

BOOK REVIEW OF *TURNING POINTS*

A Book Review

Submitted to Dr. Rex Butler

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Noll, Mark A. *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*. Second ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000.

Introduction

Mark Noll's book, *Turning Point – Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, as an attempt to identify the key narrative movements in the story of Christianity and make them accessible to the lay reader. At the time of the book's writing, Dr. Noll was serving as a professor of history at Wheaton College. At the time of this review, Dr. Noll serves as the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame. Though currently serving at a Roman Catholic institution, Dr. Noll writes out of a protestant and evangelical heritage. However, most, if not all, of his writing is prepared and published as a historian of first-rate quality.

The rationale for the study of church history is presented on page 15 in the introduction where Dr. Noll states

In a word, since Christianity is not captured simply in a set of dogmas, a moral code, or a picture of the universe – though Christianity certainly involves dogmas, morality, and a worldview – since Christianity is ultimately the acts of God in time and space, centrally the acts of God in Christ, then to study the history of Christianity is continually to remember the historical character of Christian faith.

This complex sentence establishes the basis for writing a book that it directed toward a lay audience. Essentially, Dr. Noll is saying that the Christian God is a God who acts and is perceivable during different stages of human existence. In many ways, such a basis assures the reader that just a God has acted during the time of scripture; God still acts and is working out the fulfillment of the promises that are found in scripture. Hence, Christianity is a faith that corresponds to a recordable and experiential reality.

Book Summary

Since a full scope study of church history is simply beyond the grasp of the lay reader, Noll selects twelve "turning points" in history of Christianity that he believes are pivotal and

vital for framing one's understanding of the progression of history after the time of the apostles. In brief, Noll identifies those turning points as:

1. The Fall of Jerusalem (70 AD), which resulted in Christianity's necessary tie to Judaism
2. The Council of Nicaea (325 AD), which addressed the deity of Christ but also introduced the role of secular government into the affairs of the church
3. The Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), which addressed the person of Christ as the God-man
4. The Monastic Rescue of the Church from secular and political influences (530 AD)
5. The Culmination of Christendom in 800 AD wherein medieval Christianity was essentially fused to the Roman empire
6. The split between the East and the West church over doctrinal matters such as "the double-procession of Spirit from the Father and the Son" in 1054 AD
7. The Beginning of Protestantism with the Martin Luther's protest against the abuses in the Roman Catholic church at the Diet of Worms in 1521 AD
8. The English Act of Supremacy in 1534 AD
9. The Roman Catholic attempt at Reform and World Evangelization in 1540 AD
10. The Conversion of the Wesley Brothers which birthed a "new piety" in 1738 AD
11. The French Revolution in 1789 AD
12. The establishment of the Edinburgh Missionary Conference with a view of world evangelization in 1910 AD

Noll concludes this book with a brief chapter on other events from the twentieth century that could have the potential to be turning points in the history of the church. Specifically, he considers the rise and spread of Pentecostalism, the impacts of Vatican Two, the increased visibility of women and their role in the life of the church, and bible translation.

As was mentioned earlier, in many ways, these turning points provide a framework for understanding the flow and significance of the history of Christianity. For instance, though Noll is faithful to focus the majority of his chapters on these particular turning points, he also includes a lot of supplemental material that makes the book read like a church history text as oppose to simply a text that highlights points in church history. Furthermore, each chapter concludes with suggested reading that will help the reader go deeper into each epoch and subject that is covered in the respective chapter. In other words, the book reads a lot like a survey of church history, which makes it unique and fitting for a lay audience.

Book Details

Of all the particular areas in which this book shines, one of the key areas is the readability of the book. Noll frequently defines difficult terms and concepts in the course of the writing and is able to hold the reader's attention rather well considering the material under consideration. An important example of this is found in the discussion of the council of Chalcedon. Generally speaking, the Christological disputes of this time are rather difficult to follow and define, especially when the intended audience is not really familiar with the creeds and councils of the early church. Noll, however, does a tremendous job briefly explaining the views of men like Apollonarius and Etychus without going into more detail than is necessary. Features like this made the "turning points" appear to be as significant as they truly are without forcing the reader to constantly have to read other sources to understand the theological context in which such ecumenical statements were established.

Author Details

As a protestant, one would expect Noll's writing to be heavily slanted in favor of the protestant and evangelical case. In many regards, Roman Catholic's and the Orthodox make this the battleground of debate. Noll, though, does Protestants and evangelical a wonderful services by being honest and attempting to simply give people the facts. This means that there are many times when he affirms truths that could be viewed as a threat to the protestant faith. A perfect example of this is found in chapter nine, where Noll addresses the reform efforts in the context of the Roman Catholic Church. Most Protestants would not consider this a significant "turning point" because of its close proximity to the reformation, which was truly a turning point. Instead of seeking to reconcile all of these facts with his personal view, he simply records the facts and entrusts the reader with the task of discerning the relationship between biblical truth and historical practice.

Closing Evaluation

For the most part, this book did not disappoint. In fact, it easily goes beyond the fulfillment of its stated purpose of providing a readable book for lay readers that will help them understand and appreciate God's work through the history of Christianity. Noll possesses a wonderful ability to cover much ground without getting bogged down into insignificant details. One cannot help but wonder why there have not been more works like this one written for the lay reader, especially in light of most protestants ignorance of church history. In many ways, the efforts of the reformation are in jeopardy of being lost because of the rather strong case that Roman Catholics and Orthodox apologist claims on the grounds of church history and the history of biblical interpretation. A work like Noll's book is just what Protestants need to read; namely, an honest and straightforward account of the history of the church that is not slanted in one particular confessional direction. Protestants must realize that the study of church history is not a threat to their beliefs and practices. In this respect, Noll's book is very helpful.

By way of critique though, one cannot help but wonder how some of the turning points can be so broad (i.e. – the French Revolution) and others be relatively narrow (i.e. – the Wesley's and pietism). To be fair, Noll acknowledges that such questions of his turning points is actually a good things that he hopes will be done. Yet, it is hard to imagine that one can address the impact of pietism without giving more consideration to others that promoted the practice both before and after the Wesley brothers. Another critique could seem somewhat contradictory to other statements that have been made above, but it is a necessary critique. There is a fine line between being a fair historian and an ecumenicist that would dare not call another group's views into question. The fact that Noll can be accepted in a Roman Catholic university while being a Protestant historian could give credence to the historical argumentation that often comes from those who despise the truths of the Reformation. The reader must read with a discerning and fair eye that accepts Noll's writings in light of other

historical research. Fortunately for the reader, Noll does not fear such scrutiny, which helps to assuage concerns that may rise from his close affiliation with non-protestant institutions. It for this reason that this book should be read by all concerned Christians and improved upon by Protestant scholars who care about the history of the church.