

Erasing the mainline

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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I haven't read Marcia Pally's new book yet. I'll admit it's hard for me to get past the title, *The New Evangelicals*. A couple years ago I would have just mocked it for echoing the most overreported religion-beat trend story of 2005-06, a time when every moderate-to-heavy cable news viewer managed to memorize Jim Wallis's talking points without trying to. But by now, being tired of the OMG-progressive-evangelicals narrative *itself* seems like a tired cliché.

So it's hard to imagine Pally (and Eerdmans) putting something out that sticks to the usual fare of anecdotal news flashes: I found some evangelicals who don't hate gay people! Or science! I suspect this is instead a rather substantive investigation into the subject, and I plan to take a look.

I won't, however, be looking to Pally for help in coming up with a list of designations for varieties of left-leaning American Christians. Here's what she offers in a [New York Times opinion piece](#):

Christians who don't think of themselves as part of the religious right come to roughly 24 percent of the population, according to the [Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life](#). Subtract the Catholic left and you've got some 19 percent of the population distributed among the '60s evangelical left; younger, emergent progressive churches; and [red-letter Christians](#), who focus on Jesus' words in scripture (printed in red) and who lean towards progressive activism. Others have quietly broadened the activism associated with the religious right.

Mainliners, consider yourselves erased. I can't find the Pew data Pally's referring to, so I don't know how much of this paragraph comes from them--if your memory and/or Google fingers are better than mine, don't hesitate--but I'm dubious that the Pew Forum has added up U.S. Christians in the last few years without using the word "mainline" somewhere.

Yes, it's as complicated and contested a word as, well, "[evangelical](#)." But if you're a Christian and don't identify with the religious right, there's a decent chance that none of Pally's checkboxes applies to you. What if you're not "younger" anymore, and have long since emerged? What if you don't feel compelled to describe your faith in terms of a recent, largely [evangelical-left branding effort](#) that implicitly downplays Paul's passion for faithful community and the Hebrew prophets' fervor for justice?

Perhaps it's a semantic point. But anytime you say something is new while also ignoring something old, it begs the question of what labels you use and how slippery their definitions are.