

Mark A. Noll. *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. x + 199 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3012-3.

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## The Civil War: Mother of Theological Profundity?

Mark A. Noll reminds us that war has “sometimes been the mother of theological profundity” (p. 14). But he argues that this is not true of the American Civil War. He points to the fecundity of other wars, citing such examples as Augustine’s *City of God* (ca. 422), prompted by the sack of Rome in 409; Thomas Aquinas’s engagement with ideological and military conflicts with Islam in the thirteenth century; John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), which was published in response to “conditions created by the French civil wars of the mid-sixteenth century” (p. 14); and Karl Barth’s dialectical theology, which emerged from the ruins of World War I. But the Civil War produced no such creative, theological reflection. In his introduction, Noll concludes that “this book is an effort to explain why” (p. 16).

Most treatments of the relationship between the Civil War and intellectual life have focused on those who abandoned traditional religious convictions. As examples, Noll cites George M. Frederickson’s *The Inner Civil War: Modern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (1965) and Anne C. Rose’s *Victorian America and the Civil War* (1992). Noll wants to understand what happened to the far larger body of evangelical Christians for whom the Civil War did not lead to a crisis of faith, but rather, as he argues, a crisis of biblical interpretation. Indeed, Noll claims that his main purpose “is to show how and why the cultural conflict that led to such a crisis for the nation also constituted a crisis for theology” (p. 6). Before the Civil War, evangelicals (and the politicians who wished for their votes) regularly cited the Bible in support of their policies and convictions. After the Civil War, the Bible remained the source of private devotion, but Noll claims that its public role was severely limited. Noll persuasively argues that the central issue in this crisis was the question of “the Bible and slavery,” but also points out that a second issue developed over the question of trying to understand God’s purpose in providence.

In his introductory chapter, Noll lays out the argu-

ments of four leading preachers in the winter of 1860-61: Henry Ward Beecher, an abolitionist Congregational minister in Brooklyn; James Henley Thornwell, an Old School Presbyterian in South Carolina who defended slavery from scripture; Henry Van Dyke, an anti-abolitionist pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn; and Rabbi Morris J. Raphall of the Jewish Synagogue of New York City who defended the institution of slavery without approving the particular practice of slavery in the American South. All of these preachers agreed that the Bible was the supreme authority for faith and practice, but they could not agree on what the Bible actually said regarding American slavery.

Chapter 2 presents the “Historical Contexts” of antebellum evangelicalism. Noll briefly sketches the main arguments of his *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (2002), explaining the influence of “common sense” philosophy, republicanism, and evangelical Protestantism. He demonstrates that by 1860 “evangelical Protestants, who believed that the Bible was true and who trusted their own interpretations of Scripture above all other religious authorities, constituted the nation’s most influential cultural force. By 1860 religion had reached a higher point of public influence than at any previous time in American history” (p. 28).

In the next chapter, “The Crisis over the Bible,” Noll explicates the biblical debates over slavery, especially by utilizing an 1844-45 debate between Francis Wayland and Richard Fuller. The failure of the theologians to resolve their differences meant that “it was left to those consummate theologians, the Reverend Doctors Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman, to decide what in fact the Bible actually meant” (p. 50).

As the title of chapter 4 points out, quoting Philip Schaff, “The negro question lies far deeper than the slavery question.” But, as Noll observes, very few people considered the racial question as a significant matter. Only a handful of writers considered the possibility that the bib-

lical defense of slavery would logically result in endorsing white slavery as well as black slavery. Noll engages with a variety of writers who sought to take scriptural teachings regarding slavery seriously and apply them in creative ways to the American South.

The advent of the war produced what Noll calls “The Crisis over Providence” in chapter 5. Evangelical Christians were convinced that God governed all events of history, but differed widely in their interpretations of what God was doing in history. Thornwell was convinced that God would defend the Confederacy, while Horace Bushnell insisted that God was on the side of the Union. Noll concludes by suggesting that the problem was not their trust in providence (a doctrine common to all traditional Christians), but “trust in providence so narrowly defined by the republican, covenantal, commonsensical, Enlightenment, and—above all—nationalistic categories that Protestant evangelicals had so boldly appropriated with such galvanizing effects in the early decades of the nineteenth century” (p. 94).

Perhaps the most enlightening two chapters are the last two. In “Opinions of Protestants Abroad,” Noll surveys comments from European Protestants who usually opposed slavery, but did not necessarily support the Union. Noll points to a German Protestant editor who viewed the dissolution of the Union as the natural result of the fragmentation of American churches. Many Europeans viewed the Civil War as demonstrating the folly of republicanism. Since European Protestants had never embraced the democratic, commonsense approach to reading the Bible, they found much that was objectionable both in Northern and Southern evangelicalism.

