

The Pennsylvania State University

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**EVANGELICAL ERASURE?:  
DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY  
AND THE MEMORY OF RACHEL HELD EVANS**

A Thesis in

Media Studies

by

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## Abstract

Rachel Held Evans was a blogger, author, and speaker who publicly chronicled her “evolution” from an evangelical Christian and political conservative to critiquing the traditions, interpretations of the Bible, and political ties that defined evangelicalism since 2007. She questioned the traditional teachings on the place of women and LGBTQ people in the church and claimed most evangelicals did not act on Jesus’ commandment to love and serve society’s outcasts. By 2019, Evans had published four books with a fifth under contract, maintained a popular blog and extensive social media presence, and wrote for national news outlets. Members of her online community celebrated Evans for questioning the theological justification used to marginalize people and ideas in the evangelical community, but many evangelical leaders condemned her for “teaching” or “preaching” heretical ideas—especially as a woman. Secular and religious outlets published glowing memorials and headlines calling Evans a “public theologian” after her unexpected death in May of 2019. Among those headlines, historian Elisha Coffman questioned the possibility of a theologically and socially progressive female voice to be remembered in the male-dominated conservative world of evangelical Christianity. This project contextualizes Evans’ work and impact with previous research on women in evangelicalism, how evangelical women are remembered in historical surveys, and the close relationship between evangelicals and digital communications technology. The project ends with a review of Evans’ community and impact as it stands in May 2020 and a breakdown of what it means to be remembered both in the official and public memory.

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“Whenever I want to scare myself, I consider what would happen to the world if  
Rachel Held Evans stopped writing.”  
—Glennon Doyle, foreword of *Searching for Sunday*

## Chapter One

### Introduction

In explaining this project, I encountered one of two responses: confusion tinged with intrigue, “I’ve never heard of Rachel, but sounds like an interesting project.”—or, “I love her writing. She changed how I think about faith. I’ve given everyone I know a copy of *Searching for Sunday*.”

Rachel Held Evans was a blogger, author, and speaker who publicly chronicled her “evolution” from an evangelical Christian and political conservative to critiquing the traditions, interpretations of the Bible, and political ties that defined evangelicalism.<sup>1</sup> Starting in 2007, her publications provided a respectful and well-researched examination of the theological and historical contexts that formed modern evangelicalism and her call for a “radically inclusive Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> Over twelve years, she facilitated an honest and humor-filled discussion of the many unanswered questions, problems, and discomfort the faith of her childhood created for her and other ex-evangelicals across her blog and social media accounts.<sup>3</sup> Her ability to deconstruct the theological and cultural lessons of evangelicalism that she disliked while maintaining her personal relationship to Christianity inspired others, mostly millennial-aged, to reassess and

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars have struggled to contain evangelical Christianity to a single definition. The group spans multiple denominations and is often combined with or confused with fundamental Christianity. Historian Francis Fitzgerald defines evangelicals as Protestants who believe in “Biblicism, or reliance on the Bible as the ultimate religious authority; crucicentrism, or a focus on Christ’s redemption of mankind on the cross; conversionism, or the emphasis on a ‘new birth’ as a life-changing experience; and activism, or a concern with sharing the faith with others.” I use the label “evangelical” over other, related terms including Fundamentalism which includes more religiously militant groups focused on winning a “spiritual war” through conversion.

Francis Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 637.

<sup>2</sup> Eliza Griswold, “The Radically Inclusive Christianity of Rachel Held Evans,” *The New Yorker*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/postscript/the-radically-inclusive-christianity-of-rachel-held-evans>.

<sup>3</sup> In the past five years the term “ex-evangelical,” or ex-evangelical, has become shorthand for individuals who grew up in evangelical churches but removed themselves in adulthood while still maintaining a presence in Christianity.

return to Christianity with a new perspective or ability to process the emotional and spiritual wounds they felt evangelicalism had caused.

While her publications gained Evans a wide online following, she was criticized by evangelical leaders for her divergent views. She questioned the traditional teachings on the place of women and LGBTQ people in the church and claimed most evangelicals did not act on Jesus' commandment to love and serve society's outcasts. Members of her online community celebrated Evans for questioning the theological justification used to marginalize people and ideas in the evangelical community, but many evangelical leaders condemned her for "teaching" or "preaching" heretical ideas—especially as a woman.<sup>4</sup>

By 2019, Evans had published four books with a fifth under contract, maintained 161,000 Twitter followers, annually reached over 200,000 readers on her blog, and provided guest columns multiple times for national publications including *The Washington Post*.<sup>5</sup> In early March 2019 Evans returned to her blog after an eight-month hiatus to reflect on grieving during Lent. "Death is a part of life," she wrote in her final blog post. "My prayer for you this season is that you make time to celebrate that reality, and to grieve that reality, and that you will know you are not alone. *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*"<sup>6</sup> Six weeks later, Evans entered the hospital to be treated for an infection and flu. After experiencing a severe reaction to antibiotics, including

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<sup>4</sup> Because evangelicalism encompasses segments of multiple Protestant denominations and does not fall under a single governing body referencing an "evangelical Church" would be misleading. An evangelical church, in the lowercase form, is used to describe the physical building of a single congregation. I use the term "evangelical community" to describe the wider body of people who label themselves evangelical and attend a variety of churches across the U.S.

<sup>5</sup> "Rachel Held Evans," Twitter, The Internet Archive, May 3, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190503074010/https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans>. This figure may be very inaccurate for reasons that will be discussed later.

"Rachel Held Evans," Beacon Ads, The Internet Archive, November 11, 2016, [https://web.archive.org/web/20161111021713/https://beaconads.com/buy/detail/44220\\_](https://web.archive.org/web/20161111021713/https://beaconads.com/buy/detail/44220_)

<sup>6</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Lent for Lamenting," Rachel Held Evans (blog), March 6, 2019, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/lent-for-the-lamenting> (emphasis original).



seizures, she was placed in a medically induced coma until May 2. On May 4, 2019, Evans died after additional seizures caused fatal brain damage. Her husband, Daniel Evans, who had been providing regular updates on Evans' blog, concluded the announcement of Evans' death with a nod to her legacy: "Rachel's presence in this world was a gift to us all and her work will long survive her."<sup>7</sup>

While Glennon Doyle lightheartedly asks, "What would the world be without Rachel?" just four years before the author's sudden death, I found that question a reality. A year ago, Evans existed as a peripheral presence in my research on Christian popular culture—perhaps due to her classification as a popular, not scholarly, author. In the weeks after her death, her name, initials, and the phrase "eshet chayil" repeatedly appeared in national news outlets, across social media, in podcasts, and on the Christian publications and discussion boards I was researching for another project.<sup>8</sup> Even from a distance, Evans' theological and emotional impact on her online followers and potential implications for how a generation of evangelical Christians and ex-evangelicals understood the faith was clear. On Twitter "#PrayforRHE" trended in the days after her death, an image of Evans fashioned as a saint in an icon circulated, and some women posted photos of their freshly inked "eshet chayil" tattoos.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Rachel's Health Updates," Rachel Held Evans Blog, April 9, 2019, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/health-updates>.

<sup>8</sup> In her second book, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, Evans examines the theological and cultural background of Psalm 31 that in evangelicalism is used to define gender roles and expectations for women. After researching how the phrase is used in Judaism, Evans repurpose Psalm 31 as an ode to womens' abilities and labor.

<sup>9</sup> Daneen Akers (@daneenakers), "Here's the portrait of @rachelheldevans for the @HolyTroubleBook book, finished last night w/love & tears by @GillGamble. The etching of her halo reads 'Eshet Chayil, Woman of Valor.' What a woman of valor she was. May we be the people she believed in. #SaintRachel #BecauseofRHE", Twitter, May 2, 2019, <https://twitter.com/daneenakers/status/1125858347742138368>.

Nadia Bolz-Weber (@Sarcasticluther), "Pretty sure I never again want to try to write a sermon for the funeral of someone I am so actively and deeply grieving. This helped. #womanofvalor #becauseofRHE", Twitter, May 30, 2019, <https://twitter.com/Sarcasticluther/status/1134200093282717697>.

Amid the glowing memorials and headlines calling Evans a “public theologian,” historian Elesha Coffman questioned not the importance of Evans but the possibility of a theologically and socially progressive female voice to be remembered in the male-dominated conservative world of evangelical Christianity. Pointing to other influential women in the twentieth century who pushed theological boundaries and questioned traditional leadership, Coffman wrote, “Unfortunately, there is no precedent for an American evangelical woman, however deserving, to secure such a prominent place. Rather, evangelical history has a propensity not merely to forget women but to erase them.”<sup>10</sup>

In the twelve months after Evans’ death, I joined Doyle in her quandary while considering the historical context Coffman provided. What would happen in a world without Evans? Would a legacy be imminent as many prescribed? Or would Evans be written out of the evangelical narrative? The latter question will not, and cannot, be answered for many years until the next survey of evangelical history is written. Evans’ legacy, or absence, will also not be clear for some time. But Doyle’s question persisted. So, I returned to Evans’ worlds—spaces of the blogosphere and Twitter where she connected with followers, fellow writers, and theological adversaries.

## Research Methods

Evans’ work and death received extensive coverage in popular media and by professional writers but remains absent from the current scholarship on female theologians and church leaders in the evangelical community. As of May 2020, Evans has been briefly featured twice in Kate Bowler’s study of female leadership in megachurches and appears in footnotes of articles on

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<sup>10</sup> Elesha Coffman, “Rachel Held Evans, Gone and Soon Forgotten?,” Sightings, The University of Chicago Divinity School, accessed September 14, 2019, <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/rachel-held-evans-gone-and-soon-forgotten>.

other female evangelical authors and public theologians. This project placed Evans within that conversation by contextualizing her work and impact with previous research on women in evangelicalism, how evangelical women are remembered in historical surveys, and the close relationship between evangelical and digital communications technology. Those two literature reviews track how the scholarship on evangelical women changed throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A second broad narrative established a brief history of evangelicals and their media use with a focus on how communication technologies broadcast religious teachings to a mass audience. Moving into the twenty-first century, I centered the discussion on how the internet and digital platforms have changed how religious teachings are spread and how religious communities form.

Studying the place of women in the evangelical community in conjunction with the digital community Evans created, I examined the historical and technological factors that may determine if Evans' memory will flourish.<sup>11</sup> The description highlights her impact on evangelical thought, her reception by both evangelical leaders and the evangelical community, along with how the online community that supported Evans blossomed. I then track if and how that community continued to exist in the first year after Evans' death. Conducting a netnography, I lurked in those communities, specifically on Evans' social media pages and blog. The project ends with a review of Evans' community and impact as it stands in May 2020 and a breakdown of what it means to be remembered both in the official and public memory.

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<sup>11</sup> Because evangelicalism encompasses segments of multiple Protestant denominations and does not fall under a single governing body referencing an "evangelical Church" would be misleading. An evangelical church, in the lowercase form, is used to describe the physical building of a single congregation. I use the term "evangelical community" to describe the wider body of people who label themselves evangelical and attend a variety of churches across the U.S.

What would happen to the *digital world* when Evans stopped writing? Did her ideas and supporters float into the ether? Did the traditional evangelical power structures, which have successfully adapted all previous mass communication platforms to their advantage, maintain control over the dominant evangelical narrative online and wipe Evans away? Or could the same online platforms that allowed Evans' ideas to spread and gain traction help her community and teachings stay connected and relevant in current evangelical conversations? Taking a cue from Doyle, I asked those questions.

## Chapter Two

### Going on the radio . . . and leaving the boxing gloves behind

By the mid-1920s, evangelical Christians in the U.S. were experiencing one of many tense moments in their relationship with communications technology. The infamous Scopes “Monkey Trial” that tied the complex and irregularly defined groups of Christian fundamentalists and evangelicals together brought “unwanted and often abusive attention” from journalists.<sup>12</sup> Reporters from around the country streamed into Dayton, Tennessee in July of 1925 to track the theological debate between creationism and evolution. Yet as creationism became linked with ignorance, those who initially supported the media presence in Dayton and coverage of the trial became disillusioned with journalists’ representation of the Bible.<sup>13</sup> To protect their beliefs and community from ridicule, many fundamentalists withdrew completely from interacting with secular media to create their own networks of radio stations, newspapers, and schools.<sup>14</sup> Evangelical Christians, while greatly aligning with the fundamentalist worldview, chose to continue working within the secular media systems to evangelize audiences through the use of the dominant communications technology. Evangelicals viewed technology as a neutral agent that was “morally indifferent” and purely a tool for transmission. That view justified their

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All further section headings are drawn from Evans’ publications.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Wayne Boerl and Chris Perkins, “The political pluralisation of American evangelicals: how old media built a movement, and why the Internet is poised to change it,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 11, no. 1 (2011): 68.

See Edward J. Larson’s *Summer for the Gods* for more information on Dayton and the Scopes trial.

<sup>13</sup> Racheld Held Evans, *Evolving in Monkey Town: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask the Questions* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2010), 60.

<sup>14</sup> Boerl and Perkins, “The political pluralisation of American evangelicals,” 68.

use of then mainstream radio and television to “market” Christianity.<sup>15</sup> As Quentin J. Schultze writes, “American evangelicals have always understood new technologies as part of the progressive story of God’s unfolding opportunities in the New World—God’s road to a growing church and a holy nation.”<sup>16</sup>

Evangelical preachers and churches immediately understood radio’s power to reach wide audiences and, by 1925, 10 percent of US radio stations were owned by churches. Even without full ownership, religious organizations maintained a large presence on American airwaves through broadcasting weekly services on local stations. Ward attributes the earliest evangelical radio success to Chicago evangelist Paul Rader. With a regular radio show debuting in 1925, Rader quickly took over the entire Sunday schedule and began the radio ministry “Where Jesus Bless Thousands.” Rader’s signature style of well-produced, conversational, sermon-orientated shows created a new genre that demonstrated the medium’s potential as a “vast ethereal cathedral.” His on-air success extended into a real-world enterprise including food pantries and summer camps that all furthered Rader’s message and celebrity.<sup>17</sup>

That early growth was suddenly halted in 1927 with the creation of the Federal Radio Commission. This new agency’s stringent requirements to professionalize radio stations forced 150 of the 732 stations nation-wide to close. By 1933, fewer than thirty religious stations existed.<sup>18</sup> Philadelphia pastor Donald Barnhouse attempted to work with commercial stations by purchasing weekly airtime on national networks. While initially successful, that solution proved

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<sup>15</sup> Quentin J. Schultze, “Evangelicals and the Power of Television,” in *Pop Goes the Gospel: Evangelical Christians and Popular Culture*, ed. Robert H. Woods Jr. (2013), 324.

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pensu/detail.action?docID=1122433>.

<sup>16</sup> Schultze, 120.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Ward Sr., “Air of the King: Evangelicals and Radio,” in *Pop Goes the Gospel: Evangelical Christians and Popular Culture*, ed. Robert H. Woods Jr. (2013), 103,

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pensu/detail.action?docID=1122433>.

<sup>18</sup> Ward, “Air of the King: Evangelicals and Radio,” 105.

too expensive for smaller churches that relied on their own inexpensive radio antennas and enjoyed control over where and when they broadcast.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, since evangelicals existed outside of the Federal Council of Churches, the nationally representative body of mainline Protestant churches, evangelical groups often could not participate in NBC's and CBS's "sustaining time" model.<sup>20</sup> The system, introduced in 1928 by NBC, provided free airtime to national representative organizations for Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Evangelicals continued to purchase or use airtime on small, local stations until 1934 when the Mutual Broadcasting System, which lacked the funding of NBC, allowed evangelicals to purchase weekly time on their national network.<sup>21</sup> While maintaining that tenuous relationship with national radio networks, evangelical churches also struggled to create captivating content for a national audience. Many groups turned to recently founded Bible colleges that graduated young men energized and trained to lead revival meetings, Bible conferences, summer camps, and preach on-air.<sup>22</sup>

A decade after losing most of their stations, evangelicals were again removed from air in 1943 after controversial comments by religious fundamentalists, including Father Charles E. Coughlin, upset advertisers. Despite the theological differences between Coughlin's fundamentalist Catholicism and the evangelical sermons, all national broadcasters worried that Coughlin's "inflammatory remarks" against enemies, including communists and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, reflected the messages all religious groups would promote.<sup>23</sup> The newly established National Association of Broadcasters' code of ethics that prohibited "controversial

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<sup>19</sup> Ward, 106.

<sup>20</sup> Ward, 106.

<sup>21</sup> Ward, 106.

<sup>22</sup> Boerl and Perkins, "The political pluralisation of American evangelicals," 68.

<sup>23</sup> Boerl and Perkins, 69.

speakers” allowed stations to refuse any religious groups’ request to purchase airtime.<sup>24</sup> While not as “controversial” as Coughlin’s shows, evangelical preachers’ often fiery sermons and potentially inflammatory remarks pushed national broadcasters to continue giving their sustaining time to “the more benign sermons” provided by the Federal Council of Churches.<sup>25</sup> Free sustaining time also allowed those stations to demonstrate their public service which the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) viewed favorably when considering license renewals.<sup>26</sup> Evangelicals faced a further setback in 1944 when Mutual—which up until then broadcast evangelical preachers but “feared being typecast as a religious network” and receiving advertiser complaints—also pulled evangelicals off their schedules. Due to those shifts, evangelical preachers began to return to the smaller, mostly rural, radio stations outside of the national networks’ control, which were receptive to any group willing to pay for airtime.

Those practices continued throughout the 1950s until shifts in FCC regulations during the 1960s allowed evangelical churches to reemerge in national broadcasting. During World War II and the immediate post-war period, Bible colleges continued to educate their graduates in religious revival techniques but with a focus on radio and television appearances. Those skills allowed hundreds of young preachers to seamlessly transition to broadcast preaching. A change in FCC regulations in the 1960s allowed station owners to sell their sustaining time for profit while still receiving public-service credit for paid religious programs.<sup>27</sup> The NCC suddenly found themselves unable to match the offers from deep-pocket Southern and Midwestern evangelical churches or meet the price demanded by station owners.<sup>28</sup> Over the next two

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<sup>24</sup> Boerl and Perkins, 69.

<sup>25</sup> By this time, the group had been renamed the National Council of Churches.

<sup>26</sup> Boerl and Perkins, 69.

<sup>27</sup> Ward, “Air of the King: Evangelicals and Radio,” 109.

<sup>28</sup> Boerl and Perkins, “The political pluralisation of American evangelicals,” 69-70.



decades, 92 percent of religious program airtime was purchased.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, religious content transitioned to television. Yet, radio maintained an important role in evangelical communities as FCC regulations continued to loosen. Under President Ronald Reagan's administration, the FCC placed the "public interest" in the hands of market forces allowing cash flooded evangelical groups to continue purchasing a majority share of national radio airtime.<sup>30</sup> Ward argues the 1980s "market forces" model and elimination of a national limit on station ownership in 1996 opened radio programming to corporate control.<sup>31</sup>

By 2002, twenty-one radio groups owned one-fifth of all US stations. Of the four largest religious broadcasters, Salem Media Group owns stations in major markets that reach a third of the American public.<sup>32</sup> The national coverage by single radio broadcasters has created a religious radio system that resembles the original NBC and CBS network model with set airtime slots, big name preachers with nation-wide favorable recognition, and support by commercial advertisers.<sup>33</sup> Salem serves as a testament to the growth of evangelical radio's strength and appeal in the last one hundred years, but Ward argues Salem has become a media conglomerate "built around a concerted programmatic strategy to assess the religious goods that evangelicals desire and then acquire or develop agencies to supply them."<sup>34</sup> Currently, Salem owns 115 radio stations across the US, including twenty-five stations in the top twenty-five media markets,<sup>35</sup> and produces content for 2,700 affiliates along with producing two of the top ten most listened to

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<sup>29</sup> Ward, "Air of the King: Evangelicals and Radio," 109.

<sup>30</sup> Ward, 111.

<sup>31</sup> Ward, 111.

<sup>32</sup> Ward, 114.

<sup>33</sup> Ward, 112.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Ward Sr., "A New Kind of Church: The Religious Media Conglomerate as a 'Denomination,'" *Journal of Media and Religion* 17, no. 3-4 (2019): 124.

<sup>35</sup> Ward, 122.

radio talk shows<sup>36</sup> that reaches 2,700 national affiliates.<sup>37</sup> The company also owns a conservative book imprint and newspaper, and reaches millions more through Facebook, email, and a mobile application.<sup>38</sup> Ward acknowledges Salem’s success is not “a unique phenomenon”<sup>39</sup> but views Salem as a “de facto denomination” for millions of “independent evangelicals” who either do not belong to a church or turn to Salem for resources their church does not or cannot provide. Salem’s influence over the religious media diet—and in turn religious, cultural, and political viewpoints—of millions demonstrates the authority traditional broadcast media allows corporations or individuals to maintain. That authority is only magnified by televangelists.<sup>40</sup>

## From Crusades to Televangelism

Bekkering outlines the rise of televangelism as a culmination of the regulatory, economic, and theological challenges that shaped evangelicals’ place in religious radio broadcasting. In the post-war economic boom of the 1950s, the connection between personal wealth and God’s favor spread across the country. Deemed the “Prosperity Gospel,” preachers pushed theology that encouraged their congregations to view their newfound economic status as a gift from God that should be reinvested in the church to further provide for the religious community and to support those spreading Christianity. Donations to the church would further demonstrate a person’s faith and, in turn, would please God and bring them additional wealth. Many evangelical churches moved beyond using those donations to build larger buildings or support local charitable activities to invest in television. One of the earliest religious television programs, “This is the

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<sup>36</sup> Ward, 123.

<sup>37</sup> Ward, 122.

<sup>38</sup> Ward, 123.

<sup>39</sup> Ward, 127.

<sup>40</sup> Boerl and Perkins, “The political pluralisation of American evangelicals,” 70.

Answer” was introduced in 1956 as a series of half-hour dramas that placed parables from the Gospels in contemporary settings. While this programming was innovative and capable of reaching a broad audience, those involved in creating religious television worried about the “impersonal nature” of the new medium.<sup>41</sup> The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) attempted to connect the new communications technology and the traditional in-person fellowship with their first films in 1958. Their “dramatic films with a Christian message” were distributed to local television stations for broadcast in conjunction with organized viewings at SBC churches or in the homes of church members.<sup>42</sup> Bekkering identifies SBC’s early television interactions with “the unchurched and nonbelievers” as the first instance of “televangelism.”<sup>43</sup> The SBC, seeing great potential for their new outreach program, used televangelism as a central element in their “Baptist Jubilee Revival” campaign with the “ambitious aim of baptizing over four million people” in five years.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the SBC initial success, early televangelism faced similar regulatory and scheduling challenges to religious radio broadcasting. Prior to 1960, the FCC continued to enforce free sustaining time to local organizations including religious programming. Since stations were losing revenue during those time slots, the stations rearranged programming schedules at will which limited the effectiveness of planned group viewings.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, churches in predominantly Christian areas found it difficult to effectively target nonbelievers. That challenge pushed the SBC and other evangelical groups by 1964 to shift their televangelism

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<sup>41</sup> Dennis J. Bekkering, “From ‘Televangelist’ to ‘Intervangelist’: The Emergence of the Streaming Video Preacher,” *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 23, no. 2 (2011): 101.

<sup>42</sup> Bekkering, 101.

<sup>43</sup> Bekkering, 101.

<sup>44</sup> Bekkering, 103.

<sup>45</sup> Bekkering, 104-105.

efforts “to the production of films that presented issues relevant to the family, in the hopes of encouraging spiritual discussions among family members.”<sup>46</sup> The move toward widely accepted programming was also encouraged by the deregulation of sustaining time. The 1960s drastically changed the televangelism landscape as the NCC, the original dominant beneficiary of free sustaining time, could not economically compete with evangelical organizations for paid airtime. The National Religious Broadcasters (NRB), created by evangelicals in the 1940s as a response to the NCC, proved to be the NCC’s largest competitor both financially and theologically. While the NCC promoted mainline denominations, “the NRB was a parachurch organization that supported a wide array of programs united by conservative and fundamentalist viewpoints.”<sup>47</sup> Through financial support from local evangelical churches, the NRB was able to purchase national airtime for a new cohort of charismatic and television trained preachers and start their own network, *NRBTV*. The economic power evangelicals gained during the 1950s allowed local and national evangelical organizations to out purchase, out produce, and out evangelize mainline denominations.

Over the next thirty years, televangelists dominated religious broadcasting both through standalone shows and a multitude of broadcasters and networks. In 1977, almost a decade ahead of many television networks, Pat Robertson began using satellite technology to transmit a cable network version of the already popular Christian Broadcasting Networking (CBN). The newly formed cable network, the CBN Satellite Service, demonstrated the appeal of twenty-four hour religious programming, and the model was soon followed by Trinity Broadcasting Network and the PTL Network.<sup>48</sup> By the 1980s, televangelism relied on a “dual delivery system” of satellite

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<sup>46</sup> Bekkering, 105.

<sup>47</sup> Bekkering, 105.

<sup>48</sup> Jeffrey K. Hadden, “The Rise and Fall of American Televangelism,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Religion in the Nineties* 527 (1993): 121.

transmission and commercial station syndications to fill their multiple channels with continuous content. The need for additional programming led many networks to syndicate their religious programs. In 1970 only thirty-eight religious programs were syndicated. Five years later, that number jumped to sixty-five and again increased to ninety-six by the early 1980s.<sup>49</sup>

Robertson and other religious network leaders altered their programming and message throughout the 1980s to create widely accessible shows. Returning to the model used by many televangelists in the 1960s, CBN and other cable networks dedicated a portion of their airtime to “family entertainment programming.” The shows contained or pushed religious lessons but focused on attracting and maintaining a wider audience.<sup>50</sup> In 1991 CBN’s cable network, then rebranded as the Family Channel,<sup>51</sup> reached 92 percent of all US households with cable.<sup>52</sup> While the channel continued to broadcast their cornerstone program *The 700 Club* and other religiously focused programming on Sunday, the majority of their content was categorized broadly as “family friendly” entertainment. Purchasing smaller, local, and less powerful television stations offered another strategy in religious networks’ cable television expansion. TBN founder and owner Paul Crouch maintained a large station in California and purchased hundreds of low-power stations during the 1980s. While those smaller stations only transmitted within a few miles, Crouch’s extensive ownership of local stations allowed TBN to maintain a large market share nationwide. TBN also extended its reach by producing a “substantial amount” of programming and offering syndicated versions of that programming to other cable networks.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Hadden, 121.

<sup>50</sup> Hadden, 128.

<sup>51</sup> In 2001 the channel was sold to The Walt Disney Company and is currently called *FreeForm*. As part of the terms of sale to Disney, the channel continues to air *The 700 Club*.

<sup>52</sup> Hadden, 129.

<sup>53</sup> Hadden, 129.

Television audiences initially responded positively to the increase in religious programming. In the late 1960s when many of the religious television networks including CBN began, five million people collectively watched the programs.<sup>54</sup> By the mid-1980s, collective viewership of religious broadcasters bloomed to twenty-five million people across three-hundred stations in the US.<sup>55</sup> Hadden views those figures as the peak of televangelism's reach. He writes that the push to respond to increased viewership through additional networks and syndicates created a supply and demand problem by fragmenting audiences. In 1975, Jerry Falwell's PTL Network broadcasted to 123 stations with an average viewership of just over 5,000 households per station. Over the next five years, he nearly doubled the number of stations the network reached, but the average viewership dropped by about 16 percent and continued to drop 55 percent by 1990.<sup>56</sup> Hadden acknowledges the multitude of scandals that rocked televangelism in the late 1980s,<sup>57</sup> and "the insatiable urge on the part of some broadcasters to mix religion and politics to the point that the two become virtually undifferentiated" as additional factors that decreased viewership.<sup>58</sup> Yet, Hadden argues televangelism's diminished cultural and viewership hold was created by the overlapping and unregulated growth that saturated the cable market and exhausted viewers with politically polarizing content.

