

Why I Want to Leave



STRUGGLING WITH
EVANGELICALISM



and What It Takes to Stay

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STRUGGLING WITH EVANGELICALISM



EVANGELICALISM IS MY SPIRITUAL HABITAT. I graduated from Wheaton College and Fuller Seminary. I work for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. My local congregation belongs to the Evangelical Covenant Church, the denomination that ordained me to pastoral ministry. I read publications like *Christianity Today*, support the work of agencies like World Vision, and can rattle off the lyrics to just about any worship song in the CCLI Top 100. For better or worse, my spiritual zipcode lies deep inside evangelicalism. In many ways, I benefit from the evangelical status quo. And I am conflicted about that.

Maybe you're struggling with evangelicalism too. If so, it could be for any number of reasons. Perhaps you're disillusioned with the political platform that's been conflated with Christianity into a package deal. Or you're grappling with how a seemingly

Christ-centered apologist like Ravi Zacharias could have sexually abused so many victims by using his ministry as leverage. Even if you're not surprised when famous Christians get caught doing terrible things, your revulsion may stem from a particular church environment that turned you off from evangelicalism by the way someone close to you was treated. The dissonance you feel could also stem from how the evangelicals you know have (mis)handled subjects like science, sexuality, singleness, or supernatural gifts. Perhaps it's all of the above.

You're not alone.

My struggle with evangelicalism began shortly after I graduated from Wheaton College in 2003. During the presidential primary races of 2004, I worked as a news intern for WGN Radio in Chicago. That was the year George W. Bush ran for reelection. When I began my internship in January, the field of candidates vying to be Bush's Democratic challenger numbered about half a dozen. In addition to answering the newsroom phone (I never had to fetch coffee, strangely), one of my duties was curating sound bites from the campaign trail to be used during newscasts at the top of every hour. To gather these audio clips, I'd listen to live feeds of stump speeches and press conferences each day, choosing segments that captured a candidate's tone and content but with enough variety to avoid redundancy. Over the next few months, I became quite familiar with the speeches of John Kerry, John Edwards, Wesley Clark, Howard Dean, Al Sharpton, and of course, President Bush.

Crafting news copy around those speeches not only put me in touch with the American political scene at that time, it also sparked an interest in how faith and politics shape each other. Bush's reelection victory reflected the Religious Right's

influence within evangelicalism, and by comparison, the Religious Left's lack thereof. This disparity troubled me, so I began asking questions about why so many evangelicals supported funding for the occupation of Iraq and the torture of enemy prisoners using methods like waterboarding but opposed funding for food stamps, public education, and medical care.

In 2005, I read Jim Wallis's book, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, which gave voice to the disconnect I felt between the Religious Right's brand of Christianity and the teachings of Jesus. Wallis further piqued my interest when he told Jon Stewart the following on *The Daily Show*:

We need a better conversation about moral values. Are there only two: abortion and gay marriage? I'm an evangelical Christian. . . . I would say that fighting poverty is a moral value. I'd say protecting the environment, God's creation, is a moral value. I'd say how and when we go to war—and whether we tell the truth about it—is a moral value. Is torture a moral value? Let's have a better conversation about this.¹

From there, I started reading *Sojourners*, the magazine Wallis founded, alongside *Christianity Today*, *The Economist*, *Relevant*, and the late *Books & Culture*, rest its soul. Up next was Shane Claiborne's 2006 book *The Irresistible Revolution*, followed by Greg Boyd's *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power Is Destroying the Church* in 2007. In early 2008, I started a blog to process my thoughts on everything from gender roles and pop culture to presidential politics (it was primary season again) and theological trends

within evangelicalism, like the growing rift between New Calvinism and the Emerging Church.

