

Busted for bloopers: Marty runs out of luck

by [Eric Scott](#) in the [August 7, 2007](#) issue

In this era of intense scrutiny, the media pounce on every celebrity misstep. Up to this point in his long career, Christian scholar and author Martin Marty had beaten the odds. His run of good luck came to an end last week, however, when it was revealed that Marty had duped the public for years by publishing material he knew to be false.

Marty has produced more than 50 books and 5,000 articles, many of them focused on the role of religion in public life. Yet of all his writings, none have had a more lasting impact on scholarship than his reports of zany mistakes in worship bulletins and church newsletters. Now Marty has been accused of making up the typographical errors and other miscues he often includes in his regular column in the *Christian Century*.

"Mistakes were made," said Marty stoically at a press conference yesterday. Then, after a long pause, he suddenly broke down and blubbered, "The announcement for the Little Mothers Club did not invite young women wishing to be little mothers to meet in the pastor's study. Music did not follow the bean supper in the church hall. I made it all up!"

Marty, a Lutheran pastor and professor emeritus at the University of Chicago, is also accused of bribing numerous church workers with luxurious junkets. One secretary allegedly accepted a weekend trip to Dollywood for intentionally misspelling the senior pastor's name as "Belch." A church volunteer admitted receiving a gift pack of Newman's Own salad dressing in exchange for including an article in the newsletter that asked church ladies to lend their electric girdles for the pancake breakfast.

Reactions were swift and harsh. The American Association of Worship Bulletin Editors said in a printed release, "Mr. Marty has slandered an entire generation of bulletin editors. His clams [*sic*] caused well-meaning bull [*sic*] editors to look slopy [

sic] and unprofessional. There should be consequences for his actions.”

Marty’s longtime nemesis, Martha Stewart, was gleeful at her press conference. “Now he’ll find out what it’s like on the inside. We will discover that he’s not as tough as he looks. Marty has had his last good cup of chamomile tea for a very long time.”

Marty, who has received a National Book Award, faces up to 18 months in a low-security Arts and Letters Penal Camp, reserved for hardened plagiarists and other violators of the standards of journalism and academia. The bedding materials in the camp are not made from real goose down, and lattes are available only in one size. The camp’s libraries contain mostly romance novels and books from the Left Behind series. Camp gangs engage in frequent battles over the lone copy of Nietzsche.

James Wall, a longtime colleague of Marty, endured the Arts and Letters Camp for three months in 1975 after he wrote a review of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* even though he had not seen the film. “I’m sorry he will have to go through this,” said Wall. “But Marty will make it. He has always been a survivor.”

Marty’s kindergarten teacher, the 106-year-old Edith Peppertree, was not surprised at the deception. “Martin’s work was always questionable,” she said during an interview at her home in West Point, Nebraska, Marty’s hometown. “He was always coloring outside the lines. Once, for show and tell, he brought his ‘father’—he had borrowed the school custodian for the occasion.”

Author Kathleen Norris also took the revelation of Marty’s misconduct in stride. “Remember Bibfeldt?” she asked, referring to Franz Bibfeldt, a fictional theologian whom Marty and his friends invented several decades ago. Marty and seminary colleague Jerald Brauer once wrote a book about the imaginary figure in an unsuccessful effort to score the lucrative Nobel Prize for Theology.

It is too early to determine what long-term effects these new revelations will have on Marty’s legacy. The advent of the Internet and e-mail had already begun to erode his “bulletin funnies” empire. His recent fall from grace may have struck a blow so severe that Marty’s credibility can never recover. Others believe that the scholar has the ability to overcome this obstacle and perhaps even to benefit from it. An unconfirmed report has it that Marty plans to change the name of his regular column in the Century to “Letters from an Arts and Letters Penal Camp.”

Marty's true victims are his loyal fans. They will forever remember the day they learned that their hero lied to them, and that the peacemaking conference really was held as scheduled and not canceled due to a conflict.