TURNING POINTS Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity THIRD EDITION Mark A. Noll, Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity, Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), iii.

by Mark A Noll · Language: EN

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Overview

Mark A. Noll's "Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity" offers a compelling narrative of Christian history by focusing on twelve pivotal events that profoundly shaped the faith's trajectory. Rather than presenting a comprehensive chronological account, Noll meticulously selects moments that represent significant shifts in theology, practice, institutional structure, and geographical spread. From the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, which forced Christianity to define itself apart from Judaism, to the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910, which signaled the global expansion of the faith, each 'turning point' is analyzed for its immediate impact and long-term consequences.

Noll's main argument is that understanding these critical junctures is essential for grasping the complex development of Christianity. He demonstrates how each event not only resolved existing challenges but also created new ones, leading to further transformations. The book emphasizes the dynamic nature of Christian belief and practice, showing how the faith has adapted, fractured, and expanded across diverse cultures and historical contexts. It matters because it provides a framework for understanding the continuity and discontinuity within Christian history, offering insights into how past decisions continue to influence contemporary Christianity and its global presence.

Key Takeaways

- Recognize that Christian history is not a monolithic narrative but a series of responses to specific challenges and opportunities.
- Understand that theological doctrines, like the Trinity or Christ's nature, were often forged in intense debates and councils, not simply handed down.

• Appreciate the profound impact of institutional developments, such as monasticism and universities, on the shaping of Christian thought and society.

• Consider how political power and religious authority have historically intertwined, often leading to both advancements and conflicts within Christianity.

• Realize that the global spread of Christianity is a relatively recent phenomenon, with the Edinburgh Missionary Conference marking a significant shift.

• Reflect on how past 'turning points' continue to influence contemporary Christian denominations, practices, and theological perspectives.

• Learn to identify critical moments in any historical narrative that fundamentally alter its future course and meaning.

Chapter Summaries

Introduction: The Idea of Turning Points

Noll introduces his methodology for understanding Christian history through twelve pivotal moments. He argues that these "turning points" are not merely significant events but moments that fundamentally reoriented the trajectory of Christian belief, practice, and institutional life. He emphasizes that these moments often had long-lasting, unforeseen consequences, shaping subsequent centuries. Noll also discusses the challenges of historical interpretation, the role of divine providence, and the importance of recognizing both continuity and change in the Christian tradition. He sets the stage for examining how specific decisions, theological developments, or political shifts at these junctures created new paths for Christianity globally.

Turning Point 1: The Fall of Jerusalem (AD 70)

This chapter examines the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70 as a crucial moment for early Christianity. Noll argues that this event forced Christianity to decisively separate from its Jewish roots, shifting its geographical and cultural center from Jerusalem to the broader Greco-Roman world. The loss of the temple and the Jewish state meant that Christianity could no longer be seen as merely a sect within Judaism. This turning point facilitated the Gentile mission, leading to a more universal and less ethnically defined faith. It also spurred the development of Christian self-identity, its own scriptures, and its distinct institutional structures, laying the groundwork for its expansion across the Roman Empire.

Turning Point 2: The Council of Nicaea (AD 325)

Noll highlights the Council of Nicaea as the first ecumenical council, convened by Emperor Constantine, which addressed the Arian controversy concerning the nature of Christ. The council's affirmation of Christ's full divinity, expressed in the Nicene Creed with the term homoousios (of the same substance as the Father), was a foundational theological declaration. This turning point established a precedent for imperial involvement in church affairs and the use

of councils to define orthodox doctrine. It marked a significant step in the institutionalization of Christianity within the Roman Empire, shaping the future development of Trinitarian theology and the relationship between church and state for centuries.

Turning Point 3: The Council of Chalcedon (AD 451)

This chapter focuses on the Council of Chalcedon, which definitively articulated the doctrine of Christ's two natures—fully divine and fully human—united in one person without confusion, change, division, or separation. Noll explains that this council resolved the Christological controversies that followed Nicaea, particularly against Monophysitism. While establishing a theological consensus for the majority of the church, it also led to significant schisms, particularly with the Coptic, Syrian, and Armenian Orthodox churches, which rejected its formulations. Chalcedon solidified the theological framework for understanding the incarnation, profoundly influencing Western and Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and demonstrating the ongoing struggle to define core Christian beliefs.

