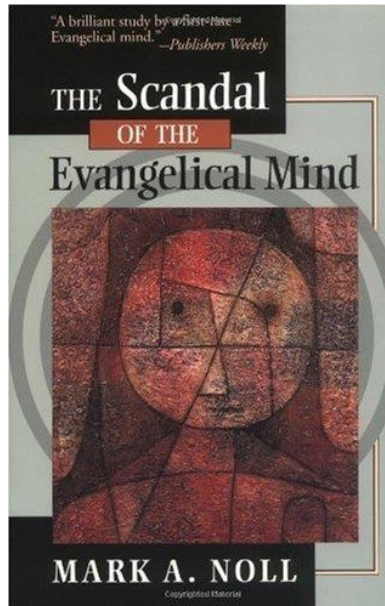


Review of “The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind” by Mark Noll



Grand Rapids Michigan

William B Eerdmans Publishing Company

279 pages, endnotes, topic list, scripture references

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This is not a new book. It was published in 1996. But it has had a long and influential life. Why should a pediatrician review it? And why now? First, I emerged from my medical training in 1967 as a theistic evolutionist, having been thoroughly indoctrinated in “the truth of evolution.” What brought me back to Biblical creation was scientific evidence. Therefore, my attention was drawn to this book when it was quoted to me as the authoritative refutation of my creationist views.

I heard the author being interviewed by Ken Myers of “Mars Hill Audio,” describing creationism as consisting of pronouncements by rural pastors unqualified to discuss science. I emailed Dr. Noll and asked if he had read young earth creationist writings. He replied that he only reads qualified experts in the field. I reminded him that he himself is considered a qualified expert, although he had not gone to the primary sources.

In 2021 I finally purchased his book. Most of it looks, to this non-historian, to be a masterful synthesis of church history, focusing briefly on the church fathers and the reformers. Most of the book addresses evangelical phenomena beginning with the Whitefield and Wesley revivals and the first and second great awakenings in America. He laments the lack of serious scholarship within the movement and analyzes the possible factors that contributed.

He draws on the writings of hundreds of experts, as evidenced by 367 endnotes. He does not dwell on the Scopes Trial which might have precipitated an evaluation of “trial by media” coordinated by anti-creationists. Instead, he simply designates it as the end of the era dominated by William Jennings Bryan.

Noll takes a panoramic view, essentially from 30,000 feet, that does not swoop down to turn over rocks until it gets to the only young earth creationists he references, Drs Whitcomb and Morris. The author quotes from the introduction to The Genesis Flood, highlighting the authors’ goal of ascertaining what the Bible has to say about the Flood and orienting the data of the relevant sciences. (page 201-202)

To Dr. Noll, that sounds like pounding square pegs into round holes and he never looks at the results of that change of orientation, either within Whitcomb and Morris's book or the tsunami of research that followed. The only other ally of modern creationism who is mentioned is Phillip Johnson and he is only applauded for addressing the philosophical overreach of naturalism (page 197), ignoring Johnson's proposal that the validity of scientific evidence needs to be evaluated by legal standards.

He notes that the evangelical experience is based on conversion. Evangelical life is influenced by separation of church and state in America and a populist orientation that has tended to be suspicious of authority and leans towards anti-intellectualism.

The flow of the book is that of a calm and disinterested scholar observing the currents of theology and practice until it comes to what certainly looks like Dr. Noll's "pet peeves." Young earth creation, he claims, is an idea that was never defended until the 20th Century (page 13). This even though Jesus believed in the Great Flood and Job hears God describe the behemoth, a sauropod dinosaur as a real animal that Job would have seen – as being created "with you." Noll attributes recent creation to Seventh Day Adventist George McCready Price (page 189) even though the Jewish calendar puts us in the year 5781.

Dr. Noll also neglects giving voice to the young earth theologians. If God uses evolution and millions of years, then the geologic layers represent death before the time of Adam, thus before sin. If the death penalty only referred to spiritual death, then why is a blood sacrifice necessary? Why did Jesus have to take a body, suffer and die? Or is God just a bad communicator?

Another issue that Noll approaches with less than scholarly detachment is "radical apocalyptic speculation," intense interest in prophecy and a penchant for identifying current events with Biblical prophecies (page 174). He opposes the rapture as a "wooden interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4" (page 143). Yet the disciples were told that Jesus was coming back in the manner He left. We are instructed to be ready because He could come at any time, and that although no one knows the day and hour except the Father, we can know the times and seasons.

Noll claims that spiritual warfare, with events in the spiritual realm paralleling the physical, as depicted in the writings of Frank Peretti, implies a nearly Manichaean dualism (page 140). Yet unlike this heresy that proposes equally powerful good and evil gods, the novels represent a reasonable application of the facts of Scripture. For instance, Jesus cast out demons and stated that Satan wanted to "sift" Peter. Paul warned that we fight spiritual wickedness in high places for which we need spiritual armor and constant prayer. An angel described as coming to answer Daniel's question was detained by "the Prince of Persia." One of the churches addressed in Revelation is located where Satan has his throne. And, of course, Satan is described in the end as defeated and cast into the lake of fire.

Mark Noll was a graduate of Wheaton College and came back to teach for 27 years after getting an MA in English from University of Iowa, an MA in church history from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and a PhD in church history from Vanderbilt University. He has since moved on to Notre Dame and Regent College. During his years at Wheaton, the college was a stronghold of theistic evolution and long age creation.

The book has an index of names and subjects and an index of Scripture references.

Reviewed by Ross S. Olson MD