

BOOK REVIEW

of

Mark A. Noll,

America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln,
Oxford University Press, 2002.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

From the back cover of *America's God, Books & Culture* printed the following: "Those who might consider *America's God* an old-fashioned work about a bygone era and might therefore pass Noll by will do so at their peril . . . Argue over interfaith services after 9/11, prayers by football teams at public schools, 'creationism' versus 'evolutionism,' Focus on the Family; 'the virtues,' the American moral condition, 'under God' in the Pledge of Allegiance, the political power of the Religious Right – engage in any or all of these debates, and you will be contending in the shadow of the achievements of Noll's cast of characters." In other words, to understand the present we must know the past. This book was the winner of the Historical Society's 2004 Eugene Genovese Best Book in American History Prize. Sean Michael Lucas, Assistant Professor of Church History at Covenant Theological Seminary and Vice President for Academics and Dean of Faculty, refers to this book as Mark Noll's *magnum opus* (a person's greatest work). Admittedly this is a somewhat forbidding tome. It is lengthy, being over 600 pages if we include notes, glossary, bibliography, and index. And history is not something that many of us approach with enthusiasm. Nonetheless, as the above quote states, we ignore it at our own peril. Noll, McManis Professor of Christian Thought at Wheaton College, believes that this time frame of Edwards to Lincoln was a period of great change, not only politically, but even more importantly theologically. At the end of this period, the roll of church in society had greatly changed, the country had gone through not only the war for independence but also the Civil War, and most tragically theological confidence in the Bible had been greatly shaken by those changes in society. At the beginning of the period theologians were the most highly educated and influential members of society; at the end of the period some of those previously elevated theologians were, if not disgraced, marginalized, due in part due to their support for slavery in the South on supposedly Biblical grounds. If the Biblical witness could not be relied upon for instruction on something as basic as slavery, an issue about which the nation paid dearly, then perhaps there was something inherently wrong with the prevailing "Bible alone" literal means of interpretation. *The New Republic* writes that this book by Noll "is destined to shape discussions of the history of American religion and politics for a long time." *The Weekly Standard* refers to the book as "Magisterial". In 2005, *Time* magazine named Noll one of the country's "25 Most Influential Evangelicals."

The book is divided into five parts. Part I, Introductory, consists of chapters 1, 2, and 3: Introduction: Theology and History; Theology in Colonial America; and The Long Life and Final Collapse of the Puritan Canopy. Part II, Synthesis, consists of chapters 4 through 8: Republicanism and Religion: The American Exception; Christian Republicanism; Theistic Common Sense; Colonial Theologies in the Era of the Revolution; and Innovative (but Not "American") Theologies in the Era of the Revolution. Part III, Evangelization, consists of chapters 9, 10, and 11: The Evangelical Surge . . . ; . . . and Constructing a New Nation; and Ideological Permutations. Part IV, Americanization, consists of chapters 12 through 17: Assumptions and Assertions of American Theology; The Americanization of Calvinism: Contexts and Questions; The Americanization of Calvinism: The Congregational Era, 1793–1827; The Americanization of Calvinism: Explosion, 1827–1860; The Americanization of Methodism: The Age of Asbury; and The Americanization of Methodism: After Asbury. Part V, Crisis, consists of chapters 18 through 22: The "Bible Alone" and a Reformed, Literal Hermeneutic; The Bible and Slavery; Failed Alternatives; Climax and Exhaustion in the Civil War; and Conclusion: Contexts and Dogma.

There are a few things that made a particular impression upon me. First, after Noll's lengthy historical review of theology and approaches to Christianity during the period of concern to the book, without significantly divulging his own views, he finally 'fesses up in the conclusion: "Attentive readers of these pages [apparently that excludes me] will realize that if I had to recommend only one American theologian [note that he does not restrict his comment to the time period of the book] for the purposes of understanding God, the self, and the world as they really are, I would respond as the Separatist Congregational minister Israel Holly did in 1770 when he found himself engaged in theological battle: 'Sir, if I was to engage with you in this controversy, I would say, *Read Edwards!* And if you wrote again, I would tell you to *Read Edwards!* And if you wrote again, I would still tell you to *Read Edwards!*'" I have read a little of Jonathan Edwards, to much profit, but only a small part of his considerable output, of which the Yale University Press now has some 25 volumes. I know from my own profession that one should not spend an excessive amount of time reading lesser lights while ignoring the bright lights. A lesson that seems to be hard to learn. The above quotation, from a very well-read and well-respected evangelical scholar is very impressive indeed.