Turning Point 4: The Benedictine Rule (AD 530)

Noll identifies the development of the Benedictine Rule by Benedict of Nursia around AD 530 as a pivotal moment for Western Christianity. This rule provided a structured, moderate, and enduring framework for monastic life, emphasizing prayer, work (ora et labora), and communal living under an abbot. The Benedictine monasteries became centers of learning, agricultural innovation, and spiritual discipline during the early Middle Ages, preserving classical knowledge and Christian culture amidst the collapse of the Roman Empire. This turning point fundamentally shaped the spiritual landscape of Europe, influencing liturgy, education, and the very concept of Christian discipleship, and serving as a model for subsequent monastic orders.

Turning Point 5: The Coronation of Charlemagne (AD 800)

The coronation of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day, AD 800, is presented by Noll as a defining moment for the relationship between church and state in the West. This event symbolized the fusion of Germanic, Roman, and Christian elements, establishing the concept of a "Holy Roman Empire" and solidifying the pope's role as a kingmaker. It marked a new era of political and religious alliance, where the church provided legitimacy to rulers, and rulers protected and promoted the church. This turning point profoundly influenced the development of Western political thought, the papacy's temporal power, and the cultural identity of medieval Europe, setting the stage for future conflicts and collaborations between secular and ecclesiastical authorities.

Turning Point 6: The Great Schism (AD 1054)

Noll examines the Great Schism of 1054 as the formal separation between the Eastern Orthodox and Western Roman Catholic churches. While the schism had deep roots in theological differences (e.g., the filioque clause, papal supremacy), cultural divergences (Greek vs. Latin), and political rivalries (Constantinople vs. Rome), the mutual excommunications in 1054 are seen as

the definitive break. This turning point created two distinct branches of Christianity, each developing its own unique traditions, liturgies, and theological emphases. It profoundly impacted the geopolitical landscape of Europe and the Middle East, leading to centuries of separate development and mutual misunderstanding, and shaping the identities of millions of Christians to this day.

Turning Point 7: The Diet of Worms (AD 1521)

The Diet of Worms in 1521, where Martin Luther famously refused to recant his writings unless convinced by Scripture or plain reason, is presented as the decisive moment for the Protestant Reformation. Noll argues that Luther's stand before Emperor Charles V and the imperial diet crystallized the challenge to papal authority and traditional church doctrine. This event marked the irreversible break with Rome for many in Northern Europe, unleashing a torrent of theological, social, and political changes. It underscored the principle of sola Scriptura and the individual conscience, leading to the formation of new Protestant denominations and fundamentally reshaping the religious map of Europe and, subsequently, the world.

Turning Point 8: The English Act of Supremacy (AD 1534)

Noll identifies the English Act of Supremacy in 1534, which declared King Henry VIII the "Supreme Head of the Church of England," as the pivotal moment for the English Reformation. Unlike the continental Reformation, which began primarily with theological disputes, the English break with Rome was initially driven by political and dynastic concerns, specifically Henry's desire for an annulment. This act established the unique Erastian character of the Church of England, where the monarch holds ultimate authority over the church. It led to a distinct trajectory for Anglicanism, blending Catholic tradition with Protestant theology, and profoundly influenced the religious and political history of Britain and its global empire.

Turning Point 9: The Founding of the Jesuits (AD 1540)

The founding of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) by Ignatius of Loyola in 1540 is presented as a crucial turning point for the Catholic Reformation (or Counter-Reformation). Noll emphasizes the Jesuits' commitment to education, missionary work, and absolute obedience to the Pope. Their rigorous spiritual discipline, intellectual prowess, and global reach made them the spearhead of Catholic renewal and expansion. They played a vital role in stemming the tide of Protestantism in Europe and spreading Catholicism to new continents, including the Americas and Asia. This turning point revitalized the Catholic Church, demonstrating its capacity for internal reform and global engagement in response to the challenges of the Protestant Reformation.

Turning Point 10: The Conversion of the Wesleys (AD 1738)

Noll highlights the Aldersgate experience of John Wesley in 1738, where he felt his "heart strangely warmed," as the catalyst for the Evangelical Revival and the rise of Methodism. This personal conversion experience, shared by his brother Charles and others, led to a powerful movement emphasizing personal piety, evangelism, social concern, and lay participation. The

Wesleys' itinerant preaching, hymn writing, and organizational genius transformed the religious landscape of Britain and America. This turning point revitalized Protestantism, gave birth to new denominations, and profoundly influenced subsequent missionary movements and social reform efforts, shaping modern evangelical Christianity worldwide.