The long-term effect of televangelism on the national evangelical consciousness is split into four opinions: a focus on individual preachers and the inability to create a national evangelical identity; mainstreaming evangelicals toward the universal conservative or fundamentalist theology of televangelists; the view that televangelism could not create a national

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<sup>54</sup> Hadden, 120.

<sup>55</sup> Hadden, 120-121.

<sup>56</sup> Hadden, 121.

<sup>57</sup> The scandals include Bakker's own that pushed him to step down as director of PTL in 1987. By 1989, a Gallup poll reported most Americans viewed televangelists as insincere, dishonest, untrustworthy with money, and lacking a special relationship with God (Castelli).

<sup>58</sup> Hadden, 121.

community due to the limited one-way communication model of television; and the creation of “consumption communities.” The first view highlights the success of Oral Roberts, Falwell, James Dobson, Robertson, Jim Bakker, and Joel Osteen as representing a focus on the individual preacher rather than a collective theology. As Ward argues, the rise of twentieth-century televangelist empires were “independently built around the religious authority of a single personality and its agency structured around the founder’s unique personal qualities.”<sup>59</sup> Their “unique personal qualities” and theological viewpoints may have attracted large audiences and effectively proselytized, but Ward views all twentieth-century televangelists missing “the broad aspiration to programmatically bring all evangelicals under their umbrellas.”<sup>60</sup> The inability of televangelists to create a universal theology or evangelical following was not due to lack of ambition to continue reaching a wider audience, but “the media landscape of the late twentieth century, a world of locally owned mom-and-pop religious radio and television stations with low power and weak coverage.”<sup>61</sup> Ward believes the twenty-first century shift to digital media may allow preachers to overcome the geographic and technological boundaries twentieth century televangelists faced.

Conversely, Boerl, who focuses on the evangelical political views, argues it was twentieth-century broadcasting technology and power of the NRB that allowed televangelists to “bridge denominational divides” through television’s “mainstreaming effect.”<sup>62</sup> While a single televangelist did not bring all evangelicals under their “theological umbrella,” televangelists across the country were able to unite their regional audiences “into closer political proximity.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ward “A New Kind of Church: The Religious Media Conglomerate as a ‘Denomination,’” 121.

<sup>60</sup> Ward, 121.

<sup>61</sup> Ward, 121.

<sup>62</sup> Boerl and Perkins, “The political pluralisation of American evangelicals,” 70.

<sup>63</sup> Boerl, 70.

Unlike Ward, Boerl views all televangelists as maintaining a shared set of core theological and political beliefs regardless of “unique personal qualities.”<sup>64</sup> Continued exposure to televangelists combined with limited or nonexistent opposing viewpoints pushed audiences to “gradually adopt the opinions of broadcasters.”<sup>65</sup> Broadcasting, Boerl argues, “strengthened” the social ties within the national evangelical community, “broadened” the community’s social capital “and its political unification behind conservative causes and candidates.”<sup>66</sup> The success of evangelical programs, Bajan and Campbell write, was also “due in no small part to the ability of television to accurately simulate religious worship environments and transmit these environments directly into the home of the viewer.”<sup>67</sup> To recreate the architectural and aesthetic model of traditional churches, televangelists turned to Hollywood-style sets and production techniques to adopt “a similar visual storytelling approach with Broadway-style stage lighting, elevated camera angles, and background music.”<sup>68</sup> Those efforts to simulate a traditional religious space and make television sets “an extension of its physical counterpart” effectively diminish the simulated aspect of televangelism to create a sense of community between the preacher and those gathered at home.<sup>69</sup>

Bekkering acknowledges the “parapersonal bonds” Boerl identifies between televangelists and audiences, but argues that even nationally known “televangelists were unable to form religious communities around their personalities, as the unidirectional nature of

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<sup>64</sup> Boerl, 70.

<sup>65</sup> Christopher Wayne Boerl, “From Monologue to Dialogue: How the Internet is empowering the evangelical periphery,” *Information, Communication and Society* 16, no. 8 (2013): 1236.

<sup>66</sup> Boerl, 1236-1237.

<sup>67</sup> Adam Bajan and Heidi A. Campbell, “Online Media and Religion in America,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, January 24, 2018, <https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-452>.

<sup>68</sup> Bajan and Campbell.

<sup>69</sup> Bajan and Campbell.



television communication did not allow viewers to interact with each other.”<sup>70</sup> While audience members may consume the same media diet and shift toward a unified belief system, their lack of two-way communication eliminates the possibility of creating a community. Schultze calls on historian Daniel J. Boorstin’s concept of “consumption communities” to explain Boerl’s identification of “cross-geographical communities made up of individuals who do not know each other personally but who identify with the products or services they commonly consume.”<sup>71</sup> For Bekkering, today’s “consumption communities” are fed by media conglomerates, including Salem Media Group, that operate as the same “nondenominational parachurches” that televangelists provided in the twentieth century.<sup>72</sup>

Moving forward with Schultze and Boerl’s conclusions that televangelism mainstreamed evangelical beliefs and created unified consumption communities, it is important to acknowledge the power of the content producers to control the theological conversations within those communities. As Boerl discusses, twentieth-century communications technologies limited consumers to select from a few theologically similar and conservative evangelical leaders. By the 1990s, the internet shifted that power dynamic to the audience. Aside from more variety, Boerl argues, “the Internet serves as a conduit through which dissident religious voices are both empowered and amplified, a fact that is lessening the influence of the old guard evangelicals by bringing to the fore new and previously neglected theological agendas . . .”<sup>73</sup> Some scholars view the internet as an immediate and lasting disruption of traditional evangelical authority; however, Boerl’s choice to identify the internet as “lessening the influence” is a more accurate description. A variety of internet affordances demonstrate how evangelical radio preachers, televangelists,

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<sup>70</sup> Bekkering, “From ‘Televangelist’ to ‘Intervangelist,’” 106.

<sup>71</sup> Schultze, “Popular Religion and the World Wide Web,” 126.

<sup>72</sup> Bekkering, “From ‘Televangelist’ to ‘Intervangelist,’” 105.

<sup>73</sup> Boerl, “From Monologue to Dialogue,” 1236-1237.

and evangelical media companies are transplanting their existing strategies, and authority, to internet spaces.

The most famous, and disgraced, televangelists are all men—Oral Roberts, Falwell, James Dobson, Robertson, Bakker, and Joel Osteen, to name a few. What the traditional evangelical histories often miss, or exclude, are the women who shared the burden of establishing a television church and its associated ministries or built their own television-based empire. Historian Kate Bowler reassesses the megachurch and televangelist power couples to move the story and work of women out of the shadows of their husbands. Bowler retells the story of Jim Bakker’s internationally successful television network PTL to highlight Tammy Faye Bakker as a star in her own right. With preaching reserved for men, music became a safe platform for women to “hold forth before mixed gender audiences because in song or storytelling or dance they were not *technically* teaching.”<sup>74</sup> Featured regularly on programming and her own show gave Tammy Faye exposure to millions of viewers on one of the three largest Christian networks.<sup>75</sup> Throughout the 1980s she provided the comedic relief and music for much of PTL’s lineup, often from one of her many albums, all while connecting with the in-studio and at-home audience. The twenty-four-hour, seven days a week programming on Christian television networks—especially the big three: PTL, TBN, and CBN—required entertainment on the stage and the guest chair to be filled. For women, the networks served as “one of the few places to perform and be interviewed without the appearance of impropriety.”<sup>76</sup>

There were also opportunities for women to exercise leadership behind the camera. While husband Robert played organ and preached on *The Power Hour*, a series of Sunday services

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<sup>74</sup> Kate Bowler, *The Preacher’s Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 118.

<sup>75</sup> Bowler, 121.

<sup>76</sup> Bowler, 121.

watched by five million viewers in 1987, Arvella Schuller served as executive producer. She maintained a production team of twenty-five, selected scripture and music, and directed everything from lighting to camera positions. The show's staff called her "The Man Upstairs" for "her omnipresent perch" in the production room.<sup>77</sup> Still, many women carved roles for themselves as equal on-air talents. Millions watched Kathryn Kuhlman's show *I Believe in Miracles* as the divorced female preacher interviewed guests who claimed to have been healed through supernatural intervention. Since the 1980s, female televangelists have been a constant presence on Christian networks founded and built by the wives of male televangelists, or singlehandedly run by women.<sup>78</sup> The widely unremembered success and work of women like Tammy Faye Bakker, Kuhlman, and Arvella Schuller are only examples of centuries of how "even the most stratospheric successes for women in ministry could be undone and forgotten. Because women were commonly relegated to itinerant ministry or parachurch leadership, they rarely led substantive Christian institutions that could carry on their work after their deaths."<sup>79</sup> Yet, the decentralized nature of the internet and the ability of dissenting voices to gain traction could outpace traditional evangelical authority.

## God and the Twitterfaceogosphere

In 1996, *Time* technology editor Joshua Cooper Ramo traveled over two hours outside of Albuquerque into the New Mexican desert to visit a technological paradox. "Twenty miles from the nearest power line and perhaps twice as far from the nearest phone" the brothers of Christ in the Desert monastery proudly hosted and maintained a "heavily trafficked" website and email

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<sup>77</sup> Bowler, 120.

<sup>78</sup> Bowler, 239.

<sup>79</sup> Bowler, 249-250.

address, Ramon wrote.<sup>80</sup> Aside from their own website, the brothers had recently started a business designing and maintaining clients' websites. Despite their "fragile" connection to the world wide web through an array of solar panels and a data link through a cellphone, their online success attracted the attention of the Vatican who requested their webmaster assist the Pope in establishing his own website.<sup>81</sup> Just as evangelicals were not the first religious community to realize the potential benefits of radio or television, the story of religion and the internet involves a range of churches and religious individuals using the internet to spread or connect their beliefs, outreach work, and community.

Early attempts to make sense of the rapidly developing internet and new online religious spaces left scholars debating if the communities and practices they were witnessing could best be described as "online religion" or "religion online." While those two labels simply rearrange the same two words, scholars of media, sociology, and history argued the order completely shifted the conversation and expression of the intersection between religion and the internet. Christopher Helland's influential distinction in the early 2000s focused on how the role of religious authority in "institution-controlled one-to-many communication" and "grassroots community-building" transferred to online spaces.<sup>82</sup> Online religion, Hutchings summarizes, reproduces the structures, symbols, practices, and authority hierarchies of the offline counterpart. In contrast, religion online would disrupt this hierarchy by building on grassroot community involvement.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Joshua Cooper Ramo, "Finding God on the Web: Across the Internet, believers are reexamining their ideas of faith, religion and spirituality," *Time*, December 1996, 60.

<sup>81</sup> Ramo 60.

<sup>82</sup> Tim Hutchings, "Contemporary Religious Community and the Online Church," *Information, Communication & Society* 14, no. 8 (2011): 1120.

<sup>83</sup> Hutchings, 1120.

Religion online, Bajan and Campbell outlined in a contemporary review of the issue, “is characterized by the presentation of religion in controlled online environments such as ‘Ask a Rabbi’ message boards and early HTML code websites.”<sup>84</sup> Common examples of this phenomenon include church websites, ministry information, and recorded sermons. This potentially too simplistic definition of religion online has recently been “reevaluated” to include “the purposeful import and adaptation of offline religious practices and traditions to an online context.”<sup>85</sup> Previously, that adaptation, which revolves around the participation of online religious networks or communities, would have been labeled “online religion.” Hutchings notes that online religion “blends local and online resources, practices and connections, offering digital forms of education, spiritual experience and social ties that generally complement local church membership rather than replacing it.”<sup>86</sup> Online religion relies on creating spiritual experiences for participants through the recreation of physical spaces and practices in an online setting. The online simulated environment Second Life is an often cited early example of how players can virtually participate in religious activities including attending services and praying.<sup>87</sup> A decade after Helland identified the distinction, scholars began to shift away from distinguishing online practices to examining “a milieu that features not only the coexistence of religious participation and sociality but their *structural* coincidence.”<sup>88</sup> Instead of separating the experiences in the church lobby, i.e. religion online, from the church sanctuary, i.e. online religion, current scholars are examining how those experiences equally pay homage to, rival, and are refashioned on the new digital medium.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Bajan and Campbell, “Online Media and Religion in America,” 5.

<sup>85</sup> Bajan and Campbell, 5.

<sup>86</sup> Hutchings, “Contemporary Religious Community and the Online Church,” 1118-1119.

<sup>87</sup> Bajan and Campbell, “Online Media and Religion in America,” 5.

<sup>88</sup> Sam Han, *Technologies of Religion: Spheres of the sacred in a post-secular modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 77-78 (emphasis original).

<sup>89</sup> Han, 77-78.

To remain conscious of that theoretical shift and treat online practices more as a continuum of activities rather than a “clear-cut typology,” I will use the term “digital religion” as Campbell does to describe “the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated.”<sup>90</sup> The term also best describes the realm this project works to understand and the effort to continually engage with “questions regarding the authenticity of mediated religious rituals, issues of facilitating community through technology, and issues regarding the role of institutional authority in a media environment again come to the fore.”<sup>91</sup>

Campbell traces religious expression and experiences on the internet back to the early 1980s when “religious computer enthusiasts” explored the intersection of religion and computer technology.<sup>92</sup> Religious bulletin board systems appeared on discussion websites like Communitree, churches began to connect with congregants online, and early proselytization efforts appeared on “email lists and chat programs to share text-based prayers and liturgies.”<sup>93</sup> While those early interactions were limited to a subset of the population with the economic and technological capabilities to have a personal computer and internet connection, religious leaders worried digital religion would dissuade people from attending a physical church or negatively impact their beliefs—concerns not dissimilar to those expressed when preachers began using

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<sup>90</sup> Timothy Hutchings, “The Internet and the Church: An Introduction,” *The Expository Times* 122, no. 1 (2010): 14. Heidi A. Campbell, introduction to *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 4-5.

<sup>91</sup> Bajan and Campbell, 6.

<sup>92</sup> Heidi A. Campbell, “Evangelicals and the Internet,” in *Pop Goes the Gospel: Evangelical Christians and Popular Culture*, ed. Robert H. Jr. Woods (2013), 278, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pensu/detail.action?docID=1122433>.

<sup>93</sup> Campbell, 278.

Hutchings, “The Internet and the Church,” 17.

radio and television.<sup>94</sup> According to Ramo’s account, those concerns caused religious establishments to delay their entry into digital religion. By the mid-1990s, Ramo saw congregations outpacing church leadership in the adoption of digital religion through an “unusually lively colloquy” on Usenet “alt.religion” boards or websites that transmitted prayers or ritual requests across the world.<sup>95</sup> Digital religion and the ability to connect worldwide allowed evangelicals to openly debate taboo social issues while being exposed to a range of doctrine and opinion.<sup>96</sup> Ramo concludes his account with two queries for the future of digital religion: the potential of a global network to “bind us together in a way that other technologies—particularly television—have failed to do” and the future existence of “cyberchurches.”<sup>97</sup>

Ramo would not have to wait long for his predictions to prove true. By the end of the decade, numerous “religious portals and hubs” were created to provide online Bible study tools, online devotional or fellowship groups, and religious news including Crosswalk.com.<sup>98</sup> Campbell also traces the beginning of the “blogging revolution” to the beginning of Open Diary, LiveJournal, and Blogger.com along with their religious counterparts Jblogs, The Jewish and Israeli Blog Network, and various Christian-centric blogs in the late 1990s.<sup>99</sup> By the new millennium, religious leaders recognized the prevalence of digital religion both as a tool to expand their influence online and the new availability of online worship for congregants. Hutchings cites multiple churches and religious organizations that published pieces targeted at a Christian audience “encouraging engagement with digital media, exploring theological

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<sup>94</sup> Heidi Campbell, “Challenges Created by Online Religious Networks,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 3, no. 2 (2004): 87.

<sup>95</sup> Ramo, “Finding God on the Web,” 62.

<sup>96</sup> Ramo, 63.

<sup>97</sup> Ramo, 63-64.

<sup>98</sup> Campbell, “Evangelicals and the Internet,” 280.

<sup>99</sup> Campbell, 280.

implications and highlighting perceived dangers.”<sup>100</sup> By 2001, the Barna Research Group’s Cyberchurch Report found that nearly 10 percent of American adults and 12 percent of American teenagers “relied on the internet for the fulfillment of religious and spiritual needs.”<sup>101</sup> That early growth speaks to the first of four large trends in the expansion of evangelical religion community to new digital spaces: religious websites.

The most basic, and earliest, form of digital religion began in the late 1980s with websites devoted to a specific religious group, church, or individual religious authority figure. Unlike previous digital spaces and discussion boards that housed a variety of belief systems, those websites focused on promoting a single evangelical authority figure or connecting users with a specific church’s ministry. Visiting one of those websites today may seem second nature when looking for event details or seeking information about a belief or local church. However, scholars identify those early websites as marketing tools rather than hubs for information.

Beginning with the overlap of early digital religion and the heyday of televangelism throughout the 1980s and 1990s the masters of one digital communications technology swiftly seized on the next. Televangelists already used multiple communications technologies from the US Postal Service, live interactions through on-air telephone calls, and sending out video, audio, and print materials to their audiences. They harnessed digital communications technologies for marketing in two key ways: “communicating with viewers in ways that mimicked personal communication” and “storing large amounts of audience donation data.”<sup>102</sup> The goal of those early ministry websites were to “coax visitors into purchasing products and providing donations” but provided “little spiritual substance.”<sup>103</sup> It would take until the early 2000s before local

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<sup>100</sup> Hutchings, “The Internet and the Church,” 122.

<sup>101</sup> Bajan and Campbell, “Online Media and Religion in America.”

<sup>102</sup> Bekkering, “From ‘Televangelist’ to ‘Intervangelist,’” 106.

<sup>103</sup> Bekkering, 107.



churches established an online presence that could provide the “spiritual substance” lacking on merchandise-only websites.

By 2005, approximately 60 percent of U.S. churches were maintaining websites in an effort to reach the 82 million adults in the U.S. that “used the Internet for spiritual or religious purposes.”<sup>104</sup> That presence created what Bennett calls “multisite churches” or the ability for churches to maintain a physical worship service on Sunday while simulcasting those sermons “to satellite congregations and church websites users.”<sup>105</sup> Organizations or individuals that lacked the resources required to maintain full time preacher turned to *Streaming Faith* to access sermons or ministry tools remotely created by evangelical churches nationwide. The GodTube homepage closely resembles its namesake’s landing page, circa 2014, with large screen captured images of Christian-approved videos labeled “must-see” or “inspirational.”<sup>106</sup> While appearing to be a simple Christian redressing of YouTube, GodTube houses an extensive collection of recorded sermons and devotionals from its partner twenty-two preachers or churches.<sup>107</sup> The website also points to other sites, including LightSource, for live broadcasts of sermons every week. Starting in the mid-morning and extending into the early evening, the average Sunday schedule for LightSource includes at least one live stream every hour from churches across the Bible Belt and as far north as Maryland.<sup>108</sup> Along with streaming and providing on-demand content,

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<sup>104</sup> Mara Einstein, “GodTube,” in *Pop Goes the Gospel: Evangelical Christians and Popular Culture*, ed. Robert H. Woods Jr. (2013), 296, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pensu/detail.action?docID=1122433>.

<sup>105</sup> Stephanie Bennett, “The Electronic Church Goes Online: Evangelical Identity and Technology,” In *The Electronic Church in the Digital Age: Cultural Impacts of Evangelical Mass Media, Volume 1: How Evangelical Media Shape Evangelical Church*, ed. Mark Ward Sr. (California: Praeger, 2016), 78.

<sup>106</sup> It should be noted that GodTube operated by the Salem Web Network, a subsidiary of Salem Media Group which provides an additional example for Ward’s observation that evangelical digital communications are becoming dominated by a single media conglomerate.

“YouTube.com,” Wayback Machine, Internet Archive, August 1, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140801000000/https://www.youtube.com/>.

<sup>107</sup> “Godtube.com,” Godtube, Salem Web Network, accessed October 1, 2019, <https://www.godtube.com/>.

<sup>108</sup> “Live Broadcasts,” LightSource, accessed October 6, 2019, <https://www.lightsource.com/live-broadcasts.html>.

LightSource publishes a monthly blog and further connects with its audience through newsletters and emailed daily devotionals.<sup>109</sup>

Some of the most successful early adopters of “multisite churches” included megachurches LifeChurch.tv and Bright Church.<sup>110</sup> Those megachurches, both with multiple physical campuses, expanded to create “online campuses” to “evangelise, communicate with members and share resources with other churches.”<sup>111</sup> Multisite churches and the ability to reach a geographically dispersed audience without large economic capital is the key development that sets apart televangelist and digital campuses. Many churches also used their websites to generate additional revenue. In an analysis of twenty-nine multisite churches using *Streaming Faith*, Bekkering found the majority included an online donation option and sold books written by the church’s preacher or audio recordings of sermons.<sup>112</sup> Bekkering connected the availability of paid and free merchandise to the “long-established practice of televangelists mailing free items” but argued this new kind of “viral marketing” in which the content is immediately available is an important feature of *Streaming Faith* and other multisite churches.<sup>113</sup> That analysis appears to narrow-cast the practice of streaming sermons and promoting merchandise into a marketing ploy focused on gaining additional profit for the physical church. Recognizing that, Bekkering relabels those practices as a new generation of televangelism—“intervangelism” or “e-vangelism.”

The parallels between televangelism and the twenty-first century version, e-vangelism, are immediate. Outside of the same evangelical Christian message being delivered from the

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<sup>109</sup> “LightSource blog,” LightSource, accessed October 6, 2019. <https://www.lightsource.com/blog/>.

<sup>110</sup> Hutchings, “The Internet and the Church: An Introduction,” 13. Han, *Technologies of Religion* 57.

<sup>111</sup> Hutchings, “The Internet and the Church: An Introduction,” 14.

<sup>112</sup> Bekkering, “From ‘Televangelist’ to ‘Intervangelist,’” 112.

<sup>113</sup> Bekkering, 112.

pulpit, Hutchings points to the orientation of the filming and website layout that encourages the audience to see the computer as a television screen. The presence of comment sections, prayer hotlines, donation requests, and free resources through email or eBooks replicate many of the practices used by televangelists.<sup>114</sup> Bekkering notes that as with televangelists, e-vangelism focuses on a “central figure” but, unlike televangelists, they rely on the “enhanced interactivity inherent” to the internet and integrate multiple aspects of digital media in their videos.<sup>115</sup> Ultimately, the internet is seen by many ministries and individual evangelicals as the contemporary tool to evangelize without geographic restrictions. Both Hutchings and Bekkering document individuals on Streaming Faith and St Pixels who manage their own “independent digital ministers” who even without being attached to an official church, lead online Bible studies and “witness” in chat rooms.<sup>116</sup> Those accounts do not cite the number of people digital ministries or individuals have converted, but they portray a general success of e-vangelism. Yet, Schultze, an early contributor to the idea of online religion in 1990, wrote pessimistically about a “mythos of the electronic church” and the “ineffectiveness” of the internet to spread evangelical beliefs.<sup>117</sup> Pinning his evidence on how past digital communication technologies were used, Schultze argued the new tools “probably secularized more than they have saved, commercialized more than they have consecrated, and propagandized more than they have proselytized.”<sup>118</sup> Schultze’s early disapproval of digital religion rests in his belief that spiritual battles, or the ability of evangelicals to convert, cannot be “won technologically.” However, ministry

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<sup>114</sup> Hutchings, “Contemporary Religious Community and the Online Church,” 1126.

<sup>115</sup> Bekkering, “From ‘Televangelist’ to ‘Intervangelist,’” 103.

<sup>116</sup> Bekkering, 109.

Hutchings, “Contemporary Religious Community and the Online Church,” 1129

<sup>117</sup> Schultze, “Keeping the Faith,” 33.

<sup>118</sup> Schultze, 34.

organizations and churches recognized the value in digital religion and began attempting to fully integrate religion into the developing virtual world.

When the 3-D virtual online game Second Life launched in 2003 it started a wave of internet video games that allowed players to interact with digital renderings of other users and recreations of every element of the physical world. Naturally, religion was quickly incorporated in to Second Life worlds. Players could attend a variety of religious services including scheduled worship at ALM CyberChurch, a Christian virtual church. The role of religion in virtual “physical” spaces moved beyond the passivity of ministry websites or live streamed services toward providing the option for active engagement with worship activities. Scholars “began to view these spaces not simply as mere simulations of their offline counterparts, but in fact as extensions of physical sacred space.”<sup>119</sup> Through that lens, Second Life can be recognized as a tool for players to both recreate religious practices “but also to re-envision their faith in ways not possible offline.”<sup>120</sup> The popularity of virtual religious spaces is often attributed to the separation of faith and religious hierarchies. First, digital religion gives “considerable agency to the individual worshipper” by allowing the individual to decide their own level of engagement and “dialog about issues and shape church practices.”<sup>121</sup> Second, “digital religion fosters a new paradigm of interconnectivity” between users across geographic, cultural, and time barriers.<sup>122</sup> Those factors can create an “openness of ‘non-religious based spirituality’” or a willingness to learn from or experience non-institutionalized forms of religion and beliefs.<sup>123</sup> The internet’s

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<sup>119</sup> Bajan and Campbell, “Online Media and Religion in America,” 6.

<sup>120</sup> Campbell, “Evangelicals and the Internet,” 280-281.

<sup>121</sup> Bajan and Campbell, “Online Media and Religion in America,” 9.

Glen Moriarty, “5loaves.net - A Christian Social Network: Definitions, Development, and Survey Results,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 11, no. 1 (2005): doi.org/10.3138/jrpc.11.1.005.

<sup>122</sup> Bajan and Campbell, “Online Media and Religion in America,” 9.

<sup>123</sup> Glen, “5loaves.net.”

inherent “bottom-up” and fluid nature promote the introduction of new practices into institutional-controlled religions, including “self-spirituality, personally selective and controlled; ‘dehierarchization;’ and pluralistic, relativistic, fluctuating, seeking faiths and loose network-type organizations—indeed, religion without religion.”<sup>124</sup>

The changes virtual spaces brought to religion pushed church leaders and scholars to question if “the reality of place” remained key to the salience of religion in daily life. Others wondered if attendance, or the need to attend, physical worship spaces will be “displaced” by digital religion.<sup>125</sup> However, Cowan argues that question remains shortsighted of the “durability and historical significance of physical religious structures” that serve important roles in offline communities. Cowan also points to the “inescapable” nature of the human physical reality, the constant need for personal face-to-face connections, and an institutional and “theological resistance grounded in religious tradition and ritual efficacy” as additional elements limiting digital religion.<sup>126</sup> Those reasons may halt a complete move to digital religion, yet they do not diminish the current shift to online spaces for many religious practices.<sup>127</sup> Two additional realms of digital religion—social media platforms and blogs—offer ample examples to grapple with the theoretical understanding and construction of religious community and authority online.

Concerns about the implications of the internet on real world communities and the debate around “online communities” predate easy access to the online world. Questions within the study of digital religion have also been raised about the strength or importance of online connections

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<sup>124</sup> Glen, “5loaves.net.”

Campbell, “Challenges Created by Online Religious Networks,” 86.

<sup>125</sup> Douglas E. Cowan, “Cyberspace and Religion in America,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, October 26, 2017, <https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-480>.

<sup>126</sup> Cowan, “Cyberspace and Religion in America.”

<sup>127</sup> Cowan, “Cyberspace and Religion in America.”

with Hutchings calling online relationships “fleeting.”<sup>128</sup> Recognizing the extensive literature that dismisses the possibility of online communities, or meaningful online communities that replicate offline relationships, this section examines the shift in literature beginning with Campbell’s examination of online religious communities in the early 2000s.

