

## Praises for *The Real Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*

*What is the state of the evangelical mind? Carl Trueman intends to re-shape that entire question, and he does so by questioning the very existence of evangelicalism. In this clever book, Trueman forces us all to think about the most basic issues of evangelical identity, integrity, and credibility. This work comes from a first-rate evangelical scholar. Read it at your own risk.*

—R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.

President and Joseph Emerson Brown

Professor of Christian Theology

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

*Professor Trueman offers a clear and sober assessment of contemporary evangelicalism and how its doctrinal neglect as well as its ecclesial and institutional practices continue to sever its intellectual and moral life from its biblical and theological roots. As a Catholic, I part ways with Professor Trueman on several doctrinal questions. But when it comes to our common heritage as Christians—and our shared understanding of the good, the true, and the beautiful—I stand with him against a spirit of the age that will not rest until all the vestiges of Christian civilization are vanquished from the face of the Earth.*

*What is truly tragic—as Professor Trueman forcefully argues—is that some who claim to be allies of that civilization, as well as friends of all things “evangelical,” embrace and propagate ideas that aid and abet its destruction. Although he may not agree with me on this, perhaps it is time for evangelicals (as well as Catholics) to consider what Alasdair MacIntyre has called “the Benedict Option.”*

—FRANCIS J. BECKWITH

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**THE REAL**  
*scandal of the*  
**EVANGELICAL**  
*mind*

*Carl R. Trueman*

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## Introduction

It has been some fifteen years since Mark Noll, then a professor of history at Wheaton College, published his famous tract for the times, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.<sup>1</sup> Writing from the context of a Christian liberal arts college, Noll expressed in the book his frustration at what he saw as evangelicals' intellectual and cultural sterility. For a book that arguably stated the obvious, it made a remarkable impact, with its titular phrase becoming a veritable cliché—a cliché that I am happy to adapt for the title of this essay.

Professor Noll blamed many aspects of evangelicalism for the cultural wasteland he said it had become, prominent among them the American predilection for dispensationalism, with its passive, “pull up the drawbridge and wait for the end of the world” mentality toward general cultural pursuits. (Although, one might note, American dispensationalists have been far from passive in at least one area of cultural engagement: conservative politics.) The other

area of intellectual suicide identified by Noll was literal, six-day creationism.

While these two beliefs were in Noll's view symptomatic of the intellectual malaise within evangelicalism, underlying his analysis was a broader conviction that American evangelicalism historically had faced internal opposition to intellectual and cultural engagement. Professor Noll hinted at this same critique in one of his lesser-known books, *Between Faith and Criticism*, where he also offered a somewhat rose-tinted perspective of the British scene. Evangelicals in the United Kingdom modeled a better paradigm for combining faith and learning,<sup>2</sup> he said, whereas American evangelicalism, with its fundamentalist-revivalist-pragmatic roots, had always been inherently anti-intellectual.

Catholic scholar Etienne Gilson's words about Francis of Assisi summarize well Professor Noll's complaint against evangelicalism and its leaders: "It is clear that he never condemned learning for itself, but that he had no desire to see it developed in his Order. In his eyes it was not in itself an evil, but its pursuit appeared to him unnecessary and dangerous. Unnecessary, since a man may save his soul and win others to save theirs without it; dangerous, because it is an endless source of pride."<sup>3</sup>

Such anti-intellectual obscurantism, of which Noll said dispensationalism and six-day creationism were the most obvious manifestations, had made evangelicals a marginal group. Not in the broader culture, of course, where the evangelical vote was politically significant, but rather in those sections of society where ideas were the stock-in-trade, where mainstream intellectual engagement took place. To a professor at Wheaton College, which had long aspired to be the evangelical Harvard, this marginalization was cause for heartbreak and lament.

Fifteen years later, the intellectual and cultural poverty of American evangelicals would seem to continue, even as church attendance is holding up reasonably well in the U.S. (at least in

comparison to other industrialized nations). Without making a judgment for or against any of the following positions, I would add these common beliefs of evangelicals to dispensationalism and six-dayism as causes of the movement's social and intellectual marginality: biblical inerrancy, opposition to women's ordination and homosexuality and abortion, religious exclusivism, and rejection of the broad claims of evolutionary science. Commitment to any or all of these positions places one at the fringe of culture, at least of thoughtful, educated culture.