Turning Point 11: The Edinburgh Missionary Conference (AD 1910)

The Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 is presented by Noll as a watershed moment for the global expansion of Christianity and the nascent ecumenical movement. This conference brought together Protestant missionary leaders from around the world to strategize for "the evangelization of the world in this generation." It symbolized the peak of Western missionary enterprise and marked a shift towards greater cooperation among denominations. More importantly, it laid the groundwork for the modern ecumenical movement, fostering a sense of shared purpose among diverse Christians. This turning point underscored Christianity's increasing global reach and its potential for unity amidst denominational and cultural differences, anticipating the shift of Christianity's center of gravity to the Global South.

Turning Point 12: The Second Vatican Council (AD 1962-65)

Noll identifies the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) as a monumental turning point for the Roman Catholic Church in the modern era. Convened by Pope John XXIII, the council aimed at aggiornamento (renewal and updating) and resourcement (return to sources). It led to significant reforms, including liturgical changes (Mass in vernacular), a renewed emphasis on the laity, a more open stance towards other Christian traditions (ecumenism), and engagement with the modern world. This turning point profoundly reshaped Catholic identity, worship, and its relationship with other faiths and secular society, influencing millions globally and demonstrating the church's capacity for self-reflection and adaptation in a rapidly changing world.

Conclusion: The Future of Turning Points

In the conclusion, Noll reflects on the ongoing nature of Christian history and the potential for future turning points. He reiterates the importance of understanding the past to navigate the present and future challenges facing Christianity. He discusses the shifting demographics of global Christianity, particularly the growth in the Global South, and speculates on how this might lead to new decisive moments. Noll encourages readers to remain attentive to how God continues to work through human events, shaping the church's trajectory, and to consider what future events might be recognized as "turning points" by historians centuries from now, emphasizing the dynamic and unfolding nature of Christian history.

Themes

- Theological development
- Institutional evolution

- Global expansion
- Church-state relations
- Intellectual transformation

Notable Quotes

- "Turning points are moments when the stream of Christian history not only takes a new direction but also seems to gather new power, new momentum, as it flows into the future." — From the Introduction, explaining the concept of a 'turning point' in the book's framework.
- "The great theological debates of the early church were not abstract exercises in philosophical speculation, but desperate efforts to preserve the integrity of the gospel." — Discussing the significance of early ecumenical councils like Nicaea and Chalcedon.
- "The Reformation was not simply a theological dispute; it was a profound cultural and political earthquake that reshaped the map of Europe and the very nature of Western society." — Reflecting on the broader impact of the Protestant Reformation beyond just religious doctrine.
- "The story of Christianity is not just the story of ideas and institutions, but also the story of individuals whose lives were transformed by faith and who, in turn, transformed the world." — Emphasizing the role of key figures like Benedict, Luther, and the Wesleys in shaping Christian history.
- "To understand where the church is going, it is essential to understand where it has been." — A concluding thought on the enduring relevance of historical study for contemporary Christianity.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is TURNING POINTS Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity THIRD EDITION Mark A. Noll, Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity, Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Bak

The book is about twelve pivotal events that fundamentally altered the course of Christian history. Mark A. Noll analyzes these 'turning points,' from the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 to the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910, to show how they shaped Christian theology, practice, and global presence. It offers a thematic rather than strictly chronological approach to understanding Christianity's development.

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Yes, it is highly regarded for its accessible yet scholarly overview of Christian history. Noll's focus on decisive moments provides a clear framework for understanding complex historical developments without getting bogged down in excessive detail. It's particularly valuable for those seeking to grasp the major shifts and influences that have shaped Christianity over two millennia.

How does TURNING POINTS Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity THIRD EDITION Mark A. Noll, Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity, Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Ba

Spoiler: The book concludes with the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, highlighting the global expansion of Christianity and its shift towards the Global South. Noll then offers a brief epilogue reflecting on the ongoing nature of Christian history and the potential for future turning points, emphasizing the dynamic and unfinished story of the faith.

Who should read TURNING POINTS Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity THIRD EDITION Mark A. Noll, Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity, Third Edition (Grand Rapids,

This book is ideal for students of religious history, theology, and anyone interested in understanding the major forces that have shaped Christianity. It serves as an excellent introduction for those new to the subject, as well as a valuable refresher for those with some background, offering a coherent and insightful perspective on Christian development.

How long does it take to read TURNING POINTS Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity THIRD EDITION Mark A. Noll, Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity, Third Edition

Given its length and academic nature, a typical reader can expect to spend approximately 7 to 8 hours to read "Turning Points." This estimate assumes a reading speed of about 250 words per minute and accounts for the need to engage with the historical and theological concepts presented.

