

*Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind*. By Mark A. Noll. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011, xii+180 pp., \$25.00.

Over 25 years have passed since Noll's indictment of the evangelical mind (*The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Eerdmans, 1994). In his sequel, *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind*, Noll's purpose is more constructive than critical, and the prospect for a genuine renaissance in Christian thought is seen as more hopeful than bleak. Noll's thesis is straightforward: the reality of Jesus Christ is foundational to the "rationale, means, methods, paradigms, and telos" (148-149) of the Christian scholarly enterprise.

The book is divided into two parts. In Chapters 1-3, Noll develops a Christ-centered framework for learning. In Chapters 4-7 he applies this Christological framework to academic disciplines in general (Chapter 4) and then specifically to history, science, and biblical studies (Chapters 5-7). The book concludes with a postscript by Noll offering an updated and hopeful assessment of the evangelical mind today. A nice resource for those interested in Christian learning is Noll's bibliography of works published on the topic since his 1994 book. Noll's prose, as always, are lucid and erudite and the book, at 180 pages, should read quickly for the scholar and layperson alike.

"How is it possible," Noll asks in Chapter 1, "to pursue goals defined by lofty phrases like 'first-rate Christian scholarship' or 'the Christian use of the mind'" (22)? The answer, says Noll, "must come from considering Christ" (22). And the Christian understanding of Christ is best found and summarized in the great creeds of the faith—the Apostolic, Nicean, and Chalcedonian proclamations of the divinity and humanity of Christ and his salvific work on the

cross. Hence, the creeds about Christ are foundational to Christian scholarship; Christ is the source and telos of all things, including all truths that can be discovered.

In Chapter 2 Noll provides seven motives for serious learning grounded in the person and work of Christ: as *Creator* and *Sustainer* of all things, (a) all study is study of what God has made and in principle this ought to lead us to Christ; as *Redeemer*, (b) study is justified in light of the priority of, together with God, meeting human needs; as *Sovereign*, (c) the Christian can have confidence that God is attached (however difficult the connections) to anything we might study; (d) as *Incarnate Lord*, (d) the material realm in which God revealed himself most fully is infused with an unusual dignity that invites investigation, (e) inspires delight, (f) dignifies the human study of personality, and (g) grounds our search for beauty in the reality of Christ.

It is in Chapter 3 that Noll provides four concrete principles detailing how scholarship might proceed along distinctly Christian lines. The first is what Noll calls doubleness: “the doubleness of Christ as divine and human, which undergirds the whole edifice of Christian life and thought, is a model for studying the spheres of existence” and thus a Christian scholar “should be predisposed to seek knowledge about particular matters from more than one angle” (46). The second principle, called contingency, arises from the surface implausibility of an incarnate deity and the reality that human salvation arose from such an incarnation. Culling from episodes within the gospels, Noll shows that to all forms of unbelief, the response of Christ was always the same: come and see. Because of the reality of contingency, as scholars, we must “seek out as much evidence as possible about whatever we are studying” (50) and allow “the evidence of experience [to] guide thinking” (51). Regarding the third principle, particularity, Noll argues that since “God used the particular means of the incarnation to accomplish a universal redemption” (58), Christianity offers mediation between “the perspectival and the

universal” (55). Thus Christian scholars can calmly navigate through the modern/postmodern debate endorsing, on the one hand, universal truth, and on the other hand, a kind of perspectivalism that validates the reality that individual scholars each have a unique cognitive access-point to the data set (of an academic discipline). Finally, Christological considerations provide an antidote to the moral diseases common to the intellectual life, namely, self-sufficiency and self-exaltation. “Knowing Christ,” says Noll, “means learning humility” (62). The genius of Noll’s concrete suggestions is hardly in the articulation of the principles themselves—surely many scholars, Christian or otherwise, intuitively employ these principles as they go about their intellectual tasks. The genius, rather, is in showing how a distinctively Christian view of reality can ground these guiding principles, inspire confidence in the process of discovery for the scholar, and avoid a kind of blind dogmatism derived from (justified or unjustified) philosophical or theological convictions. And the fourth, self-denial, is absolutely essential for the Christian scholar as she navigates through the modern academy and its impulse toward hubris, self-advancement, and competition.