Given the recent onslaught of the so-called new atheism, with its rhetorical arsenal of ridicule and mockery, it would seem that the question of the scandal of the evangelical mind is ripe for revisiting. If Professor Noll feared that the late twentieth century featured a climate where a literal six-day creation and the excesses of dispensationalism were distancing evangelicals from the wider world, what can be said of today? In the wake of the "four horsemen" of atheism—Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens—and in the aftermath of 9/11, "fundamentalism" has become a popular bogeyman. The scholarly construct of said fundamentalism has proved elastic enough to extend past the hard-line fanatics of religious movements. Any Muslim who takes his or her religion seriously is liable to be seen as a potential terrorist, however loyal and well-behaved in the civic sphere. Christians who hold to traditional views of the Bible, sin, and the afterlife fall into the same broad category of "fundamentalists," right alongside Osama bin Laden and the Aryan Nation. The times have changed much faster than Professor Noll seemed to anticipate, and for the worse. Indeed, it is clear that from the perspective of wider society, religious beliefs are more scandalous now than they have been for many years.

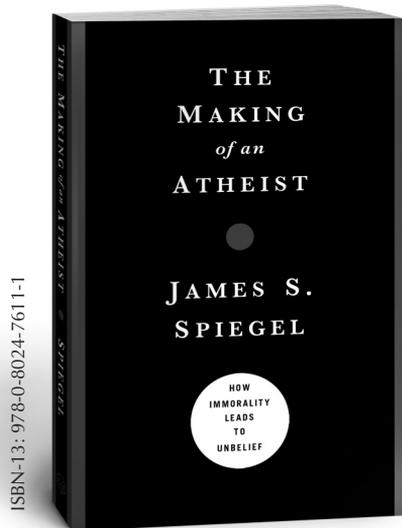
So does the scandal of the evangelical mind continue? I will argue ahead that it does, though not at all in the manner that Noll maintained. The views of some evangelicals do, indeed, marginalize us in

the public square, but that is not the central problem confronting evangelicalism today. More concerning is the lack of any consensus about evangelicalism's intellectual identity—an issue Noll may have noticed in 1994 but that has grown more pronounced in recent years. For there to be a scandal of the evangelical mind, there must be not just a mind, but also a readily identifiable thing called an “evangelical” and a movement called “evangelicalism”—and the existence of such is increasingly in doubt.

### NOTES

1. Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).
2. Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).
3. Quoted in James A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1983), 65.

# THE MAKING OF AN ATHEIST



How did such folks as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens become such ardent atheists? If we are to believe them there are not enough rational grounds for belief in God. But is this the whole story? Could it be that their opposition to religious faith has more to do with passion than reason? What if, in the end, evidence has little to do with how atheists arrive at their anti-faith?

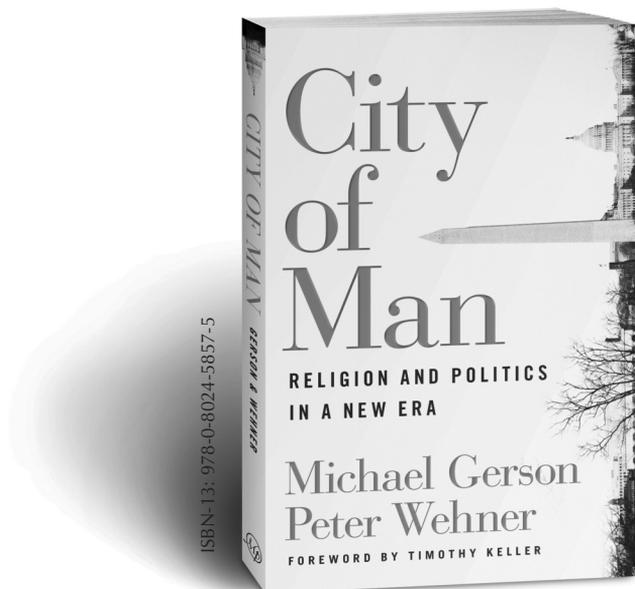
For the atheist, the missing ingredient is not evidence but obedience. The psalmist declares, "The fool says in his heart there is no God" (Psalm 14:1), and in the book of Romans, Paul makes it clear that lack of evidence is not the atheist's problem. *The Making of an Atheist* confirms these biblical truths and describes the moral and psychological dynamics involved in the abandonment of faith.

THE MAKING OF AN ATHEIST-



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# CITY OF MAN



An era has ended. The political expression that most galvanized evangelicals during the past quarter-century, the Religious Right, is fading. What's ahead is unclear. Millions of faith-based voters still exist, and they continue to care deeply about hot-button issues like abortion and gay marriage, but the shape of their future political engagement remains to be formed.

Into this uncertainty, former White House insiders Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner seek to call evangelicals toward a new kind of political engagement—a kind that is better both for the church and the country, a kind that cannot be co-opted by either political party, a kind that avoids the historic mistakes of both the Religious Left and the Religious Right.

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