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The Civil War as a Theological Crisis. Mark A. Noll

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Mark A. Noll. *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*.
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006

Reviewed by Mary Stovall Richards

In early September 1862, following disastrous Union losses, President Abraham Lincoln meditated on the role of God in human affairs and the attempts of humankind to discern divine will: “In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong. God can not be *for*, and *against* the same thing at the same time” (88–89). Lincoln’s observation aptly summarized a major dilemma facing Americans, North and South, in the Civil War and the decades preceding it. How could each side claim the support of God for its position?

Mark A. Noll, the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame, looks beyond the more obvious political, economic, and social lines of cleavage between opposing sections and instead focuses on their contradictory opinions of God’s will, which transcended geographical lines. Even Northerners were divided among themselves in interpreting the Bible. In this collection of expanded lectures originally delivered at Penn State University and based on his analysis of writings of American and European theologians, Noll poses the questions: How could Protestants who had so much in common come to understand the Bible and God’s will so differently? How was this divergence manifested in views on slavery, which ultimately led to the Civil War? And, why did this dissension result in a theological crisis for American Protestants?

Noll’s answers in this well-written and insightful work are complex. To address these questions, he takes on a multitude of issues: background on the establishment of the United States as a primarily Protestant nation, arguments over divine approbation of slavery, the role of race in religious discussions of American slavery and the legacy of that discussion, Northern and Southern views on God’s intervention in history, and viewpoints of European Christians on slavery and the Civil War. It is a tall order for a slim volume, but Noll makes every word count. In the process he

demonstrates convincingly that one cannot fathom American culture, slavery and the sectional crisis, and the Civil War without understanding the centrality of covenantal Protestantism to both shapers of thought and ordinary Americans in the mid-nineteenth century.

Thus, Noll's book offers perspectives not just on American Protestantism but also on the mind and values of American society generally. Protestantism became dominant in the United States, according to Noll, because it had wed religion and republicanism; not only were thousands converted during the Second Great Awakening, but the religion also offered a vision of America that coincided with the converts' political views. Protestant ministers argued that Americans were chosen people, part of God's covenant, which emphasized the connection between civic virtue and freedom. Further, Protestants had embraced the Enlightenment ideal of individual reason. An ordinary, diligent person could read and understand the Bible. Such views, Noll contends, empowered individuals as arbiters of biblical understanding to such an extent that those who challenged a reader's "common-sense" meaning of a text were not seen as mistaken but as maliciously distorting scripture. When the interpretation of the Bible focused on an issue—slavery—that divided the country economically, socially, and morally, the stakes were raised even higher as Southerners and abolitionists volleyed scriptures at each other. As Noll so eloquently comments, "The Book that made the nation was destroying the nation" (8).

Noll moves beyond an analysis of biblical proslavery and abolitionist arguments, which have been studied in depth by other scholars. Instead, he is interested in analyzing why abolitionists' arguments were decried even by some opponents of slavery in the North. He argues that abolitionists' repudiated biblical literalism, which allowed slavery, and instead emphasized the Bible's overall message of love and equality, which threatened the position of the Bible as the standard of truth. If one discounted verses permitting slavery, what else might one discard? Some ministers tried to sustain the position of the Bible but attack the specific variant of Southern slavery as unbiblical. Their arguments garnered little support because, as Noll maintains, they relied on a knowledge of biblical history and context, not just a surface reading of the text that was supposedly comprehensible to all.

Intertwined with support for Southern slavery were assumptions that the Bible sanctioned race-based African slavery. Racism was woven into arguments for black slavery, including those that focused on the Bible. Thus, even when slavery ended, Noll explains, a popular view of biblical support for racism remained.

Noll also examines Northern and Southern views of divine providence. Because orthodox believers held that God controlled history, both sections claimed to see the hand of God in the Civil War and understand what he was doing. Northerners regarded Union victory as directed by God, but Southerners had to explain defeat, which their ministers viewed as divine chastening of the faithful. Noll contends that such simplistic views of God's will amid the moral complexities of war undercut belief in providence among some intellectuals. In the aftermath of the war, they moved away from what Noll terms "theological certainties" (92) to scientific explanations for interpreting the world.

In one of the greatest contributions of the work, Noll analyzes the writings of European and Canadian Protestants and Catholics on the Bible and slavery. While he admits his research is still fragmentary, his conclusions illuminate differences between American and European views. With few exceptions, Protestants abroad condemned slavery by focusing on moral argument rather than a minute dissection of verses. Noll argues that because European Christianity relied more on a body of traditional scriptural interpretation rather than Americans' individualistic views, dissent over what the Bible taught about slavery was more easily settled.

While European Catholics disagreed among themselves on biblical support for slavery, many Catholic commentators emphasized Catholicism's efforts to ameliorate the conditions of slavery. They also emphasized the unity of biblical understanding that came from the writings of the church fathers. Catholic Cardinal Karl August von Reisach even used the birth of Mormonism as an example of what was wrong with Protestantism. A religious system in which individuals read the Bible for their own answers had led to the rise of numerous denominations, the "most fantastic" of which was Mormonism (150). While the cardinal acknowledged that Mormonism claimed religious authority—something he condemned Protestant churches for lacking—he deemed Joseph Smith's teachings "the most impudent fables" that "totally destroy the foundations of Christ" (152). Only the traditional authority of Catholicism could produce religious stability and unity.

Noll's work makes a major contribution to our understanding of how the early national public Protestant consensus was destroyed by slavery and the Civil War. Generally, not ministers, he points out, ultimately determined the meaning of scripture. In a poignant lament, he notes that Protestant theology was so shaken by the war that it could not marshal resources to answer the challenges posed by racism, higher criticism, evolution, and rampant industrial capitalism. After the Civil War, religion exerted less direct influence on public policy.

If the book has a weakness, it is its brevity. Noll crams every page with important points that cry out for more discussion. For example, his second chapter, “Historical Contexts,” is much more understandable to those readers conversant with his *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), which covers the same concepts in two hundred pages rather than thirteen. While Noll notes that he is not writing a monograph, such concision allows the reader little time to absorb an idea before confronting another. Yet, it is perhaps not a bad thing to say that a book has too many ideas rather than too few.

Last, *BYU Studies* readers who are not interested in slavery, the Civil War, or the history of theology may wonder why they should read this book. While Noll’s references to Mormonism are not his main point, he raises important questions about the use and abuse of scripture, particularly as a political tract, and effectively gives a sense of the stakes involved in reading sacred texts in particular ways. As Noll demonstrates, too often we see what we want to see.

Mary Stovall Richards is Associate Professor of History at Brigham Young University. She received her PhD at the University of Chicago, with her professional emphasis on the nineteenth-century South. Her publications have focused on women’s history, history of the family, and African American History.

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