The definition of Christian community rests on a description, rather than a definition, of the many communities within the umbrella of Christianity. Campbell first reasons that an offline Christian community is recognized by “uncovering its history, identifying its faith-based focus, considering its interpretation of the larger Christian narrative, locating its definition of community, and labeling the core self or identity of the group.”<sup>129</sup> Moving those factors to digital religion, Campbell points to the specific issue(s) of faith a community is linked by and the ability of “two-way interaction through various forms of technology” as additional defining elements.<sup>130</sup> In her original definition, Campbell recognizes the paradox that online religious communities present to the traditional anthropological understanding of community as a geographic fixed structure and the sociological idea of networked social relationships built on shared interests or social patterns rather than physical proximity.<sup>131</sup> Labeling online religious communities as social networks “creates a tension of both language and practice” by challenging the traditional “theological and structure ideas of a community” along with creating the presumption that those networks are at odds with offline churches.<sup>132</sup> Using a network metaphor for describing online communities may not be “ideal,” but Campbell explains it is the most effective term to describe

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<sup>128</sup> Hutchings, “Contemporary Religious Community and the Online Church,” 1131-1132.

<sup>129</sup> Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc, 2005), 79.

<sup>130</sup> Campbell, 79.

<sup>131</sup> Campbell, “Challenges Created by Online Religious Networks,” 84.

<sup>132</sup> Campbell, 82.

communities that form through “self-selecting networks”<sup>133</sup> and function as both “autonomous religious worship”<sup>134</sup> and a space for relationships based on shared interests.

Social media websites offer the form and function of digital religious communities that Campbell describes. Facebook groups allow a global membership centered on an interest or viewpoint to interact and discuss in a closed environment. Secret or closed groups, on Facebook or other internet platforms, allow members to “start conversations and build relationships in a low-pressure environment” with like-minded individual without the real life social circles knowing.<sup>135</sup> Online communities are often criticized for the fluidity of membership and the ability for members to lurk rather than actively participate. Hutchings acknowledges that is yet another paradox that online communities wrestle with, both as “stable points in broader social landscapes” and “resources that attract the temporary attention of individual media users.”<sup>136</sup> Sitting with those paradoxes and inconsistencies may be key to understanding how online networks grow and operate.

While scholars debate the features and definition of online religious networks, the evangelical community has long recognized their presence and potential to coax people away from pews and to their computers. Members of online religious groups often view their interactions and experiences as a realization of what they “envisioned” or “hoped” their offline church community would become.<sup>137</sup> Those critiques appear to support the theory that evangelicals are deserting their physical churches for online replacements. However, Campbell’s

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<sup>133</sup> Campbell, 95.

<sup>134</sup> Campbell, 85.

<sup>135</sup> Hutchings, “The Internet and the Church,” 18.

<sup>136</sup> Hutchings, 1129-1130.

<sup>137</sup> Heidi Campbell, “Approaches to Religious Research in Computer-Mediated Communication,” in *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 225 (original emphasis removed).

original 2003 study of digital religion argued an increase in online participation does not decrease real world church attendance.<sup>138</sup> That conclusion was later confirmed with additional studies in 2011 and 2017.<sup>139</sup> In all three cases, online and offline religious participation and communities were seen as complementary activities. Digital religion offered new resources, ideas, and connections for those seeking “spiritually and socially valuable encounters” while traditional offline religious services and ministries shaped and gave meaning to the online experiences through local involvement.<sup>140</sup>

While not pushing evangelicals away from their physical churches, digital religion is altering the authority structure of how religious ideas are taught and discussed. Social media encourages the breakdown of authority through the ability of users to “pick and choose” the beliefs and content they consume. The ability to build “in-groups” around a narrow strand of theological thinking or belief creates a “risk of social fragmentation and community strife.”<sup>141</sup> Additionally, Stout argues the “emergent church,” or online religious networks that are not attached to an offline church, are characterized by their rebuff of traditional religious authority and structure.<sup>142</sup> Religious blogs exemplify Stout’s observation both through the function of the blogosphere and their accessibility for untraditional authority figures, including women.

In a corner of the blogosphere a collection of part-personal-diaries, part-birth-narratives, part-highlight-reels of raising children appear to be a Christian version of the popular “mommy blogger” trend. Yet, as Whitehead explains in her case study, those blogs serve as a haven for

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<sup>138</sup> Campbell, 223.

<sup>139</sup> Hutchings, “Contemporary Religious Community and the Online Church,” 1127.

Cowan, “Cyberspace and Religion in America,” 11.

<sup>140</sup> Hutchings, “Contemporary Religious Community and the Online Church,” 1132, 1127.

<sup>141</sup> Boerl and Perkins, “The political pluralisation of American evangelicals,” 74-75.

<sup>142</sup> Daniel A. Stout, *Media and Religion: Foundations of an Emerging Field* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 56.



grieving mothers to process and share their stories of miscarriages, infant death, and the impact of those events on their faith—topics that are often seen as taboo and minimally discussed in traditional evangelical spaces.<sup>143</sup> Whitehead sets those blogs apart from other “mommy blogs” for their “rich combination of the sharing of personal experience, the description of shared religious practices and beliefs, the narrative structure that blogging provides, and the supportive networked communities that social media enables.”<sup>144</sup>

The trauma and loss written about in the blogs Whitehead analyzes is a subcategory of religious blogging that this project does not discuss, but the elements Whitehead highlights are features of evangelical women-led blogs across the internet. Those include blogs as women-centric spaces, the absence of systematic hierarchy, author-focused platforms with built-in engagement tools, and the ability to discuss and learn about dissenting beliefs without evangelical institutional approval. In this section, blogs will serve as one example of many spaces on the internet where those characteristics are present, including the “microblogging” element of Twitter. Women-led religious blogs do not fit into a single blogging category. The authors or administrators discuss a range of topics from current events, politics, theological discussions, family, and relationships, among others, all with a religious viewpoint. Evangelical blogs led by women also range from religiously conservative or fundamentalist viewpoints to Evans’ own social justice and religiously progressive leanings. The diversity of blogging styles, topics, and outlooks along with the implications for religious authority online make blogs an important medium to study.

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<sup>143</sup> Deborah Whitehead, “‘The story God is weaving us into’: narrativizing grief, faith, and infant loss in US evangelical women’s blog communities,” *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia* 21, no. 1-2 (2015): 54-55.

<sup>144</sup> Whitehead, 43.

In traditional evangelical spaces, women have been relegated to Sunday school teachers, women ministry leaders, and pastors' wives. They are systematically restricted from the pulpit to prevent any form of speaking that could be construed as "preaching" and, when allowed to lead, are allowed to only teach women and young children.<sup>145</sup> The shift to digital religion has allowed some "leveling of the playing field" as women can write, theorize, and even teach about religion without their actions being seen as "preaching" or overstepping their gender-defined roles.<sup>146</sup> While a select group of women historically had access to traditional forms of mass media and were present in televangelism, radio broadcasts, advice and guide books, and were interviewed in Christian news media, their presence served a supporting role to their church's pastor, often their husband.<sup>147</sup> Messina-Dysert calls that selective historical absence in traditional media as "silencing" the female evangelical voice. The accessibility of digital religion, she argues, provides "significant opportunities" for women "to claim leadership roles, effect change, and build global communities while reflecting on their personal experiences."<sup>148</sup> Blogs create a platform for women to meet and discuss topics that have been ignored in traditional evangelical spaces.

Along with giving more women access, the free or low-cost publishing platform helps to legitimize the knowledge evangelical women are producing. Instead of being directed by evangelical gatekeepers, traditionally men, and evangelical gender roles that privilege male-produced knowledge, blogging offers "*active agency*, wherein women generate and post content

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<sup>145</sup> Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife*, 24-26.

<sup>146</sup> Samuel E. Ebersole, "Evangelicals and Social Media," in *Pop Goes the Gospel: Evangelical Christians and Popular Culture*, ed. Robert H. Woods Jr. (2013), 312, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pensu/detail.action?docID=1122433>.

<sup>147</sup> Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife*, 92.

<sup>148</sup> Gina Messina-Dysert, "#FemReligionFuture: The New Feminist Revolution in Religion," in *Feminism and Religion in the 21st Century: Technology, Dialogue, and Expanding Borders*, ed. Gina Messina-Dysert and Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Routledge, 2015), 17.

as a site administrator, or at the invitation thereof.”<sup>149</sup> Women also have “*reactive agency*” to engage or respond to posted content based on their comfort and interest level.<sup>150</sup> Coleman and Augustine link the agency blogging affords women as a driving force in three themes of the medium: breaking the silence and raising consciousness, cultivating a hermeneutic of suspicion, and creating community.<sup>151</sup> Those themes outline how knowledge created and directed by women is validated through blogging without the need for approval from traditional evangelical authority figures. The ability for women to write and publish their viewpoints without oversight shifts the function of blogging from personal writing to a type of ministry for readers. Within blogging, the idea of ministry moves away from a central figure speaking at a pulpit and toward a communal and collaborative process. Blogging works to break the traditional model of preacher and audience by allowing readers to engage with the blogger through comment sections, feedback forms, and the possibility to submit their own pieces for community-driven publications.

In many ways religious blogs are a strong example of women-led, even feminist, spaces. However, it should be acknowledged that not all evangelical women-led blogs are welcoming spaces for all variations of evangelical Christianity, all those who identify as women, nor those who step outside of the traditional gender roles some evangelical bloggers promote. Of the women Whitehead profiled, many promoted hallmarks of conservative evangelical beliefs, including traditional gender roles and a literal reading of the Bible. While understanding those

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<sup>149</sup> Kristina Benson, “Private Space, Public Forum: A Netnographic Exploration of Muslim American Women, Access, and Agency in ‘Islamic’ Cyberspace,” in *Feminism and Religion in the 21st Century: Technology, Dialogue, and Expanding Borders*, ed. Gina Messina-Dysert and Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Routledge, 2015), 107 (emphasis original).

<sup>150</sup> Benson, 107 (emphasis original).

<sup>151</sup> Monica A. Coleman and C. Yvonne Augustine, “Blogging as Religious Feminist Activism,” in *Feminism and Religion in the 21st Century: Technology, Dialogue, and Expanding Borders*, ed. Gina Messina-Dysert and Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Routledge, 2015), 22.

tensions, the act of blogging both about personal experiences or theological issues can be understood as a disruptive action by evangelical women who traditionally have not been afforded the same power over their voice and knowledge production as men. A key to this change is the medium's ability to disrupt traditional evangelical hierarchy and authority.

Unlike televangelism or radio broadcasting in which a small number of dominant, male figures led the messaging and drew the largest audiences, blogging does not have a systematic hierarchy or even "lead" bloggers. Cheong views authority as a "performative and discursive" quality that requires leaders to offer "persuasive claims" that ultimately "elicit an audience's attention, respect, and trust."<sup>152</sup> Preachers who used television and radio benefited from those medium's one-way communication style that echoed and recreated a pulpit within audiences' homes. Blogging relies on "dynamically constructed" content that encourages audience feedback and participation with the author. The dynamic nature of the platform along with the range of topics and perspectives makes blogging adverse to the rule or regulation of traditional evangelical media. A blog's form can restrict the type of content posted (single author, invited authors, community-led) and the engagement level of readers (an open comment section, member-only comment section, no comment section) but, unlike in offline congregations, a disgruntled reader can easily amplify and spread their own voice. For those reasons, blogging "is attractive to those who have been left out of decision-making participation in more linear structures."<sup>153</sup>

Bajan and Campbell view the ability and presence of bloggers as a "challenge to institutional authority within established offline religious contexts, as their presence and

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<sup>152</sup> Pauline Hope Cheong, "Authority," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 74.

<sup>153</sup> Coleman and Augustine, "Blogging as Religious Feminism Activism," 29.

influence online redefines traditional notions of religious authority.”<sup>154</sup> Relying on their technical skills and ability to lure and sustain an audience, evangelical bloggers can use the medium to promote their viewpoints in ways that are “unconventional” in comparison to the traditional method of guiding theological discussions. Those unconventional methods that many evangelical leaders may be unfamiliar with “clearly challenge the top-down, one-to-many assumptions of traditional mainstream media.”<sup>155</sup> From this break in traditional authority structures, new evangelical leaders have emerged.<sup>156</sup> While not all bloggers oppose the current dominant evangelical theology and structure, and some promote fundamentalist views, the ability of nontraditional ideas to enter the theological conversation is an unprecedented change.

Those advantages over offline evangelical hierarchies does not mean blogging and digital religion broadly are immune to traditional authority. As discussed earlier with the growth of e-vangelism, ministry websites, and social media use, evangelical leaders have adapted to the blogosphere and understand its ability to reach outside of their physical congregation. Cheong cites the capability of some evangelical leaders to restructure “their communicative practices online, bridging and bonding forms of social capital to spur administrative and operational effectiveness.”<sup>157</sup> As their congregations become further dependent on internet services and potentially encounter dissenting information, evangelical leaders are adapting their resources to emerging online platforms which helps to curtail “the negative impact of false and inflammatory interpretations and reclaiming their audience's respect and trust.”<sup>158</sup> Multiple studies find that

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<sup>154</sup> Bajan and Campbell, “Online Media and Religion in America.”

<sup>155</sup> Ebersole, “Evangelicals and Social Media,” 311.

<sup>156</sup> Cheong, “Authority,” 77.

<sup>157</sup> Cheong, 80.

<sup>158</sup> Cheong, 82.

audience driven and active participatory web spaces including Facebook continue to reflect and promote the influence of traditional hierarchical structures.<sup>159</sup>

Yet how evangelical authority figures use those social networks reflects their traditional one-way, “asymmetrical relationship between speaker and audience.”<sup>160</sup> Evangelicals outside of that authority structure are more open to digital religion’s “peer-to-peer networks” that encourage “fellowship among believers.”<sup>161</sup> Campbell argues “new media,” including internet communications technologies, encourage a “meta-realism in which the user is master with the power to discern, deconstruct, and control the reality or ‘illusion’ with which he or she is presented.”<sup>162</sup> That power to select content and engagement level is the key feature that can allow traditional and new authority figures to coexist within digital religion. Filtering in or out content can create information silos, but it can also open audiences to dissenting or nontraditional theological viewpoints.<sup>163</sup> Along with providing a platform for those with unorthodox religious views to publish, blogs often include a personal narrative or spiritual journey which draws in a community that may align or feel connected to those experiences. Bajan and Campbell call the prevalence of blogs that discuss theological issues and interpretations without evangelical authority oversight a “concern among church leaders and theologians that misinterpretation of core religious messages will result as the untrained serve as interpreters of church teaching.”<sup>164</sup> Additionally, the lack of geographic constraints on blogs create the opportunity for one dissenting viewpoint to gain traction among evangelicals across

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<sup>159</sup> Lee Farquhar, “From Facebook to Instagram: The Role of Social Media in Religious Communities,” in *Religion Online: How Digital Technology Is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray*, ed. August E. Grant, Amanda F. C. Sturgill, Chiung Hwang Chen, and Daniel A. Stout (California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2019), 33-34.

<sup>160</sup> Bajan and Campbell, “Online Media and Religion in America.”

<sup>161</sup> Bajan and Campbell, “Online Media and Religion in America.”

<sup>162</sup> Campbell, “Challenges Created by Online Religious Networks,” 83.

<sup>163</sup> Cheong, “Authority,” 75.

<sup>164</sup> Bajan and Campbell, “Online Media and Religion in America.”

the US and even globally. For those reasons Boerl views digital religion as “capable of dramatically reshaping both religion and society.”<sup>165</sup>

The relationship between evangelicals and communications technologies provides an important backdrop to understand the role of Evans’ own blog and Twitter account in her impact on evangelical culture. First, the ability of traditional evangelical religious leaders to adapt to new communications technologies, such as digital religion, demonstrates their lasting and dominant presence. Second, recognizing the challenges digital religion brings to those authority hierarchies and traditional understandings of religious communities offers room for new and unconventional leaders to arise. As co-founder of the Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual, Mary E. Hunt explained, “Ideas still trump technology. Hard work is all. But technology plus ideas and hard work can change the world as we know it.”<sup>166</sup>

## Church Stories

The expansive catalogue of popular media made for or by evangelical Christians throughout the 1990s was another phase of an effort since the 1950s to define and distinguish evangelicals from mainline Protestants and the larger secular culture. For almost one hundred years, evangelicals had maintained a distinct theological and cultural identity from other Christians. Yet, their hardline stance of “traditional” gender roles and a literal interpretation of the Bible became stark contrasts to other denominations in the decades after World War II. Historians and religious scholars were consumed throughout the 1950s and 1960s with wrapping evangelicals up in a succinct definition despite the multiple Christian denominations that label

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<sup>165</sup> Boerl, “From Monologue to Dialogue,” 1228.

<sup>166</sup> Mary E. Hunt, “From Typewriters to Social Networking: A Feminist Organization’s Techno History,” in *Feminism and Religion in the 21st Century: Technology, Dialogue, and Expanding Borders*, ed. Gina Messina-Dysert and Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Routledge, 2015), 69.

themselves evangelicals and a lack of centralized leadership. The new monographs of evangelical history weaved tales of a theological worldview shaped by the political and cultural moments of the surrounding world all led by a cast of men, mostly white, who led revivals, preached over radio and television, and served as pastors at some of the nation's largest churches. Women rarely appeared in those accounts of evangelicalism or were painted in broad strokes as a homogeneous group working to support the male leadership. Scholars, even those from within the evangelical community, were unable to create a widely accepted explanation of who classified as an evangelical despite agreeing on certain theological boundaries.

Scholars across disciplines became more interested in evangelical Christians as their beliefs became tied to the emerging conservative Republican political party in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>167</sup> As the post-WWII nation found itself grappling with new racial tensions and how to convince millions of housewives to return home after a mass call to work, evangelical Christians became more concerned about the changing social and political dynamics of the U.S. The cultural upheaval of the 1960s, and into the 1970s, brought larger questions about how evangelicals would respond to the perceived attacks from ideological and religious beliefs including atheists, feminists, political liberals, and religions outside of the Judeo-Christian family. Many evangelical leaders saw “effeminate men and overreaching women” as the church's greatest vulnerability in face of external challenges which could only be solved by

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<sup>167</sup> During the split between fundamentalists and evangelicals in the decades after World War II, evangelical preachers emerged as the national voice calling for an alignment of moral and political ideologies. In the 1950s televangelist Billy Graham both attracted an immense following and linked himself to conservative politics through close ties with Richard Nixon. As Nixon lost national support during the 1970s, the Graham-Nixon relationship was replaced with a new political movement. Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority Party aligned themselves with Ronald Reagan and harnessed the grassroots resistance to the cultural upheaval of the 1960s to campaign for a range of federal and state measures that supported evangelical social beliefs. Historian Francis Fitzgerald argues Falwell successfully created “a jeremiad that conservative Christians had to get into politics or see the destruction of the nation”—a project that linked, at least rhetorically, conservative Republican politics and evangelical Christianity. Francis Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 8.



ceding “positions of church leadership to godly men who governed the church and ruled the home.”<sup>168</sup> The rise of evangelical apologetics in the 1960s left a lasting impact that Evans felt thirty years later when her college courses gave her the tools to dismantle the inevitable onslaught of doubts and questions she would receive from people with opposing worldviews.

External events, people, or ideas rocking a believer’s once sturdy faith by presenting ways of viewing the world that seem appealing, even morally good, has been a common thread throughout this history of evangelicalism. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminism became that force. As feminism shifted from a fringe movement to creating legal and cultural change in the second half of the twentieth century, the cultural narrative told evangelical Christians to feel their beliefs and traditions were under attack.<sup>169</sup> Women who appeared to align themselves with the feminist movement, either through words or actions in which they asserted their equality to men, were ridiculed for abandoning their evangelical values.<sup>170</sup> In response, women in any leadership positions took extra steps to establish their adherence to evangelical gender roles and their support of women practicing submission to male leadership.<sup>171</sup> In the 1980s the ordination of women became “a litmus test in Protestantism’s largest denomination [the Southern Baptist Convention] for a range of other issues, particularly biblical inerrancy, and became a defining controversy for their leadership.”<sup>172</sup> Beth More pushed the limits of that test as a preacher who “routinely outsold and outperformed her fellow evangelists” but maintained “a delicate dance between professed submission to men and implicit independence from them. She promised that she was under the authority of male pastors and that she sought to be a leader only of other

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<sup>168</sup> Bowler, *The Preacher’s Wife*, 41.

<sup>169</sup> Bowler, 68-75.

<sup>170</sup> Bowler, 52.

<sup>171</sup> Bowler, 103.

<sup>172</sup> Bowler, 40.

women, but her constant presence on television made it impossible for her to maintain the appearance of teaching an all-female audience.”<sup>173</sup>

Scholarship in the 1990s examined the lived reality of many evangelical women in the 1970s and 1980s who accepted parts of feminist ideology and practiced a form of evangelical-feminism that hybridized their religious beliefs and shifting cultural values about a woman’s worth and place in society.<sup>174</sup> Those women supported women establishing careers and identities outside of the domestic sphere and potentially within church communities. Yet, the importance of male spiritual leadership, meaning women are not ordained and do not “teach” or “preach” in churches, and male headship within nuclear family structures was reinforced as core evangelical values.

Historians during this period and into the 1990s recognized the lack of women as detailed and active characters in the existing evangelical histories. In response, essay collections, edited anthologies, and monographs aimed to correct the male-dominated accounts.<sup>175</sup> Through newly uncovered documentation, oral histories, and community memories, those authors argued that women had always been central figures in the expansion of evangelicalism since the American colonial period. The classifications prior scholarship, and those within the evangelical community, used to label leadership and spiritual authority defined women out of those roles. In

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<sup>173</sup> Bowler, 5-4.

<sup>174</sup> By the late 1980s scholars acknowledged the women and men who vocally opposed feminism as a secular attack on faith but noted that those opinions often dwarfed a silent majority who had a more complex relationship with the two ideologies. Articles by Esther Byle Bruland and Clyde Wilcox, acknowledge the often-conflicting viewpoints of feminism and evangelicalism but pointed to contemporary surveys, past literature, and archival information that feminism had been at the center of a long-standing debate within the evangelical community that women frequently navigated.

<sup>175</sup> Barbara J. MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

Susan Hill Lindley, *“Your Have Stept Out of Your Place:” A History of Women and Religion in America* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

*In Our Own Voices: Four Centuries of American Women’s Religious Writing*, ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995).

reexamining those definitions and established histories, women became a driving force in building evangelical communities. Women working as missionaries in colonial America along with women as preachers and agents of social change during religious revivals in the U.S.<sup>176</sup> received the highest interest from scholars since the rewriting of evangelical histories began in the 1970s.

Two books published just years apart demonstrate the shifting understanding of women as religious leaders during revivals in the U.S. from the colonial period to just before the Civil War. Catherine A. Brekus' 1998 book *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* tells the lost stories of over one hundred female preachers during the first Great Awakening. Under the revival tent, women and men equally required salvation which Brekus views as the determining factor in allowing women to guide prayers and worship based on their spiritual leadership—not gender. Prior to the Victorian era, concepts of separate spheres and

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<sup>176</sup> Anne M. Boylan, "Evangelical Womanhood in the Nineteenth Century: The Role of Women in Sunday Schools," *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 3 (1978).

Carl J. and Dorothy Schneider, *In Their Own Right: The History of American Clergywomen* (New York: Crossroad Publisher, 1997).

Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Turn the Pulpit Loose: Two Centuries of American Women Evangelists* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

Kristin Kobes Du Mez, "Leaving Eden: Resurrecting the Work of Katharine Bushnell and Lee Anna Starr," in *Breaking Boundaries: Female Biblical Interpreters Who Challenged the Status Quo*, ed. Nancy Calvert-Koyzis and Heather Weir (New York: T&T Clark, 2010).

Catherine A. Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

Nancy F. Cott, "Young Women in the Second Great Awakening in New England," *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 1/2 (1975).

Dana Lee Robert, *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers: Missionary Women in the Twentieth Century* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002).

Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007).

Thomas A. Robinson, *Preacher Girl: Uldine Utley and the Industry of Revival* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

feminine fragility, the boundaries between public and private spheres were more fluid, Brekus argues. Those factors allowed women to speak publicly about their faith to crowds of all sizes.<sup>177</sup>

Brekus' project is continued by Kathryn Teresa Long's 2000 book, *The Revival 1857-58: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening*. Long argues the traditional histories of the revivalist period were written by male, mostly Calvinist, leaders who highlighted their achievements while minimizing or excluding the labor of women and other denominations.<sup>178</sup> The work of Brekus, Long, and other scholars demonstrated how histories written shortly after the revivals and the majority of work done since do not accurately reflect the many women who led mass conversions and their own revival tours.

By 1997, Ann Braude asserted "Women's History *Is* American History."<sup>179</sup> Without women being the audience, participants, financial supporters, and natural transmission system for faith to the next generation, Braude argues, Christianity would never have been able to build itself into the present day institution.<sup>180</sup> The new wave of publications illustrate a recognition of the absence of women, as authors and central characters, in prior histories. The texts are clear in their agenda of promoting women in both roles to introduce new voices into the landscape of established histories.

In similar ways, scholars at the end of the twentieth century had become less concerned with the theoretical of evangelicalism and, instead, turned to the practical implications.<sup>181</sup> Scholars working with feminist methodologies applied tools to grant research subjects and

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<sup>177</sup> Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 13-14.

<sup>178</sup> Kathryn Teresa Long, *The Revival of 1857-58: Interpreting and American Religious Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 13-15.

<sup>179</sup> Ann Braude, "Women's History *Is* American History," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 87-107.

<sup>180</sup> Braude, 89.

<sup>181</sup> Angela Pears, *Feminist Christian Encounters: The Methods and Strategies of Feminist informed Christian Theologies* (Vermont: Ashgate, 2004).

historical characters equal levels of authority and validation. Ethnography was a favorite tool of those scholars—including R. Marie Griffith’s *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (1997)—who completed multi-year projects on a variety of evangelical community groups and denominations. Scholars emerged with tales of women whose faith allowed them to live out their own definition of womanhood that encouraged male leadership while exerting authority both at home and in public.<sup>182</sup> In her ethnography of the Women’s Aglow Fellowship, Griffith recorded stories of women’s secular careers, leadership roles within their church, and, in some instances, how their faith and community helped them recover from physically or emotionally abusive relationships and conquer physical or mental health challenges.<sup>183</sup>

Many authors of these projects position themselves as religious outsiders, or at least not evangelical Christians, and do not express any concern about criticizing or questioning beliefs or practices they encountered.<sup>184</sup> However, they approach their subjects with the belief that every woman’s experience should be heard and validated even if it seems oppressive to an outsider.<sup>185</sup> That stance can be read as a direct critique of second-wave feminism’s blanket assumption that all gender roles and forms of submission set by evangelical beliefs were oppressive. Many of the studies either explicitly address that narrative by emphasizing how evangelical women find empowerment and happiness in their gendered roles. Those studies do not specifically address famous or nationally known female figures and faith leaders. Instead, they focus their definition of leadership and authority on the everyday experiences of women groups, ministry activities,

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<sup>182</sup> R. Marie Griffith, *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 15-16.

<sup>183</sup> Griffith, 186-191.

<sup>184</sup> Griffith, 22-23.

<sup>185</sup> Griffith, 204.

church communities, and interpersonal relationships, as defined by the women themselves. The authors use those examples to pivot to a larger methodological argument to push for more ethnographies of evangelical communities and improved methods that value how women, not researchers, understand their lived experiences.

