BOOKS I HAVE READ: THE RISE OF EVANGELICALISM

Posted on January 11, 2018 by Eddie

An altogether excellent book
Category: Reviews

This is the first in a five book series on the history of Evangelical Christianity and it is absolutely excellent. I realise that not everyone wants to read church history, but if you are from an Evangelical background and you want to understand the background to your tradition then this book (and, indeed, the whole series) are essential reading.

Rise of EvangelicalismÂ by Mark Noll is subtitled The Age of Edwards, Whitfield and the Wesleys. It is a large format paperback of just under 320 pages including indices and references and will set you back something in the order of Â£15.

The blurb about the series reads:

> *This series presents, for the first time, a connected history of the evangelical movements throughout the English-speaking world, from the 1730s to the 1990s... The series offers provocative interpretations as well as factual details, provides extensive bibliographical references and is accessible to a wide readership.*

The first book broadly covers the 1730s to the 1790s. The style is what might be called academic-light. There is enough detail and footnotes to keep the specialist happy, but not so much that the interested amateur can't profit from the book. It's not an easy read, but it's not difficult either.

The book starts by looking at why Evangelical revivals broke out more or less simultaneously in several places in the UK and North America in the 1730s. It traces the roots of Evangelicalism back to its roots in Puritanism, Continental Pietism (and somewhat surprisingly to me) High Church Anglican spirituality.

The book then follows the lives of the main characters of the age; the Edwards, Whitfield and the Wesleys of the title and many others. It describes their conversion, their careers, the development of their theology and the ways in which the main players cooperated and/or fell out with each other. The book covers a lot of ground and of necessity doesn't go into as much detail about the people as a specialised biography would. This, however, is one of the great strengths of this book; I have read biographies of many of the people in the book, but the lack of an overview means that I've never seen the way that their lives intertwined, nor how they fit against the background of wider historical events.

From my own point of view, there are two things which struck me most forcibly about the book.

The first (surprise, surprise) is the way in which overseas mission was a feature of Evangelicalism from the start. We look to William Carey as the founder of modern mission work in the 1790s. However, he acknowledged in his "Enquiry" that he was building on the foundations laid by others. For my purposes, a helpful thread runs through the book, pointing out the role of the early voluntary societies in the growth and spread of Evangelicalism and the development of foreign missions. It

isn't a mission history book as such, but mission runs through it nonetheless.

The second issue which struck me was the extent to which the protagonists slowly found that their Evangelicalism was more important to them than their denominational background. Noll shows that Evangelicalism first developed within Anglicanism, but quickly spread into the dissenting churches, too. (I do like being thought of as a dissenter.) Much to the horror of their more Anglican brethren, people like Whitfield were happy to share a pulpit and even communion with non-conformist ministers even though they had not been "properly ordained". In an age where Evangelicalism was only just getting off the ground, this cross-denominational cooperation was vital to the spread of the gospel, although it was extremely uncomfortable for those involved. In our own day, when Christianity is in decline across the West, Evangelicals need to unite around the centrality of our message and worry less about the things that divide us.

Who should read this book? I'm tempted to say everyone should, because I love history. However, being realistic, I think it should certainly be on the reading list for anyone training for church ministry in an evangelical context (and their teachers). Those who are interested in church history will probably already have read it. I'd also suggest that it would make a good read for anyone who is trying to understand the church scene in the UK today - we are a product of our history.

In case you haven't gathered; I think this is an excellent book and I'm very, very grateful to the kind friend who bought the series for me.

This year, I am going to try to review every book I read in one way or another. Most books will getÂ mentioned in aÂ monthly summary, butÂ those I feel are worthy of a separate review will get one.Â