

Stackhouse & Friends: Ep. 2

Interview Transcript: Mark Noll

Publish Date: February 28, 2023 (35:10)

Speakers in the audio file: John Stackhouse, Mark Noll

John Stackhouse (00:01):

Welcome back. I'm John Stackhouse and I'm joined today by Professor Mark A. Noll. Professor Noll most recently served at the University of Notre Dame in the McAnaney chair of history, and before that, as the McManus Professor of Christian Thought at Wheaton College—surely now with Mark having been there and Timothy Larsen succeeding him, one of the more distinguished chairs of historical studies maybe in the world.

Mark Noll and I go back—we might as well get his dirty laundry out there in public right now. Mark, before he knew better, took me on as a graduate student years ago and did his best, friends. I've got to tell you, he did all he could, but he can't be blamed for the results.

We have had the opportunity, mostly by his good graces and grant seeking ability, to do a little work together here and there over the years. Mark has been a kind of big brother to lots of younger scholars. As busy as he has been as one of America's leading historians of the Christian experience, he's also been a very generous encourager of younger scholars as well. And so it's good of him to take a little time to talk with us today from his home in Wheaton, Illinois.

Welcome, Mark.

Mark Noll (01:21):

Well, thank you, John. I'm delighted to be here with you.

John Stackhouse (01:27):

I want to start perhaps on the nose and then we'll go to some other areas of mutual interest that may not be quite so obvious. But many scholars who write a lot end up in a kind of irony being best known for one of the books that they tossed off rather quickly. I remember sitting on a plane once with George Lindbeck at Yale, the distinguished scholar of early Christian theology. He said that a kind of fit came upon him and he wrote a very short meditation on the nature of systematic theology called *The Nature of Doctrine*. That shot him to global renown. He reflected ruefully on the fact that he was known mostly for the smallest book he'd ever written.

In Mark Noll's case, of course, many people will know him particularly for his tract for the times, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, a truly historically based meditation,

but indeed a meditation on the state of evangelical culture at the time. Well, that's been a couple of decades ago and I think a new edition has come out.

Mark, how has your thinking changed and not changed about evangelicals and cultural engagement?

Mark Noll (02:45):

Well, yes, the new edition is a reprinting of the original book with a fresh foreword and afterword. It did offer the opportunity to think through the argument of the book, which I guess I still agree with. That argument is that the fundamentalist-modernist battles of the early 20th century pushed white northern America evangelicals in a direction that had some positive [qualities], but then also some negative. The negatives included a diminished capacity and a diminished interest in what might be called formal academic or formal intellectual life.

The argument in the book was that the Christian tradition in general, the Protestant tradition in general, and certainly much of the evangelical tradition with founders like Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, had a strong intellectual component that did not substitute for the gospel and for Christian faith but was a natural complement to it. [American evangelicalism has largely lost that component.] I think that argument still prevails.

What's changed over the last maybe 25 or 30 years is that the white northern evangelical population in the United States has been less internally focus on questions of doctrine, and maybe Christian ethics, and had much more external focus on social, cultural, and political matters.

When I wrote the book, I was concerned that when, for example, the Gulf War broke out, the most prominent evangelical response was to hasten to specify by biblical prophecy what was going on and who was responsible. I thought that was actually a misstep by people not actually trying to understand what was happening on the ground and how ethically it could be evaluated. In recent years, it hasn't been so much that move, but a [reduction] of theological and ethical reason. That has meant two culture wars: political battles that have, I think, undermined the capacity of Christian people in general—and not just white evangelical Protestants—Christian people in general to use their mental capacities in a proper, useful, and God-honoring way.

The circumstances have changed. Now, whether it's still a scandal of the evangelical mind—and you yourself have been involved in trying to define more carefully what “evangelical means”; that's an open question—but clearly God's people,

self-identified Christian Protestant believers, can do better in avoiding false news, fake intelligence, conspiracy theories. And, in fact, many have done better. What I try to point out in the new preface and afterword of *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* is that there is now a really strong Christian Protestant intellectual capacity in North America, and in western Europe. But it's also more disconnected from the constituency used to identify as "white evangelical."

