it were a state religion](#).

On the negative side, fundamentalists and their evangelical successors have dropped the conviction that the best theology should understand and incorporate the best science. Yet they hold to the conviction that it is important to harmonize the Bible and science, as long as it is Baconian. P. 185-186

William Jennings Bryan had no difficulty accepting an ancient earth. He understood that the problem with evolution was not the practice of science, but its use to justify metaphysical naturalism and social Darwinism. Modern creationism with its 6000-year-old Earth, by contrast, was the result of Seventh-Day Adventists, especially George McCready Price 1870-1963. They wanted to show that the sacred writings of Ellen G. White could provide a framework for studying the history of the earth. P. 189

John C. Whitcomb, Jr, who was a theologian at Grace Theological Seminary, and Henry M. Morris, a hydraulic engineer, objected to Bernard Ramm's chastising of fundamentalists concerning their literal interpretation of the Bible. He insisted that God's revelation comes in and through the Biblical languages and their accompanying culture. He also leveled stern attacks on the types of harmonizations that Price and Rimmer had provided. In 1961, Whitcomb and Morris collaborated on a book called *The Genesis Flood*. It was an updating of Price's original work, but they made his points more persuasively. By the mid-1980's, it had sold over 200,000 copies, launching the current "creation science" fervor. "Since 1960, creationism has done more than any other issue except abortion to inflame the cultural warfare in American public life." P. 190-192

Why did creationism take off?

1. It's populist and simplistic
2. It's anti-authoritarian
3. It's anti-intellectual
4. It reflects the dynamics of the eschatological mentality of dispensationalism

Biblical literalism, gaining strength since the 1870's, has fueled both the intense concern for human origins and the endtimes. In 1923, George McCready Price said, "Surely it is useless to expect people to believe in the predictions given in the last chapters of the Bible, if they do not believe in the record of the events described in the first chapters." P. 193-194.

[Noll observes that unfortunately](#), "Creation science has damaged evangelicalism by making it much more difficult to think clearly about human origins, the age of the earth, and mechanisms of geological or biological change. But it has done more profound damage by undermining the ability to look at the world God has made and to understand what we see when we do look." [It indulges Manichean attitudes toward](#)

knowledge about the natural world.<sup>25</sup> P. 196. Creationism at its root is religion. Yet it has become politics because of the overweening metaphysical pretensions of elitist pundits exploiting the prestige of “science.” Millions of evangelicals think they are defending the Bible by defending creation science, but in reality they are giving ultimate authority to the... interpretations of the Bible that arose from the mania for science in the early nineteenth century. Evangelicals have gone back to thinking that we must shut up one of God’s books (Nature) if we want to read the other one (Scripture). P. 198-199.

The problem with this [simplistic] sort of reasoning is not confidence in the Bible, but confidence in ourselves — the same hubris that rendered Aristotelianism fruitless: “the sin of intellectual pride, manifested in the presumptuous endeavor to conjure the knowledge of the nature of things out of one’s own head, instead of seeking it patiently in the Book of Nature.” P. 200

One of the earliest full statements of the problem involved in carrying self-evident, literal, normal, simple, or common-sensical interpretations of the Bible into the arena of science is also one of the earliest. It was written by Augustine in the fifth century toward the end of his life. “If infidels find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well, and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods on facts which they themselves have learned from experience and the light of reason?” P. 200, 202-203

In 1623, Francis Bacon wrote, “We create worlds. We prescribe laws to nature and lord it over her. We want to have all things as suits our fatuity, not as fits the Divine Wisdom, not as they are found in nature. We impose the seal of our image on the creatures and works of God, we do not diligently work to discover the seal of God on things.” P. 204

At about the same time, Galileo wrote this: “It is most pious to say and most prudent to take for granted that Holy Scripture can never lie, as long as its true meaning has been grasped; but I do not think one can deny that this is frequently recondite and very different meaning from what appears to be the literal meaning of the words.” P. 205.

For Galileo, as for Bacon and Augustine before him, to think that one could interpret the Bible on scientific questions without employing a dialogue between natural and biblical observations was to guarantee *misunderstanding* of Scripture. P. 206.

Charles Hodge wrote, “Nature is as truly a revelation of God as the Bible; and we only interpret the Word of God by the Word of God, when we interpret the Bible by science.” B.B. Warfield wrote, “The really pressing question with regard to the doctrine of evolution, is not... whether the old faith can live with this new doctrine... We may be sure that the old faith will be able not merely to live with, but to assimilate to itself all facts... The only living question with regard to the doctrine of evolution still is whether it is true.” PP. 207-208

**Noll closes with this:** “The effort to think like a Christian is rather an effort to take seriously the sovereignty of God over the world he created, the lordship of Christ over the world he died to redeem, and the power of the Holy Spirit over the world he sustains each and every moment. From this perspective the search for a mind that truly thinks like a Christian takes on ultimate significance, because the search for a Christian mind is not, in the end, a search for mind, but a search for God.”

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<sup>25</sup> Manicheism is a branch of Gnosticism in which everything is divided into good and bad, light and dark, spiritual and physical, etc. (sometimes termed dualism).