Questions & Answers

What is the main argument of Mark Noll's "Turning Points"?

Noll argues that specific, identifiable moments in history profoundly reshaped the trajectory, character, and understanding of Christianity. These "turning points" were not merely significant events but moments that fundamentally altered the church's theological development, institutional structures, geographical spread, and cultural engagement, leading to lasting consequences that define Christianity today. He aims to show how the present state of Christianity is a product of these decisive historical shifts.

How does Noll define a "turning point" in Christian history?

Noll defines a "turning point" as a moment that decisively altered the course of Christian history, leading to new directions in theology, practice, or institutional structure. These are not just important events, but moments where the church made a fundamental shift, often with unforeseen long-term consequences. He emphasizes their lasting impact on the identity and development of Christianity across different eras and regions, shaping what Christianity became.

Why does Noll begin his analysis with the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70?

Noll begins with the Fall of Jerusalem because it marked a crucial shift for early Christianity. Before 70 AD, Christianity was largely perceived as a Jewish sect. The destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem forced Christians to define themselves apart from Judaism, accelerating their mission to the Gentiles and transforming Christianity into a distinct, predominantly Gentile religion with a universal scope, rather than one tied to a specific ethnic or national identity.

What was the significance of the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) according to Noll?

According to Noll, the Council of Nicaea was critical for defining the core doctrine of Christ's divinity. It addressed the Arian controversy by affirming Christ as "homoousios" (of the same substance) with the Father, establishing a foundational Trinitarian understanding. This council set a precedent for ecumenical councils to define orthodox belief and significantly shaped the theological language and conceptual framework of subsequent Christian thought for centuries.

How did the Benedictine monastic movement shape Western Christianity?

The Benedictine monastic movement, initiated by Benedict of Nursia, profoundly shaped Western Christianity by providing a stable, disciplined model for spiritual life and community during a period of societal upheaval. Monasteries became centers of learning, preserving classical texts and Christian scriptures, developing agricultural techniques, and serving as missionary outposts. They fostered a culture of prayer, work, and study that laid foundations for medieval European civilization and church structure.

What were the long-term consequences of Charlemagne's coronation in AD 800?

Charlemagne's coronation by the Pope in AD 800 solidified the alliance between the church and secular power in the West, establishing the concept of the Holy Roman Empire. This event had long-term consequences, including the intertwining of political and religious authority, the development of a distinct Western European identity, and ongoing tensions between imperial and papal claims to supremacy, shaping the political and religious landscape for centuries to come.

What caused the Great Schism of 1054, and what were its effects?

The Great Schism of 1054 was caused by a culmination of theological, cultural, and political differences between the Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Catholic) churches. Key issues included papal authority, the "filioque" clause in the Nicene Creed, and differing liturgical practices. Its effect was a permanent split, creating two distinct branches of Christianity that developed

independently, each with its own theological emphasis, ecclesiastical structure, and cultural expression, profoundly altering global Christianity.

How did the rise of universities impact Christian thought and practice?

The rise of universities around 1200, particularly in Paris and Bologna, profoundly impacted Christian thought by fostering scholasticism. This intellectual movement emphasized systematic theology, logical reasoning, and the integration of faith with reason, exemplified by figures like Thomas Aquinas. Universities became centers for theological debate, training clergy, and shaping intellectual discourse, leading to a more formalized and rationalized approach to Christian doctrine and practice, which continues to influence theology.

What was the importance of Martin Luther's stand at the Diet of Worms?

Martin Luther's stand at the Diet of Worms in 1521 was a pivotal moment for the Protestant Reformation. By refusing to recant his writings unless convinced by Scripture or clear reason, Luther asserted the primacy of individual conscience and biblical authority over papal and conciliar decrees. This act of defiance solidified the break from Rome, inspired widespread reform movements, and laid the groundwork for the development of diverse Protestant traditions that continue to thrive today.

How did the Council of Trent respond to the Protestant Reformation?

The Council of Trent (1545-1563) was the Catholic Church's comprehensive response to the Protestant Reformation. It reaffirmed traditional Catholic doctrines, such as the authority of tradition alongside Scripture, the seven sacraments, and the necessity of good works for salvation, while also implementing significant reforms regarding clerical education, discipline, and the sale of indulgences. Trent revitalized Catholicism, clarified its teachings, and shaped its identity for the next four centuries, defining modern Catholicism.

