Evangelicals have not always been enthusiastic students of the Early Church, at least, not of the Early Church beyond the pages of the New Testament. J. C. Ryle, first bishop of Liverpool and a prominent spokesman for the Evangelical school in the Church of England in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, expressed his misgivings about patristics in typically trenchant style: ‘When a man makes an idol of Fathers and Councils, and disparages the theology of the Reformation, we may be sure there is a screw loose in his theology.’ Ryle’s caveat was telling: patristic scholarship in his heyday was often deployed by Tractarian or Anglo-Catholic apologists to support conclusions unacceptable to Evangelicals. Even then, however, Evangelicalism had its experts on the Early Church, of whom Nathaniel Dimock was perhaps the most erudite.

Less than a century later, evangelicalism had become a global phenomenon blending outstanding numerical success, bewildering diversity and regular crises of identity. One cause of concern, particularly among North American Evangelicals, has been a sense of spiritual, doctrinal and ecclesiological shallowness. This has led some to embrace varieties of Eastern Orthodoxy, and others, in Mark Noll’s beautifully-turned phrase, to ‘hit the Canterbury trail’. Evangelicals have discovered, or re-discovered the Christian past, finding spiritual and theological resources in, for example, patristic commentaries on Scripture and models of catechesis. Wheaton College, one of the most illustrious evangelical institutions in North America, epitomised by Joel Carpenter as the ‘Harvard of the Bible Belt’ in the 1930s, established a Center for Early Christian Studies in 2009. A conference marking the inauguration of the Wheaton Center was held in Spring 2010, bringing together supporters of the Center and members of Wheaton’s Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals. The volume under review was the product of that conference, and the co-editors are the directors respectively of the Center and the Institute.

The essays offered here follow three broad themes. First, several contributors present detailed case studies of particular historical figures, movements or happenings. In ‘John Wesley and the Early Church: History, Antiquity and the Spirit of God’, Jeffrey Barbeau delineates Wesley’s engagement with patristic texts, showing how Wesley sought to portray Methodism as both faithful to Christian Antiquity and as a movement of reform and renewal. Barbeau’s argument is persuasive and his survey of the relevant historiography is exhaustive and illuminating. Darryl Hart writes on the Mercersburg theologians John Williamson Nevin and Philip Schaff in ‘The Use and Abuse of the Christian
Past. Mercersburg, the Ancient Church and American Evangelicalism’. As well as providing a careful contextual reading of Nevin and Schaff, Hart also sounds a warning about the risks of taking an expression of Christianity forged in one time and culture and then seeking to impose it on another: an insight raising questions about the whole project of ‘Early Christian Studies’. Finally, in this excellent section, Elesha Coffman examines the 1977 ‘Chicago Call’, an attempt by some forty evangelical scholars to encourage their fellows to pay more attention to historic roots and credal identity. Dr Coffman’s spirited essay was this reviewer’s first encounter with the ‘Chicago Call’, and it was comforting to learn that the ‘Call’ made little apparent impact on its contemporaries either.

The second set of essays consider why Evangelicals should, in principle, pay attention to the Fathers, and why, in practice, they may fail to do so. Five or six of the essays address this theme. In the prologue to the volume, Robert Wilken writes about ‘Going Deeper into the Bible’, commending the Fathers for their theological and Christological reading of Scripture. Michael Graves sounds a similar note in ‘Evangelicals, the Bible and the Early Church’. Christopher Hall discusses ‘Evangelical Inattentiveness to Ancient Voices’, considering why evangelicals may be impatient or suspicious of church history, or simply be bad listeners. Everett Ferguson asks, ‘Why study Early Christian History and Literature?’. Scot McKnight makes a case for the regular liturgical use of creeds in ‘Evangelicals and the Public Use of Creeds’, and Jeffrey Bingham uses Irenaeus as a case study in ‘Evangelicals and the Rule of Faith’. Many of these essays overlap, and some sit slightly uncomfortably between academic discussion and pedagogical programme. Evidently the contributors are concerned to offer practical suggestions for action, whether in the seminary or the local congregation, and this is picked up in George Kalantzis’ epilogue, ‘The Radicalness of the Evangelical Faith’, which includes a critique of the curriculum in liberal arts colleges.

The third theme is covered by an essay by Gerald Bray, asking ‘Evangelicals: Are They The Real Catholics and Orthodox?’. Bray argues that Evangelicals are closer to the Fathers than contemporary Roman Catholic or Orthodox theologians, because of Evangelical fidelity to Scripture. This case is made via a potted summary of Church history, concluding with a list of evangelical strengths, which some readers may find less than fully persuasive (for instance: ‘Evangelicals deal with scandals better than others do’ [p. 234]).

The origin of this book in a conference comes through in a couple of ways. One is that many of the papers read as if they were presented verbally, and generally this is a strength, because they communicate in a lively and engaging manner. Another is that most of the essays are followed by a shorter ‘response’, presumably delivered as part of the conference programme. In some cases the