During a 1999 Republican presidential debate in Des Moines, Iowa, then-Texas governor George W. Bush was asked to name his favorite political philosopher. Without hesitating, Bush responded “Jesus Christ, because he changed my life.” Somewhat predictably, the media had a field day, charging Bush with everything from pandering to evangelical voters to failing to know any real philosophers. The speculative case about the former will likely never be closed. However, judging from Mark Noll’s new book, *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind*, Bush’s favorite philosopher qualifies. Indeed, Noll’s adulation for Jesus Christ as the fount of all things intellectual makes Bush’s rather simple response seem benign by comparison.

As its title discloses, Noll’s book is self-consciously Christological. Taking his cue from the centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ—both in the Gospel and the historic creeds of the church—Noll argues that Christ motivates, guides, and frames serious scholarship. Jesus is, Noll suggests, “the Christ of the Academic Road.”

As a whole, *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind* is perhaps best construed as an inviting exploration—an invitation to explore whose structure is as elegant as it is clear. Noll begins with a foundational sketch of the relation between two important threads in
bibilical revelation and historic Christian creeds. Possibly in an effort to allay anxieties among evangelicals who “have no creed but Christ,” he argues that the early Christian creedal statements (Apostles’, Nicene, Chalcedonian formula) reflect the early church’s effort to grapple with the nature of the person and work of Jesus from a decidedly canonical perspective, especially in light of the apocalyptic imagery of Revelation and the biblical theme of “glory.” Rather than being obstacles to genuine faith, the historic Christian creeds constitute the windows through which Christ is more clearly illuminated, and thus, indispensable tools for Christo-centric scholarship.

Noll extends the invitation to take up these tools in his second chapter, in which he illustrates the many ways in which a “high Christology”—one that insists on the full humanity and full deity of Jesus Christ—motivates learning. Engaging in reflection on key Christological texts (John 1:1-3, Colossians 1:15-16, Hebrews 1:2), Noll points to Christ’s ontological primacy and fullness as grounds for intellectual engagement with “all things.” For if Christ is the one in whom, by whom, and for whom all things exist, then “[t]here simply is nothing humanly possible to study about the created realm that, in principle, leads us away from Jesus Christ” (25). Noll adds that our confidence in such inquiry is bolstered by the providential encouragement that all things “hold together” in Christ, and that Christ’s incarnate personality and beauty motivate study of every aspect of Creation’s concrete particularity.

Noll wisely recognizes that his motivating portrait would potentially ring hollow apart from practical guidance. Thus, chapter three tackles the unenviable task of unpacking “specific ways that the teaching of the creeds might make an intellectual difference” (44). Briefly, Noll suggests that Christologically-informed scholarship be guided by a sense of “doubleness, contingency, particularity, and self-denial” (44). Noll’s case for the final triad in this set, though not novel, is nonetheless compelling, and in the case of “self-denial,” even convicting. About the latter, Noll writes prophetically:

There is pride to be cultivated in degrees earned, books published, honors bestowed, or interviews granted; academic introversion can easily transform into callousness toward people of ordinary intelligence; cliquishness and partisanship can be exploited for promoting my faction...and there is an eagerness to view the gifts that are not congenial to scholarship as somehow less important. These and other sins of intellectuals are familiar to everyone with any experience in the academy. (61)

Yet, as Noll explains, “if Jesus himself confessed during his earthly ministry that there were things he did not know, then scholars following Christ should be doubly aware of how limited their own wisdom truly is” (61-62).

Slightly less compelling is Noll’s treatment of “doubleness.” Noll suggests that the “expectation that some important results of scholarship will have a dual or doubled character would seem to flow naturally” from the two natures of Christ (45). Noll summarizes:

The natural human urge moves to adjudicate competition among overarching claims. This urge, which relies on the practical necessity of the law of noncontradiction, must certainly be trusted in many specific scholarly arenas. But for a Christian . . . it will be a smaller step, when confronting at least some dichotomous intellectual problems, to seek the harmonious acceptance of the dichotomy than for a scholar who does not believe that the integrated person of Christ was made up of a fully divine and fully human nature. (49)

Noll is certainly right that the “duality” that falls out of Chalcedon is a necessity. However, given that the Scriptures do not view two-mindedness as a virtue (James 1:5-8) and that some dualities, in contrast to the Chalcedonian definition, represent mutually exclusive truth claims, some caution seems warranted in connecting the two natures of Christ with an approach to scholar-
ship exhibiting greater comfort with “apparently irreconcilable dichotomies” (49). Though Noll clearly does not intend this, the latter, it seems, might easily be invoked in the name of sloppy or even heretical thinking. (“Synthesis” may have been a better concept for Noll here.)

Practicing the humility that he commends, Noll acknowledges that “risks accumulate” in the second half of his book. For chapter four explores the implications of the doctrine of the atonement for several areas of scholarly inquiry, while chapters five through seven offer specific applications of his Christological outlook to the areas of history, science, and biblical studies respectively. Naturally, Noll’s treatment of history is the richest and most extensive of these. But even when writing beyond the bounds of his formal expertise (i.e., in science and biblical interpretation), Noll offers a carefully-crafted perspective that welcomes response from scholars in these disciplines. Somewhat predictably, both chapters rely heavily on Noll’s notion of “doubleness”—arguably his unique conceptual contribution in this book. For Noll, the dual natures of Christ call for a “concursus” (here Noll draws on insights from B.B. Warfield) between apparent antinomies that arise when attempting to exegete the Scriptures and nature or the Bible as both a product of divine revelation and human agency. Noll’s case for harmony might have difficulty receiving a fair hearing among readers unsympathetic toward those he enlists to his cause: B. B. Warfield as an example of a Christological approach to evolution and Peter Enns as an example of inspiration and incarnation in biblical hermeneutics.

Noll is to be commended for the courage with which he has endeavored to unpack the practical implications of his theoretical exploration. Far too often, authors who call for the integration of faith and learning fail to move beyond the platitudinous. The latter, while occasionally inspiring, risks little in its failure to take on concrete form. Noll has risked much. And while his arguments are cautious and nuanced, he will likely draw fire from at least some among his evangelical audience.

Still, Noll’s book is a high-watermark in recent reflection on the relationship between Christianity and scholarship. The simplicity of its prose is adorned with what at times is poetic elegance. In this way, Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind embodies what Noll is attempting to articulate—a passionate plea for rigorous intellectual inquiry that is moved, guided, and framed by the love of Christ. Few books on Christian faith and learning will inspire and illuminate in the way that Noll’s book does. Yet, it is precisely this feature of Noll’s book that makes it the standard for future work on Christian higher education. For if, as Noll points out, Jesus Christ is all that Christians profess, then we should expect the fruits of our teaching and scholarly labors to radiate with the joy of the Light of life. Noll has issued a clear challenge. Will the reality of Christ’s person and work “sustain the most wholehearted, unabashed, and unembarrassed efforts” in teaching and scholarship? Or will we blush at Bush’s blurt, thinking, “Jesus isn’t a real academic”?

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