In Chapter 4, Noll focuses on the doctrine of the atonement with the stated goal of asking “a theological principle to serve as a compass” (65). Noll ably expounds the doctrine of the atonement and makes many valid connections between the atonement and various academic disciplines. A key insight I would like to see him press into service is the idea that there is a “strong narrative movement” (69) within the doctrine of the atonement: “the drama of salvation...must be narrated” (69) and thus, “scholarship about humanity must in some form reflect the narrative of God’s saving work in Christ” (71). I think Noll is correct of course, but the narrative movement is wider in scope, as Noll acknowledges—Creation-Fall-Redemption-Restoration—and it seems that it is this grand narrative, and not just the atonement, that *all*

Christian scholarship must in some form reflect. I wonder if a foundation based on the metanarrative of Scripture, rather than the great Christological creeds, might better serve the Christian scholar and the task of learning. Such a foundation reveals the missionary impulse of God most clearly and, by my lights, could have helped Noll surface a key Christological insight that he seemed to miss (or under appreciate), to be discussed below.

Moving quickly now, Chapter 5 applies the Christological framework to the nature of historical knowledge (where a “chastened realism” (84) is advocated) and the knotty issue of how to understand divine providence in historical writing (where our Christian convictions regarding divine providence can be legitimately explicit or implicit depending on the purpose and audience of the work). In Chapter 6, Noll shows how a Christological framework can shed light on the relationship between science and religion, and notably, how an appeal to “doubleness” and “contingency” provide a way to harmonize evolutionary theory with a high view of Scripture. In Chapter 7, we are encouraged to realize afresh how important the Christ-centered message of Scripture is for understanding the Bible as a whole.

One potential worry I have after reading the second part of the book: Noll doesn't seem to be consistently aware of the fact that *all* scholarship is shaped and informed by the dominant norms, practices, and faith presuppositions within each academic discipline. Noll seems most aware of this in Chapter 7 where he approvingly cites Peter Enns's latest work, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Baker, 2005) and Enns's charge that modernism and its core assumptions guide contemporary Biblical scholarship instead of principles taken from Scripture itself (135). On the other hand, in Chapter 6, Noll seems unaware of the same modernist assumptions that guide much of contemporary science, including science conducted by Christians, in his (seemingly) quick and easy acceptance of “the full

picture of human evolution now standard in many scientific disciplines” (124). It could be the case, as Noll rightly points out, that this standard evolutionary story is correct. But it could also be the case that the methods employed in arriving at this standard evolutionary story are guided more by modernist assumptions than Biblical principles, a possibility that Noll doesn’t consider.

My main complaint with Noll’s masterful work is that he has not gone far enough in applying his Christological framework to the task of learning. Specifically Noll does not consider how Christ’s *mission* informs the Christian scholarly task. If Christ is the “Christ of the Academic Road” (22) as Noll states, where is this road headed? To what end the Christian scholarly enterprise? It seems to me that Christ’s mission, namely, to “seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10) ought to inform Christian scholarship just as much as the reality of Christ as Creator and Sustainer. As witnesses for Christ (Acts 1:8), our scholarship must always be conducted with the progress of the gospel upper-most in our minds. The work of Nicholas Wolterstorff and his key insight that Christian scholarship is justified in terms of justice-in-shalom is helpful on this point. I suggest that a Christological framework to scholarship, when considering Christ’s mission and the great mission of God as articulated from Genesis 12-Revelation 20, necessitates a missional impulse to the Christian scholarly task as follows: as Christian scholars, we ought to engage in research with one eye toward transforming our academic discipline (where it needs transformation) and one eye toward the (spiritual and physical) needs of the world. In doing so Christian scholars will present a beautiful and brilliant Christ to the academy and world *and* be faithful witnesses. With this concern now stated, I highly recommend Noll’s *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind* as a must read for all Christian scholars.

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