

Unlisted: Influential evangelicals

From the Editors in the [March 8, 2005](#) issue

List-making is a peculiarly modern obsession. The top 20 basketball teams. The top ten best sellers. Ten ways to trim your thighs. *Time* magazine recently listed its choices for the 25 most influential evangelicals. The article seemed designed partly to let readers know about some of the folks who have political clout in the world of the Religious Right and perhaps some influence at the White House. The importance of Bush's speechwriter Michael Gerson cannot be denied. Richard John Neuhaus doubtless has influence, though to call this Lutheran turned Roman Catholic priest an evangelical seems to stretch the category beyond reason. (Senator Rick Santorum is the other Roman Catholic to make the list.) It was interesting to learn about revisionist historian David Barton, photographed in cowboy hat and star-spangled denim shirt, who seeks to undo the "myth" of separation of church and state, and who is cochair of the Texas Republican Party and a close friend of House Majority Leader Tom DeLay. And it is important to know about Howard and Roberta Ahmanson, who fund much of the activity of the Religious Right. Hispanic Pentecostal pastor Luis Cortes is a bridge for Bush to Latin voters. David Coe, host of the presidential prayer breakfast, is cited as the "stealth Billy Graham."

Others names were predictable: James Dobson, Billy and Franklin Graham, Charles Colson, Tim and Beverly LaHaye. A few figures named would show up on a "most influential" list among mainline Protestants too: Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, and Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Church in suburban Chicago and pioneer of the "seeker" service.

One problem with the list: "evangelical" seems largely to mean "Christians politically on the right." No "liberal evangelical" made the list (Brian McLaren may be the lone exception, but his work has not been politically focused). Most glaringly omitted were Jim Wallis of *Sojourners* and the Call to Renewal movement; Tony Campolo, the activist and evangelist; and former president Jimmy Carter. And there was not one African-American leader whose theology is evangelical but whose politics line up more with the Democrats.

Identifying religious “people of influence” should always generate some unease. For most Christians, the person of greatest influence is a friend, family member or pastor. A famous author, evangelist or TV preacher may reach a large number of people, but without personal friendships and mentorships, that influence will prove superficial.

And there are theological reasons to be wary of “most influential” lists. Jesus proclaimed that the last will be first. Texts in the Old and New Testaments look forward to the day when the exalted will be brought low and the lowly lifted up. The kingdom of God, we learn, is working away in secret, and tends to look as powerful as a mustard seed. In Lent we recall that Pilate was certainly on the “most influential” list in Jerusalem. A different kind of power rested in the silent one in shackles before him.