By the twenty-first century, a new wave of scholarship emerged that acknowledged the importance of correcting any narratives that pinned evangelicalism and feminism against each other. Those authors questioned previous works that, in critiquing Second-Wave Feminists' dismissal of evangelicals, had laxed their critiques of evangelical cultural and social practices. Many of these new authors came from evangelical backgrounds and taught at evangelical Bible colleges or religiously affiliated institutions. Their research was informed by their own experiences and those of their students that contradicted the existing framing of evangelical gender norms as empowering and positive for women. Beginning with texts that presented a more nuanced view of women in evangelical communities, this wave of research transitioned to introduce a range of younger and more diverse voices to the understanding of evangelicalism. In her own examination of gender within evangelicalism, Julie Ingersoll argues histories that present women finding "power in submission," including Griffith's work, distort the "messier, complex reality lived by women in contested positions".<sup>186</sup> Ingersoll's 2003 study and interviews culminate in *Evangelical Christian Women: War Stories in the Gender Battles* which offers an insider-turned-outsider's view of how women are treated within evangelicalism. Relying on extensive research and over forty interviews, Ingersoll portrays a pessimistic view of evangelical-feminism and the potential of ethnography to elevate underrepresented stories.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Julie Ingersoll, *Evangelical Christian Women: War Stories in the Gender Battles* (New York: New York University, 2003), 7-8.

<sup>187</sup> Ingersoll, 142-147.

While her conclusions run contrary to other scholars' conclusions, Ingersoll's view ushered in a new wave of scholarship that provides viewpoints and stories of evangelicals rarely discussed.

Tom Krattenmaker's 2013 book—*The Evangelicals You Don't Know: Introducing the Next Generation of Christians*—uses the stories of young evangelical Christians who, for Krattenmaker, represent the future of evangelicalism. The series of profiles on “average” young adult evangelicals speak to Krattenmaker's belief that the next generation of evangelicals hold the same religious beliefs as their parents but do not want to participate in the social and cultural baggage associated with evangelicalism.<sup>188</sup> Krattenmaker's study is an important recognition of the younger believers who could shift the understanding of evangelical beliefs and cultural values, if they stay in the church through adulthood. Yet, the next generation that Krattenmaker portrays is one that includes only a few women and people of color.<sup>189</sup> Some of the work to expand the picture of evangelicals outside of the traditional white male leaders has been completed by graduate students, including dissertations by Elizabeth Hill Flowers and Isaac B. Sharp. Flowers researched the history of womanhood in the Southern Baptist Convention while Sharp's project extended even further to produce a comprehensive history of twentieth-century evangelicalism that highlighted the “other evangelicals” who were pushed out of the dominant narrative.<sup>190</sup> Both conclusions echo Krattenmaker's assessment that the youngest generation of evangelicals may reflect their parents' theological beliefs but are rejecting the culture wars that became tied to evangelicalism in the 1960s.

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<sup>188</sup> Tom Krattenmaker, *The Evangelicals You Don't Know: Introducing the Next Generation of Christians* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 8-9.

<sup>189</sup> Krattenmaker, 9-10.

<sup>190</sup> Elizabeth Hill Flowers, “Varieties of Evangelical Womanhood: Southern Baptists, Gender, and American Culture,” PhD diss., (Duke University, 2007). A version of the dissertation was published in 2012 as *Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power Since World War II*.

Isaac B. Sharp, “The other evangelicals: The arginalization of liberal-modernist, barthian, black, feminist, progressive, arminian- wesleyan-pietist, and gay evangelicals and the shaping of 20th century U.S. american evangelicalism,” PhD diss., (Union Theological Seminary, 2019).

Two studies published in 2019 analyze the theological, cultural, political, and economic reasons behind the continued dominance of white male leadership within the contemporary evangelical church despite a far more diverse population of believers. Works by Bowler and Emily Suzanne Johnson examined the difference between authority and power within evangelical networks to understand how women work within their gender-defined roles to gain greater influence in the evangelical community.

In *This is Our Message: Women's Leadership in the New Christian Right*, Johnson explains the seemingly paradoxical relationship of evangelical women in power who defended their religious structure during the cultural upheaval of the late twentieth century.<sup>191</sup> Out of the many women profiled, Johnson uses author Beverly LaHaye to demonstrate how women were not helpers to their influential and famous husbands but held their own leadership positions and swayed the opinions of many evangelical women. The texts and women that Johnson covers range from Marble Morgan in the 1970s to contemporary political figures Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann. By gathering at conferences, speaking on church circuits, and publishing popular books, women were able to influence each other and the church's stance on gender roles, feminism, and a range of cultural changes.<sup>192</sup> Previous scholarship tried to recognize the ways evangelical women made feminism and their religious beliefs compatible by working outside the home while still practicing private forms of submission to male authority. Anecdotes throughout *This is Our Message* demonstrate how female politicians and religious leaders maintain high-profile public positions while navigating their private support of submission without portraying

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<sup>191</sup> Emily Suzanne Johnson, *This is Our Message: Women's Leadership in the New Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>192</sup> Johnson, 146-147.



themselves as subservient.<sup>193</sup> Johnson uses those examples to point to a cultural shift in the late 1980s toward complementarianism in which submission was viewed “as a private issue related to household decision making” while being “entirely unrelated” to professional positions.<sup>194</sup>

Bowler provides another examination of that balancing act in *The Preacher’s Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities*. For historical context she highlights many of the same women Johnson covers but focuses on the current leaders of all evangelical megachurches in the U.S. Comprehensive data and dozens of interviews inform her portrayal of preacher’s wives as multidimensional characters who initially played the supporting role in their husband’s career as a pastor.<sup>195</sup> As entertainers or by running secondary ministries for women, children, music, local charities, or missionary work, and sometimes their husband’s television program, the women became popular in their own right.<sup>196</sup> Many of the women outgrew their minor ministries and moved to preaching on stage with their husband or moved outside the church to start their own ministries or produce informational media for evangelical women.<sup>197</sup> Yet, the theological and cultural implications of complementarianism and biblical gender roles loomed over the women’s careers and successes. For women in co-pastor or pastor’s wife positions, that meant they “could inhabit a turnstile of endless nonpulpit roles, from pop princess to televangelist, so long as she was the sweet harmony to his strong melody.”<sup>198</sup> The amount of leadership a woman could take on and the strength of her celebrity that was allowed hinged on

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<sup>193</sup> During her run for president in 2011, a video from five years earlier captured Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann telling the Living Word Christian Center that her decision to pursue post-doctorate education was based on submitting to her husband’s encouragement. Johnson notes that Bachmann made the distinction between subservience and submission as a form of respect when she was later asked about the video (Johnson 142-143).

<sup>194</sup> Johnson, 143.

<sup>195</sup> Bowler, *The Preacher’s Wife*, 253-278.

<sup>196</sup> Bowler, 117-152.

<sup>197</sup> Bowler, 62-64.

<sup>198</sup> Bowler, 152.

“two powerful forces: first, the complementarian theologies that prescribed a limited set of feminine virtues and capacities; and, second, the industries that sustained their careers, which had their own rules about leading women.”<sup>199</sup> That meant a woman could appear to be in a commanding, even pastoral, role only if she “could put the audiences’ mind at ease that their husbands [and other male industry leaders from bookstore owners and record executives to megachurch pastors] exercise benevolent leadership rather than a cold dictatorship.”<sup>200</sup> Within those limitations, Bower argued, “it was almost impossible for a woman to gain the kind of equivalent celebrity that was within reach of almost any megachurch pastor through traditional means.”<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Bowler, 5.

<sup>200</sup> Bowler, 103.

<sup>201</sup> Bowler, 239.

## Chapter Three

### Doubt Filled Believer

The daughter of a substitute teacher with a special affection for “needy kids,” and “a genuine, certified theologian” and professor, Evans was born on June 8, 1981 to Robin and Peter Held in Birmingham, Alabama.<sup>202</sup> The first fourteen years of Evans’ life were spent exploring the hill she lived on, overlooking the airport, with her younger sister Amanda. The combination of her father’s seminary education, professional ties to religion, and her geographic location in the Bible Belt made Christianity central to Evans’ life from an early age. Bible stories and songs about Jesus were her fairy tales and nursery rhymes. Unlike the imagination and make-believe that permeated through the Brothers Grimm’s stories, Evans viewed the stories of Jonah and the giant whale, or fish as she liked to remind her Sunday school teacher, or Jesus’ miracles as “grand narratives that flowed like streams into [her] own story, created the currents that would move [her] forward and give [her] direction in life.”<sup>203</sup>

Evans did not remember the moment she accepted God as her Lord and asked Jesus into her heart.<sup>204</sup> While usually a crucial and formative step in an evangelical’s faith journey, Evans felt she knew Jesus from such a young age it was impossible to remember a time when understanding the “Four Spiritual Laws” and dispensationalism were not weighted equally with school lessons and memorizing her address.<sup>205</sup> In elementary school she vehemently competed for the “Best Christian Attitude Award” throughout the year by completing small tasks,

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<sup>202</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Evolving in Monkey Town: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask the Questions* (Grand Rapids, M.I.: Zondervan, 2010), 28-29.

<sup>203</sup> Evans, 28.

<sup>204</sup> Evans, 27.

<sup>205</sup> Evans, 27-29.

memorizing Bible verses, being kind to her classmates, and helping teachers—she was awarded it over four consecutive years. For Evans, winning awards seemed to be “an internal truce between my secret hope of being ‘discovered’ and my persistent fear of being ‘found out’” that beneath the image of talent she was “a complete fraud.”<sup>206</sup> From the time she was a child, Evans worried that her outward faith, knowledge of the Bible, skills, and kindness would be discovered as performative expressions and disingenuous. Those fears extended to God when as a child she recognized her own depravity and worried that she “would stumble upon some terrible, unspeakable thing that proved he wasn’t as great and good as grown-ups made him out to be.”<sup>207</sup> Evans’ writings about her childhood are peppered with stories that juxtapose her faith and desire to teach others about Jesus with her doubts that the more she learns about God, the less god-like he will become.

The “hermeneutical maze” surrounding gender also brought up questions within Evans’ understanding of Christianity: “When I was a little girl,” Evans wrote, “I knew I could be anything I wanted to be when I grew up, except a pastor.”<sup>208</sup> In Sunday school Evans was informed only boys could become church leaders while at the same time being praised for taking on leadership positions in the youth programs and her public speaking skills. In the same breath, however, a friend would tell Evans, “You’d be a great preacher if you were a guy.”<sup>209</sup> No matter what profession Evans envisioned for herself, she knew, even as a child, her identity would be defined by Biblical womanhood: a set of gender roles that used passages from Timothy, Corinthians, Paul’s letters, and the Psalms, among others, to establish a woman’s primary

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<sup>206</sup> Evans, 37.

<sup>207</sup> Evans, 35.

<sup>208</sup> Evans, 181.

<sup>209</sup> Evans, 183.

position as a helpmate for her husband.<sup>210</sup> The constant contradictions left Evans with many questions and only one conclusion, “to grow up as a strong-willed woman in the conservative evangelical community is to never quite understand your place in the world.”<sup>211</sup>

Even while inwardly questioning her understanding of God and how religion guided her identity, as a child Evans was committed to outward expressions of faith to pull others toward a relationship with Jesus. As a child of the 1980’s and 1990’s culture wars, Evans gravitated toward popular, Christian media that reflected and reinforced her evangelical beliefs. She recalled listening to tapes of Ravi Zacharias’ and sermons in the car on the way to kindergarten and being drawn to anyone who shared a love for singer Amy Grant. Evans used those cultural touchstones in her own attempts to convert her neighborhood by loudly singing hymns or leaving pamphlets in mailboxes. One of her first missions included sending the “plan of salvation” to her Mormon neighbors by way of a paper airplane flown over their shared fence. Her commitment to evangelicalism extended to a fascination with the details and an accurate understanding of Biblical stories from removing wise men figurines from manger scenes to correcting adults on the specifics of Bible passages.<sup>212</sup>

## Monkey Town

Evans came of age in Dayton, Tennessee where she spent her teenage and college years steeped in the religious traditions of Southern evangelical Christianity. The Held family moved to Dayton after Evans’ father was hired as a professor and administrator at the local college, William Jennings Bryan College. Dayton’s fifteen minutes of fame in the mid-1920s remains a

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<sup>210</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband “Master”* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2012), xxi.

<sup>211</sup> Evans, *Evolving in Monkey Town*, 181-182.

<sup>212</sup> Evans, 31.

central part of the town's identity and provided a theological and historical springboard for Evans' writings about evangelicalism in "Monkey Town." After fourteen years in Alabama, the move to Dayton offered Evans an exciting new opportunity to witness about her faith and convert her new neighbors. She was disappointed when shortly after moving she realized the residents of Dayton did not need a teenage evangelist—"Revival found the Tennessee Valley long before I arrived and had settled in, like a fog."<sup>213</sup> Sitting in the middle of the Bible Belt and with the history of the Scopes Monkey Trial, Christian culture held deep ties in Dayton: beauty pageants, football games, and city council meetings opened with prayers; liquor sales were outlawed in the county; high school biology courses did not include lessons on evolution; gospel nights were held at the local McDonald's and Hardee's; and a statue of William Jennings Bryan guarded the courthouse.<sup>214</sup>

Not deterred by the churches that lined the town, Evans spent her teenage years leading her high school's Bible Club and leading mini-revivals "determined to transform all the Christians there into *evangelical* Christians and set them on fire for God."<sup>215</sup> Her "crusader complex" and curiosity about theology, while well intentioned, sometimes emerged at inappropriate times.<sup>216</sup> Evans recalled taking an inopportune moment at a bridal shower to ask her mother if Anne Frank went to heaven or hell.<sup>217</sup> The day after the massacre at Columbine High School, Evans attended school thinking, "It's the perfect witnessing opportunity." She later reflected on the choice to ask a classmate if they knew "where you would spend eternity if you

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<sup>213</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015), 24.

<sup>214</sup> Evans, *Evolving in Monkey Town*, 39, 45.  
Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 24-25.

<sup>215</sup> Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 24.

<sup>216</sup> Evans, 27.

<sup>217</sup> Evans, 13.

died today” writing, “Had I not been so utterly sincere, so genuinely devoted to the eternal well-being of my fellow human beings, I would have deserved the glare she sent back.”<sup>218</sup>

It was her youth pastor, Brian Ward, who Evans attributes with understanding early on her “knack for teaching and leading in a church setting.”<sup>219</sup> Ward made church interesting and fun by moving Wednesday night youth group to a downtown storefront decked out with La-Z-Boy chairs, a foosball table, video games, and a large stage for music. Evans writes fondly of Ward’s authentic and effortless “cool factor” that refused to fall into “Christianese” by talking “about his walk with the Lord” and instead sitting on the floor while he played guitar and talked about Jesus to an average crowd of seventy local teenagers.<sup>220</sup> Ward helped “temper” Evans’ enthusiasm for revivals and planning altar calls for the middle of Super Bowl watch parties while encouraging her to become a leader in the planning of youth group events and leading the weekly Bible lesson.<sup>221</sup> Evans’ relationship with Ward helped solidify her identity as “the church girl, the girl who always had a place in her youth group family, the girl on fire for God.”<sup>222</sup> While that fire was eventually “washed out,” the role of spiritual mentor in Evans’ life was important to her initial understanding of faith and community.<sup>223</sup>

Evans stayed in town to attend Bryan College, graduating in 2003 with a degree in English. Despite her home discipline, Evans spent most of her credit hours in the theology department honing the “biblical worldview” the college based its educational approach on.<sup>224</sup> Evans tracks her Bible-based education on the influence of the apologetics movement. Starting in

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<sup>218</sup> Evans, 24-25.

<sup>219</sup> Evans, 27.

<sup>220</sup> Evans, 25.

<sup>221</sup> Evans, 27.

<sup>222</sup> Evans, 31.

<sup>223</sup> Evans, 31.

<sup>224</sup> Evans, *Evolving in Monkey Town*, 72.

the 1970s as a reaction to the cultural upheaval of the 1960s, Christian apologists worked to “more effectively engage modernism” by understanding and combating “threats” from feminists to atheists.<sup>225</sup> The multitude of religion courses on a “biblical worldview” and the history of Christianity that Evans took were part of a larger trend across evangelical Bible colleges to help their graduates move away “from blind faith, anti-intellectualism, and cultural withdrawal toward hard rationalism, systematic theology, and political action.”<sup>226</sup> For Evans, that instruction included lessons on breaking down other belief systems and engaging in classroom debates with professors playing the part of the skeptics that she was sure to encounter after graduation.<sup>227</sup> Throughout her college years, the terms “Christian” and “evangelical” became modifiers for a range of media from textbooks to music as a way to frame responses to cultural questions from global warming or parenting to why “non-believers” could not enter heaven.<sup>228</sup>

Evans writes about her college experience with a warm nostalgia in recalling the friends she met, professors who served as mentors, her blossoming love of literature and writing, and meeting her husband.<sup>229</sup> Yet, in hindsight she recognized how the tools she had been given to fight off the imposing questions of evangelical skeptics could be used to question her own faith and worldview.<sup>230</sup> After four years of picking apart the contradictions and possibilities of other belief systems, she began to recognize the blind faith that she applied to similar features within Christianity. Evans had spent four years perfecting her critique of belief systems that accepted “picking and choosing truth” and was beginning to understand the selectivity occurring in her faith.<sup>231</sup> Prompted by the beginning of the Iraq War and fueled by reflection on a millennium of

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<sup>225</sup> Evans, 75.

<sup>226</sup> Evans, 75.

<sup>227</sup> Evans, 72-73.

<sup>228</sup> Evans, 77.

<sup>229</sup> Evans, 78.

<sup>230</sup> Evans, 79.

<sup>231</sup> Evans, 80.



suffering, chaos, and billions of people who did not believe in Christianity, questions began to challenge Evans' understanding of God.

In late 2001, just before the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, Evans and her classmates watched footage of a woman, Zarmina, being executed in Kabul after allegations that she murdered her husband. Evans recalls that the footage, shown on *Behind the Veil* “an undercover documentary,” was meant to demonstrate the oppression of women in Muslim-majority countries, but instead sparked disturbing questions for Evans about Zarmina’s fate in the afterlife.<sup>232</sup> Her evangelical beliefs specified that only Christians, specifically born-again Christians who strictly followed the Bible, would be allowed to enter heaven after death.<sup>233</sup> Evans was consumed by the implications of that model for non-believers who would enter eternal damnation for simply not believing in Christianity. Remembering that realization, Evans writes, “suddenly abstract concepts about heaven and hell, election and free will, religious pluralism and exclusivism had a name: Zarmina.”<sup>234</sup> Evans found the response by evangelical apologists and believers around her especially troubling when a friend “insisted that Zarmina went to hell because she was a Muslim.”<sup>235</sup> That event triggered “the scandal of the evangelical heart” in Evans who felt the evangelical explanation of salvation “boiled down to luck of the draw.” Zarmina’s death served as a turning point in Evans understanding of religion as an ideological endeavor into “questions of conscience and empathy.”<sup>236</sup> By graduation, Evans, selected to give the class’s departing speech, encouraged her classmates to face the world with their newly minted biblical worldview while pondering the validity of her own beliefs and tolerance for ambiguity.

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<sup>232</sup> Evans, 89-92.

<sup>233</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “The Scandal of the Evangelical Heart,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, January 24, 2013, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/scandal-evangelical-heart?rq=zarmina>.

<sup>234</sup> Evans, *Evolving in Monkey Town*, 91.

<sup>235</sup> Evans, “The Scandal of the Evangelical Heart,” blog.

<sup>236</sup> Evans, “The Scandal of the Evangelical Heart,” blog.

The moral foundations of Christianity—loving all neighbors, caring for society’s outcasts, turning the other cheek—all seemed to contradict the interactions she was being prepared to face after graduation. She was at once being told to expect temptations and doubts from non-believers who would try to undermine her faith while also being instructed to witness and convert those same people. Evans later wrote that “Christians have been obsessed with the afterlife for centuries” while seeming to forget the commandment to care for others in the physical world. The nagging feeling that evangelicals’ concern with the afterlife made them prone to conversion rather than caring for their neighbors in the present. The result, Evans wrote, was a faith that had become “judgmental, narrowminded, intolerant, and unkind.”<sup>237</sup>

## When Believers Ask

In the months after graduating college, Evans began a process of deconstructing, examining, and rebuilding her religious beliefs that would continue for the next fifteen years. While it would be roughly a decade before Evans dove into the history of women in the Bible and their place within Christianity, she started with breaking down the theological and historical background of the evangelical beliefs she was raised with and taught in college. Evans married her college boyfriend, Daniel Evans, shortly after graduation and moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee to complete an internship at the Chattanooga Times Free Press.<sup>238</sup> Returning to Dayton in 2004, Evans took a job reporting for the local newspaper, *The Herald-News*.<sup>239</sup>

That following summer she reread the four accounts of Jesus’ life in an attempt to understand her anger with God stemming from her “deep, entrenched sadness of this world”

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<sup>237</sup> Evans, *Evolving in Monkey Town*, 204.

<sup>238</sup> Evans, 79.

<sup>239</sup> Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 54.

relating to global poverty, hunger, and illness.<sup>240</sup> The project helped her recognize how her conceptualization of Jesus, along with the cultural practices of evangelical Christianity, departed from the theological record of Jesus' actions. She was left with the understanding that Christianity ought to be based on "embodying" the service and kindness of Jesus recorded in the Bible rather than "agreeing" to a set of beliefs. Over the next two years, Evans continued to research the history of Christianity and its evolution from a small set of believers in hiding to a dominating force in global politics. She did not publish or publicly release any writings about her faith from this time, but her later books and blog posts explain that this time revolved around questions of "religious pluralism and the destiny of the unevangelized."<sup>241</sup>

In 2006, Evans moved away from full-time reporting to become a freelancer for the humor column in *The Herald-News* along with guest writing for other outlets. Her newly flexible work schedule allowed her to travel to Hyderabad, India in the fall to visit her younger sister, Amanda, who had spent the summer months working for organizations that ran orphanages, missionaries, and schools. The trip included assisting Amanda in her work and traveling with her as she transitioned to a new position in Bangalore. Visiting a country home to a multitude of competing religions seemed to be "a form of shock therapy" for someone struggling with her own religious doubts. Nodding to the "increasingly hip" trend of traveling to India to reenact the spiritual awakening made glamorous by the book turned movie *Eat Pray Love*, Evans worried the trip would be the final piece toward losing her faith.<sup>242</sup>

Within the first week working with Amanda at a live-in school for children whose families suffered from HIV/AIDS strengthened Evans' faith and understanding of true Christian

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<sup>240</sup> Evans, *Evolving in Monkey Town*, 101.

<sup>241</sup> Evans, 131.

<sup>242</sup> Evans, 139.

charity. The Christian families she met in India that helped those affected by HIV/AIDS demonstrated to Evans a relationship rooted in Jesus' call to serve the poor and sick neighbors.<sup>243</sup> It was one of the women Evans met who lived at the school who forever shifted Evans' understanding of Jesus. Laxmi was left without any money or family while raising three children after her husband was diagnosed with a late stage of HIV and died shortly afterward. Laxmi and her youngest child were also later diagnosed with HIV. Cast out by their family and friends because they feared and misunderstood the disease, Laxmi and her children eventually found refuge with a family of Christians. As Indians themselves, the family understood the social implications of living with HIV/AIDS. After receiving requests from other families in the area for similar support, they opened a boarding school that housed twenty-five children when Evans visited.<sup>244</sup>“For Laxmi,” Evans wrote, “Jesus had little to do with a transfer of information or a statement of belief and everything to do with outstretched hands offering food and shelter.”<sup>245</sup>

That new perspective led Evans to examine the disconnect between preaching a commitment to serving the outcasts of society and the minimal actions many evangelicals, including herself, took to achieve that goal in daily life. Her trip continued to be a source of writing inspiration—serving as the basis of two chapters in *Evolving in Monkey Town* and numerous early blog posts throughout 2008—and a new foundation for her religious and cultural beliefs based on serving those institutional Christianity pushed aside.

Those lessons would soon become personal for Evans who, during her decade of activity, experienced extensive criticism for “teaching” her theological perspective. Combining her new full-time freelancer status and continuing exploration of Christian beliefs, Evans launched her

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<sup>243</sup> Evans, 139.

<sup>244</sup> Evans, 141-142.

<sup>245</sup> Evans, 143.

blog, originally called “Evolving in Monkey Town,” in the final days of 2007. Her first post acknowledged her recent dive into hermeneutics while promising readers she would avoid the “snobbery” that can plague theological discussions. Instead, Evans offered the blog as a space to “celebrate our wanderings, our little journeys without destinations.”<sup>246</sup> She also hoped the blog would serve as a community gathering space for believers and non-believers alike: “I look forward to sharing my own ideas, and I look forward to hearing from you.”<sup>247</sup> Over the next twelve years, Evans built an online community stemming from her blog and Twitter account, started in 2008, that fostered an exchange of theological insights and opinions while bonding Evans and her readers through a constant multi-way exchange. As Evans jumped into the world of digital religion, other evangelicals had been using the affordances of the internet since the mid-1990s to build online congregations and share their beliefs. No longer was the pulpit made of wood, but ones and zeros.

## You’re Not Crazy and You’re Not Alone

A married woman in her late-twenties blogging about her life and evangelical faith, at first, seemed to fit the mold of the popular “mommy blogger” trend of the late 2000s with lighthearted stories about her relationship with husband Daniel, vacations ruined by unexpected weather, and predictions about the upcoming college football season.<sup>248</sup> Yet, Evans’ blog, while fitting broad generalizations, tackled heavy theological topics, parsed Bible passages, and

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<sup>246</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Traveling Mercies for the ‘Consummate Ass,’” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, December 28, 2007, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/article-1198883430>.

<sup>247</sup> Evans, “Traveling Mercies for the ‘Consummate Ass,’” blog.

<sup>248</sup> After becoming a mother herself, Evans discussed how she was often assumed to be a “mommy blogger” when she started her blog. Her “antipathy” toward the assumption soon turned to defensiveness when she began reading blogs about motherhood as she prepared for the birth of her son in 2016. In a 2017 post Evans thanks “all the mommy bloggers” for “some of the most honest, considered, and powerful essays I’d ever read.” Rachel Held Evans, “Hey Mommy Bloggers—Thanks.,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, August 3, 2017, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/hey-mommy-bloggers-thanks>.

extensively cited conservative and liberal theologians along with popular religious news outlets and traditional authorities on the Bible.<sup>249</sup> At its core, the blog explored Christianity, its history, its failings and triumphs, its cultural impacts, and the range of believers and non-believers that Evans encountered. However, she did not make fruitless attempts to guide readers to faith or impose her theology on others. Her straightforward and jargon-free writing style turned heavily researched and complex theological discussions into effortless conversations between friends. Her respect for her readers' insights and opinions was a constant as she asked for advice and feedback or engaged directly with commenters who she referred to by their first names. Her examination of Christianity was built on a multi-way dialogue.

Evans repeatedly asked readers to voice their opinions or give feedback on potential topics for future posts. She solicited guest pieces from readers or book reviews in the weeks she felt pressed by a writing deadline. Weekend posts often encouraged readers to promote their own blog or work in the comment section. A monthly virtual book club, that ran for the first few years of the blog, combined weekly posts of Evans' reaction and interpretations with questions for readers to discuss. Other posts operated as check-ins with readers. Most Fridays, Evans posted "fill in the blank" or "complete the sentence" questions that asked readers about their upcoming weekend plans, the most-recent movie they watched, their current favorite book, what songs they enjoyed listening to, a recipe suggestion, or how they reacted to a political or cultural event. Some of those posts could be read as unimportant distractions from the blog's main discussion of

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<sup>249</sup> From 2007 to 2015 Evans posted a minimum of twelve times per month, but, especially in the early years, posted daily. Beginning in August of 2015, she posted one to three times per month and by 2016 she often posted only once a month. Most of her posts in 2017 were announcements and promotions for her speaking engagements and upcoming book release. She took a hiatus between June of 2018 and March of 2019 when she posted a few times about Lent and the upcoming Easter holiday before entering the hospital in May of 2019. Her last post was in April 2019. Evans' husband, Daniel Evans, posted a funeral announcement shortly after her death. The reduced number of posts and extended break in 2018 can be attributed to the increased number of press tours, speaking engagements, and freelance projects she undertook.

