

A SCANDAL, A CRISIS, A HOPE

Eric Miller

In the fall of 1994 some of your older brothers and sisters were busy being born. My wife, herself carrying a baby who is now a college senior, was enjoying her first weeks of health after four months of pregnancy-induced *hyperemesis gravidarum*, which translated from the Latin means *hyper-puke*. For my part, I was trying to teach middle school Bible and high school phys. ed. while caring for my wife. And sometime in there I, along with thousands of others, managed to read Mark Noll's blazing-hot new book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, published on October 1. I had pre-ordered a copy, in those pre-Amazon, pre-internet days. I read it briskly. And in twenty-two years I haven't stopped thinking about it. It was a landmark volume, as people immediately knew.

Noll called it a *cri de coeur*—a cry of the heart. An evangelical Protestant himself and professor of history at Wheaton College, he lamented in searing prose the absence of a vital and aggressive evangelical presence in the intellectual life of the nation. Plenty of evangelicals had done well in college and grad school, Noll granted.

But the point is not simply whether evangelicals can learn how to succeed in the modern academy. The much more important matter is what it means to think like a Christian about the nature and workings of the physical world, the character of human social structures like government and the economy, the meaning of the past, the nature of artistic creation, and the circumstances attending our perception of the world outside ourselves. Failure to exercise the mind for Christ in these areas has become acute in the twentieth century. That failure is the scandal of the evangelical mind.

OK, Professor Noll. This Christian absence may indeed be a deficit, a deficiency. But why a *scandal*? Why a reason for public outrage? You issue a strong accusation, Professor, especially coming from one evangelical to another.

Because, replies Noll, Christians believe Christ to be the source of all truth, to be the *logos*, the reason that governs and enchants the universe. How can it be that Christ-ians—little Christs—so poorly reflect his mind, his spirit, his very nature and being? To be required to do something crucial and not do it is the very definition of scandal.

So Noll, in his closely reasoned and disturbingly thoughtful book, charged us with high, public failure. We claim to love Christ. We just haven't bothered much to look like Him, at least in this decisive way. We've been content to service the economy. Content to mimic the dominant patterns of our radically and resolutely secular disciplines. Content to think like the world while mouthing Christian pieties. And this, for the sake of Christ himself, must stop.

It must stop for the sake of the world, too, Noll exclaimed—the world being, remarkably, among Christ's chief, overriding concerns. It was because of his love for this bloodied and bruised

world, after all, that He came: to pursue lost sheep, to heal the diseased, to befriend the broken, to teach the misguided, to absolve the guilty, to die that we might live.

The crisis in which Christ quite evidently found himself has not expired. Rather, the world continues to exist in, to quote the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, a “revolutionary state of emergency.” We live in a world in need of thousands, millions of little Christs, taking his mind and heart and body and soul to all the places of need—and even to places that don’t realize their neediness. Such as, for instance, the university, uber-confident in its intellectual integrity and moral vision. Such as, for instance, the world of law, so sure of its narrow and novel definitions of justice. Such as, for instance, scientific laboratories the world round, splicing the genome in quest of “transhuman” transgression. These are immensely influential professional fields that are hardly aware of their actual condition, their crisis: their need for transformed understandings of knowledge, justice, progress.

But there are other spheres in which crisis can hardly be denied by anyone (except maybe politicians). Consider the state of public education in Detroit, where parents are suing the school district for failing to teach their children to *read*. What about the depleted fisheries of our only oceans, surely in need of, among other things, careful scientific and economic response? And then there is the political system that seems incapable of mobilizing itself to address these life-threatening concerns, these sources of suffering.

Drug abuse taking lives daily by the thousands? Tens of thousands of aging Americans lonely and abandoned in marginally sanitary nursing homes? Hundreds of thousands of refugees desperate for a gallon of water, a pint of justice, an ounce of love?

Girls are being trafficked into prostitution this very moment. Prisoners face pitch-black day after pitch-black night. Children grow up in neighborhoods with no true neighbors—not even parents. And in the midst of all this men and women by the millions succumb to laughably shallow visions of the good life, brought to us so generously by Hollywood, Harvard, Wall Street, and Washington D. C. Blaise Pascal’s 17th century warning—“We run heedlessly into the abyss after putting something in front of us to stop us from seeing it”—never seemed so necessary. We are in crisis, have no doubt.

But do we, at this college, have the acuity of mind, of spirit, to actually see the crisis, let alone respond to it?

Some of us do. I know this because I’ve met them. And they are *you*. I have taught at Geneva since 1999, just five years after Noll delivered his manifesto. I have taught honors students year after year. I have been enriched, nourished, heartened, and enlivened by your intelligence, your joy, your longing to matter, your desire to be little Christs. And I have watched it happen. I think of Matt Stewart, former editor of *The Cabinet*, now a PhD candidate in US history at Syracuse, striving to speak for Christ in the academy. I recall Hannah Keeler, teaching English in China, befriending her students with a warm enthusiasm for their very lives. I think of Amanda McCrina, seeking to master the craft of historical fiction while studying ancient history in Georgia, while Mat Meyer writes poetry in Beaver and serves as an elder in his church. There’s Jackie Robel, studying law at Duquesne, Justin McGear, pastoring in New York, and Emma Lamberton—class of 2016—now working as a journalist in New England. At this moment Ruth Martin is in Scotland training to be a veterinarian. There are hundreds more.

That most of you will depart from here and become successful professionals, I have no doubt. That is your trajectory, by dint of effort, social class, and aptitude. But will you go forth as *Christians*—as *fully* Christian? That is my chief concern as director of this program and, in fact, a heavy burden. That end—your becoming fully and deeply *Christian*—is what we in this program are here to foster. Because the crisis we're in—global in scope, intellectual in nature, and personal in effect—requires that we *understand* it, which means that we must understand it as *Christ* understands it. And this requires no mean effort—certainly it requires both a willingness to think beyond the secular box that has so diminished our disciplines and the courage to go as deeply as possible into the Christian faith itself.

A century ago, as the extent of the modern crisis was beginning to become clear, the English journalist and Christian intellectual G. K. Chesterton sounded a warning the fundamental importance of which these hundred years have only amplified.

There has arisen in our time a most singular fancy: the fancy that when things go very wrong we need a practical man. It would be far truer to say, that when things go very wrong we need an unpractical man. Certainly, at least, we need a theorist. A practical man means a man accustomed to mere daily practice, to the way things commonly work. When things will not work, you must have the thinker, the man who has some doctrine about why they work at all. It is wrong to fiddle while Rome is burning; but it is quite right to study the theory of hydraulics while Rome is burning.

Friends, we live in a world in which things have stopped working. Type the professional adjective of choice before the word "crisis" in a google search and you'll see what I mean. Financial crisis. Medical crisis. Higher education crisis. Ecological crisis. Law enforcement crisis. And does anyone watching this election dare deny that we're in a profound state of *political* crisis? The world needs *help*—whether it knows it or not. And if Chesterton is right, it needs help from people who *understand in the most profound ways what, sphere by sphere, institution by institution, relationship by relationship, soul by soul, has gone wrong in the world—and what we must do to reclaim the good purposes of God in it.*

I urge you, for the sake of Christ, to take full advantage of the years you have here to seek this necessary understanding of the world, from the members of the faculty and staff who are here precisely to help you to know it—and who, in fact, may need *you* to help them see it more clearly. I urge you to give yourself over to asking God how he might direct your way, so that you may move with all the intelligence and skill and love with which he's made you to move. And I invite you, above all, to join together with us, the people in this room, in this work of the kingdom, warming one other with laughter and sharpening our minds in love.