John Stackhouse (06:20):

Yes, and I appreciate you making that last acknowledgement because it seems to me, too, that with the burgeoning of higher education in North America since the 1960s and '70s, there's been a burgeoning of evangelical investment likewise in higher education. So there simply are a lot more Christian scholars of literature and of philosophy and of history and so on. There is now a conversation in many disciplines where there wasn't one before—about Christianity and A, B, or C.

But paradoxically at the very same time as one can look at these encouraging signs of an evangelical mind really quite across the waterfront, which didn't used to be the case as your book in the first edition shows, Trump has happened and Trumpism has happened. I remember when the first results were coming in supporting Donald Trump, I tried to suggest that there would probably be a difference between people who were called "evangelicals" by the media or by the pollsters, as opposed to the church-going faithful evangelicals. And of course it turned out that they were just about as solidly for Trump as everybody else. In a sense, we're all sick of talking about Donald Trump and talking about "evangelicalism and Trump." But it seems to me that you're unusually well positioned to reflect on what's happened to the evangelical mind, not just around Donald Trump, but of course around COVID and masks and vaccines.

What's the evangelical mind now in terms of trying to find out what's true and whom to believe? It seems to me one of the most important things you said in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* is that evangelicals keep looking in the wrong places. When they should be looking at history or politics, they're searching Old Testament prophetic scripture. And sometimes, I would say, when they should be searching Old Testament prophetic scripture, they're looking at history and politics. Help us understand, if you can, with the little distance we have on the Trump phenomenon—particularly as we anticipate there may be another round.

Mark Noll (08:27):

As a historian, I'm focused almost all the time on long trends and long-standing developments. What's clearly the case for the emergence of what at least traditionally has been called evangelical Christianity in the 18th century was innovation in communication strategies that were then exploited for Christian renewal. George Whitefield was the preacher in the public square most dramatically. But then through the rest of the 18th century, and the 19th century, real pioneering work in mass publication—the British and Foreign Bible Society, the American Bible Society, American Tract Society—mission agencies were leaders in not just publishing religious material, but right into the early 20th century leaders in publishing some of the best, certainly in the United States, the best information about the world. A.T. Pierson's *Missionary Review of the World* was a fairly learned periodical by evangelicals for evangelical purposes, but with good coverage of the world.

What I'm trying to say is that evangelicals were exploiting new possibilities in communication. That wasn't the case so much with television, but it was with radio. There were a lot of religious crackpots on the radio, but there were really strong Christian voices—like Walter Maier and “The Lutheran Hour,” and then from the Catholic point of view, Bishop Sheen, who were articulate, conservative, and expert communicators.

Now, what can we say about evangelical and modern communications in the last 30 or 40 years? Well, it's been the rise of the internet, it's been the rise of streaming, it's cable television, and evangelical people have taken advantage of these new media—but not, in my view, on the whole positively. Of course you have to make exceptions for podcasts like your own and quite a few other responsible podcasts. But the democratization of media and the general North American push toward giving extreme voices and extreme opinions the greatest press, the greatest visibility have, I think, contributed to the lowering of the quality of analysis, recognition, and thought about current events.

If you're asked to comment and if the media's paying attention and you start out by saying, “Well, we have at least three or four factors to engage with in understanding this problem,” then you're not going to be quoted. If you're asked for an opinion and you hit hard in one direction or another, if you don't worry about checking your facts, and if you've got a plausible theory of conspiracy (and this comes from the left as well as the right, although I think the right's been more successful), then that gets the attention. The evangelical exploitation of new media forms is consistent, but the

new media forms that are being exploited in this era have, I think, let things off track as much as they've helped keep things on track.

John Stackhouse (12:01):

Yes, and as I think back to our friend George Marsden's work on Fundamentalism and American Culture, one of the most important parts of that book (published back in 1980) was to relate the rise of fundamentalism in America in the early part of the 20th century to broader cultural changes. This wasn't just some kind of weird religious aberration. As you talk about how evangelicals since then have looked hard at social, political, ethical kinds of concerns, of course George is looking back then to the particular religious threat of higher criticism of the Bible, but also the broader cultural decline of the Bible as the privileged text, and evolutionary theory, and communism—and this sense of being embattled, this sense of being afraid, "We've lost control of the steering wheel of American life and we're going to try to get it back."