Second, Christians in the South as well as in the North during the Civil War, including theologians, were convinced that God was on their side, and that this resulted in a devastating decline in church attendance and confidence that the Bible could be read in a simple, literal manner. According to Noll, the theologians of the South seemingly won the day in terms of a literal reading of the Bible, justifying slavery. Theologians such as Dabney and Thornwell, widely recognized as outstanding conservative theologians in the North as well as the South, strongly supported slavery, and did so upon their interpretation of the Bible. Most of the abolitionists in the North were of a more liberal theological persuasion, convinced that slavery was wrong no matter what the Bible said. Even after the war was over, Dabney continued to be an apologist for slavery and the old way of life in the South. It is interesting that, according to Noll, almost no one outside of the United States thought that slavery could be justified based on Christian beliefs. Especially since slavery in the South was not slavery of just anyone, but of a particular race of people! No one was arguing that slavery of the Irish would be justified, for example, or slavery of the Chinese; only people of African descent! Yet, some thought that the Bible justified just that! And both sides thought God was on their side, and that the Southern theologians were correct that the Bible justified what was being done in the South! Not quite everyone, of course, and President Lincoln was one exception.

Third, Noll is amazed that Abraham Lincoln, without any formal education in theology or the Bible, and not even a member of a church, wrote some of the most theologically perceptive and humble interpretations of the Civil War from a "Christian" perspective. Noll asks "how was it that this man who never joined a church and who read only a little theology could, on occasion, give expression to profound theological interpretations of the War between the States?" And again he asks "how was it that the distinguished theologians of Lincoln's generation, some of whom remain highly honored in various religious communities to this day, were able to offer so little of theological profundity concerning the religious meaning of the Civil War?" Noll continues, "none of America's respected religious leaders – as defined by contemporaries or later scholars – mustered the theological power so economically expressed in Lincoln's Second Inaugural. None probed so profoundly the ways of God or the response of humans to the divine constitution of the world. None penetrated as deeply into the nature of providence. And none described the fate of humanity before God with the humility or the sagacity of the president. . . . Lincoln's conception of God's rule over the world set him apart from the recognized theologians of his day." Lincoln, the president of the victorious North, almost alone in his generation, suggested that the responsibility for the Civil War must be shared by those in the North as well as those in the South. At the end of Lincoln's Second Inaugural address, he concluded by acknowledging that the progress of the United States was as nothing compared to the mysterious will of God. Noll continues: "The contrast between the learned religious thinkers and Lincoln in how they interpreted the war poses the great theological puzzle of the Civil War. . . . The country's best theologians, by contrast, presented a thin, simple view of God's providence and a morally juvenile view of the nation and its fate. . . . For the theologians there was little mystery in how God dealt with the world; for Lincoln there was awesome mystery."

Fourth, Noll writes about how, even for those with the best of intentions, bring their presuppositions with them when they interpret the Bible, even those who proclaim "the Bible alone" and a reformed, literal hermeneutic. This, I think, is the main theme of Noll's book. At the beginning of the time frame of the book, during the mid-1700s, probably the dominant approach to the Bible, at least among the most influential, could be perhaps labeled as Old Calvinist Puritanical. However, republican ideas of self-determination, the right to rebel against traditional authority, and a representative form of government, so entered into the mind-set and world view of the population that it significantly influenced Christian's approach to church and theology. Noll writes: "American Christians, despite substantial conflicts among themselves, took for granted a fundamental compatibility between orthodox Protestant religion and republican principles of government. Most English-speaking Protestants outside the United States did not." Another significant influence was that of common sense moral philosophy. This philosophy was well-received because it reported to "show how Enlightenment ideals could restore intellectual confidence and promote social cohesion." "The startling reversal in which America's religious leaders took up the language of republicanism was the most important ideological development for the future of theology in the United States. That reversal, however, was not the only intellectual surprise of the period. The turn by Protestants to the language of the eighteenth century's new moral philosophy represented as much a break from historic associations as did the turn to republicanism . . . theistic common sense would exert a tremendous influence on theology in the nineteenth century. The force of what simply had to be taken for granted was precisely the force that changed how Americans thought about human character, the nature of salvation, and the relationship of God to the world." I think it is safe to say that Noll considers most of the influence of republicanism and common sense philosophy upon Christianity to be negative. The scary thing is, that the way Noll presents this influence is such that most were probably unaware of it, thinking that they were reading the Bible unbiased and without presuppositions.

This work appears to me to be Christian scholarship of the highest level. It reveals how much we are influenced by our surrounding culture, along with its biases and presuppositions. It is, in that sense, a call for introspection and reflection, and a recommitment to be a true disciple of the revealed Word.