
This study is the first in the projected five-volume series A History of Evangelicalism. Subsequent titles will each cover several decades, concluding with the current era. Each volume will be subtitled, as is this one, by referencing the most prominent evangelical leaders of that period—Billy Graham and John Stott scheduled to appear on the last one. The series is a welcome, important, but daunting and vulnerable undertaking.

In his introduction, Professor Noll sets the boundaries. Noting the New Testament and Reformation senses of evangelical, he stipulates that for this project it means “a set of convictions, practices, habits and oppositions” (17) generated by British and North American revivals commencing with the Great Awakening. In its emphases and manifestations, evangelicalism closely resembled, interacted with, and drew sustenance from continental European Pietism and Puritanism. England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and Britain’s colonies in North America are the series’ arena, although presumably it will reference the global impact of this Anglo-American movement. Evangelicalism included a number of important emphases: personal conversion, the sufficiency and infallibility of Scripture on the way of salvation, active witness and service, and the necessity of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for God’s forgiveness of our sin. The movement was united spiritually but not organizationally by a network of leaders, churches, other organizations, publications, causes, and projects. Noll acknowledges that the project’s boundaries are porous. To his qualifications one might add several others. His emphasis on revivals as a fundamentally defining feature of evangelicalism seems too narrow. Many who historically and presently are identified with the movement have not been part of the revival scene or legacy. Additionally, the phenomena of revivals and the emphases of evangelicalism certainly predate 1740. The addition of “Anglo-American” as a modifier of evangelicalism in the series title, therefore, would be helpful.

Chapter 1, “Landscapes,” is a masterful treatment by a seasoned, well-read scholar on the social, political, and religious contexts of eighteenth-century evangelicalism. In the second chapter, “Antecedents,” Professor Noll reviews evangelical roots and indebtedness. Here constraints of space preclude an ample treatment of how the evangelicalism of the period covered also diverged from its continental and Puritan antecedents. The third chapter, “Revivals,” presents a close examination, based on a wide study of primary as well as secondary sources, of the events of 1734-1738 and their interconnection. Noll is certainly correct in concluding that Jonathan Edwards’ “Faithful Narrative” in its circulation and numerous reprints did far more for religious revival than his original revival sermons in Northampton (91). “Revival, Fragmentation, Consolidation, 1738-1745,” the fourth chapter, considers a number of new developments, such as the first outdoor preaching caused when the use of Anglican church buildings was denied to evangelical leaders. These years also witnessed the first preaching by laymen, doctrinal divergence between the Wesleys and
Whitefield, the conversion of the Countess of Huntingdon, and strenuous opposition to the movement’s excess “enthusiasm.” Noll here identifies evangelical weaknesses that emerged and continued to afflict the movement: disregard for tradition, empire building, judgmentalism, and lack of organizational planning and continuity. It also introduced effective use of assistants and innovations that carried the spiritual power of the movement far beyond parish structures and constraints. Concerts of prayer are one example, and in Scotland awakening occurred in connection with quarterly communion services and the rigorous self-examination associated with them. The early 1740s were important years of networking, also through a number of popular periodicals, and for Wesley’s articulation of “methods” for generating and sustaining spiritual vitality. Noll finds that by 1745 evangelicalism was widely disseminated, well defined, and permanently entrenched.

Chapter 5 is devoted to explanations, where the author steps back from his historical narrative to scrutinize various explanations for the rise of evangelicalism. Some work better for specific cases of early revival than for the movement as a whole. Noll believes the movement is due to the coalescing of many factors. He reviews them, from the early explanations that evangelicalism was the result of a mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit, to more recent and subtle psychological theories. He concludes that evangelicalism was grounded religiously in the innovative preaching of justifying faith. It was promoted and maintained by the effective exertions of capable spiritual leaders. It offered a compelling picture of direct fellowship with God for believers as individuals and in groups. It represented a shift in religiosity away from the inherited established churches toward spiritual communities constructed by believers themselves. It featured a form of conversion as much focused on personal experience, as much convinced of the plasticity of human nature and as much preoccupied with claims of certainty as any manifestation of the Enlightenment. And because its spirituality was adjusted to an opening world of commerce, communications and empire, that spirituality effectively resolved the psychological dilemmas created by this opening world. (154)

The second half of the book cuts a wider swath. One chapter is devoted to the twenty-five years concluding with the death of Whitefield and the commissioning of Francis Asbury as Methodism’s superintendent of American operations, under whose capable leadership that branch of evangelicalism grew from three hundred to three hundred thousand adherents by 1795. Noll surveys the movement’s varied expression in its numerous ecclesiastical settings, including its emergence among African-Americans and in the Caribbean. This was the period when Old Side-New Side differences in Presbyterianism and Old Light-New Light differences in Congregationalism appeared. (Noll could-should have included coetus-conferentie differences in colonial Dutch Reformed circles, for through Freylinghuizen and his legacy they were integrally part of the same dynamics.) The next chapter covers the last quarter century, 1770-1795, when
evangelicalism moved beyond ecclesiastical contexts and found expression in such prominent figures as John Newton, Charles Simeon, Hannah More, and William Wilberforce. The review in both chapters is encyclopedic, judicious, and solid. It is based on an impressive array of recent, secondary research and a select reading in strategic, key primary sources of the period.

Chapter 8, “In the World,” acknowledges that evangelicalism “was a pietistic movement in which the relationship of the self to God eclipsed all other concerns” (234). Yet, these other concerns proliferated into a wide range of philanthropically and evangelistically motivated endeavors. Here Noll creatively and helpfully distinguishes between those sponsored by patrician evangelicals, those by plebeian or democratic evangelicals, and those by populist evangelicals. However, rather than reviewing the astounding range and diversity of these endeavors, he selects the antislavery and antiwar causes for thorough, illustrative treatment. It might have been more consistent with the nature of this volume and the projected series to provide a picture of the full range of missionary, educational, social reform, and other initiatives inspired and shaped by the evangelical faith of the time. Is it the case that these evangelicals “were never as successful at ‘fleeing the world’ as they thought they should be” (234)? Or, was their evangelical engagement of their world on these fronts itself a “fleeing of the world” in its sinful, broken form until the Lord returned and inaugurated full restoration? For many evangelicals, world flight meant world engagement in a way not adequately recognized in this study. This suggestion is not incompatible with the true religion that is the focus of the final chapter. Here, Professor Noll explains the pervasiveness of the foundational themes of personal salvation, the power of grace, deliverance from sin, celebration of God and his saving work, and life in the Spirit—all amply illustrated by the prolific, perceptive evangelical hymnody of the period. As he has in other places, Noll exposes evangelicalism’s intellectual deficiencies and its frequent emphasis on the faith of the heart at the expense of the faith of the mind.

This outstanding book gives early Anglo-American evangelicalism the comprehensive, informed analysis it deserves. It will, and should, endure as a standard interpretation for years to come. If its sequels meet its standards, the project will be a scholarly triumph.

—James A. De Jong