

Sightings 5/12/08

Manifesto

-- Martin E. Marty

A week from Sunday we will join millions of worshipers in many lands and churches in dusting off the ancient church's Athanasian Creed in a Trinity Sunday ritual. As a boy I would join in confessing incomprehensibly that "the Father [is] incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible...but there are not three incomprehensibles...but one incomprehensible." Back when I could still quake, I quaked because we had just confessed that "except everyone do keep whole and undefiled [this Catholic Faith] without doubt he shall perish everlastingly." That line hardly bode well for us who were too ignorant to keep this Faith, this Creed, whole and too boyish to keep anything "undefiled." I bring this up because the Athanasian Creed was a manifesto.

"Come On, You Call This A Manifesto?" screams a headline in the May 9th Wall Street Journal over a column by Wheaton College's Gary Jacobs, as he scorns the two-day old Evangelical Manifesto, a twenty-page document issued by evangelicals, some of whom he counted as friends. With other early critics, he questioned whether the document was sufficiently sharp, punchy, short, memorable and agenda-specific. Ugh! He found it "insistently moderate", something evangelical statements should not be. First and worst of all, its authors want their evangelicalism to be disassociated from the fundamentalism that was a parent of their movement. Instead? "The fearless spirit of the true manifesto is just what an increasingly somnolent evangelical movement needs."

Its authors feel otherwise. True, they don't shout as they set out to correct stereotypes of modern evangelicalism. My word-search turned up only four one-liners critical of "fundamentalism." That search did not find shibboleths like "inerrant Bible" or sacraments of any sort worth manifestoing about this year. I found no "rapture" or "second coming" or "born again." "Abortion" draws one line and "gay-marriage" is so decontextualized that you might not notice it. Trying to extricate political evangelicalism from a too-close identification with one party, the authors do not want a retreat from politics or public life but more clarity of purpose and freedom from partisanship.

If it is not sharp-punch-memorable-specific enough, its authors did have specific purposes in mind. To that end, while they did punch sharply at "liberal" Protestantism, leaving Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and moderate Protestantism almost un-jabbed, theirs is a call for fellow evangelicals to make manifest their repentance and take a new course or, better, revisit and revise old strong ones. Seeing mid- and late-twentieth-century evangelicalism as having failed to distance its movement from capitulation to materialist crowd culture, these authors think that it has become the new capitulator.

When invited to gatherings of the evangelical movement, I am sometimes introduced as "this year's non-evangelical" observer. I then observe that I am almost always the only person in the room who is a member of a church body with the word "evangelical" in its name. Truth to say, I could sign this Manifesto with fingers only very rarely and loosely crossed. That is the problem, in the eyes of critics. This call to evangelical repentance does not sound angry enough, judgmental enough, ready enough to consign non-signing Christians to the fate of "perishing everlastingly."

This Manifesto is not the only thing repentant evangelicals have to talk about, but it may help non-evangelicals and "seculars" to see the positives in this strong contender for the hearts and minds of Americans, post-fundamentalist as most of them may be.

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

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

Attribution

Columns may be quoted or republished in full, with attribution to the author of the column, Sightings, and the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago Divinity School.