Likewise, in “Catholic Viewpoints,” Noll examines both American and foreign Roman Catholic commentary on slavery and the Civil War. “They suggested that the Protestant embrace of unfettered economic freedom actually damaged Christianity,” and argued that “Protestant American individualism” had resulted in the confusion over the Bible’s teaching on slavery (p. 125). Due to strong anti-Catholic tendencies in antebellum culture, American Catholics tended to stay on the sidelines in debates over slavery, but Noll points out that foreign Catholics were often more vocal. Not surprisingly, many conservative Catholics believed that the solution was for Americans to accept “the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church to guide interpretation of the Bible” (p. 155).

Noll concludes with a “Retrospect and Prospect” in which he suggests that the postwar years revealed two

continuing problems which emerged from the Civil War—“the enduring reality of racism” and “the expansion of consumer capitalism” (p. 159). But unlike the antebellum era, evangelical Protestants in the Gilded Age had little to say about social issues. “The theology that had risen to preeminence in the early nineteenth century continued to work effectively for vast multitudes in private; but because of its public failure during the war, it had little to offer American society more generally in the decades that followed the war” (p. 160). The end result was an “implicit national agreement not to base public policy of any consequence on interpretations of Scripture” (p. 161), a result that Noll thinks has had both positive and negative effects on both the nation and the churches.

This book should provide the stimulus for further studies of theology and the Civil War. The chapters on European Protestant and Catholic reactions are immensely useful, and provide an external perspective on slavery and the Civil War which begs for further exploration. In a book of this length one cannot expect full treatment of every topic, so readers should not be disappointed at Noll’s selectivity of sources. But, while it may be true that the 1845 Wayland and Fuller debates were one of the last “serious one-on-one debates” over slavery (p. 36-37), it should be pointed out that George Armstrong and Cortlandt Van Rensselaer engaged in a similar debate as late as 1857-58 in the *Presbyterian Magazine*, maintaining a remarkably civil tone at a time when most religious periodicals absolutely refused to allow discussion of slavery in their pages for fear of the virulence that almost invariably resulted.[1]

The major problem with the book is that the evidence of the book does not support its conclusions. Noll claims that the Civil War did not produce theological profundity. But the evidence of the book points in the opposite direction. If the sack of Rome helped produce Augustine’s *City of God* over the next twenty years, and if World War I contributed to Barth’s theological development (which only emerged fully in the 1930s), then we should not expect to see the fruits of theological reflection emerging from the Civil War until the 1870s and 1880s—the decades that witnessed the emergence of liberal Protestantism. If Noll is correct, as I think he is, regarding the crisis of biblical interpretation over slavery, then the theological creativity that we should expect to follow the Civil War is how to maintain a sort of Christianity that no longer requires a literal, commonsense form of biblical interpretation. And that is precisely what happens!

In light of Noll’s thesis, it would be interesting to see how Charles D. Cashdollar’s *The Transformation of The-*

*ology, 1830-1890* (1989) would read differently if he had considered the impact of the Civil War on the reception of positivism in America. Cashdollar uses 1865 as the watershed year—but that is because of the publication of John Stuart Mill's *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1865). Noll's evidence suggests that for Americans, 1865 also signaled a watershed in biblical interpretation and public theology.

Likewise, it is interesting to reread William R. Hutchison's *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (1992) in light of Noll's work. Certainly the roots of theological modernism can be found long before the Civil War, but Hutchison's narrative indicates that it was only in the decade immediately after the war that theological modernism took root, and yet Hutchison never mentions the war. Is it possible that the event which shook America to the core of its identity really had no effect on the development of the theologians and pastors who grew up

with the daily memory of the slaughter of their brothers and their parishioners?

Could it be that the distinctively American form of theological modernism was the fruit of the Civil War?—The crisis of biblical interpretation and providence of the 1860s produced a generation of theologians and pastors who could no longer affirm the historic confessions of their fathers. In short, in the wake of the Civil War, American evangelicals came to the conclusion that they could no longer insist upon their own interpretations of scripture—and so embraced a theology of tolerance and love in which all theological statements were culturally relative.

#### Note

[1]. An account of this debate can be found in Peter J. Wallace, "The Bond of Union': The Old School Presbyterian Church and the American Nation, 1837-1861" (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2004): chap. 7.

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