It seems to me that when people are afraid, they don't always think as well as they should. And I'm thinking that part of what we've seen in the Trump phenomenon, which not coincidentally followed the eight years of Barack Obama, is, "We're losing control." When you're afraid, your vision narrows and things become simpler. This seems to me to tie in also to the built-in evangelical ambivalence about the world. It's at once God's good creation and also the battlefield on which we are contending for our souls and everybody else's. Then if we combine those with the power that fear has to get you noticed in the media ... I'll never forget Stephen Colbert at one point running a fake ad, "Fear!—and how it can kill your children! Tonight at 11:00!"—I thought, "Exactly. This is what works."

Is there something about evangelical culture that is particularly primed to respond to fear? Are we a fearful bunch? Then when somebody comes along and helps us articulate and maybe strike back at our fear, does that connect with our sense of "We've lost control of America; we need to try to get it back"?

Mark Noll (14:31):

Well, there's quite a responsible book by Matthew Sutton that I think would reinforce what you've just said. It shows that particularly the apocalyptic way of thinking has been prominent in evangelical fundamentalist groups since the middle of the 19th century and remained strong. I'm not sure, however, that that analysis can be comprehensive. I do think situations must be studied in their particularities.

At the end of the 19th century, early 20th century, there's certainly a sense (in the white Protestant population in the United States) of losing control. In a very fine book, probably 30 years ago or more, Douglas Frank talked about how the theology of premillennial dispensationalism was a kind of reaction to—maybe not entirely fear, but at least uncertainty of trying to figure out what was going to happen.

Your analysis, I think, is certainly true for much of the recent past. And it's a situation where the media's constant focus on being able to see things right away does, I think, heighten the fear factor. Culture wars are not new, but in the same way that television was actually critical for the national focus on civil rights, I think the media focus on ethical issues, the gay issues, abortion, various theories about who's controlling the politics—these have all been heightened by the current media. Certainly the notion of losing what had once been a supposedly stable Christian America is really powerful.

Now, I say "supposedly" because my day job is the study of North American history in the 18th and 19th centuries. There are a great deal of positives in those eras from a Christian point of view. But a great number of problems also, and especially problems of treatment of minority people who simply were not given the God-given respect that from a Christian point of view should have prevailed. Yes, much of current white evangelical reaction can, I think, be ascribed to a sense that in the United States that we're losing control.

I do think there's quite an interesting contrast with your situation, John, in Canada where, at least as I read things, there have been very strong evangelical Protestant traditions within a denominational structure that was always a lot firmer than in the United States. As opposed to talking about an evangelical reaction, it was important to talk about a Presbyterian, an Anglican, or a Methodist reaction (eventually a United Church reaction). There have been lots of evangelical influences in those denominations. But the denominations were, in my reading, to Protestant Canada with the Catholic Church was to Quebec. You just had a different approach to public life because of the way that the Christian constituencies were configured somewhat differently on the two sides of the 49th parallel.

John Stackhouse (18:12):

Yes, I think that's right. And I think it's really helpful to think of how the evangelicals in Canada who would have this sense of alienation from the centre, who would feel themselves to be always on the periphery—that's not something new. That's something that the Christian & Missionary Alliance always felt. That's something the Mennonite Brethren always felt. That's something that, outside probably maritime Canada, the Baptists always felt. Whereas the evangelicals within the United Church,

the Anglican Church, the Presbyterian Church—and there were lots of them—would've felt a much more comfortable sense of being at home in Canada and their sense of losing cultural control, it's really downstream of the Sixties. It's a relatively recent phenomenon. That's one of the really interesting differences between the two countries.

Now, by mentioning Canada, of course, you've instantly cut the audience for this interview in half or maybe 80%! You started in doctoral work a few (!) years ago, interested in things European and Reformational and in the providence of God ended up studying things American and more recent. But you've always had an interest in comparative studies with Canada as well as with Mexico and other places, and we're grateful for that.

In my view, the two best essays about recent Canadian religious life have been written by foreigners, one by yourself, "What Happened to Christian Canada," and the other by the late David Martin. Mark, I just have to take advantage of the situation to ask you why, over your career of supervising brilliant doctoral students at Notre Dame and elsewhere, why do Americans just not find comparison with Canada an interesting thing to engage in? I recognize that America has to keep the whole world in focus. You are the superpower that dominates the world. But when it comes to comparative studies of religion in America, I was always baffled as a Canadian among American students that they always looked to the Old World. They might look at Mexico. But Canada, to most Americans, just seemed like North Dakota, except duller! They thought they knew enough about it to know that there wasn't anything interesting there. I think you felt differently, but what's going on there?