Did I mention my blog was eclectic? The first twenty posts included a book review, a music review, a piece about calls to boycott the Beijing Olympics, a five-thousand-word analysis of Honolulu's proposed rail transit project, and a thirty-nine-word poem with each line shorter than the last—resulting in the shape of an upside-down triangle. I also wrote an hour-by-hour recap of my first day in grad school, a reflection on the deadly sin of envy, two posts about basketball (college and pro, respectively), and one each on evangelism, Earth Day, capital punishment, and the doctrine of common grace.²

Speaking of common grace, it was through the exploration of these eclectic interests that my appreciation grew for the writings and public voice of Richard Mouw, who was then Fuller Seminary's president. I was especially drawn to the astounding ease with which Mouw could find theological common ground with almost anyone, not in spite of his Calvinist convictions but *because* of them. I had first heard him speak when he gave the 2003 commencement address to my graduating class at Wheaton. A couple years later, while browsing the shelves at Honolulu's Logos Bookstore, I stumbled upon his little book *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*. It was such an unexpectedly enjoyable and compelling read that I devoured it in a couple sittings. Shattering my stereotypes of Calvinism as a rigid, Puritanical system committed to preserving male authority, Mouw introduced me to the world of his favorite theologian, Abraham Kuyper, also a fervent Calvinist but one whose seemingly strongest point of overlap with John Piper was that their last names rhymed. Everything else between Kuyper and Piper was a case in contrasts, not only

in tone and focus but also politics and cultural engagement. Apparently Calvinists don't all agree! Dating back to my undergrad days at Wheaton a few years prior, I had until then assumed that Piper's interpretation of Calvinism was authoritative and uncontested. And yet in Mouw's Kuyperian version of Calvinism, women could be pastors, wars could be protested, and through the idea of common grace, the scope of God's care extended to all areas of creation and society, creating the basis for redemptive collaboration across any number of differences.

After hearing Mouw speak at the Hawaiian Islands Ministries conference in 2006 on "How to be a Public Christian," I found myself reading as much of his work as possible, from columns on Beliefnet.com to his Fuller blog, *Mouw's Musings*. When I started blogging in 2008, I was reading *He Shines in All That's Fair*, Mouw's lectures on culture and common grace, titled after a phrase in the hymn, "This Is My Father's World." At last, here was a Calvinist who valued both God's sovereignty and social action! As my Kuyperian horizons broadened, I discovered magazines like *Comment* and think tanks like The Center for Public Justice. It's no coincidence that after finishing my social work degree in 2011, I promptly started online classes at Fuller Seminary, in large part due to Mouw's effect on me.

As my seminary years began, I remained interested in conversations around the church's role in public life. Thus began my struggle to navigate the dissonance between who evangelicals purport to be as followers of Jesus, and who evangelicals are when capitulating to idolatries like Christian nationalism and injustices like white supremacy. Where was my place in all of this? Was it more problematic to identify as an evangelical or not? My time working in that election year newsroom may have started

the ball rolling, but I soon realized that the struggle went deeper than candidates, campaigns, and cable news. Even if we could remove partisan politics from the equation, evangelical Christianity has supplied ample cause for mixed feelings about this particular expression of faith.

Blogging about evangelicalism helped clarify some of my ambivalence. At the same time, it stoked a stronger curiosity to find out why this topic mattered so much to me and a deeper longing to make sense of the mess. Entering my thirties stirred up new questions: How many possible meanings does *evangelical* have and how do we distinguish between them? If this label causes such a reactionary ruckus, why can't we seem to stop using it? When we get pulled into the cycle of debating the word's usefulness and proper usage, what effect does that have on our capacity for constructive conversation about cultivating a healthier evangelicalism, without minimizing either its brokenness or beauty?

I was initially dismayed to learn that Mouw's time as Fuller's president was ending in 2013, the year before Rebecca and I planned on moving our family from Honolulu to Pasadena so that we could both be full-time seminarians. However, shortly after we arrived there in 2014, I was delighted to discover through his fabulous assistant, Tammi (who just so happened to be my pre-assigned vocational formation small group facilitator during my first quarter on campus), that since Mouw's schedule was no longer packed with running the seminary, he now had more time to connect with students! Almost immediately, I gathered some classmates from the MDiv program and set about forming a "Kuyper Club" in the hopes of enticing Mouw to meet with us on a regular basis. Thanks to Tammi's influence, we made it onto

his calendar, and our little reading group had a blast getting to know Dr. Mouw in person over the next several years, eventually reaching the outer orbit of those who call him “Rich.” Living in seminary housing surrounded by classmates from around the world, I learned that Fuller is neither shy about identifying itself as an evangelical institution nor reluctant to name and address evangelicalism’s shortcomings. This willingness to engage gray areas was part of what drew us there.