What role did the conversion of the Wesleys play in the history of Christianity?

The conversion experiences of John and Charles Wesley in 1738 were crucial for the rise of Methodism and the broader Evangelical Revival. Their emphasis on personal conversion, sanctification, and evangelism, coupled with innovative organizational methods like circuit riders and class meetings, led to a widespread spiritual awakening. This movement revitalized Protestantism, fostered social reform, and significantly influenced the development of modern evangelicalism, particularly in Britain and America, with lasting global impact.

Why does Noll include the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 as a turning point?

Noll includes the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 because it marked the high point of the modern Protestant missionary movement and signaled a new era for global Christianity. It brought together hundreds of mission leaders, fostering unprecedented cooperation and strategizing for world evangelization. More importantly, it foreshadowed the shift of Christianity's demographic center from the West to the Global South, recognizing the growing

importance of non-Western churches and their future leadership.

What was the impact of the Azusa Street Revival on global Christianity?

The Azusa Street Revival (1906-1909) in Los Angeles was a seminal event for the emergence and rapid global spread of Pentecostalism. Characterized by spiritual experiences like speaking in tongues, divine healing, and ecstatic worship, it launched a movement that emphasized the direct experience of the Holy Spirit. Its impact was immense, leading to the formation of numerous Pentecostal denominations and becoming one of the fastest-growing segments of global Christianity, profoundly reshaping its landscape.

How did Vatican II modernize the Roman Catholic Church?

Vatican II (1962-1965) was a pivotal ecumenical council that initiated significant modernization within the Roman Catholic Church. It fostered a spirit of aggiornamento (updating), leading to reforms like the use of vernacular languages in the liturgy, increased lay participation, a renewed emphasis on Scripture, and a more open stance towards other Christian denominations and world religions. It reshaped Catholic identity and its engagement with the modern world, impacting millions globally.

What criteria does Noll use to select his "decisive moments"?

Noll selects his "decisive moments" based on their profound and lasting impact on the entire trajectory of Christian history. He looks for events that fundamentally altered theological understanding, institutional structures, geographical spread, or the church's relationship with culture and society. These are moments where Christianity took a new, irreversible turn, shaping its subsequent development in significant ways that continue to resonate in contemporary Christian life and thought.

What is the overall trajectory of Christian history as presented by Noll?

Noll presents Christian history as a dynamic and evolving narrative, shaped by a series of critical junctures. He shows a trajectory from a small Jewish sect to a global religion, marked by both unity and division, theological development and institutional adaptation, and a constant interplay between internal beliefs and external cultural forces. The overall trajectory highlights Christianity's resilience, adaptability, and its increasing global diversity, culminating in its current worldwide presence and varied expressions.

How does Noll balance theological and socio-political factors in his analysis?

Noll meticulously balances theological and socio-political factors by demonstrating their intricate interplay at each turning point. He shows how theological debates (e.g., Nicaea, Trent) were often influenced by political realities, and conversely, how theological decisions had profound socio-political consequences (e.g., Charlemagne, Reformation). He argues that understanding Christian history requires appreciating both the internal religious convictions and the external historical contexts that shaped and were shaped by the church.

What can readers learn about the diversity of Christian traditions from this book?

Readers learn that Christian traditions are incredibly diverse, having evolved significantly over two millennia. The book illustrates how different turning points led to the formation of distinct branches (e.g., East-West Schism, Protestant Reformation) and how various theological emphases and practices emerged. It highlights that there is no single monolithic "Christianity" but a rich tapestry of traditions shaped by historical, cultural, and theological developments, each contributing to the global Christian landscape.

Does Noll suggest any future "turning points" for Christianity?

While Noll focuses on historical turning points, he implicitly suggests that the ongoing shift of Christianity's center of gravity to the Global South (Africa, Asia, Latin America) represents a contemporary, and perhaps future, turning point. He concludes with events like the Edinburgh Conference and Azusa Street, which foreshadow this global reorientation, implying that future decisive moments will likely emerge from these rapidly growing Christian populations and their unique cultural and theological contributions.

What is the significance of the "Third Edition" mentioned in the title?

The "Third Edition" signifies that the book has been updated and revised multiple times since its initial publication. Noll likely incorporated new scholarship, refined his arguments, and potentially added or re-evaluated certain turning points to reflect contemporary understanding and the ongoing evolution of Christian history. Later editions often include expanded coverage of global Christianity and recent developments, ensuring the book remains current and comprehensive for its readers.