Mark Noll (20:44):

Well, I think the size of the United States and the inclination of scholars in the United States to think about their own region as the sole region is almost overwhelming. We certainly have had a welcome growth in "America and world" scholarship in the last generation or more. But for very, very long periods of time, American history meant the study of the United States—and usually the dominant groups in the United States and their immediate antecedents, which meant Scotland, Ireland, England, Germany, France, and the rest of the Continent.

I guess I've always felt that if you wanted to know something historically, you faced the same situation that someone did who wanted to know one's own language. That situation is that if you really want to know your own language, you must study other languages—or at least have some kind of nodding acquaintance. That would be true also if we're studying American history.

I got interested in Canadian history as kind of an alternative to a midlife crisis—finding a few Canadian students like yourself at Wheaton College, and then meeting the late George Rawlyk from Queen's University. He was interested in Canadian evangelical history, but he lacked a group to talk to about it. He found in people like Nathan Hatch, Grant Wacker, Harry Stout, Joel Carpenter, Dana Robert, and myself an interesting group that could help him write the history of evangelicals. In my case, and in the case of some others, too, I was helped by seeing how interesting Canadian history was.

Now: Why interesting? We don't have time to go through it all. But in the United States' history, Catholics are really important, but as a late-coming force against which the dominant population reacted. In Canadian history, the Catholics are there first. In American history, we've been talking about fundamentalist-modernist clashes, with fundamentalists clearly differentiated on questions like biblical criticism from the modernists.

There was a small group of learned American evangelicals who wanted to take on board some aspects of modern biblical criticism. You could call these people "liberal Evangelicals," but they were really a tiny group. [I'm not sure I agree with Mark on that. See my recent article in *Christian Scholar's Review*.] You look north of the border and you find in the late 19th and early 20th century Methodists, Presbyterians, and then in United Church for quite a while, a real strong centre of liberal evangelical gospel people, people who honor the Bible, people whom I think would fit under the category "evangelical" that you've developed in the very short introduction volume, and they're close to the mainstream of Protestant history. That to me was just very interesting. Why has there been a big liberal evangelical (or "evangelical liberal") stance in Canada and not so much in the United States?

Fundamentalism. You have big movements in the United States, you have small fundamentalist movements in Ontario, in the Maritimes, and on the Canadian prairies. You have fundamentalists who become political leaders. Now you just don't have that in the United States until the very, very recent past. Then not only do you have fundamentalist radio preachers becoming premiers—Aberhart and Manning—but then the Manning tradition leads on to Preston Manning and a kind of conservative regional party that's not a culture war party as in the American movement. That, to me, is just a very interesting alternative, a very interesting variation on the Christian movement from Europe to America.

The indigenous people. Canadians are rightly traumatized by all of the attention in recent years on the residential schools and the disaster they were for so many First

Nation people. The United States is worse. In a comparative framework, consider the treaties in the Macdonald era in Canada that established a legal basis that today, as we speak, is providing the basis for legal recompense to Canada's First Nations. The United States has something vaguely similar, but nothing nearly so interesting. Again, we could just go on and on and on for aspects of the history of Christianity in Canada that are similar to, but interestingly different from, what has taken place in the United States.

John Stackhouse (26:19):

Well, I, of course, agree as a Canadian who, like George Rawlyk, needed a framework in which to think about things Canadian. It wasn't provided by the historians of that previous generation, particularly not John Moir and H.H. Walsh and some of those guys. The late John Webster Grant, I think, was a superb historian and was kind of my way in to the subject. But even he was very much a United Churchman and saw things from that particular point of view. I'm very grateful for my American training because I think of how Canadian journalists often speak about things Canadian: they refer to things American, but when they think they see the same things in Canada I think, "Yeah, you don't know much about American history. You just know about American popular culture and you're making superficial comparisons."

For instance, in Canada, Mark, there's a cottage industry of journalists—every 10 years there's a breathtaking groundbreaking book that says, "Oh, no, the religious right is coming to get you and your kids." Really, it's always much, much less than it appears. And two-thirds of their notes are taken from American sources anyway. We Canadians would do well to see our own country by knowing some American history. I think increasingly of our friend Mark Hutchinson in Australia, and how interesting then to compare the Australian situation and the British situation where American exceptionalism is still a thing and worth looking at, but not as exceptional in some ways and intriguingly exceptional in others. I'm glad to put a plug in for those kinds of comparative studies, particularly when there's now actually good stuff to read in all of those countries about all those countries.