Christianity. Based on their frequency and longevity, those posts seemed to be crucial elements to Evans' goal of creating "a safe place for fellow travelers [referring to her readers' spiritual journeys] to stop and take a breather, to perhaps share a few stories and exchange some traveling tips."<sup>250</sup> Those check-ins demonstrate Evans' being "more interested in making connections and building relationships than racking up a bunch of comments here."<sup>251</sup>

Evans' emphasis on personal connections, even in the virtual realm, can be understood as a symptom of her shifting theological views mediated by the communications technology she used to explore her beliefs and connect with others. The blogosphere, unlike other modes of communication, lives outside of the theological and structural control of the evangelical institution. Free or low-cost online spaces were accessible to individuals, including women, who were not granted theological or cultural authority within traditional church settings. Instead of abiding by the top-down modes of communication and power, blogs foster a more democratic space for communication to anyone with a stable internet connection. Collaboration and intimacy flourished in the online space Evans created, in part, because it was free of institutional control on what was written and by whom.

The affordances digital religion and specifically blogging offered Evans and her readers are a mirror to Evans' own shifting in theological values. From her first post Evans emphasizes the importance to remove her blog from the authoritative communication style of a church pulpit. She hoped to foster personal connections with and between readers. The affordances of blogging helped that idea grow into a large online community built on critical yet respectful discussions. In many ways, Evans' emphasis on an intimate community space reflected her own shift toward

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<sup>250</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Your Spiritual Journey: Send Me a Postcard!," *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, August 21, 2008, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/article-1219340672?rq=your%20spiritual%20journey>.

<sup>251</sup> Evans, "Your Spiritual Journey," blog.

a theology based on serving and accepting others. Based on a review of Evans' publications and her interactions with her blog readers it is possible to track how her interactions with the digital religion ecosystem through the democratic space created by blogging shifted her beliefs.

Blogging technology provided Evans with a platform free from institutional evangelical authority in which she, or anyone else, could write and discuss. To create an online space that did not resemble the authoritative and one-way communication style of evangelical churches, Evans insisted on two-way dialogue between herself and readers. The comment feature on her blog offered Evans with immediate feedback and responses from her readers meaning commenters had equal power to shape and Evans' beliefs. The affordances of the blogosphere that helped Evans promote those values in turn introduced Evans to and cultivated new theological interpretations and understanding of social justice issues. By reviewing her blog posts and interactions with readers, it appears her religious beliefs regarding the acceptance and equal treatment of those society and Christianity have traditional rejected stems, in part, from her interactions with a communications technology that fosters equal access and authority.

Unfortunately, reader comments after 2009 are not visible on the current version of Evans' blog.<sup>252</sup> Archived versions, on the Internet Archive's Way Back Machine, provide a limited insight into how Evans engaged in lively conversations and debates with her readers.

Most of the posts in Evans' first few months had fewer than ten comments.<sup>253</sup> However, posts

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<sup>252</sup> The first version on Evans' website used an internal comment feature which allowed the Internet Archive to capture comments up until February 2009. By September 2010, Evans had redesigned her website and started using the subscription-based plugin Disqus to create reader profiles and house comments. With an eighteen-month gap between captures on the Internet Archive, I cannot say exactly when the switch occurred. Disqus as a company is still active but, it appears the subscription on Evans' website has elapsed meaning comments since early 2009 are no longer visible on the blog or the Internet Archive. At the time of writing, I do not know if the service archives comments after accounts subscriptions end or if the blog administrator, Evans' husband, has access to the comments.

<sup>253</sup> A post in March 2008 received fifty-eight comments, but the majority of those were spam comments advertising medication and cars available for online purchase.



about the 2008 presidential election and Evans' support of Democratic nominee Barack Obama, examinations of the cultural and theological responses to LGBTQ marriage, and book club discussions all had twenty or more comments. From the outset, reader comments remained respectful contributions to an open-ended conversation prompted by questions at the end of each post.<sup>254</sup> "When people ask me about my religious affiliation, I say that I am a . . . what do you say?" Evans asked after announcing the October 2008 book club selection. The five commenters gave a range of responses from "I'm an evangelical" qualified by the reader's identification with liberal politics and feminism to another reader trying to brush off labels around their faith.<sup>255</sup>

Another post from September 2008 marked one of Evans' earliest discussions of LGBTQ people and Christianity. In "An Evangelical's Response to Homosexuality," Evans outlined the personal experiences and interpretations of scriptures that made her "absolutely terrified that evangelicals have gotten this wrong." A conversation about LGBTQ marriage and civil rights was a contentious issue both in Christianity and in American culture in 2008. Yet the twenty-two responses to Evans' post remained level-headed and respectful even as readers replied directly to each other's comments.<sup>256</sup> Evans frequently appeared in the comment sections to offer a clarification of her own views, answer questions, provide additional resources or links to other blogs, or to thank readers for their contributions. After responding to a few readers directly and listing some additional information, Evans concluded her comment with "I am by no means trying to stop the conversation. Just wanted to acknowledge some of your comments!"<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Thanks + Topic Ideas," *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, December 22, 2008, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/article-1229993111?rq=readers>.

<sup>255</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "New Book Club Selection + Finish-the-Sentence-Friday," *Rachelheldevans.com*, Web Archive, October 29, 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20081029044915/http://www.rachelheldevans.com/article-1224258485>.

<sup>256</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "An Evangelical's Response to Homosexuality," *Rachelheldevans.com*, Web Archive, September 5, 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080905144301/http://www.rachelheldevans.com/article-1217262864#commentsAnchor>.

<sup>257</sup> Evans, "An Evangelical's Response to Homosexuality," *Web Archive*.

It is difficult to quantify how many spiritual wanderers found a place in Evans' digital community. The nature of the platforms Evans' community called home restrict analytics data to approved administrators, but some information is either publicly available or can be gathered through archived and third-party sources. By the end of her life, Evans had amassed 161,000 Twitter followers and more than 100,000 "likes" on her Facebook page. Finding an accurate measurement of her blog readership is more challenging. An archived version of her blog includes a FeedBurner tracker which listed 5,802 readers as of April 2008.<sup>258</sup> However, that number did not change between April and December of 2008.<sup>259</sup> It is not clear if that figure referred to overall readership or registered users visiting the website. Even with that inaccurate early measurement, readership numbers can be tracked using figures provided by Beacon, the company Evans used to sell advertisements through, along with figures from Google Analytics posted on the blog. In 2010, the webpage listed 931 RSS feed subscribers.<sup>260</sup> In October 2011, the blog "received over 230k page views from 75k visits" which was about double the figures from the previous year.<sup>261</sup> In information provided to advertisers by Daniel Evans, the blog was viewed an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 times in a thirty-day period.<sup>262</sup> By May 2012 the website received "over 1 million pageviews" from just under half a million visitors.<sup>263</sup> *Slate* wrote the blog had between 80,000 and 100,000 visitors per month in late 2012 just after the publication of

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<sup>258</sup> A web feed company that provided custom RSS feeds since 2004, it was acquired by Google in 2007. Rachel Held Evans, "Rachel's Blog," *Rachelheldevans.com*, Web Archive, August 8, 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080808134223/http://www.rachelheldevans.com/>.

<sup>259</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Rachel's Blog," *Rachelheldevans.com*, Web Archive, December 21, 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20081221045841/http://www.rachelheldevans.com/>.

<sup>260</sup> "Rachel Held Evans," *Beacon Ad Network*, Web Archive, October 3, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20101003081909/http://beaconads.com/buy/detail/35996>.

<sup>261</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Advertise," *Rachelheldevans.com*, Web Archive, December 14, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111214090238/http://rachelheldevans.com/advertise>.

<sup>262</sup> "Rachel Held Evans," *Beacon Ad Network*, Web Archive, October 3, 2010.

<sup>263</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Advertise," *Rachelheldevans.com*, Web Archive, November 14, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121114052141/http://rachelheldevans.com/advertise/>.

*A Year of Biblical Womanhood*.<sup>264</sup> An article published in October 2012 in *The Guardian* put Evans' daily readership at 5,000.<sup>265</sup>

Fewer readers visited her page over the next two years, with the figures dipping to under 300,000 visitors in January of 2013<sup>266</sup> and to just over 150,000 in September of 2014.<sup>267</sup> The decrease in readers could have been a result of the fewer posts in 2014 compared to 2013. Those figures increased by about 10,000 monthly visitors as of September 2015 and 9,376 people subscribed to the blog, an increase that could be attributed to the publication of *Searching for Sunday*. Those numbers continued to climb into 2016 when Evans reached 210,000 monthly impressions.<sup>268</sup> However, those numbers remain inaccurate estimations of Evans' actual readership and subscribers. First, they did not reflect Evans' shift from upwards of twenty posts a month between 2008 and mid-2015 to fewer than three times a month by 2016. Most posts in 2017 were announcements for upcoming events or appearances and excerpts from *Inspired* to advertise the book's publication in 2018. Evans also took a long hiatus from the blog between June of 2018 and March of 2019. In that period her Twitter and Facebook followings continued to climb as did her national exposure through press tours and further publications that existed outside of her blog. For those reasons, quantifying her popularity and community based on her

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<sup>264</sup> Ruth Graham, "Her Year of Living Biblically," *Slate*, October 15, 2012, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2012/10/a-year-of-biblical-womanhood-rachel-held-evans-followed-the-bible-and-wrote-about-it-but-now-christian-chain-lifeway-wont-sell-her-book.html>.

<sup>265</sup> Hannah Booth, "The Book of Rachel," *The Guardian*, October 26, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/oct/27/rachel-held-evans-biblical-womanhood>.

<sup>266</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Advertise," *Rachelheldevans.com*, Web Archive, November 27, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131127095556/http://rachelheldevans.com/advertise/>.

<sup>267</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Advertise," *Rachelheldevans.com*, Web Archive, October 29, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20141029071835/http://rachelheldevans.com/advertise>.

<sup>268</sup> "Rachel Held Evans," *Beacon Ad Network*, Web Archive, November 11, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20161111021713/https://beaconads.com/buy/detail/44220>.

blog readership or social media following alone provide an inaccurate understanding of her impact.

In digital religion where physical boundaries of church and congregation become followers and likes, it can appear that Evans' were at once a sizable following and a barely registerable percentage of the U.S. population. In the U.S., where 70 percent of the population identifies as Christian and about 25 percent identify as evangelical, her online followers appear to represent a small section.<sup>269</sup> Contextualizing those figures with the shifting appetite and attention of internet users during Evans' twelve years of activity provides a different view. Blogging remained a popular medium in the final years before the social media giants Facebook and Twitter started in the late 2000s. Evans' shift from long-form blog posts to micro-blogging on Twitter reflected both her increasingly busy speaking and publication schedule and the public's desire for instant and small-bite pieces of information. An obituary published on *Vox* argues "Evans not only worked her way up but also had staying power—she remained a relevant voice, even after readers shifted away from blogs in favor of social media posts, and, more significantly, when she left evangelicalism and became a member of the Episcopal Church in 2015."<sup>270</sup> Additionally, when viewing evangelical Christianity as a subculture housed within Protestant Christianity it is easier to understand how a following of a few hundred-thousand can have a substantial impact. "Whatever subculture you are/have been a part of, think of the person who spoke truth to power about the more messed up elements of it," BuzzFeed reporter Anne Helen Petersen wrote on Twitter when Evans died. "That's who Rachel was."

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<sup>269</sup> "Religions," Religious Landscape Study, Pew Research Center, accessed April 18, 2020, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/#topics-questions>.

<sup>270</sup> Kate Shellnutt, "How progressive Christian blogger Rachel Held Evans changed everything," *Vox*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/5/7/18535272/rachel-held-evans-obit>.

Who was Evans' community? A 2010 edition of her blog described her readers to potential advertisers as "young adults, philosophically minded, college educated, familiar with evangelical culture."<sup>271</sup> Her readership was also described as "high user loyalty and engagement."<sup>272</sup> In 2011 that description was widened to include "educated adults with a variety of perspectives on sometimes controversial topics related to religion and current events." Based on a review of her blog's early commenters and Evans' own assessment of the community in 2009, her readership represented a variety of faith backgrounds from Catholics, conservative evangelicals and Pentecostals, to "religious scholars" and "religious misfits."<sup>273</sup> While fostering a supportive readership was important to Evans, she was unafraid to bring in people who challenged her and the blog's readership. In the middle of a month-long conversation about LGBTQ relationships, Evans invited a "celibate gay Christian" to offer her experience with sexuality and Christianity.<sup>274</sup> Evans was criticized by readers and on social media for giving a platform to someone who believed Christians should not practice same-sex relationships. Evans responded in a lengthy Facebook post writing, "Inviting guests with whom I disagree—even strongly—has long been part of my editorial posture on the blog."<sup>275</sup>

She was also frequently in dialogue with evangelical leaders, other theologians, and their followers with whom she disagreed with on Twitter.<sup>276</sup> Her critics included male leaders in the

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<sup>271</sup> "Rachel Held Evans," *Beacon Ad Network*, Web Archive, October 3, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20101003081909/http://beaconads.com/buy/detail/35996>.

<sup>272</sup> "Rachel Held Evans," *Beacon Ad Network*, Web Archive, October 3, 2010.

<sup>273</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Faith in Transition—a rite of passage or a cultural shift?," *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, September 1, 2009, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/faithintransition?rq=readers>.

<sup>274</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Ask a (Celibate) Gay Christian...," *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, September 25, 2014, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/ask-a-celibate-gay-christian-response?rq=cel>.

<sup>275</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Why invite guests with whom you disagree?...", Facebook, September 26, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/rachelheldevans.page/posts/10152521692309442>.

<sup>276</sup> Rachel Held Evans (@rachelheldevans), "Neo-Calvinist dues who insist they aren't legalists because their conversations about whether women should be allowed to be engineers happen over bottles of craft beer...", Twitter, April 25, 2018, <https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans/status/989134230885105664>.

evangelical community who saw her blog, books, and speaking engagements as efforts to preach to or teach followers. Informed by their belief that women should not be allowed to preach, those leaders argued Evans' theological beliefs and insistence on publicly criticizing evangelical tradition made her a heretic. In February of 2011 she scrutinized comments made by Seattle megachurch pastor Mark Driscoll in 2006 regarding the importance of women not "letting themselves go" as they aged or after having children. Evans wrote she "feared" Driscoll's comments reflected a larger cultural pressure on women to "stay beautiful or your husband might leave you" which created a new type of misogyny. Ontario pastor Tim Challies questioned Evans' conclusion, writing "In too many cases a woman who lets herself go is simply symbolizing that she has let her marriage go."<sup>277</sup> After disagreeing with theologian Tim Keller's understanding of hell on Twitter in 2018 Evans tweeted, "Disagreeing with Tim Keller on Twitter was the worst decision I made today and I had a pickle for breakfast.

#RIPmymentions."<sup>278</sup>

In April of 2009, Evans extended her community to Twitter, and a month later opened a Facebook account.<sup>279</sup> Classifying Evans as just a blogger and author misses her ability to use

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<sup>277</sup> Tim Challies, "Letting Herself Go," Challies, May 26, 2011, <https://www.challies.com/christian-living/letting-herself-go/?fbclid=IwAR06QdBi3DPrhwtW0G1-TCfp3L0nSQzgOvfU-Qbo8JvmurUwCdM23-hxBnY>.

<sup>278</sup> Rachel Held Evans (@rachelheldevans), "Disagreeing with Tim Keller...", Twitter, April 25, 2018, <https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans/status/989234077248184321>.

<sup>279</sup> Evans opened her Twitter account on March 24, 2008 but did not begin tweeting until April 7, 2009. She tweeted just under 60,000 times during her decade on the platform and peaked at 170,000 followers in the month after her death in May 2019. Without access to Evans' account, tracking the growth of her followers is difficult. The Internet Archive did not capture Evans' Twitter account until May 3, 2019 when she had about 161,000 followers. Early on, Evans did tweet about her follower numbers which can be used to make a basic trajectory of her rise in popularity. In August 2009, she tweeted that she had ninety-nine followers; by January 2011 she had just under 2,000 followers; and in October 2015 she mentioned having "more than 10,000 followers." Over the next four years she reached 161,000 followers.

At some point Evans also ran an Instagram account, but as of this writing the account has been deleted and no archived records can be found. Evans references the account in an April 9, 2015 post on Facebook.

Rachel Held Evans, "So if you follow me on Instagram...", Facebook, April 9, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/rachelheldevans.page/photos/a.10150102653724442/10152983638329442/?type=3&theater>.

social media as a neutral meeting table for her supporters, fellow writers, and those who disagreed with her work. Twitter, Facebook, and her blog all seemed to function as separate bodies of work that intersected and built off one another in many ways while remaining distinct audiences. It was on Twitter than Evans rallied behind other authors, talked with her critics, and later found her political voice. Her Facebook page functioned as both an extension of the blog's comment section and as a space to promote her work and speaking tours along with updating followers on her trips to conferences and conventions. Those two social networks demonstrate the breadth of Evans' online community. On one site, Evans engaged with professional writers, theologians, and politicians, and on the other, she posted family photos and vacation updates amidst the discussions around her latest blog post.

In many ways, her early tweets provided a commentary to her blog and operate as an ongoing conversation with other authors and bloggers. Instead of using Twitter as a purely promotional tool, Evans understood the advantages of cross-pollinating her blog and social media. She leveraged Twitter's "micro-blogging" feature to give quick, spur of the moment updates or opinions on late night television—*The Colbert Report* appeared to be a favorite—college football, and politics. Twitter seemed to provide both a point of intersection and divergence for her blog readers and larger community of supporters. She asked for feedback on blog posts or ideas for future topics, advice on marketing a book, recommendations for agents, and vented about the writing and publication process with opinions on the newest episodes of *Lost* and updates on Daniel's latest film project sprinkled throughout.

Since the beginning of her online days, Evans often placed the promotion of her own work in the background in favor of supporting unpublished authors, beginning bloggers, and other religious leaders representing minorities within the evangelical community. She frequently

engaged with authors Heather Sunseri, Jason Boyett, Anne Marie Miller, and Elizabeth Esther, among others, about the challenges of writing, the many setbacks and trials of publication, and the joy of sharing work with their readers. Evans did not use Twitter as a networking tool to advance her career, but rather to meet and share ideas with other authors. Alongside tweeting notes of encouragement, she offered her Twitter and blog platforms for writers to promote their own work: “Feel free to pimp your blog on my site today . . . if you're into that sort of thing” she tweeted in 2010.<sup>280</sup> Who Evans championed separated her the most from other evangelical authors and theologians. She used her Twitter to promote the work of authors of color and a range of sexual orientations. While the evangelical community’s stance continued to disapprove of non-heterosexual relationships and favor white men for leadership positions, Evans frequently stepped aside to allow authors and thinkers to use her platform to spread their ideas. Those tweets came without fanfare or self-congratulations. Evans would tag another Twitter user or link to a blot with a simple, “great new post by” or “we should listen to.” In those short snippets Evans redirected her platform and her followers’ attention to voices that most evangelical outlets pushed aside.

Her conversations with other authors illuminated her worries about being accepted by her readers and how to facilitate the online community she built. “Unsure of how to moderate blog comments right now . . . or if I should moderate at all. \*sigh\*”<sup>281</sup> she tweeted in June of 2009. Later that summer, she was again upset about the state of her blog’s community, “I have this one

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<sup>280</sup> Rachel Held Evans (@rachelheldevans), “Feel free to pimp your blog...”, Twitter, April 2, 2010, <https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans/status/11485367526>.

<sup>281</sup> Rachel Held Evans (@rachelheldevans), “unsure of how to moderate...”, Twitter, June 20, 2009, <https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans/status/2253914433>.



reader who always posts hateful ignorant comments on the blog. What to do? Any advice?”<sup>282</sup> Evans’ next tweet demonstrated her concern for how her blog readers interacted with her posts and each other, “I really want to respond in love . . . but I am protective of my readers and the tone of the blog.”<sup>283</sup> She also experienced bouts of anxiety over her readership numbers after a controversial post and external event caused a large fluctuation in traffic: “Want to double your traffic and triple comments?” Evans tweeted on May 28, 2009 after writing about a recent positive experience attending a Reformed church, “Bring up election and free will! Time to move on to another post . . .”<sup>284</sup>

Her protectiveness offers an insight into the loose connections between the blog and social media communities. As early as 2012, Evans referenced her experiences with “trolls” on social media. She complained about “trolls & folks from other blogs—not credible people. But it hurts because those words exist.”<sup>285</sup> Potentially to protect both her writing and her community of readers, Evans rhetorically treated her Twitter and blog followers as separate audiences. Evans’ tweets acknowledged that her readers may be close by but uses Twitter for more professional networking and support for fellow writers than conversing with the average reader. Many of her Twitter followers were also blog readers, often tweeting out Evans’ latest blog post or responding to her blog on their own website.<sup>286</sup> And while Evans mentions her social media presence on her blog, mostly in posts that worry about the effects of heavy social media use on

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<sup>282</sup> Rachel Held Evans (@rachelheldevans), “I have this one reader...”, Twitter, September 29, 2009, <https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans/status/4481710030>.

<sup>283</sup> Rachel Held Evans (@rachelheldevans), “I really want to respond in love...”, Twitter, September 29, 2009, <https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans/status/4481719015>

<sup>284</sup> Rachel Held Evans (@rachelheldevans), “Want to double your traffic...”, Twitter, May 28, 2009, <https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans/status/1949990470>.

<sup>285</sup> Rachel Held Evans (@rachelheldevans), “@davidkinnaman It’s mostly trolls...”, Twitter, March 6, 2012, <https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans/status/177238637153484800>.

<sup>286</sup> Rachel Held Evans (@rachelheldevans), “Lots of folks weighing in on this one...”, Twitter, October 2, 2012, <https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans/status/253175458122833921>.

her psyche, she does not encourage her blog readers to follow her Twitter account.<sup>287</sup>

Surprisingly, Facebook did seem to serve as an extension of the blog. The nature of the two platforms may have encouraged those different types of communities. Twitter’s character limit was not hospitable to the type of long-form discussion Evan and her followers used on Facebook. Posts that promoted a new blog post were filled with reactions and comments by readers. Evans frequently responded to those comments and critiques multiple times to create a type of conversation on the platform. The clearest divide between her Twitter and Facebook begins in 2016. While on Twitter, Evans tweets became increasingly politicized throughout the 2016 presidential election, her Facebook page remained focused on her writings about religion and her personal life.

In surveying Evans’ work and followers more than a decade after she started her online community, it can be easy to ignore those early moments of vulnerability and self-doubt when viewing them with the knowledge of the influential figure Evans would become. However, those tweets are crucial to understanding the balance Evans walked between a freelance writer hoping to make a living income and a spiritual guide to her readers. Early on in her career she frequently tweeted about feeling inadequate against other authors both in readership numbers and online followers, “Ego alert: It crossed my mind today that I shouldn't follow new people until I have the same amount or more following me. Classy.”<sup>288</sup> Bowler writes about the uncertain position female evangelical leaders faced as they navigated their religious role and the financial marketplace that dictated their success:

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<sup>287</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “God and the Twitterfaceogosphere,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, February 10, 2010, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/twitterfaceogosphere>.

<sup>288</sup> Rachel Held Evans (@rachelheldevans), “Ego alert: It crossed...”, Twitter, April 30, 2010, <https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans/status/13139035772>.

Celebrity Christian women must live in the ambiguity of competing claims on their lives. Spiritually, they are called to transcend worldly concerns and even their own desire to clothe themselves with divine knowledge, paradigmatic virtue, and the gospel's story of the redemption of the world. But with their feet planted on this side of heaven, they are also products of institutional and cultural expectations with long-standing customs and prescriptions as well as a marketplace propelled by an exacting pragmatism that presses them toward results-driven metrics and messages.<sup>289</sup>

## Small Town, Big Tent

Even in her early blog posts and first book, Evans seemed unconcerned with upsetting evangelical leaders or those who held different beliefs. However, she was aware of the fickle nature of consumers whose choice to purchase her first book would factor heavily into her ability to secure a second publication. Posts from her early career are also filled with worries about the responses she received from friends and strangers in Dayton regarding her theological doubts and change in political parties. In 2008, Evans announced the publication of her first book, *Evolving in Monkey Town: How a Girl Who Knew all the Answers Learned to Ask the Questions*,<sup>290</sup> through the HarperCollins imprint Zondervan which specializes in religious texts. Marketed as a spiritual memoir, the book recounted Evans' shifting religious beliefs by questioning most of what she was taught about Jesus and how religion informs cultural practices. Evans incorporated stories from her life into her own interpretations of Biblical teachings to explain how she moved from a fanatical teenage evangelist to accepting her uncertainty about evangelical Christianity and creationism. Those doubts, which she openly discussed on her blog before the book's publication, caused many of her neighbors and fellow churchgoers to question

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<sup>289</sup> Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife*, xii-xiii

<sup>290</sup> The book was rebranded and released in 2014 under the new title *Faith Unraveled: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask Questions*.

her commitment to Christianity or positioning her theological questions as fruitless explorations. Reviewers congratulated Evans for “deep insights [that] pop out in simple, homey prose.”<sup>291</sup>

While *Evolving in Monkey Town* received a positive reception from fellow bloggers and authors along with a few national outlets after its release in 2010, Evans struggled with rejection from her religious community over differences in opinion on political and cultural issues.<sup>292</sup>

During college, she had supported President George W. Bush during both of his terms and elections. However, Evans found herself drawn far more to then senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton over Republican nominee Senator John McCain. Her public support for Obama and Clinton led to friends and neighbors criticizing her for voting for a “terrorist” or a “bitch.”<sup>293</sup> In recapping her highest and lowest points of 2008, Evans wrote one of the worst moments was “constantly being asked, ‘How can you call yourself a Christian and vote for Obama?’”<sup>294</sup> On her blog, both before and after the election, Evans defended her choice by outlining Obama’s foreign policy points and personal commitment to Christianity, which she supported, while acknowledging her disagreement with Obama’s stance on reproductive and LGBTQ marriage rights.<sup>295</sup>

Rumors quickly spread around Dayton that Evans had become a universalist, a Buddhist, or even an Anglican as her online following grew throughout 2008.<sup>296</sup> Strangers and neighbors

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<sup>291</sup> Karl Giberson, “Evolving in Monkey Town: A Good Read on Religious Doubts,” HuffPost, June 28, 2010, revised May 25, 2011, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/emevolving-in-monkey-town\\_b\\_626612](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/emevolving-in-monkey-town_b_626612).

<sup>292</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “On the Paralysis of Insecurity,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, July 13, 2009, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/insecurity>.

<sup>293</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Reflections on 2008,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, December 18, 2008, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/article-1229635479>.

<sup>294</sup> Evans, “Reflections on 2008,” blog.

<sup>295</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Why Obama takes the Bible more seriously than Dobson,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, June 28, 2008, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/article-1214684547?rq=obama>.

Rachel Held Evans, “Five Things Obama Needs to Say Tonight,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, August 16, 2008, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/article-1218921967?rq=obama>.

<sup>296</sup> Evans, *Evolving in Monkey Town*, 115.

informed Evans they were praying for her to stop “backsliding” in her faith.<sup>297</sup> Old friends reached out over email to provide spiritual encouragement or attempt to correct her new views, with one email lamenting that “a smart girl like you has become another cotton-candy Christian.”<sup>298</sup> Her blog posts from this time were filled with disappointment and frustration that her questions about evangelical Christianity’s ties to conservative politics were being extrapolated into character flaws. In her fourth book she reflected on this time, writing, “Armed with a library card and a blog . . . I became something of a Bible bully.”<sup>299</sup> Turning critiques she received into debates over dispensationalism and interpretations of scripture, Evans admitted she often judged those who did not see the same hypocrisy in Christianity or were not outwardly as concerned about the fate of billions unbaptized souls.<sup>300</sup>

In the two years leading up to the release of *Evolving in Monkey Town*, her notoriety grew in evangelical and conservative political circles while she continued to search for a church that fit her new understanding of Christianity. Unsatisfied with the teachings and link to conservative politics within her family’s church, Evans and her husband eventually stopped regularly attending church in 2008. Evans later wrote that for years she experienced a painful cycle of spending the week working through a “litany of grievances” including “political jabs” and a “simplistic interpretation of a complicated text” she felt her family’s nondenominational Bible church incurred every Sunday before working up the motivation to attend the following week.<sup>301</sup> In the midst of struggling to attend church, Evans was further upset when her church offered their support for the Tennessee Same-Sex Marriage Ban amendment to the state’s

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<sup>297</sup> Evans, 113.