In 2015, Fuller’s magazine devoted an entire issue to a one-word theme: *Evangelical*.³ That issue served up a feast’s worth of food for thought from a diverse cross-section of scholars and practitioners. I read it from cover to cover, but one article stayed with me, “Confessions of a Reluctant Evangelical,” in which theology professor Dr. Erin Dufault-Hunter describes her struggle with both the label and the entity to which it points. She confesses that she often wants “to be cool more than I want to be Christian” yet chooses to claim and be claimed by evangelicalism because “I need my crazy kin. Just as I did not choose my blood family, I did not decide who would also come into this space of open gifts of grace and peace through Christ. . . . Despite our sometimes tense and important divergences, we are all claimed by the good news of what God has done in Christ, enticed by what God reveals in Scripture, and invigorated by the Spirit for engagement with a creation beloved by the One who created it.”⁴

By articulating her struggle with evangelicalism, Dr. Erin, as students affectionately call her, had put her finger on something I hadn’t yet realized about my own struggle: I wanted evangelicalism to claim me. I wanted to belong. Well, at least that’s how I felt for an hour until the next time evangelicalism did something irksome (sigh).

Still, that article marked a tipping point. I began tracing the struggle back to a desire for belonging. I wanted to fit somewhere, not just in Christianity (too big) or my church's denomination (too small) but tethered to evangelicalism as an interdenominational, multiethnic space distinct enough to be its own faith stream yet broad enough to include a range of role models and kindred spirits. The struggle was far from over, but I began approaching it differently. I could no longer look the other way and remain at peace. It was time to face the quandary. And if Dr. Erin's reluctance persisted after many years of discipleship and deep reflection, perhaps mine would too.

By the end of 2015, I had started a Google document compiling links to articles about evangelicalism that resonated with me. I wasn't trying to write a book at that point. I just wanted to find patterns that might help make sense of my confusion. Amazed by how much was being written about the label's baggage alone, I separated the articles that grappled with the label from those that did not. That's when I began noting contrasts between what I now call the brand and the space. If an article was insightful, I'd summarize it and make note of key themes. Even in a non-election year, it felt like evangelicalism was making news every day, with opinions swirling from every direction. So many articles came across my radar that I only had time to save the links, hoping to read them later.

By the time I graduated from Fuller in mid-2016, presidential campaign season was in full swing, complete with the usual attention given to white evangelical voters' preferences. Coverage of non-white evangelicals was scant at best, if mentioned at all. Donald Trump surprised many pundits by securing the

Republican Party's nomination, even as his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton appeared to be leading in most polls. Trump's supporters would prove those polls wrong, electing him as America's forty-fifth president.

In January 2017, I attended InterVarsity's national staff conference in Orlando. While there, I saw an announcement for a meet-up with IVP staff to learn about writing opportunities; I decided to go. By that point, I was considering writing a book about evangelicalism but wanted to learn more about IVP's proposal process. The staff were very informative, and I left the meeting with a sense that I needed to develop my ideas by writing something shorter first.

Over the next year, I continued working on that Google doc, compiling articles and making notes on how the evangelical brand differs and overlaps with evangelicalism as a space. As the election's anniversary approached that fall, an opportunity arose to write for Missio Alliance, thanks to an unexpected coffee meeting in Pasadena with Missio's then-director, JR Rozko. Missio Alliance is a parachurch network that organizes conferences and online content, providing theological and practical direction for North American church leaders in the vein of the Lausanne movement.⁵ Its resources have been a breath of fresh air for evangelicals seeking an alternative to "New Calvinist" complementarian networks like The Gospel Coalition and the Acts 29 Network.⁶ JR liked my contrast between brand and space, so I worked on an article that was eventually published in January 2018, one year after President Trump's inauguration.

