

Protestantism: A Very Short Introduction

Mark Noll

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Reviewed by Darold H. Morgan

Any book authored by Mark Noll is worthy of serious consideration. He is one of America's leading church historians and theologians with many valuable and relevant volumes to his credit. Oxford University Press has developed a widely heralded series of small books under the intriguing umbrella "A Very Short Introduction" or VSI. Within this series, there are hundreds of titles covering an exceptionally wide range of topics by very capable authors. Dr. Noll's VSI takes on the incredibly complex subject of Protestantism. It measures up fully to the publisher's original intent of brevity while at the same time providing the scholar's approach of genuine substance in overview. What you have in this book are the major historical and theological developments that produced one of history's great turning points as well as a genuinely helpful outline of contemporary Protestantism around the world.

The author emphasizes the influence of Martin Luther and John Calvin as the primary leaders of Protestantism. He demonstrates that the concurrent influences of both the German and Swiss political atmospheres were vital factors in the rebellion against medieval Catholicism. Luther's primary emphasis upon the authority of the Bible, his and Calvin's stress upon "justification by faith alone," as well as "the priesthood of the believer" are all detailed. That there were significant differences between Lutheranism and, ultimately, the Reformed approach to church life, surface quickly in the book. The colorful and irritating developments of the Anabaptists are a part of this enduring saga of the 16th through 17th centuries in northern Europe. Luther's masterpiece of endeavor was, of course, his translation of the Bible into German. Coupled with the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg, Luther's Bible made it possible for the Scriptures to come to the common folk of that day. Noll follows closely the continued

translation of the Bible into multiple languages around the globe, concluding that this is a fundamental reason for worldwide evangelical strength in the current century, particularly in Third World countries. In addition to Bible translation, other strengths in early Lutheranism include the new place in worship for hymn-singing, as well as Luther's production of the famed Small Catechism, resulting in "a Christ-centered form of instruction" (17) in the local church.

Noll traces the amazing missionary movements of the Protestant denominations over the past two centuries. Beginning with the Moravian outreach to the American Indians and the work of the black Baptist and Methodist preachers in America before the Civil War, Noll introduces the multiple and fruitful missionary advances of a Protestant outreach around the world. Special attention is given to the English Baptist Missionary Society founded by William Carey in his groundbreaking mission to India, an effort which had a major influence on Adoniram Judson and the American Baptist move into Burma. China, Africa, and Latin America eventually were touched by similar movements. Noll gives special attention to the amazing modern-day growth of Anglicanism in Nigeria and Lutheranism in east Africa.

Noll sees theological liberalism, beginning with Schleiermacher and continuing through von Harnack, as one of the main reasons for the gradual diminution of Protestant influence in Europe. He traces the additional contributions of Darwin's discoveries and as well as Bible scholars in "the higher criticism." The incalculable stress of two horrendous major wars in the 20th century, plus the impact of pacifism and communism, provided a staggering challenge to the fading glory of Luther's Reformation. But concurrently, Noll focuses on one of Christian history's most amazing developments: 20th century Pentecostalism. An outgrowth of Wesleyan theology, this movement is a worldwide phenomenon almost beyond belief. Pentecostalism is growing, with hundreds of millions of adherents in Africa, Central and South America, China, Korea, and to some measure in America, and even in leading European cities as well as Russia.

Noll concludes the book with the chapter “Whither the West?” Interestingly, he attributes part of the European Protestant decline to the loss of loyalty on the part of women in the church. He holds out hope for Protestantism from an unusual source: the growing strength of churches holding the historic values of Protestantism in Africa, Asia, and South America. Their vitality may issue in a missionary movement from the East to the West. The serious student of religious history has grounds for a solid optimism about the future of Protestantism.

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