<sup>298</sup> Evans, 115.

<sup>299</sup> Evans, Rachel Held, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and loving the Bible Again* (Nashville, Tennessee: Nelson Books), xviii.

<sup>300</sup> Evans, *Evolving in Monkey Town*, 114.

<sup>301</sup> Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 48

constitution in the summer of 2006. At the time, Evans “wasn’t even sure what I thought about same-sex relationships,” but felt uncomfortable about creating civil restrictions based on religious beliefs. When her church, and others, handed out lawn signs reading “Marriage = Man + Woman. Vote Yes on One.” and members of her congregation gave their support for the measure during services, Evans grew convinced that she “could never really be [herself] in church, that [she] had to check [her] heart and mind at the door.”<sup>302</sup>

By 2009, Evans and her husband began visiting some of the hundreds of churches in their county.<sup>303</sup> After a year of “church hopping” across denominational lines, but still within the Protestant tradition, the couple was unsuccessful in finding a congregation that meet their top priorities: “1. prioritizes care for the poor as essential to the mission of the Church and provides opportunities to serve the community; 2. creates an environment that encourages intellectual honesty and embraces a diversity of perspectives regarding theology; 3. stays out of politics; 4. allows women equal opportunities for leadership.”<sup>304</sup> Evans continued to blog, almost daily, about her doubts, fears, and hopes for finding a stable relationship with faith and a new church. The year of searching and the increasing attention her blog received left her feeling abandoned by other Christians in Dayton. She felt that “fellow Christians didn’t want to listen to me, or grieve with me, or walk down this frightening road with me. They wanted to *fix* me.”<sup>305</sup>

During this time Evans corresponded regularly with her youth pastor, Bryan Ward, who had moved to Texas to serve at a progressive evangelical megachurch.<sup>306</sup> Ward and Evans

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<sup>302</sup> Evans, 61.

<sup>303</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Finding Our Notch in the Bible Belt,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, April 16, 2009, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/churchsearch>.

<sup>304</sup> Evans, “Finding Our Notch in the Bible Belt,” blog.

<sup>305</sup> Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 52 (emphasis original).

<sup>306</sup> Evans, 53.

discussed their shared doubts about evangelical interpretations of the Bible and church structures. By the end of 2009, Ward and his wife, Carrie, left their jobs leading “one of the largest youth groups in the country” to return to Dayton.<sup>307</sup> That November, Evans tweeted out an announcement about a new church the two couples and a small group of friends were starting. The Mission held its first official service in the Wards’ living room in January of 2010.<sup>308</sup> By early April, the group found a temporary home in an empty apartment above a funeral home in Dayton. Evans and Ward shared duties writing sermons and delivering liturgies, Evans’ husband handled the legal paperwork and online presence, and other members organized community service projects, managed their small finances, and dreamed about what “a different sort of church in Dayton” could provide.<sup>309</sup> Over the summer the small group held their first baptism and expanded their commitment to serving the community while financing the church with their own income and small donations. That fall they moved to an empty downtown store front that they were able to remodel and gained a few more members. But, after eighteen months, funding and attendance dwindled. A few members moved out of town, another couple became too busy with their newborn baby, and Ward found a position with a comfortable salary in Florida.<sup>310</sup> Reflecting on their first Easter Sunday service together, Evans wrote, “And for a moment, on this day of impossible things come true, I did. I believed more than I had in a long time.”<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Evans, 53.

<sup>308</sup> In an announcement on her blog, Evans wrote that their new church’s mission reflected that of God, “The mission of God to redeem the world is therefore our mission, as together we pursue justice, celebrate beauty, love our neighbors, and share the good news that God is building a new kingdom in our midst under the authority of Jesus Christ.”

Rachel Held Evans, “The Mission - Part 1 of Many,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog* December 14, 2009, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/the-mission-part-1>.

<sup>309</sup> Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 100-101.

<sup>310</sup> Evans, 107-108.

<sup>311</sup> Evans, 102-103.

## Living Biblically

The concerned emails and conversations in the grocery store Evans encountered in Dayton suddenly expanded to national attention during the summer of 2010 with the release of *Evolving in Monkey Town*.<sup>312</sup> The new visibility the publication brought led to increased scrutiny from leaders in the evangelical Christian world. Many took issue with her conclusion that younger evangelicals, those in the millennial generation, were disinterested in continuing “culture wars” over topics including evolution, reproductive health choices, LGBTQ marriage rights, and the equality of women in churches. Some of her biggest critics came from Calvinist or Reformed theological backgrounds and pointed to flaws in Evans’ basic understanding of scripture. One blogger wrote after the publication of *Evolving in Monkey Town*, “In her search for consistency it is clear she has not experienced the liberation provided by a commitment to scripture first, and evidence and arguments second—presented in light of a proclaimed faith in Christ. This, I hope she finds, because every other worldview argues from within its system.”<sup>313</sup> Prominent creationist Ken Ham retorted Evans’ beliefs shortly after she appeared in an article in *USA Today*.<sup>314</sup> Ham viewed Evans as another young person “led astray by compromising church leaders of our day” and blamed her college for compromising their beliefs in favor of “the typical

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<sup>312</sup> The book was placed on the creative non-fiction shortlist for the 2010 INSPY Awards, an organization created by bloggers to recognize texts about Christianity.

<sup>313</sup> Sarah J. Flashing, “When Doubt Becomes Skepticism,” *First Things*, October 21, 2011, <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2011/10/when-doubt-becomes-skepticism>.

<sup>314</sup> Ham is CEO and founder of Answers in Genesis. The organization runs the Creation Museum and Ark Encounter in Kentucky that through exhibits, a theater, a planetarium, and replica ark promote a literal interpretation of the creation story found in the Book of Genesis. The article by Bob Smietana was originally published in *The Tennessean*.

Smietana, Bob. "Faith, Science Fight Still Simmers." *The Tennessean*, Jul 23, 2010. <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/646211081?accountid=13158>.



evolutionary/millions of years indoctrination of our age.”<sup>315</sup> While Evans believed, based on her own experiences and interactions with other millennials, that the new generation of evangelicals were uninterested in culture wars, Ham wrote, “Well, Rachel, I have news for you. Your generation is not ready to call a truce in this battle in the culture wars; in fact, we are finding more and more people are getting enthusiastically involved in fighting the culture war by standing uncompromisingly and unashamedly on God’s authoritative Word.”<sup>316</sup>

The next year Evans dove straight into one of those “culture war” topics by examining the place of women in the Christian church through the lens of the Bible. Taking many of the commonly cited Bible verses about women literally, Evans tackled a different “virtue” of biblical womanhood every month. The “ten commandments” of biblical womanhood she selected would, among other activities, require her to:

rising before dawn each day (Proverbs 31:15), submitting to my husband (Colossians 3:18), growing out my hair (1 Corinthians 11:15), making my own clothes (Proverbs 31:22), learning how to cook (Titus 2:3-5), covering my head when in prayer (1 Corinthians 11:5), calling Dan ‘master’ (1 Peter 3:5-6), caring for the poor (Proverbs 31:25), nurturing a gentle and quiet spirit (1 Peter 3:4), and camping out in the backyard for the duration of my monthly period (Leviticus 15:19-33).<sup>317</sup>

Alongside those new rituals and actions, Evans brought new light to women in the Bible who she felt were emblematic of that month’s virtue at the end of each chapter.<sup>318</sup> Mixed into funny anecdotes about Thanksgiving dinner mishaps and caring for a baby simulator, Evans

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<sup>315</sup> Ken Ham, “‘Move On’ From Evolution-Creationism Debate?’- No, It is Heating Up!” *Ken Ham* (blog), Answers In Genesis, July 29, 2010, <https://answersingenesis.org/blogs/ken-ham/2010/07/29/move-on-from-evolution-creationism-debate-no-it-is-heating-up/>.

<sup>316</sup> Ham, “‘Move On’ From Evolution-Creationism Debate?’ ...” *Ken Ham* (blog).

<sup>317</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “My Ten Commandments,” *Rachel Held Evans*, accessed April 25, 2020, <https://rachelheldevans.com/ybw-ten-commandments>.

Rachel Held Evans, “Book #2: A Year of Biblical Womanhood,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, October 13, 2010, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/womanhood-announcement>.

<sup>318</sup> Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, 44-47.

parsed each verse by comparing multiple translations, consulting theological commentary from feminist, egalitarian, and complementarian perspectives, and contextualized the verses with the cultural and political events of the time period in which they were written.<sup>319</sup> Unlike her first book that stayed within the parameters of evangelical interpretation of the Bible, her year of biblical womanhood branched out to understand how women of many faith backgrounds understood how the Bible guided their lives. She met with and interviewed women from fundamentalist Christian, Jewish, Catholic, and Mennonite backgrounds to understand how they incorporated the Bible into their understanding of womanhood.<sup>320</sup>

Evans spent multiple chapters consulting the Jewish understanding of Old Testament instructions to women especially around holidays, feasts, and in the Book of Proverbs. For Evans, January 2011 was the month of valor as it was understood in Proverbs 31. In her introduction to the chapter, Evans wrote, “In the evangelical Christian subculture, there are three people a girl’s got know about before she gets her period: (1) Jesus, (2) Ronald Reagan, and (3) the Proverbs 31 woman.”<sup>321</sup> Evans explained that evangelicals understood the chapter as a list of attributes and duties a woman must fulfill to be considered “a good wife.”<sup>322</sup> Throughout her month of living out Proverbs 31 as a literal “to do” list, she corresponded with a Jewish woman, Ahava, who explained to Evans that most Jewish people understand Proverbs 31 as a poem of praise used to compliment a woman on her skills and everyday actions.<sup>323</sup> Those conversations, and Evans’ later research, changed her understanding of one of the opening lines, “A valorous woman, who can find,” to match how Ahava and other Jewish people used “eshet chayil,” the

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<sup>319</sup> Evans, 37-43, 189-196.

<sup>320</sup> Evans, 181, 86-90, 263-278, 163-140.

<sup>321</sup> Evans, 74.

<sup>322</sup> Evans, 76-77.

<sup>323</sup> Evans, 87-88.

original Hebrew phrase, as way to praise women. “Eshet chayil is at its core a blessing,” Evans explained in *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, “one that was never meant to be earned, but to be given, unconditionally.”<sup>324</sup> Evans turned the English translation, woman of valor, into a rallying cry for women in her life, “One of my goals after completing my year of biblical womanhood was to ‘take back’ Proverbs 31 as a blessing, not a to-do list, by identifying and celebrating women of valor: women who are changing the world through daily acts of faithfulness, both in my life and around the world.”<sup>325</sup>

The resulting *New York Times* bestseller, published in 2012 by Thomas Nelson, brought Evans national attention both for the “drama” of living the parts of the Bible literally and for her conclusion that many evangelicals often cherry-picked and incorrectly interpreted the ancient text in applying it to their modern lives. Secular news outlets and liberal religious organizations lauded Evans for her “creatively critiqu[ing] the notion of biblical womanhood” along with challenging “the traditionalist view of women.”<sup>326</sup> Her project was covered by *Slate* and NPR a year before the book’s publication and later reviewed or featured by ABC’s “The View,” *The Atlantic*, CBC Radio, *People Magazine*, and NBC’s “Today.”<sup>327</sup> After her death, *The New York*

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<sup>324</sup> Evans, 88.

<sup>325</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Woman of Valor: An Essay Contest and Giveaway,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, August 17, 2012, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/women-of-valor-contest>.

<sup>326</sup> Hannah Booth, “The Book of Rachel,” *The Guardian*, October 27, 2012, *NewsBank: Access World News*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/1423DDA602830D18>.

<sup>327</sup> Ruth Graham, “A Year of Biblical Womanhood,” *Slate*, September 1, 2011, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2011/09/an-evangelical-blogger-is-spending-12-months-following-the-bible-s-instructions-for-women-and-she-s-doing-it-for-egalitarian-reasons.html>.

Guy Raz, “‘Biblical Womanhood’: A Year of Living By the Book,” All Things Considered, NPR, September 25, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/2011/09/25/140761994/biblical-womanhood-a-year-of-living-by-the-book>.

Kristin Larson, “Rachel Held Evans on ‘The View,’” Juice Ecumenism, November 2, 2012, <https://juicyecumenism.com/2012/11/02/rachel-held-evans-on-the-view/> (The interview aired November 1, 2012 and Evans’ website references the appearances but a recording could not be located).

Rachel Held Evans, “‘Too Bad You’re a Girl’: Testing the Biblical Teachings I Grew Up With,” *The Atlantic*, November 1, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2012/11/too-bad-youre-a-girl-testing-the-biblical-teachings-i-grew-up-with/264396/>.

*Times* called Evans' idea to challenge the evangelical system of biblical literalism "provocative." For Evans' existing supporters, new readers, and those outside of the evangelical community it was that provocative stance that made *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* so powerful.<sup>328</sup>

The broader evangelical community saw misused power in Evans' second publication. Many reviewers, evangelical pastors, and bloggers insisted Evans was a hypocrite for calling out the practice of "cherry-picking" Bible verses to create theological and social codes while using those same methods to select the verses she analyzed.<sup>329</sup> A review on evangelical pastor John Piper's website argued that "while the book is engaging, [Evans'] methods and her conclusions on womanhood are confusing at best. And this is largely because she selectively decides which Scriptures apply to women and which ones do not."<sup>330</sup> A review for The Gospel Coalition echoed that sentiment, writing, that through her selectivity Evans had "imposed [her] own agenda on Scripture in order to advance [her] own goals."<sup>331</sup> *Christianity Today* was an outlier in arguing that many critics and fans failed to read and understand Evans' book before jumping to conclusions; the magazine later placed Evans on their list of "Fifty Women You Should

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People Magazine, Nov 12, 2012 p.63

Eun Kyung Kim, "Living like a good Bible woman was 'complicated,' says author," Today, October 22, 2012, <https://www.today.com/news/living-good-bible-woman-was-complicated-says-author-flna1C6604411>.

<sup>328</sup> Michael Barbaro, Elizabeth Dias, and Natalie Kitroeff, "The Legacy of Rachel Held Evans,": in *The Daily*, produced by *The New York Times*, MP3 audio, 27:26, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/03/podcasts/the-daily/rachel-held-evans.html?searchResultPosition=1&showTranscript=1>.

<sup>329</sup> Kelly Givens, "Fathoming Biblical Womanhood May Require More Than a Year...", Crosswalk.com, November 9, 2012, <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/women/review-year-biblical-womanhood-rachel-held-evans.html>.

<sup>330</sup> Trillia Newbell, "A Year of Biblical Womanhood: A Review," *desiringGod*, October 8, 2012, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-year-of-biblical-womanhood-a-review>.

<sup>331</sup> Kathy Keller, "A Year of Biblical Womanhood," The Gospel Coalition, October 30, 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/year-biblical-womanhood/>.

Know.”<sup>332</sup> Many bloggers critiqued her for approaching the project and the Bible with a sarcastic and “poking fun”<sup>333</sup> attitude which made any serious interrogations of scripture impossible.

I think Evans’ lack of theological training and maturity is evident and problematic to her wanting to be taken serious in evangelical Christian circles. Instead of her offering work that is helpful to further along the discussion of women in Christian ministry, she widens the gap and confirms conservative complementarian belief that a woman’s place is in the home and not in biblical teaching. And irony above all ironies, I think that she is one woman who would do better to remain silent at this time.<sup>334</sup>

Evans responded to those critiques with a blog post in early October 2013 that provided a “cheat sheet” for reviewers who were “concerned that ‘women might be confused’ by the fact that my yearlong exploration of biblical womanhood involved following all of the Bible’s instructions for women as literally as possible, sometimes taking them to their most literal extreme.” The cheat sheet, available for download in color-coded and black and white versions on her blog, referenced page numbers where Evans employed various literary techniques including metaphor, hyperbolic language, satire, biblical exegesis, and non-fiction storytelling to make her points. Evans called reviews that questioned her writing style “a convenient way to avoid engaging the substance of the book.”<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Matt Mikalatos, “Reviewing the Reviews of ‘The Year of Biblical Womanhood,’” *Christianity Today*, October 31, 2012, [christianitytoday.com/pastors/2012/october-online-only/reviewing-reviews-of-year-of-biblical-womanhood.html](http://christianitytoday.com/pastors/2012/october-online-only/reviewing-reviews-of-year-of-biblical-womanhood.html).

Katelyn Beaty, “Rachel Held Evans,” *Christianity Today*, October 2012, 27, <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=82186254&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

“50 Women You Should Know,” *Christianity Today*, October 2012, 22.

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/october/50-women-you-should-know.html>.

<sup>333</sup> Deborah Cruz, “Woman Calls Her Husband ‘Master’ & Makes a Mockery of the Bible,” *CafeMom*, October 18, 2012, [https://thestir.cafemom.com/in\\_the\\_news/145316/woman\\_calls\\_her\\_husband\\_master](https://thestir.cafemom.com/in_the_news/145316/woman_calls_her_husband_master).

<sup>334</sup> Kristen Padilla, “Review of Rachel Held Evans’ A Year of Biblical Womanhood,” *Kristin Padilla Blog*, February 9, 2014, <https://www.kristinrpadilla.com/blog/2014/02/10/review-of-rachel-held-evans-a-year-of-biblical-womanhood>.

<sup>335</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “‘A Year of Biblical Womanhood’ Genre Cheat Sheet,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, October 12, 2013, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/year-of-biblical-womanhood-genre-cheat-sheet>.

Others placed her project as a less successful version of A. J. Jacobs' earlier publication *The Year of Living Biblically* and argued she owed any success the book reached to a scuffle with Lifeway Christian Resources.<sup>336</sup> In March of 2012, Evans wrote to her blog readers that her editors at Thomas Nelson suggested she remove the word “vagina,” which appeared in her manuscript twice, to meet the standards of Christian bookstores.<sup>337</sup> Initially, Evans planned to remove the word but after hearing from her readers who started an Amazon petition, contacted the publisher, and made t-shirts in support, Evans declined the edit.<sup>338</sup> She acknowledged the decision may hurt her financially—Christian bookstores were estimated to provide 40 percent of the book's sales.<sup>339</sup> Evans later wrote that Lifeway's, and the broader Christian publishing industry's, “highly sanitized inventory” altered “the degree of freedom authors feel they have to speak through their own platforms.”<sup>340</sup> She also criticized the industry for allowing men, including pastor Mark Driscoll, to publish far more inflammatory and sensitive language while

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<sup>336</sup> Bromleigh McCleneghan, “A Year of Biblical Womanhood and Sabbath in the Suburbs,” *The Christian Century*, February 17, 2013, <https://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2013-02/year-biblical-womanshyhood-rachel-held-evansand-sabbath-suburbs-maryann-mckibben-dan>.

Evans cited Jacobs' 2007 publication as inspiration for her dive into biblical living.

Rachel Held Evans, “‘A Year of Biblical Womanhood’—Frequently Asked Questions,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, October 18, 2012, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/biblical-womanhood-faq>.

Lifeway is a publishing company and retailer division of the Southern Baptist Convention. At the time, Lifeway was one of the biggest Christian retailers with 160 stores in 26 states. In early 2019 the company moved its operations exclusively to online sales.

Graham, “Her Year of Living Biblically,” *Slate*.

<sup>337</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Scattered thoughts on my life in the Christian ‘industry,’” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, March 14, 2012, <http://rachelheldevans.com/christian-industry>.

<sup>338</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “On keeping vaginas out of Christian bookstores,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, March 23, 2012, <http://rachelheldevans.com/vagina-christian-bookstore-a-year-of-biblical-womanhood>.

Caryn Rivadeneira, “When Christian Bookstores Ban Female Body Parts,” *Christianity Today*, March 27, 2012, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2012/march/when-christian-bookstores-ban-female-body-parts.html>.

“EricMicahel84,” *Zazzle*, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.zazzle.com/store/ericmichael84>.

Rachel Held Evans, “A small, strange victory for vaginas everywhere...,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, May 1, 2012, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/victory-vagina>.

<sup>339</sup> Graham, “Her Year of Living Biblically,” *Slate*.

<sup>340</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Update: Lifeway won't carry ‘A Year of Biblical Womanhood,’” *Rachel Held Evans*, October 4, 2012, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/lifeway-year-of-biblical-womanhood?rq=lifeway>.

censoring women.<sup>341</sup> Just before the official release of *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, Lifeway announced they would not carry the book in stores or online. Evans was reportedly later told, unofficially, by a source at Lifeway that the chain declined to stock the book for other issues.<sup>342</sup>

Those pre-publication problems and Evans' decision to retain the word "vagina," while accepting "every other word or content issue that was challenged as problematic for Christian bookstores" brought her extensive publicity. Covered in *Slate*, *The Daily Beast*, *The Huffington Post*, among others, the "brief skirmish" was pointed to by some as the only reason the book would be purchased by those outside her existing readership.<sup>343</sup> A reviewer for *The Christian Century* pointed to Evans' recurring blog posts and public comments about the issue "along with Evans's frequent mention in the book itself of the journey toward publication and the advance publicity she received, suggests that this book was written to make a splash. The clarity of that intention is not altogether pleasant."<sup>344</sup> Despite the dividing line between support from secular and evangelical reviewers, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* became a *New York Times* bestseller.

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<sup>341</sup> Evans, "Update: Lifeway won't carry..." blog.

<sup>342</sup> Evans, "Update: Lifeway won't carry..." blog.

A statement from Lifeway later published in *The Christian Post* cited poor sales of *Evolving in Monkey Town*, "less than one book per store," as the deciding factor to not carry Evans' second publication.

Katherine Weber, "LifeWay Cites Poor Sales in Refusal to Sell Controversial 'Biblical Womanhood' Book," *The Christian Post*, October 10, 2012, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/lifeway-cites-poor-sales-in-refusal-to-sell-controversial-biblical-womanhood-book.html>.

<sup>343</sup> Graham, "Her Year of Living Biblically," *Slate*.

"How Rachel Held Evans Beat the Evangelical Decency Police" *Daily Beast, The*, October 26, 2012. *NewsBank: Access World News*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/1422B6B76D570670>.

Allie Compton, "Rachel Held Evans, Author of 'A Year of Biblical Womanhood,' Spent A Year Living The Bible Literally," *HuffPost*, October 23, 2012, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-year-of-biblical-womanhood\\_n\\_2006184](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-year-of-biblical-womanhood_n_2006184).

<sup>344</sup> McCleneghan, "A Year of Biblical Womanhood and Sabbath in the Suburbs."

## Why Millennials are Leaving the Church

Nestled among stories about the surprise and unwanted “royal baby town crier” and concerns that “squirrel tests positive for plague,” Evans earned a spot on CNN’s homepage on a Saturday afternoon in late July of 2013.<sup>345</sup> Moved to a more prominent position Sunday morning under the headline “They don’t want hipper worship bands,” Evans argued “young adults perceive evangelical Christianity to be too political, too exclusive, old-fashioned, unconcerned with social justice and hostile to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.”<sup>346</sup> Evans again pointed to the evangelical culture wars as an unappealing sideshow distracting believers and pushing away anyone with questions or who wanted “a truce between science in faith.”<sup>347</sup> The common response to the dwindling congregations, Evans observed, were “a few style updates—edgier music, more casual services, a coffee shop in the fellowship hall, a pastor who wears skinny jeans, an updated Web site that includes online giving.”<sup>348</sup> Yet, millennials, at least those Evans represented, were more interested in a change in substance, “I would encourage church leaders eager to win millennials back to sit down and really talk with them about what they’re looking for and what they would like to contribute to a faith community.”<sup>349</sup> The response was immediate. In less than twenty-four hours the opinion piece had thirty-five pages of comments and close to one-hundred pages within a month. Before the comment section was closed a year later, the piece had 125 comment pages. Within a week the post had been shared from CNN’s

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<sup>345</sup> “Home,” CNN, Web Archive, July 27, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130727215653/http://www.cnn.com/>.

<sup>346</sup> “Home,” CNN, Web Archive, July 28, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130728125152/http://www.cnn.com/>.

Rachel Held Evans, “Why millennials are leaving the church,” CNN Belief Blog, July 27, 2013, <https://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/27/why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church/>.

<sup>347</sup> Evans, “Why millennials are leaving the church.”

<sup>348</sup> Evans, “Why millennials are leaving the church.”

<sup>349</sup> Evans, “Why millennials are leaving the church.”



Belief Blog Facebook page 196,000 times. Bloggers, pastors, and religious reporters also responded in the following days. Many pastors argued “why millennials are coming to church” by outlining their church’s attendance or questioning why Evans and other millennials are not joining mainline Protestant denominations.<sup>350</sup> Others supported Evans’ questions but disagreed with her conclusions.<sup>351</sup> While many shared her feelings and hoped evangelical leaders would start listening to the ideas of Evans and other non-traditional voices.<sup>352</sup>

Evans continued talking to evangelical leaders along with introducing a range of bloggers, authors, and speakers of minority racial and gender or sexual identities over the next three years. She continued to blog regularly until 2015—when she moved to a handful of times a month rather than multiple times per week—and kept a busy speaking schedule at religious conferences, churches, and youth organizations along with writing for national news outlets. During that time, she continually handed the microphone and pen, or their digital counterparts, to people she felt were being ignored. Evans had offered her blog to guest authors, linked to the posts or blogs of others that she admired, and made space for different opinions than her own, but the wider audience and increasing cultural influence she garnered by 2013 allowed her to point an even larger spotlight at people and issues she found important.

Her understanding of when it was her platform not her voice that was needed is potentially best demonstrated by her response to the fatal shooting of African American teenager

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<sup>350</sup> Mark Whittall, “Why Millennials Are Coming To Church,” St Albans (blog), July 2012, <https://www.stalbanschurch.ca/media-channel/blog/43-blog-archive/47-why-are-millennials-coming-to-church>. Anthony Bradley, “United Methodists Wearing A Millennial Evangelical Face,” Action Institute Powerblog, July 29, 2013, <https://blog.acton.org/archives/58052-united-methodists-wearing-a-millennial-evangelical-face.html>.

<sup>351</sup> Trevin Wax, “Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church: A Response to Rachel Held Evans,” The Gospel Coalition, August 1, 2013, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church-a-response-to-rachel-held-evans/>.

<sup>352</sup> Andrew Stephens-Rennie, “Why Are Millennials Leaving the Church?,” The Community (blog), July 29, 2013, <http://thecommunity.anglican.ca/generation/ministryareas/faith-formation/8449/why-are-millennials-leaving-the-church/>.

Trayvon Martin in 2012. A month after Martin's death, Evans tweeted a link to "required reading" to her followers and published a lengthy blog post with responses from African American parents who constantly feared for their children's safety and white writers who urged readers to grapple with the details before defending the shooter George Zimmerman.<sup>353</sup> Evans offered little commentary, instead writing "I am not Trayvon Martin. I will never understand what it's like to be black in America."<sup>354</sup> Evans continued to write about Martin's death and the eventual not guilty verdict of Zimmerman's trial, along with offering her blog to African American pastors, parachurch organization leaders, and writers to give their perspectives.<sup>355</sup>

Within the first few months of blogging, Evans included the evangelical community's response to the LGBTQ community as one of "the issues facing the Church today that may come back to haunt us in the future."<sup>356</sup> She had also cited the church's stance on gay marriage as one of the deciding factors in leaving her family's church in 2009.<sup>357</sup> However, her new position as a national representative for evangelicalism and progressive theology gave new weight to her comments and garnered more scrutiny. Evans started a September 2013 blog post with the

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<sup>353</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Sunday Superlatives 3/25/2011," *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, March 25, 2012, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/sunday-superlatives-3-25-11>.

