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February 4, 2008 [printer-friendly version](#)

The New-Old Evangelicals

— Martin E. Marty

"Anything anybody can say about Evangelicalism is true" is my take-off from Emmett Grogan's "Anything anybody can say about America is true." He and his truism issued from the sixties, a period when I would not have known about or spoken of the Protean character of modern American evangelicalism. Back then, schooled by the likes of the late Carl F. Henry, we thought Evangelicalism cohered around a distinctive theology born of 19th century Princeton-born thought and 20th century Billy Graham evangelistic style. It was "soft" and "open" post-fundamentalism at its core.

These years, with one-fourth of America identifying or being identified as evangelical, leaders within, critics without, and editorialists within and without are trying to find coherence. Of course, there are some continuities, such as: 1) a high view of biblical authority, but by no means always or any longer the old doctrine of inerrancy; 2) a high Christology but one with bewildering variations; 3) a commitment to evangelizing, making converts, and growing, but in competitive and sometimes mutually contradictory forms; 4) a dream of community, but now challenged by individualist, go-it-alone spiritualities and mega- and post- and emergent- and traditional styles; 5) an involvement with public life, but by no means reducible to the politically "Christian right."

Historians, social scientists, theologians, and journalists owe it to the public and their own consciences to chronicle these varieties and not stereotype.

These thoughts were brought on this week by my reading of Chris Armstrong's "The Future Lies in the Past," subtitled "Why evangelicals are connecting with the early church as they move into the 21st century," in the February issue of *Christianity Today*. Armstrong takes off with a report on the 2007 Wheaton Theology Conference on "The Ancient Faith for the Church's Future." He pays tribute to the recently-deceased Bob Webber, the pioneer in this "connecting" work. Many of us had paid tribute to him as he lay near death at the time of a 2006 conference on this theme, one in which I participated and found ample opportunity to do some sizing up. As Armstrong describes it, this growing minority is weary and wary of an evangelicalism that puts too many of its bets on growth for growth's sake, triumphalism, present-mindedness, and repudiation of the Christian past.

As I viewed this group last year and as Armstrong describes its leaders now, a very few were seen heading off to Rome while more of them (at Wheaton College and its kin) now are Episcopalian. Some join the more liturgically and confessionally traditional churches (labeled "mainline" by those who think Mainline Protestantism is also one thing). Most remain in the churches of which they were a part, but bring in change—not made up of novelties, but based on the early Christian church. The changes are to be used not as antiques or period pieces, but as challenges to many of the forms that took over in recent decades.

Again, as Armstrong describes this Webberian heritage, it is not negative, not dismissive of all evangelical expressions of the recent past in favor of the remote past. Its leaders are aware of hungers not being met elsewhere in evangelicalism, and of strengths which the past-less and of-the-moment evangelicals have been missing. One hardly need say, because the people Armstrong describes are aware of it, that this new-old or old-new crop can also be triumphalist, or snobby and snooty and condescending. Yet those who are reading the relics of the early church find plenty of delicious texts which bring judgment on those who forget the plain people of the gospel stories and their successors.

Martin E. Marty's biography, current projects, upcoming events, publications, and contact information can be found at www.illumino.com.

Sightings comes from the [Martin Marty Center](#) at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

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Sightings welcomes submissions of 500 to 750 words in length that seek to illuminate and interpret the forces of faith in a pluralist society. [Previous columns](#) give a good indication of the topical range and tone for acceptable essays. The editor also encourages new approaches to issues related to religion and public life.

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