Part of me was hoping that writing an article or two would get the topic out of my system so that I wouldn't have to continue contemplating whether or not to attempt a book proposal. As

2018 unfolded, however, it became clear that even if the proposal wasn't accepted, I felt a sense of urgency to at least follow through. If it was rejected, I would know I tried. But if it was accepted, it would be worth putting my struggle into words to help someone else find hope.

Our family moved from Southern California back home to Honolulu that fall, which delayed things a bit, but in February 2019 I finally submitted the proposal. It had been over two years since Orlando, four years since reading Dr. Erin's article, eleven years since starting a blog, and fifteen years since my internship in a radio newsroom. Did I mention this was just the proposal? Even after its acceptance, my struggle with evangelicalism persisted.

Why tell you this if it won't eliminate the struggle? The short answer is that struggles are not all created equal. Your journey might look very different from mine. You might not find any appeal in claiming or being claimed by evangelicalism. My goal isn't for you to land in the same place as me, Dr. Erin, or anyone else mentioned in these pages. This book is less of a roadmap and more of a compass. If you've ever grappled with mixed emotions about evangelicalism, this book is for you. If you're repulsed by the brand yet still inhabit evangelical spaces, this book will help you navigate the dissonance. If you're puzzled by how evangelicalism can be so broken yet beautiful at the same time, we'll unpack the reasons together.

AWKWARD SACRAMENTS

Evangelicalism is far from monolithic because it encompasses so many denominations and traditions, yet its variety of expression contains a distinct flavor. Take the practice of Communion for example. Between the type of bread, form of

distribution, and style of musical accompaniment, evangelicals celebrate the Lord's Supper in many ways. Sometimes the congregation remains seated while trays are passed down each row. At other times, most people rise and form a line near the front.

There's also the question of music. A group of instrumentalists, often called a worship team or praise band, might play softly as the elements are distributed, or the process can be accompanied by prerecorded music. Sometimes evangelicals pre-cut the Communion bread, but at other times they practice intinction (colloquially known as "rip and dip"). Some churches use crushed crackers; some distribute paper-thin wafers. Once served, the elements might be held in hand until all partake together. At other times, congregants eat in turn as they head back to their seats.

Since evangelicals tend to emphasize personal faith, church services are designed facilitate an individual encounter with God. A worship team of musicians helps create an atmosphere conducive to such encounters. Sometimes the goal of a personalized encounter conflicts with the goal of sharing the experience as a group. Clashing priorities can produce awkward results. In order to set a worshipful tone, the band might play a song while Communion elements are served. If this is not carefully planned in advance, musicians can find themselves in a situation where their hands are needed for two different actions at once: receiving Communion and playing their instrument. Without a suitable surface upon which to set down their bread (unsanitary without a plate) and cup (risking stains if spilled), a dilemma arises for each instrumentalist.

Option A: Attempt to continue playing while consuming the bread and juice. This risks a potentially distracting musical

hiccup and a couple awkwardly rushed movements from hand to mouth, especially with the juice. Option B: Cease playing the instrument for a longer period of time in order to reverently hold the elements securely in hand. This risks unintended musical consequences if the band relies on that instrument's part to carry the song. Most pianos and keyboards have a flat surface within reach and wide enough for an individual Communion cup, but guitarists, drummers, and bass players don't typically enjoy this luxury. Without sufficient guidance or preplanning, each musician must decide which to prioritize: playing their instrument or receiving the elements in hand.

I recall one particular Communion Sunday when this scenario played out unceremoniously at first. The music sounded great, but when it came time for the band members to be served Communion, a noticeable change occurred. As each instrumentalist paused to receive the bread and cup, the sound mix changed as if their instrument had been unexpectedly muted. First, the guitar dropped out, then returned once the guitarist had partaken. Next, the piano dropped out for the same reason, then returned. The drums ceased briefly but came back, followed by the bass. As each instrument briefly paused, the song kept going, but our ears were treated to a unique arrangement, the likes of which we've never heard before and would be rather difficult to replicate!