<sup>354</sup> Evans, "Sunday Superlatives 3/25/2011," blog.

<sup>355</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "It might not look like it, but the Resistance is winning': An excerpt from 'Inspired,'" *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, June 19, 2018, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/inspired-excerpt-resistance-stories>.  
Rachel Held Evans, "On Race, the Benefit of the Doubt, and Complicity," *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, August 15, 2014, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/ferguson-race-benefit-of-the-doubt-complicity>.

Grace Biskie and Rachel Held Evans, "Church Stories: A Plea to Engage in Racial Reconciliation (by Grace Biskie)," *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, August 14, 2012, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/church-stories-racial-reconciliation>.

Rachel Held Evans and Austin Channing Brown, "Ask a racial reconciler...(response)," *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, September 26, 2013, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/ask-a-racial-reconcilerresponse>.

Enuma Okoro and Rachel Held Evans, "Women of the Gospels: Elizabeth—A Curious Woman (by Enuma Okoro)," *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, July 13, 2012, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/women-gospels-enuma-okoro>.

Rachel Held Evans, "Follow Friday: Drew Hart," *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, March 4, 2016, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/follow-friday-drew-hart>.

<sup>356</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Gays, Buddhists, and Scientists: Will Evangelicals Change Their Minds?," *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, May 16, 2008, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/article-1210966492>.

<sup>357</sup> Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 64

question, “does the Bible really condemn committed gay relationships?” Instead of giving her opinion or interpretation of scripture, she provided readers with a presentation by Matthew Vines who explained what he learned from two years of studying the issue along with his experiences as a gay man practicing Christianity. Evans also promoted Vines’ non-profit organization “dedicated the changing church teaching on sexual orientation and gender identity” along with his forthcoming book.<sup>358</sup> She encouraged readers to watch the hour long talk, or read the accompanying transcript, then discuss the presentation, “I think it’s worth taking the time to seriously consider the various viewpoints,” she wrote, “whether through these resources or others; don’t you?”<sup>359</sup>

Just after the new year, Evans was invited to speak at the Gay Christian Network’s “Live It Out” conference. The experience seemed to further convince Evans of the need for a change in the official stance on LGBTQ marriage rights and leadership roles in evangelical Christianity, “I speak at dozens of Christian conferences in a given year, and I can say without hesitation that I’ve never attended a Christian conference so energized by the Spirit, so devoid of empty showmanship or preoccupation with image, so grounded in love and abounding in grace.”<sup>360</sup> When Vines’ book, *God and Gay Christians*, debuted later that year, Evans featured it as her blog’s monthly digital book club selection. What made Evans’ work with the LGBTQ Christian community so groundbreaking was not her willingness to discuss the theological viewpoints, but her insistence on creating space on her platforms that allowed queer people to speak and teach

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<sup>358</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Does the Bible really condemn committed gay relationships?,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, September 16, 2013, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/matthew-vines-video>.

<sup>359</sup> Evans, “Does the Bible really condemn...,” blog.

<sup>360</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Unstoppable Grace: Thoughts on the Gay Christian Network Conference,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, January 15, 2014, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/gay-christian-network-conference>.

both readers and Evans. She also challenged Christian institutions on their exclusion or unwillingness to accept LGBTQ Christians.

In March of 2014, World Vision announced the organization would “no longer require its more than 1,100 employees to restrict their sexual activity to marriage between one man and one woman” because it, as a “parachurch organization” wanted to refrain from entering the theological thicket.<sup>361</sup> The organization stated it was not taking an official position on the matter, leaving those decisions to its partner denominations, but would hire LGBTQ people in its domestic offices. The announcement caused an uproar in the evangelical community. Many evangelical churches and pastors ended their financial support of World Vision and child sponsorships. Evangelical news outlets “mourned” the financial repercussions the decision would create for children in developing countries who depended on financial support from Americans which Evans called a thinly veiled way to “blame gay and lesbian people . . . *for the actions of evangelicals.*”<sup>362</sup> Evans asked her readers to consider stepping in to that financial gap by providing a one time donation or recurring sponsorship. However, within forty-eight hours World Vision reversed their decision citing the “inadequate consultation with our supporters” before making the original decision and the need to affirm “certain beliefs that are so core to our Trinitarian faith” without deferring “to a small minority of churches and denominations that have

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<sup>361</sup> World Vision International is an evangelical humanitarian aid organization that supports Christian missionaries, provides disaster and emergency relief, and “sponsors” the health, education, and housing needs of children around the world.

Celeste Gracey and Jeremy Weber, “World Vision: Why We’re Hiring Gay Christians in Same-Sex Marriages,” *Christianity Today*, March 24, 2014, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/march-web-only/world-vision-why-hiring-gay-christians-same-sex-marriage.html>.

<sup>362</sup> Trevin Wax, “World Vision and Why We Grieve For The Children,” The Gospel Coalition, March 25, 2014, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/grieving-for-the-children/>.

Rachel Held Evans, “On the World Vision Reaction: Some Bad News, Some Good News, and Some Ideas,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, March 25, 2014, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/world-vision> (emphasis original).

taken a different position.”<sup>363</sup> After the reversal, Evans consoled readers who had celebrated the initial decision or who felt betrayed by Evans, “I can see how this effort would make you feel betrayed, as though it were launched under false pretense. And I’m so, so sorry for that. I’m as surprised by all this as you are.”<sup>364</sup> Evans also expressed her frustration with how World Vision handled the situation, writing, “I don’t think I’ve ever been more angry at the Church, particularly the evangelical culture in which I was raised and with which I for so long identified. I confess I had not realized the true extent of the disdain many evangelicals have toward LGBT people, nor had I expected World Vision to yield to that disdain by reversing its decision under financial pressure.”<sup>365</sup>

The experience sent Evans “into as deep a religious depression as I’ve ever known,” she wrote in 2015, “and I’m still struggling to climb out of it.”<sup>366</sup> During this same time Evans was quietly, but formally, leaving the evangelical church. She did not publicly announce the transition to the Episcopal Church until the publication of her third book, *Searching for Sunday*, in 2015. In the weeks leading up to the book’s release, headlines positioned the change as a theological break up: “Rachel Held Evans Defends Leaving Evangelicals for Episcopalians” the *Huffington Post* wrote, the *Christian Examiner* announced “Rachel Held Evans drops evangelical pretense for mainline Christianity,” “The popular blogger joins the mainline tradition. Can evangelicals wish her well?” *Christianity Today* asked.<sup>367</sup> Evans felt “disheartened” by how her

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<sup>363</sup> Celeste Gracey and Jeremy Weber, “World Vision Reverses Decision To Hire Christians in Same-Sex Marriages,” *Christianity Today*, March 26, 2014, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/march-web-only/world-vision-reverses-decision-gay-same-sex-marriage.html>.

<sup>364</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “World Vision Update,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, March 26, 2014, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/world-vision-update>.

<sup>365</sup> Evans, “World Vision Update,” blog.

<sup>366</sup> Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 221.

<sup>367</sup> Religion News Service, “Rachel Held Evans Defends Leaving Evangelicals For Episcopalians,” *HuffPost*, March 10, 2015, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/rachel-held-evans-episcopalian-evangelical\\_n\\_6842872](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/rachel-held-evans-episcopalian-evangelical_n_6842872).

new “very pro-church, pro-ecumenical book [got] spun as a battle of denominations, complete with winners and losers based on membership numbers.”<sup>368</sup> Using the seven sacraments<sup>369</sup> as a literary framing device, Evans explained why millennials, including her, were leaving the evangelical church but how they could find faith, spiritual comfort, and God in Christianity’s core beliefs. Each chapter tells both the theological and historical background of the sacrament weaved throughout narratives of Evans’ own religious journey along with writings from past theologians and believers from a variety of Christian denominations.

Evangelical news outlets, bloggers, and theological leaders pointed to two main issues: Evans’ affirming position on LGBTQ relationships and leadership positions in Christianity and her statement of “unfaith” in the book’s prologue, “I don’t even bother getting out of bed many Sunday mornings, especially on days when I’m not sure I believe in God or when there’s an interesting guest on *Meet the Press*.”<sup>370</sup> Those points of contention centered on Evans’ dual existence in the Episcopal Church while continuing to write about and speak on her evangelical upbringing and the current status of evangelical Christianity. Some speculated she maintained her dual ties to “reach more readers.”<sup>371</sup> Evans responded to those criticisms in a Facebook post

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Joni B. Hannigan, “Rachel Held Evans drops evangelical pretense for mainline Christianity,” March 20, 2015, <https://www.christianexaminer.com/article/what.rachel.held.evans.her.move.to.episcopaliansays.about.evangelicalism/48594.htm>.

Katelyn Beaty, “Rachel Held Evans Returns to Church,” *Christianity Today*, April 16, 2015, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/april-web-only/rachel-held-evans-returns-to-church.html>.

<sup>368</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “On ‘Going Episcopal,’” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, March 25, 2015, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/going-episcopal>.

<sup>369</sup> The Catholic Church and most Protestant denominations list baptism, confession, communion, confirmation, marriage, holy orders, and last rights as the seven sacraments of Christianity.

<sup>370</sup> Chris Linzey, “Searching for Sunday: A Moderate Evangelical Reviews Rachel Held Evans’ New Book,” *Theology Mix*, April 29, 2016, <https://theologymix.com/reviews/searching-for-sunday-a-moderate-evangelical-reviews-rachel-held-evans-new-book/>.

Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, xv.

<sup>371</sup> Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “How Rachel Held Evans became the most polarizing woman in evangelicalism,” *The Washington Post*, April 16, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/04/16/how-rachel-held-evans-became-the-most-polarizing-woman-in-evangelicalism/>.

in March of 2015 writing, “I could no more ‘leave’ evangelicalism than I could ‘leave’ my parents. Evangelicalism is a part of me. It has irrevocably shaped my faith and my view of the world, and I am glad for that . . . A rejection of one kind of church for another would make a simpler story, but it’s not my story. And my guess is it’s not many other people’s story either.”<sup>372</sup>

That spring, Evans slowed her posting schedule from upwards of twenty blog posts a month to about three. Instead she shifted to publishing for a wider audience on CNN and *The Washington Post* websites. She criticized *Newsweek* for misrepresenting evangelicals; applauded President Obama’s acknowledgement “that American history, and indeed Christian history, includes racism, violence, injustice, and oppression;” condemned the ongoing culture wars at the expense of children and society’s outcasts; and continually discouraged evangelicals from trying to make church “cool.”<sup>373</sup> The national exposure she gained with *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* and those nationally-circulated publications extended her message far beyond the reaches of her blog and social media. In those three years, Evans had gone from a successful blogger and published author to a recognized voice on evangelical beliefs and one of the go-to authorities for the ex-evangelical or progressive-Christian viewpoint.<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “So I realize I don’t have much control over these things...” Facebook, March 11, 2015, [facebook.com/rachelheldevans.page/posts/10152915304339442](https://facebook.com/rachelheldevans.page/posts/10152915304339442).

<sup>373</sup> “What Newsweek gets wrong about evangelicals,” *CNN Wire*, January 6, 2015, *Gale In Context: Global Issues*, <https://link-gale-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/apps/doc/A396290168/GIC?u=psucic&sid=GIC&xid=2605bad2>. Rachel Held Evans, “Strong enough to be Self-Critical”: In America and the Church,” *CNN Wire Service*, March 13, 2015, <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/1662734752?accountid=13158>. Rachel Held Evans, “Are Culture War ‘Victories’ Worth the Casualties?” *CNN Wire Service*, March 30, 2015, <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/1667970242?accountid=13158>. Rachel Held Evans, “Churches try to be trendy to lure millennials, but that’s not what we’re looking,” *Washington Post*, May 1, 2015. *Gale In Context: Global Issues*, <https://link-gale-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/apps/doc/A411865703/GIC?u=psucic&sid=GIC&xid=d29e6717>.

<sup>374</sup> Bailey, “How Rachel Held Evans became the most polarizing woman in evangelicalism.”

## Chapter Four

### Life After Evangelicalism

Evans' first child was born in February of 2016. In the days before Donald Trump's presidential inauguration in mid-January 2017, Evans wrote, "In 2016, the world bared its teeth and my baby giggled back."<sup>375</sup> The 2016 presidential election was another turning point for Evans who wrestled with her own religious values, political beliefs, and personal morals before endorsing Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. Geopolitical and domestic issues over the past fifteen years including the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, the legal and cultural battle over same-sex marriage, and the Obama administration's healthcare reform caused Evans to shift her political affiliations. How evangelicals handled those issues and events were critical to Evans' transition from a conservative Republican to voting for politically liberal candidates.<sup>376</sup> Even though she was not shy about sharing her political opinions and openly supported Obama's initial and reelection campaign, Evans made a point to not tell readers how they should vote.<sup>377</sup>

Yet it was Trump's claim that he spoke for, represented, and would govern in the interest of America's Christian, and specifically evangelical, population that Evans detested. About a

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<sup>375</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "2016 and the Risk of Birth," *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, January 13, 2017, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/risk-of-birth-2016>.

<sup>376</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Why Progressive Christians Should Care About Abortion," *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, May 2, 2013, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/why-progressive-christians-should-care-about-abortion-gosnell>.

<sup>377</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "A Week Without Opinions: Can I do it? Could you?," *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, July 17, 2009, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/opinionfastintro>.

Evans, "Five Things Obama Needs to Say Tonight," blog.

Evans was nominated to be a member of President Obama's Advisory Council on Faith-Based Neighborhood Partnerships in 2016.

"President Obama Announces More Key Administration Posts," Obama White House Archives, January 29, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/29/president-obama-announces-more-key-administration-posts>.

Rachel Held Evans, "So you're thinking of voting for a pro-choice candidate..." *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, August 2, 2016, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/pro-life-voting-for-hillary-clinton>.



quarter of her posts in 2016 were about the upcoming election. In late January of 2016 Evans warned readers to not fall for Trump’s “‘good news’ to Christian voters: Stick with me and you’ll be a winner. Stick with me and I’ll give you power, protection, prestige.” Evans noted that those promises were “the very thing Satan promised Jesus when he tempted him in the desert.”<sup>378</sup> By August, with Trump’s nomination secured, Evans wrote to “many of my pro-life friends feel[ing] torn between voting for an unpopular but highly qualified pro-choice candidate in Hillary Clinton and an incompetent narcissist who poses a unique threat to our American democracy in Donald Trump.”<sup>379</sup> Evans told readers she remained committed to her pro-life beliefs despite being “acutely aware of the inconsistencies and uncertainties in my own pro-life convictions, which continue to be challenged and changed in the midst of lived experience.”<sup>380</sup> After outlining her beliefs that a pro-choice candidate would not necessarily mean an increase in abortions and most likely would address many of the healthcare, socioeconomic, and education issues leading to unplanned pregnancies, Evans pledged her support to Clinton.<sup>381</sup>

Her decision and accompanying reasoning were criticized for not being based on scripture and conflating candidates and political parties.<sup>382</sup> Most were upset with her decision to retain pro-life values while supporting candidates who campaigned to make abortions and

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<sup>378</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Donald Trump and a Tale of Two Gospels,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, January 28, 2016, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/donald-trump-gospel-liberty>.

<sup>379</sup> Evans originally published this on *Vox* and later republished it on her blog. Rachel Held Evans, “I’m a pro-life Christian. Here’s why I’m voting for Hillary Clinton,” *Vox*, August 4, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/8/4/12369912/hillary-clinton-pro-life>.

Evans, “So you’re thinking of voting for a pro-choice candidate...,” blog.

<sup>380</sup> Evans, “So you’re thinking of voting for a pro-choice candidate...,” blog.

<sup>381</sup> Evans, “So you’re thinking of voting for a pro-choice candidate...,” blog.

<sup>382</sup> Jay Hobbs, “No, Rachel Held Evans, Voting For Hillary Clinton Is Not Pro-Life,” *The Federalist*, August 5, 2016, <https://thefederalist.com/2016/08/05/no-rachel-held-evans-voting-for-hillary-clinton-is-not-pro-life/>.

Bob Eschliman, “Rachel Held Evans’ New Big Lie,” *Charisma News*, August 5, 2016, <https://www.charismanews.com/politics/elections/59066-rachel-held-evans-new-big-lie>.

contraceptives widely available.<sup>383</sup> Evans defended her decision on election day with a Facebook post in which she accepted her vote for Clinton was also a vote for “things I don’t agree with . . . But with voting, the question isn’t \*if\* you will compromise but \*how\* you will compromise, and I can live with those compromises.”<sup>384</sup> During the first half of Trump’s presidency Evans continued to write and Tweet about her dislike for Trump and his policies while calling her community to action at their local and state level. “The gospel may not be partisan, but it is certainly political, and it’s as appropriate as ever for Christians to ask that the people who represent them represent the concerns of the poor, the sick, the marginalized, and the strangers whom Jesus loves,” Evans wrote in March of 2017 on her blog.<sup>385</sup>

The final years of Evans’ life were marked by an increased politicization while reconciling with many parts of Christianity she had disavowed or struggled with in her young adult life. In 2018, she and co-creators Sarah Bessey and Jeff Chu started the Evolving Faith conference billed as “a gathering for wanderers, wonderers, and spiritual refugees to help you discover you are not alone.”<sup>386</sup> Evans also co-created the Why Christian conference with Nadia Bolz-Weber to host speakers who would remind attendees “why, in spite of all its dysfunction, [they] remain a part of the sprawling and diverse family of God.”<sup>387</sup> Evans fourth book, *Inspired* published in 2018, can be read as Evans’ love letter to the Bible, or at least, the letter she wished she could write. After almost a decade of deconstructing her religious beliefs and scripture,

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<sup>383</sup> Micaiah Bilger, “Evangelical Blogger Rachel Held Evans Claims Pro-Lifers Should Vote for Hillary Clinton,” LifeNews.com, August 2, 2016, <https://www.lifenews.com/2016/08/02/evangelical-blogger-rachel-held-evans-claims-pro-lifers-should-vote-for-hillary-clinton/>.

<sup>384</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Today I voted for Hillary Clinton for president . . .,” Facebook, November 8, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/rachelheldevans.page/posts/today-i-voted-for-hillary-clinton-for-president-it-wasnt-a-difficult-choice-and-/10154368652109442/> (emphasis original).

<sup>385</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Calling Your Reps and Planting Onions: A Plan for Faithful Resistance,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, March 1, 2017, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/faithful-resistance-plan>.

<sup>386</sup> “About,” Evolving Faith, accessed October 29, 2019, <https://evolvingfaith.com/about>.

<sup>387</sup> “Who Are We?” Why Christian, accessed March 21, 2020, <https://whychristian.net/>.

Evans returned the Biblical stories and lessons that she still found inspiring or intriguing. The memoir is bound together with snippets of poetry, monologues, a screenplay, and additional stories about Evans' childhood and life since leaving evangelicalism.<sup>388</sup> In her blog post announcing the upcoming publication, Evans thanked her followers for their "readership and support. It never fails to humble and move me that you would want to spend time in the company of my words. What an honor it is."

## #PrayforRHE

In the first months of 2019, Evans was planning the second Evolving Faith conference, completing her fifth book, and started regularly blogging again with a series on Lent. In mid-April, Evans went to the hospital to receive treatment for an infection and flu. A few days later her husband posted on her blog that Evans "was experiencing constant seizures" and had been placed in a medically induced coma. On April 19 her supporters and critics rallied for her on Twitter with the hashtag "#PrayforRHE."<sup>389</sup> Thousands of Twitter users echoed the sentiment, "Wake up, Rach." Her friend and fellow author, Kaitlin Curtice, tweeted on May 2, "We have so many stories to tell you."<sup>390</sup> Elizabeth Esther, a long-time blog reader and friend of Evans since her early days on Twitter, tweeted "Rachel, I love you. I'm so grateful for you. You are a light in the darkness. Woman of valor. Courageous warrior. Defender of the broken. A light in the darkness. A beacon of hope. May Jesus, Mary, and all the angels and saints attend to you now.

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<sup>388</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Introducing: My New Book!," *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, January 25, 2018, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/inspired-pre-order-cover-announcement>.

<sup>389</sup> "#PrayforRHE @rachelheldevans," Twitter, April 19, 2019 to May 3, 2019, [https://twitter.com/search?q=\(%23prayforrhe\)%20\(%40rachelheldevans\)%20until%3A2019-05-03%20since%3A2019-04-12&src=typed\\_query](https://twitter.com/search?q=(%23prayforrhe)%20(%40rachelheldevans)%20until%3A2019-05-03%20since%3A2019-04-12&src=typed_query)

<sup>390</sup> Kaitlin Curtice (@KaitlinCurtice), "Wake up Rach...", Twitter, May 2, 2019, <https://twitter.com/KaitlinCurtice/status/1123899048098971649>.

Lord, hear our prayer. #PrayForRHE”<sup>391</sup> Theological and ideological adversaries also sent their support, including Russell Moore who tweeted “@rachelheldevans and I are, as you know, theological opposites, and we’ve debated each other on all kinds of stuff over the years. She needs our prayers right now. Conservatives, progressives, centrists, everybody: let’s pray for RHE.”<sup>392</sup> Karen Swallow Prior, a professor at Liberty University, had disagreed with Evans on a number of occasions but also sent her support for Evans, “My English Novel class prayed for you today, @rachelheldevans.”<sup>393</sup> Later that day the hashtag began trending on Twitter.<sup>394</sup> In the following days, Evans’ partners in the Evolving Faith conference started a campaign on GoFundMe to support Evans’ family and cover the increasing medical bills. The initial goal of \$40,000 was met within the first day, and over \$67,000 was donated within the first twenty-four hours.<sup>395</sup> Approximately 5,000 donors raised over \$225,000 when the campaign closed.<sup>396</sup>

Evans remained in a coma for two weeks and was transferred to three different hospitals before dying from additional seizures and swelling of the brain on May 4, 2019.<sup>397</sup> Along with her husband Daniel, parents, and sister, Evans left behind young children—a three-year-old son

<sup>391</sup> Elizabeth Esther (@elizabethesther), “Rachel, I love you...,” Twitter, April 19, 2019, <https://twitter.com/elizabethesther/status/1119284569792860160>.

<sup>392</sup> President of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. Russell Moore (@drmoore), “@rachelheldevans and I are...,” Twitter, April 20, 2019, <https://twitter.com/drmoore/status/1119620158966960128>.

<sup>393</sup> Karen Swallow Prior (@KSPrior), “My English Novel class...,” Twitter, April 19, 2019, <https://twitter.com/KSPrior/status/1119292758575976448>.

<sup>394</sup> Emily McFarlan Miller (@emmillerwrites), “#PrayforRHE is trending on Twitter in the United States...,” Twitter, April 19, 2019, 3:00 p.m., <https://twitter.com/emmillerwrites/status/1119314915993489418>.

<sup>395</sup> Greg Garrison, “Friends, family raise money for Christian author Rachel Held Evans,” AL.com, April 22, 2019, <https://www.al.com/life/2019/04/friends-family-raise-money-for-christian-author-rachel-held-evans.html>.

Samuel Smith, “Over \$67,000 raised for Rachel Held Evans; Christian writer still in medically-induced coma,” April 23, 2019, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/over-67000-raised-for-rachel-held-evans-christian-writer-still-in-medically-induced-coma.html>.

<sup>396</sup> Sarah Styles Bessey, “Supporting Rachel Held Evans’ Family,” GoFundMe, April 22, 2019, <https://www.gofundme.com/f/supporting-rachel-held-evans>.

<sup>397</sup> Bessey, “Supporting Rachel Held Evans’ Family,” GoFundMe.

Daniel Jonce Evans, “Rachel’s Health Updates,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, April 19, 2019, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/health-updates>.

and a daughter two weeks shy of her first birthday. Her funeral was live streamed on June 1 and has been viewed over 100,000 times.<sup>398</sup> The funeral liturgy noted that “the communion table is open to everyone without a single exception.”<sup>399</sup>

In the days after her death, secular outlets including *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Vox*, *The Atlantic*, and *CNN* called Evans the voice for a generation of evangelical believers who felt pushed aside or pushed out by their churches.<sup>400</sup> Many of her friends and fellow writers paid tribute to Evans in the weeks after her death. Jen Hatmaker wrote in *Time* that “a better ally didn’t exist;” “Rachel’s generosity was entirely without ego” Laura Turner wrote for *Buzzfeed*; in *The Washington Post*, Katelyn Beaty added, “she opened doors we never could have opened ourselves;” and pastor Emily Swan emphasized “RHE didn’t just listen, she acted” in *Medium*.<sup>401</sup> Religious news outlets and writers also acknowledged the impact Evans had on

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<sup>398</sup> “Rachel Held Evans Funeral,” Rachel Held Evans, YouTube, June 1, 2019, accessed May 14, 2020, video, 1:45:18, <https://youtu.be/XyoxUwdSnzA>.

<sup>399</sup> “Rachel Grace Held Evans: Requiem Eucharist,” *rachelheldevans.com*, pdf file, June 1, 2019, <https://rachelheldevans.com/funeral>.

<sup>400</sup> Elizabeth Dias and Sam Roberts, “Rachel Held Evans, Voice of the Wandering Evangelical, Dies at 37,” *The New York Times*, May 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/04/us/rachel-held-evans.html>.  
Eliza Griswold, “The Radically Inclusive Christianity of Rachel Held Evans,” *The New Yorker*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/postscript/the-radically-inclusive-christianity-of-rachel-held-evans>.  
Kate Shellnutt, “How progressive Christian blogger Rachel Held Evans changed everything,” *Vox*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/5/7/18535272/rachel-held-evans-obit>.  
Emma Green, “Rachel Held Evans, Hero to Christian Misfits,” *The Atlantic*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/05/rachel-held-evans-death-progressive-christianity/588784/>.  
Amir Vera, “Rachel Held Evans, popular Christian writer, dies at 37,” *CNN*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/04/us/rachel-held-evans-dead/index.html>.

<sup>401</sup> The women became friends when Evans defended and encouraged Hatmaker after she supported same-sex marriage in a 2016 interview and her books were pulled from LifeWay shelves.  
Kate Shellnutt, “LifeWay Stops Selling Jen Hatmaker Books over LGBT Beliefs,” *Christianity Today*, October 27, 2016, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/october/lifeway-stops-selling-jen-hatmaker-books-lgbt-beliefs-chris>.

Jen Hatmaker, “‘A Better Ally Didn’t Exist.’ Jen Hatmaker Remembers the Generosity of Rachel Held Evans,” *Time*, May 9, 2019, <https://time.com/5586402/rachel-held-evans-obituary/>.

Laura Turner, “Why Rachel Held Evans Meant So Much To So Many,” *Buzzfeed*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lauraturner/rachel-held-evans-death-doubt-evangelical-christianity>.

