

Notes by Randy Isaac on this article

Evangelicals, Creation, and Scripture: Legacies from a Long History

Mark A. Noll

This article specifies fifteen attitudes, assumptions, and convictions from the long history of western interaction between Christianity and science that continue to shape the perceptions of American conservative Protestants to this day. It finds three of them arising in the Middle Ages and early modern period, five from early United States history, five more from the modern university era, and two from the recent period of culture wars. The overall appeal is to realize how much precommitments affect contested issues of science and religion and to urge as much self-critical self-consciousness as possible when approaching such questions.

Mark Noll is one of the premier historians of Protestant Christianity. He graduated from Wheaton College in 1968 with a B.A. degree in English. He earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in history from Vanderbilt University in 1974 and 1975. He is presently Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame. He may be best known for his 1995 book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* which begins with the assertion that "The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind."

In this article, based on a lecture I heard him give at a BioLogos Conference nearly ten years ago, he shares some deep insight into the various forces that shaped the current cultural relationship between science and Christianity. He identifies 15 factors, from the Middle Ages to today, that have influenced our ideas.

- I. Middle Ages and early modern period
 - a. Univocity
 - i. "once something is explained clearly and completely as a natural occurrence, there is no other realm of being that can allow it to be described in any other way" i.e. events can either be explained scientifically or as an act of God but not both.
 1. If there is a scientific explanation, then there is no theistic one
 2. If there is no scientific explanation, then there must be a theistic one
 3. If there is a theistic explanation, then there is no scientific one
 4. If there is no theistic explanation, then there could be a scientific one
 - b. Harmonization
 - i. "those who believed God created the physical world and revealed himself verbally in Scripture should harmonize in one complete picture what they learned about nature from studying nature and what they learned about nature from studying Scripture."
 - c. Natural theology
 - i. "not only did God create and providentially order the natural world, but humans could figure out exactly how and why God ordered creation as he did."
 - d. Summary
 - i. "the assumptions of univocal metaphysics, harmonization, and natural theology created powerful channels in which much subsequent discussion has flowed."

- II. Early United States history (pre-Revolutionary War to the Civil War)
 - a. Voluntary Organization
 - i. “the best medium for nurturing the Christian faith in a republican and democratic society was churches organized democratically on a voluntary basis”
 - b. Scripture as a focus of authority
 - i. “the Bible was a uniquely powerful agent for evangelism, training in godliness, guidance to churches, and—also—the construction of social order.”
 - c. Scripture as a defense against secularism
 - i. “the Bible, appropriated democratically, and science, also appropriated democratically, were the safest possible guardians against the corruptions of tradition and the perils of infidelity.”
 - d. The sufficiency of Scripture
 - i. “the Bible only” provided the ideal anchor amidst the tumults of an otherwise unstable world.”
 - e. Literal hermeneutics
 - i. “the best biblical interpretation was the most literal interpretation as grasped by the most democratic audience of readers.”
 - f. Summary
 - i. “A democratic, populist, and literal hermeneutic was the interpretive strategy that evangelical Protestants exploited to win the new republic for Christ. The social transformation that resulted seemed to validate the evangelicals’ approach to Scripture. For reaching the unreached with the Christian message, for organizing congregations and building churches, for creating agencies to construct and reform society, reliance on the Bible alone, literally interpreted, worked wonders.”
- III. The Modern University (post-Civil War)
 - a. Enemy territory
 - i. “the modern research university defines enemy territory that can be explored only with the greatest caution and only with defenses constantly on guard for intellectual battle.”
 - b. Scripture vs the Modern University
 - i. “the Scriptures—as preached to all, read by all, and applicable to all—provide the strongest support for Christian life and truth amidst the perils of the modern age.”
 - c. Scripture as the best bulwark against infidelity
 - i. “popular mobilization appealing to the commonsense of ordinary Bible readers and to time-tested explanations for how God relates to nature— univocal metaphysics, harmonization, and natural theology—is the best way to enlist the Scriptures for combating infidelity and moral decline.”
 - d. Secularism underlies scientific anti-theism
 - i. “when scientists or the popularizers of science make use of new proposals about nature to undercut traditional belief in God, the problem is almost always with those who make the proposals and almost never with assumptions about

- the neutral character of science or assumptions about how science and Scripture should be aligned.”
- e. Origins and eschatology at the core of Biblical truth
 - i. “the norm for interpreting all of Scripture as God’s life-giving revelation is strongly supported by literal interpretations of the first and last parts of the Bible.”
- f. Summary
 - i. The threat posed by modern universities can best be met by a firm commitment to a literal interpretation of Scripture
- IV. Culture Wars (since mid-20th century)
 - a. Government funding for teaching evolution
 - i. “when scientific teaching that appears to undercut Christian belief is supported by both the federal government and by the scientific establishment, truth and morality are under deadly assault.”
 - b. Evolution represents all threats
 - i. “opposition to evolution is a useful shorthand for opposing radical feminism, the sexual revolution, the normalization of homosexuality, and alternative family definition, as well as for opposing perceived attacks on Christianity.”
 - c. Summary
 - i. Historical convictions and experience culminate in the establishment of a cultural war of academic intellectualism vs biblically based spirituality.

Discussion questions:

1. In what ways do we express the idea of univocity in our daily lives?
2. What are the pros and cons of the principle of harmonization?
3. What truths lie in the ideas of natural theology?
4. Why did the Bible and especially inerrancy become of such prominence in early America?
5. How did the Civil War affect the role of Christians in the public arena?
6. How is the conflict between modern universities and the Christian community expressed today?
7. What can we do to influence today’s cultural wars?