I suspect these awkwardly holy moments aren't uncommon in evangelical worship spaces featuring a worship band tasked with playing accompaniment during Communion. Even if unintended, the rotation of instruments being silent reflects the trajectory of 1 Corinthians 12:12: "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with

Christ.” There’s beauty in the sequence of taking turns, especially given the theological significance of pausing one’s routine to cradle the body and blood of Christ, broken and shed for us. It reminds us why we’re gathered for music-making in the first place.

Having said that, this scene would be unlikely without a peculiar recipe of evangelical-flavored ingredients: music designed for a personal encounter with God combined with the communal action of sharing the Lord’s Table as God’s family. Which priority takes precedence? I’ve often faced this dilemma in my experience leading worship teams. It’s tough for instrumentalists to choose between two essential tasks when their hands can only perform one at a time. Which role takes precedence: parishioner or musician? It sounds strange to describe the dilemma that way but makes perfect sense within an evangelical context that values both personal encounter and group participation.

In addition to the beauty of taking turns, this scene also reveals a bit of sacramental clumsiness on the part of well-intentioned evangelicals. While I can appreciate blending tradition with innovation, it can come off like the two are at odds, as if the Eucharist celebration is interrupting our regularly scheduled rock music. How ironic to rehearse our songs thoroughly enough to anticipate every chord change and vocal harmony yet not give commensurate attention to how the precious symbols of Christ’s body and blood will be partaken to nourish us as God’s people.

Perhaps it’s very evangelical of me to even consider a musical hiccup such a problem in the first place! Surely the gifts from the Lord’s Table are worth far more than any worship we could bring. Indeed, evangelicalism is beautiful and broken, awkward sacraments and all. But it makes me feel at home.

GRAPPLING REALISTICALLY AND REDEMPTIVELY

Coastal cliffs are a mixed bag, offering breathtaking views but also hazardous landslides. In a similar way, evangelicalism can be simultaneously life-giving and dangerous. Much of the recent commotion surrounding the evangelical label reacts to one of these seemingly incompatible characteristics. On one hand, cynicism has swelled because hypocrisy, injustice, and abuse repeatedly harm those Jesus commanded us to love. Cynicism's negative filter makes it increasingly difficult for some to see any hope for evangelicalism's future. At the spectrum's other end, conversations tend to focus on evangelicalism in its ideal form, emphasizing what it *should* or *could* be if we lived out our values faithfully or recaptured the best of our heritage. This idealistic approach sets a high bar with good intentions, but, like cynicism, it tells an incomplete story by failing to describe evangelicalism as it really is: a mixed bag.

This book proposes a third way that is neither idealistic nor cynical. In order to take the mixed bag seriously, I believe we can neither disavow evangelicalism on account of its brokenness nor minimize its complicity in ongoing patterns of idolatry and injustice. By grappling with a more realistic account of evangelicalism experienced from the inside, this book aims to cultivate appreciation for the gifts God has given us, even as we learn to repent for our collective sins. As we come to terms with a complicated space, we must neither yield to the status quo nor oversimplify the mess we're in.

Beginning in the next chapter, I'll suggest four active postures that are essential for grappling realistically and redemptively with evangelicalism. These postures are awareness, appreciation, repentance, and renewal. Without awareness, we're like the baby

bird in *Are You My Mother?* Without appreciation, we risk succumbing to cynicism. Without repentance, we capitulate to idolatry and injustice. Without renewal, future generations of evangelicals will find this space even less inhabitable. For each posture, we'll spend one chapter exploring what it is and why it matters, then another chapter on how to cultivate it.

Until we engage evangelicalism's good and bad in an integrated way, we won't come to terms with our mixed feelings about this influential space where so many have encountered Jesus in direct and personal ways. Whether you're on the brink of leaving evangelicalism behind, strongly committed to staying, or somewhere in between, I desire to help you make an informed decision about your relationship with evangelicalism moving forward. Are you ready?

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