Katelyn Beaty, “Instead of Throwing Out God Or Church, Rachel Held Evans Demonstrated a Robust Christian Faith,” *The Washington Post*, May 4, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/05/05/instead-throwing-out-god-or-church-rachel-held-evans-demonstrated-robust-christian-faith/>.

young evangelicals and the questions she caused evangelical leaders to ask or confront.<sup>402</sup> Public comments from evangelical pastors and theologians noted their disagreements with Evans' work while acknowledging her relentless efforts to productively engage with evangelical believers and leaders even after moving to the Episcopal Church. Ed Stetzer reflected on his personal and often adversarial relationship with Evans that was grounded in a mutual respect for continued dialogue,

Yes, Rachel Held Evans stirred the evangelical pot in ways that were uncomfortable and distressing. However, for me, she made me think and she made me better. She pointed out my logical fallacies and forced me to defend my assumptions. And when she appreciated something, she said it. She was always looking for the good in people, and didn't hold back when she found it.<sup>403</sup>

*The Christian Century* memorialized Evans as “a public theologian” who led “the sort of Christianity that’s coming” and left behind “the digital church that now carries on its work. Its witness, like that of Evans is far from over.”<sup>404</sup> Obituaries pointed to the “rising female Christian voices” along with people of color and those in the LGBTQ community who followed the path Evans carved and gained “platforms now because Evans made sure to share hers.”<sup>405</sup> An obituary published in *Christianity Today* noted that even in the face of intense scrutiny and criticism for her theological and political beliefs Evans “was able to confront evangelical

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Emily Swan, “Rachel Held Evans: A True Ally,” Medium, May 6, 2019, <https://medium.com/solus-jesus/rachel-held-evans-a-true-ally-a6ec55e1a29f>.

<sup>402</sup> Ed Stetzer, “Reflecting on Rachel: Why She Mattered,” *Christianity Today*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2019/may/reflecting-on-rhe.html>.

<sup>403</sup> Stetzer serves as executive director of the Billy Graham Center along with being the Billy Graham Distinguished Chair of Church, Mission, and Evangelism and the Dean of the School of Mission, Ministry, and Leadership at Wheaton College.

Stetzer, “Reflecting on Rachel.”

<sup>404</sup> Jason Byassee, “Rachel Held Evans, public theologian,” *The Christian Century*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/rachel-held-evans-public-theologian>.

<sup>405</sup> Emily McFarlan Miller, “What Would Rachel Held Evans Do? Late Author’s Voice Lives in Those She Championed,” *Crosswalk.com*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.crosswalk.com/blogs/religion-today-blog/what-would-rachel-held-evans-do-late-authors-voice-lives-in-those-she-championed.html>.

controversies wisely, graciously, and assertively both in her writing and speaking and she wasn't shy of challenging the areas where she saw injustice or inequality."<sup>406</sup>

Those tributes acknowledged Evans' controversial, even polarizing, stances while underscoring the impending legacy and long-standing impact of her work. Among those commemorations were essays and opinion pieces that questioned an "intolerance we have developed for critical analysis of the dead."<sup>407</sup> It was her presence—"she was not milquetoast" after all—and unceasing need to continue the conversation, ask another question that warranted a response.<sup>408</sup> "She required a response," William Stell told *The New York Times*, "Her work and her life demanded a response from people who didn't agree." Rod Dreher argued "it is an act of generosity for her theological opponents to recognize her errors, as they see them, within a statement of appreciation. If her life had mattered, and mattered greatly, nobody would care."<sup>409</sup> Conservative blogger Anne Kennedy lamented that crafting a respectful rebuttal in the days after Evans' death was uncomfortable and difficult.

This is an awkward moment for the evangelical world. It is a moment long coming, and one that many Christians who have lived through the quiet earthquakes along the fault-lines within mainstream Christianity have dreaded, knowing how it goes, but one that cannot be avoided any longer. I suppose we should even welcome it for its ever increasing clarity.<sup>410</sup>

Jon Stonestreet was one of the first to test the waters. Better known as "Greg the Apologist" to Evans' readers, Stonestreet was featured in *Evolving in Monkey Town* as a speaker

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<sup>406</sup> Mandy Bayton, "#BecauseofRHE: What I will remember about Rachel Held Evans," *Christianity Today*, May 25, 2019, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/becauseofthe-what-i-will-remember-about-rachel-held-evans/132445.htm>.

<sup>407</sup> Rod Dreher, "Blaspheming St. Rachel Held Evans," *The American Conservative*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/blaspheming-st-rachel-held-evans/>.

<sup>408</sup> Dreher, "Blaspheming St. Rachel Held Evans."

<sup>409</sup> Dreher, "Blaspheming St. Rachel Held Evans."

<sup>410</sup> Anne Kennedy, "Answering A Kind Comment," *Preventing Grace* (blog), May 7, 2019, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/preventinggrace/2019/05/07/answering-a-kind-comment/>.

who visited Evans' high school and inspired Evans to continue to study and learn about her faith.<sup>411</sup> Evans later sent Stonestreet a signed copy of the book.<sup>412</sup> Two days after Evans' death, Stonestreet published a memorial and analysis of Evans' life and work that upset many of Evans fans including friend and fellow author Sarah Bessey who tweeted, "the last person I want to read is 'Greg the Apologist' . . . If you didn't love her, get her name out of your mouth this week."<sup>413</sup> Stonestreet's essay was removed two days after publication and replaced with a note from *Christianity Today* editor-in-chief Mark Galli who admitted "I realize there were problems I should have caught. We now see that what was intended to be a tribute came across as overly negative and not framed well." What Stonestreet wrote about Evans is unclear. Only partial versions of the original article exist online<sup>414</sup> with other websites that reference housing the entire article now leading to dead pages. Those snippets began with Stonestreet calling Evans "a gold medalist" in tweeting and remarking how the flood of responses he received after disagreeing with Evans on Twitter "courtesy of the faithful following she'd build over the last decade or so . . . underscored the passion, influence, and cleverness that propelled Rachel into one of the most formidable progressive thinkers and writers of this generation."<sup>415</sup> Yet Galli acknowledged the article "inadvertently antagonized many who deeply loved Evans."<sup>416</sup> The nerve Stonestreet uncovered was not a product of questioning Evans' legacy but a result of disrupting the mourners who wished to remember Evans as a courageous and compassionate

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<sup>411</sup> Evans, *Faith Unraveled*, 68.

<sup>412</sup> "John Stonestreet Remembers His Former Student and Interlocutor Rachel Held Evans," Black Christian News Network One, May 6, 2019, <https://blackchristiannews.com/2019/05/john-stonestreet-remembers-his-former-student-and-interlocutor-rachel-held-evans/>.

<sup>413</sup> John Stonestreet, "Rachel Held Evans Had a Story," *Christianity Today*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/may-web-only/rachel-evans-had-story.html>. Sarah Bessey (@sarahbessey), "Listen, I have done my level best. . .," Twitter, May 7, 2019.

<sup>414</sup> Dreher, "Blaspheming St. Rachel Held Evans."

<sup>415</sup> Dreher, "Blaspheming St. Rachel Held Evans."

<sup>416</sup> Mark Galli, "RE: Rachel Held Evans," *Christianity Today*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/may-web-only/re-rachel-held-evans.html>.



trailblazer. Reckoning with Evans' imperfection could come later for her family, friends, and supporters who were digesting their loss and her legacy.

## #BecauseofRHE

Legacy is at once a noun, verb, and adjective which makes it complex and confusing to apply. The term refers to an item or "long lasting effect" passed down by a predecessor, the act of bequeathing said item, and, while rarely used, "a body of people sent on a mission."<sup>417</sup> With that definition, Evans' legacy is not forthcoming or in question, but had been enacted throughout her life. She left printed books that contain her ideas and theological interpretations along with a digital treasure trove of hundreds of blog posts and thousands of tweets, video and audio clips stored on YouTube and other websites capture her voice and lectures, and online newspaper articles serve as a record of her life and her critics. Within that media she stored her questions for evangelicals and God, her memories, her stories of unraveling and rebuilding her faith, and her hopes for the future of Christianity.<sup>418</sup> Evans bequeathed those items to the wanderers she met along her journey—the evangelicals who shared her questions, the queer Christians who questioned if they were loved by their churches, the women who wanted to lead but were told no, the people of color who did not feel represented or heard.<sup>419</sup>

In May of 2019 that legacy was permanently handed to those believing and doubting alongside Evans in her digital community. Today her legacy resides with her blog readers and social media followers whose lives were impacted by her work, the new authors Evans

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<sup>417</sup> "legacy, n. and adj.," OED Online, March 2020, Oxford University Press, <https://www-oed-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/view/Entry/107006?rskey=g2Yh64&result=1>.

<sup>418</sup> Jonathan Merritt, "Rachel Held Evans: Remembering a 'torchbearer,' an 'arsonist,' a 'prophet with a pen,'" *USA Today*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/05/07/rachel-held-evans-christian-author-modern-prophet-future-faith-column/1120983001/>.

<sup>419</sup> Green, "Rachel Held Evans, Hero to Christian Misfits," *The Atlantic*.

introduced to her literary agent, the people who attended seminary because Evans refused “to cede to ownership of Christianity to its traditional conservative-male stewards,” the people who returned to their faith or found Christianity after encountering Evans’ writings, and the next generation of leaders who Evans gave time to on her media platforms.<sup>420</sup> “It’s not the ending any of us would have imagined for Evans,” Heidi Stevens wrote in *The Chicago Tribune*, “But if we’re so inclined, we can keep her too-short story alive by reading and sharing her words.”<sup>421</sup> Evans’ legacy could be seen across social media after her death when friends, peers, and followers digitally gathered around “#BecauseofRHE.”

I am now in Full-time vocational ministry, pursuing ordination, and enrolling in seminary. In no small part, I credit RHE with helping me realize my call and see that it was not ‘confused’ with my husband’s, but my own. I praise God for her life and ministry! #BecauseofRHE<sup>422</sup>

Woke up thinking of where to place @rachelhendevans’ image on my altar. She is resting w/ the saints now and, as a WoC, this is how I honor her. I’m grateful I can place her image at my altar knowing she would recognize the sacredness & not judge. #BecauseofRHE #PoCspirituality<sup>423</sup>

My teenager just saw me crying and I told her all about @rachelheldevans, and how she was one of the best allies and advocates in the church to help change our minds about LGBTQ people. The world is a safer place for my daughter because of Rachel. Ever the wise soul, my daughter said, well you’re still here. Keep doing what she was doing. I think that’s exactly what Rachel would suggest, too. And it got me thinking, if the people who influenced me toward becoming an LGBTQ-affirming parent were influenced by RHE, then it’s #BecauseofRHE that we have the beautiful relationship that we do today. Sending her off to prom last night, I thanked God for what Rachel gave us.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> Emma Green, “Rachel Held Evans, Hero to Christian Misfits,” *The Atlantic*.

<sup>421</sup> Heidi Stevens, “‘Without her, I feel scared’: The sudden death of spiritual writer Rachel Held Evans is a devastating jolt,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/heidi-stevens/ct-life-stevens-monday-rachel-held-evans-appreciation-0506-story.html>.

<sup>422</sup> Jennifer Precht (@KnitGirlJ), “1/2) 3 years ago I preached...,” Twitter, May 8, 2019, <https://twitter.com/KnitGirlJ/status/1126182894668582912>.

<sup>423</sup> AnaYelsi Velasco-Sanchez (@brwneyedamzn), “Woke up thinking of where...,” Twitter, May 5, 2019, <https://twitter.com/brwneyedamzn/status/1125039300343685121>.

<sup>424</sup> Adrienne (@ThingsSheNeeded), “My teenager just saw my crying...,” Twitter, May 4, 2019, <https://twitter.com/ThingSheNeeded/status/1124718520808427521>.

Recognizing the magnitude of Evans' legacy must be accompanied by historian Elesha Coffman's cautionary perspective that prominent women, especially those who challenged the evangelical status quo, are erased from evangelical histories. Coffman notes that Evans sold more books and maintained a larger following, thanks to her blog and social media, than "her Christian feminist foremothers."<sup>425</sup> The many authors, speakers, and theologians Evans worked alongside and championed created "a chorus [that] is harder to mute (in real time or in the writing of history) than just one or two voices."<sup>426</sup> Even with those caveats, Coffman reminds us that "a sober historian cannot predict a different ending to this chapter in the saga."<sup>427</sup> There, Coffman is referencing the memory of Evans and her work. Memory is a slippery term. It is a personal and collective process of ordering and thinking about past events. To historians, memory becomes a useful and untrustworthy tool that requires verification and analysis. In writing about "evangelical history," Coffman invokes the official record of memory which is curated and stored in museums, textbooks, Routledge and Oxford research companions, and the work of evangelical historians. To Coffman, and as the record of progressive female evangelical leaders shows, a canonical evangelical history written by evangelical leaders would not include Evans. However, another avenue for Evans is the unofficial collective memory that is stored outside of academic, government, and religious institutions. Within the collective memory, also referred to as the vernacular memory, stories of people and events are remembered to inform the culture or community that held them close. Bowler summarizes this in the final pages of her research on female leaders in evangelical ministries across the country:

In 2019, the sudden death of author Rachel Held Evans, 37, met with a massive outpouring of grief and questions about the afterlife of her efforts. She had been one of

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<sup>425</sup> Coffman, "Rachel Held Evans, Gone and Soon Forgotten?"

<sup>426</sup> Coffman, "Rachel Held Evans, Gone and Soon Forgotten?"

<sup>427</sup> Coffman, "Rachel Held Evans, Gone and Soon Forgotten?"

the leading voices in the ex-evangelical movement and a fierce advocate of sexual and racial minorities in church leadership. As her spiritual following was largely online, what structures were in place to preserve her memory and further her work? The ability to preserve legacy was a privilege reserved almost exclusively for those men at the helm of powerful religious organizations. Since most women of all theological persuasions lacked the prerequisite institutional backing, memory itself was in peril.<sup>428</sup>

The content of future histories cannot, and should not as Coffman reminds us, be predicted, but over the past twelve months Evans' memory has reverberated across the digital landscape as her work continues to be cited and remembered.

## Holding Vigil

Almost a month after Evans' death her social media pages were updated with a photo of Evans' at-home desk darkened by a digital black overlay with the text "1981-2019." Two scraps of white paper were pinned at the bottom off a corkboard board among the smaller notes: "Your Job: Tell the Truth" one read, and "Eshet Chayil" was scrawled in script block letters on the other.<sup>429</sup> The photo received just under 3,000 reactions on Facebook and offers one glimpse into the many ways Evans' family, friends, and online community have continued to engage with her memory since her death.

Without a central church hierarchy or single denominational umbrella, evangelical traditions and histories are their own versions of collective memory. That collective memory is tailored by the cultural leaders and authorities who establish the "exemplary individuals" who

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<sup>428</sup> Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife*, 251.

<sup>429</sup> Rachel Held Evans Legacy, Facebook, image, May 30, 2019,

[https://www.facebook.com/rachelheldevans.page/photos/a.10150679755559442/10156809125854442/?type=3&\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=HH-R](https://www.facebook.com/rachelheldevans.page/photos/a.10150679755559442/10156809125854442/?type=3&__tn__=HH-R).

Rachel Held Evans Legacy, "Just for fun, here's a picture of the mantra/inspiration board above my writing desk..." Facebook, image, October 10, 2016,

<https://www.facebook.com/rachelheldevans.page/photos/a.10150102653724442/10154276896214442/?type=3&theater>.

“encapsulate conceptions of character: what a good person is like, and virtues that define such character.”<sup>430</sup> As Coffman, Bowler, and others argue, those exemplary characters are the white-male preachers, revival leaders, televangelist, and megachurch pastors who have maintained the dominant cultural and theological influence in evangelicalism. While recognizing the power of those “symbolic elites,” Bodnar points out the importance of memory at the local level. In their summary of Bodnar’s research on collective memory, Mateusz Magierowski points out Bodnar’s recognition that cultural elites at all level of a community—national, regional, and local—maintain a similar level of authority. Within democratic societies, that multiplicity creates “official memories [that exist] at different levels of social life, rather than one monolithic discourse.” Additionally, collective memory exists within the “lived or shared experiences of small groups” which are stitched into the life stories and personal memories of group members. Those autobiographic memories are shared with later generations of the group who continue the collective narrative and pass stories about their own exemplary members.<sup>431</sup>

While both groups hold narrative power and contribute to the collective memory, the “symbolic elites,” in this case the established evangelical leaders, maintain greater material and cultural resources which allows them to more effectively change the “social consciousness” and “eliminate” any “discrepancies between official and vernacular memories.”<sup>432</sup> Bowler illustrates this phenomenon in her history of evangelical pastors’ wives who exert great influence over their congregation and often over larger parts of the evangelical community through television, speaking engagements, social media, and publications. Few of those women are remembered,

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<sup>430</sup> Tuula Sakaranaho, “Religion and the Study of Social Memory,” *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 47, no. 2 (2011): 144, <https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.5151>.

<sup>431</sup> Magierowski, 85.

<sup>432</sup> Magierowski, 85.

and none are placed on the same levels as their husbands despite their individual accomplishments.<sup>433</sup> The power of symbolic elites to “silence” or “erase” memories of events and people can apply to both individuals who do not fit into existing cultural narratives and those who only bring up a “negative ingroup past.”<sup>434</sup> While Evans sparred with and was respected by many evangelical, theological, and cultural leaders, she was called a heretic for her theological interpretations and insistence on equal footing for women and LGBTQ people within evangelical leadership.<sup>435</sup> That theological dissonance may regulate Evans as a “negative ingroup past” that the symbolic elites chose to forget and ignore rather than pass down to the next generation of believers.<sup>436</sup>

Amir Goldstein argued against that “top-down” approach to memory, “popular culture, spontaneous actions taken by the civil society, competing elites, fringe groups, and other circles—some of which are subversive—can also transform the collective memory, at least in a democratic society, making it multivocal and diverse.”<sup>437</sup> Goldstein contended that “the consumers of memory” are not “a passive mob, but have their own outlooks and belief systems.” Collective memory is instead “molded” by the “deliberate action by the hegemonic groups” and the acceptance of those interpretations or counter-narratives “incorporated into the discourse from the ‘opposing memories’ of fringe groups.”<sup>438</sup> After recognizing the pattern of erasure caused by evangelical symbolic elites, it is important to note that the preservation of Evans’ work in the collective memory will depend on the narratives told and retold by her supporters and

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<sup>433</sup> Bowler, *The Preacher’s Wife*, 239-241.

<sup>434</sup> Magierowski, 85.

<sup>435</sup> Jeff Maples, “Remembering the Heretic, Rachel Held Evans,” ReformationCharlotte, May 7, 2019, <https://reformationcharlotte.org/2019/05/07/remembering-the-heretic-rachel-held-evans/>.

<sup>436</sup> Magierowski, 85.

<sup>437</sup> Amir, Goldstein “Olei Hagardom: Between Official and Popular Memory,” *Journal of Israeli History* 34, no. 2 (2015): 160, doi:10.1080/13531042.2015.1068974.

<sup>438</sup> Goldstein, 160-161.

peers. Based on other studies of artists' posthumous reputations, the collective memory of Evans will hinge on the effects and impact of her work during life along with her "links" to networks associated "with emerging cultural or political symbols" who "have a stake in preserving or giving a boost to that reputation."<sup>439</sup> Evans' extensive digital footprint and the existing online networks used by her community may be the key to creating a favorable collective memory: "It is what transcends the psychological aspects of memory and makes the concept sociological. Communication makes possible the unique capacity of collective memory to preserve pasts older than the oldest living individual."<sup>440</sup>

Evans popularity spiked in the weeks after her death as long-term readers flocked to her social media and publications to remember her, celebrate her work, and perhaps find solace. *Searching For Sunday* climbed to the ninth spot on *The New York Times* bestsellers list for non-fiction paperback and remained on the list for three weeks.<sup>441</sup> On the day of her death, her Facebook following increased by 2,000, within ten days the page had increased by more than 10,000 "likes."<sup>442</sup> Her Twitter account experienced a similar trajectory.<sup>443</sup> Evans' digital community used Twitter to commemorate the first anniversary of her death by sharing stories, activities, or positions Evans inspired them to take on, or express their continued grief with

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<sup>439</sup> Janice Hume, "Memory Matters: The Evolution of Scholarship in Collective Memory and Mass Communication," *Review of Communication* 10, no. 3 (2010): 192, doi:10.1080/15358591003632563.

JA Edy, "Journalistic uses of collective memory," *Journal of Communication* 49 (1999): 72, doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02794.x.

<sup>441</sup> "Books Best Sellers, Combined Print & E-Book Nonfiction," *New York Times*, May 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2019/05/26/combined-print-and-e-book-nonfiction/>.

<sup>442</sup> Rachel Held Evans Legacy, Facebook, Web Archive, May 4, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190504221450/https://www.facebook.com/rachelheldevans.page/>.  
Rachel Held Evans Legacy, Facebook, Web Archive, May 14, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190514135013/https://www.facebook.com/rachelheldevans.page/>.

<sup>443</sup> Rachel Held Evans (@rachelheldevans), Twitter, Wayback Machine, May 4, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190504184555/https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans?lang=en>.  
Rachel Held Evans (@rachelheldevans), Twitter, Wayback Machine, May 14, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190514135018/https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans?lang=en>.

“#BecauseofRHE” and “#RememberingRHE.” Her friends and fellow Christian authors<sup>444</sup> wrote about their first year without Evans. Her colleagues for the Evolving Faith conference honored her during their 2019 gathering and posted quotes from her publications on their Facebook page throughout May 2020.<sup>445</sup> Her husband and sister wrote on their own blogs about worrying what to say while being unable to express their grief.<sup>446</sup> The continued posts on social media, in news outlets, and on personal blogs throughout 2019 and into 2020 established a public memorial of Evans’ life and work.

Within the rhetoric of collective memory, the construction of public memorials is examined in three ways that analyze the memorial as: a type of performance; the embodiment of a cultural competition; and as a social text.<sup>447</sup> All three of those elements place public memorials in “contested space” where the public’s memory of an event or person collides with the official record. As a piece of cultural competition, public memorials challenge the established narrative with the physical existence of the memorial. Evans’ public memorial in the digital space serves as a “physical” symbol of the continued social and political tensions between the collective

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<sup>444</sup> Sarah Bessey, “Remembering Rachel Held Evans,” Sarah Bessey’s Field Notes, e-newsletter, May 2, 2020, <https://sarahbessey.substack.com/p/remembering-rachel-held-evans>.

Kaitlin Curtice, “On Loss & Belonging,” Soul to Soul, e-newsletter, May 3, 2020, <https://kaitlincurtice.substack.com/p/on-loss-and-belonging>.

<sup>445</sup> Evolving Faith, Facebook, accessed May 6, 2020, [https://www.facebook.com/pg/EvolvingFaith/posts/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/EvolvingFaith/posts/?ref=page_internal).

<sup>446</sup> Daniel Jonce Evans, “Imaginary Future,” *Daniel Jonce Evans* (blog), May 4, 2020, <https://danieljonce.com/blog/imaginary-future>.

Amanda Opelt, “On Spring Peppers, Pandemics, and an Approaching Anniversary,” *Amanda Opelt* (blog), April 16, 2020, <http://www.amandaopelt.com/blog/springpepperspandemics?fbclid=IwAR10WtdQyqhhV6c3l4rxcAtRH5SEJFN911MMO57eGeLPgFiY12v5LDtJZ8>.

Amanda Opelt, “Some Thoughts on Grief & Gratefulness,” *Amanda Opelt* (blog), September 30, 2019, [http://www.amandaopelt.com/blog/griefandgratefulness?fbclid=IwAR2xG7RkNBf6xkcJV4WB4-5PM6NDtIXtFint2TNeHwovxQsiXKUneM-g\\_tw](http://www.amandaopelt.com/blog/griefandgratefulness?fbclid=IwAR2xG7RkNBf6xkcJV4WB4-5PM6NDtIXtFint2TNeHwovxQsiXKUneM-g_tw).

<sup>447</sup> Aaron Hes, “In digital remembrance: vernacular memory and the rhetorical construction of web memorials,” *Media, Culture & Society* 29, no. 5 (2007): 814-815, doi: 10.1177/0163443707080539.



memory of Evans' work and the history of institutional voices erasing women such as Evans.<sup>448</sup> Hes argues that "web memorials" feature "the interests of 'ordinary people' and their personal situation interpretations" of events and people but have multiple downfalls. Digital-only memorials, by contrast, are "guarded by the search engine that provides access to it" which can bury a webpage underneath "a mixture of official, corporate and individual memorials, all of which compete for the same digital space at the front of the line."<sup>449</sup> Additionally, webspaces are vulnerable to digital vandalism and hacking and require continued funding to maintain an active host and domain name.<sup>450</sup> For Hes, and other historians and memory scholars, digital public memorials operate in two ways: "preservation through historically marking the text in its original form, and reproduction through duplication and distribution are methods of reproduction."<sup>451</sup> Evans' existing digital footprint will remain available as long as the corresponding platforms, including her social media accounts, continue to operate. It is unlikely that Twitter or Facebook will become inactive, but the future of her personal blog is more uncertain. Archived versions of her blog along with replications of the posts and the public's own "personal journalism about the events" can help to maintain and extend Evans' memory. To Hes, digital memorials are a groundbreaking method for members of an online community to "replicate and distribute" their own versions of events and use "web memorials as a point of social activism."<sup>452</sup> Continued interactions with Evans' social media accounts, sharing or reposting her online publications, and

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<sup>448</sup> Hes, 815.

<sup>449</sup> Hes, 819.

<sup>450</sup> Hes, 821.

<sup>451</sup> Hes, 822.

<sup>452</sup> Hes, 827.

the retelling of Evans' life on personal blogs “offer a message of both personal historical reflection and of personal actions to take.”<sup>453</sup>

“Did anyone else lose their breath for a second when you saw her name in your feed?” a Facebook user Marie Hagan commented on an updated posted to Evans' Facebook page on May 23, 2019.<sup>454</sup> In the past year, Evans' husband has updated or posted to her Facebook legacy page more than twenty-five times. Initial posts updated followers on Evans' medical condition while in the hospital then linked to details about her funeral. In the months since, Evans' husband has posted reflections on grief and tributes to Evans written by Christian news outlets. Subsequent posts resemble the issues and people Evans most often wrote about: archived blog posts reflecting on the church calendar, promotions for the Evolving Faith conference, congratulatory notes for her friends and peers who published books, and blog posts about the need to accept all believers without qualifications. Most posts received about 5,000 “reactions” with a few almost reaching 10,000 digital “likes.” Those messages were also shared across the digital landscape thousands of times.<sup>455</sup> Additionally, Evans' body of work continues to be updated and expanded. In October of 2019, her husband released an unfinished blog post expressing Evans' affirmation and support for LGBTQ Christians that she had drafted for years and intended to publish earlier in 2019, and her fifth book is slated for publication in October 2020.<sup>456</sup>

“For people who are saying, ‘What’s next?’—what’s next is the exact same thing it always is,” Diana Butler Bass, an independent scholar of American religion and culture wrote

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<sup>453</sup> Hes, 827.

<sup>454</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Rachel’s sister Amanda Opelt wrote the song...,” shared post from Daniel Jonce Evans, May 21, 2020, [https://www.facebook.com/pg/rachelheldevans.page/posts/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/rachelheldevans.page/posts/?ref=page_internal).

<sup>455</sup> Evans, “Rachel’s sister Amanda Opelt wrote the song...”

<sup>456</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “LGBTQ+,” *Rachel Held Evans Blog*, October 8, 2019, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/lgbtq>.

shortly after Evans' death, "It's gird your loins, go to work. And that's what's next—you're next."<sup>457</sup> Evans did not convert thousands or start a successful parachurch organization. Her intervention was far more personal. Over twelve years of blogging, publishing, and speaking, she helped build a bridge between the culture wars and tradition of the old guard and the questions from the next generation of evangelicals. The long-term impact of Evans' work and how she is remembered by the evangelical institution cannot be determined in this moment or in the immediate future. Her embrace of digital communications technology as a low-cost and relatively equalizing platform helped her connect with thousands of other evangelicals and Christians who asked the same questions and worried over the same doubts. Those digital spaces and online communities may be the key to keeping a collective memory that calls Evans a hero rather than a heretic.

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<sup>457</sup> Emily McFarlan Miller, "'Who will be our Rachel now?' Progressives reflect on movement without Held Evans," Religion News Service, May 20, 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2019/05/20/who-will-be-our-rachel-now-progressive-christians-reflect-on-movement-without-held-evans/>.

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