Mark Noll (28:04):

Yes, and just to extend the spirit of comparison even farther, it's clear for people interested in evangelical Christianity that not necessarily the word, but the phenomenon, is a worldwide phenomenon. And the development of Bible-honoring conversion among people in China and some parts of Africa and some parts of Latin America is very, very different from the history of Bible-honoring conversion among people in the United States and even in Canada. Understanding that, I think, gives

some good perspective on wringing hands about the “evangelical” term and what's happened to it in the United States—because the United States is not the world!

John Stackhouse (28:59):

Well, let's go back for a few minutes now to think about this divide that you've pointed to. Even as the evangelical mind is broadening and becoming more sophisticated in the United States, and I would say that's true here in Canada and Down Under, there yet are distressing signs that the thought leaders among Christian laypeople tend to be semi-educated, clever folk who do a much better job in the media than ivory tower academics do. They command impressive audiences of Twitter followers and Facebook friends and podcast subscribers. For thoughtful people who listen to something like this who are busy folk and can't read 10 books and 25 journal articles, but who do want to cultivate a Christian perspective, you and I used to recommend something like Books and Culture and The Reformed Journal, both of which have come and gone. Are there particular media that are your favorite recommendations for people who are trying to keep a Christian mind to develop one in these busy, busy days?

Mark Noll (30:23):

Right now, I think I would just underscore the last phrase, a Christian perspective. I do think we see more and more evangelical Protestants and of different flavors, different races, different backgrounds making contributions. But my own distinction—and I'm not sure if it's one that you would always make, but you understand it—is that there's a difference between “an evangelical way of thinking” and “Christian ways of thinking by evangelical Protestants.” I think what we've seen in recent decades is a really marked strengthening of Christian thinking in various domains by people who want to call themselves evangelical or evangelical-friendly or evangelical-like, and I think that that's just very important.

Now to your question about the media, you're probably asking the wrong person because I still mostly like to read books and books take a long time to get out. So what would I recommend for books? Studies like Abram van Engen's book about John Winthrop's “City on a Hill” or the Tom Holland book on “Dominion,” which is a big history of Christianity.

But in more popular media, I myself read magazines still. I read Christianity Today, The Christian Century, First Things, Commonweal (from a Catholic perspective). I don't do many websites or podcasts, but I do check Current, which is a website to which Jay Green and John Fea and a few other folks contribute to, and it's thoughtful. It's kind of a Books and Culture on the media, longer articles. Comment, organized by Anne Snyder, is a fine magazine, but also a website with a strong

Canadian connection, I think owned by Cardus, which has done terrific work. I don't read Faith Today all the time, but I do read it and I am really impressed by the work that Bill Fledderus and Karen Stiller do—and your own contributions to Faith Today as well as other people. You have made it a kind of a junior Books and Culture. It's really been very helpful.

I don't think it's true that there's nothing around. But you'd have to ask other people, I think, than me to tell you what might be the most engaging podcasts and websites and blog posts to check out.

John Stackhouse (33:21):

That's really helpful and I probably will be asking most of my guests that question because I do think it's important to light candles and not just curse darkness, as fun as it is to do the latter. I've gotten way too good at it myself, but I know you've always been a positive person to try to conclude whatever jeremiad you might find yourself in trying to say, "But and yet, and yet, I believe in the Holy Ghost. And yet Jesus is Lord."

I wondered if there was anything we've touched on such that there was something to prompt you to say, "I just want to say one more thing before we're done."

Mark Noll (34:02):

Just actually relating to your last query, I'm glad that you have a podcast now, and I hope you can continue to have not two-minute guests, but 30 minutes, 40 minutes, and people that will come at issues from different points of view, and you'll be able to encourage give and take. A curse—well, maybe, yes, a curse!—in our age is just the quick fix. Media of various kinds that are adjusted to the modern world that yet abjure the quick fix and try to go a little deeper, and have perspective, and to keep, as in the case of many outlets like yourself, a Christian framework in play, that's all to the good. So Godspeed in the podcasting effort!