

After Evangelicalism

The Path to a New Christianity

David P. Gushee

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Foreword

BRIAN D. McLAREN

Years ago, an evangelical pastor told me of an exchange he had with a fellow pastor. They had attended the same evangelical seminary about a decade earlier. As he sat in his former classmate's office, he scanned his colleague's huge bookshelf filled with familiar evangelical titles by familiar evangelical authors. To his surprise, he noticed one my books, sticking out like a sore thumb.

He pulled it off the shelf and asked, "How did you like it?" "I didn't finish it," his friend replied. "Why not?" he asked. "I spent a lot of money and time on this library," his friend answered. "If that book is right, I would need to throw out half my library and start over again. That's not happening." That ended the conversation.

I kept thinking of that story as I read the book you're now holding. You might be one of those people who have invested a lot of money and time in evangelical Christianity. The thought of writing off that investment seems too high. Yet every day that passes, the cost of staying silent and therefore complicit rises too.

David Gushee has good news for you. Instead of writing off your whole evangelical investment as a total loss, you can shift your investment into a different kind of Christianity. He calls it *Christian humanism*, and if that term seems to entice you, let it. (And if it doesn't, let it anyway.)

I've had the honor of reading and endorsing several of David's books, so I've had a front-row seat in watching his transformation and migration. Step by step, he has made clear what he needed to leave, and in this book he makes it equally clear that instead of moving from one static location to another, he has moved from a static location to a dynamic peregrination, from a place to a path, from "Here I stand" to "Here is the path I am now following."

It's a good path, an honest and welcoming path; and by the time you finish chapter 9, there is a good chance you will feel drawn to join him on it.

Whatever else we might say about American evangelicalism, it's hard to deny that it has become uglier, more compromised, and less credible in recent decades, and especially since November of 2016. There is a certain point in the decomposition of a religious community at which its gatekeepers lose their authority. Like a bar of soap, it has been used up. They can scold, critique, and threaten even more loudly than before, but folks wonder, "And why should I care what *you* think anymore?"

I think we're at that point for growing numbers of evangelicals. If evangelical gatekeepers can swallow keeping children in cages, mocking the Sermon on the Mount, and following leaders in thrall to Trumpist bigotry, why would anyone respect their discernment, value their praise, or fear their critique?

For that reason (and many more), I think a lot of people are ready for this book; and if they start it, there's a high probability that they'll actually finish it, come what may. David writes so clearly and with such refreshing brevity that I feel confident in making that prediction.

After getting the lay of the land in the first few chapters, here are a few highlights you can expect:

In chapter 4, you will not be able to forget the "burning children test." Then, after David describes six strands of evangelical theology, you'll come to the dramatic watershed moment when he concludes, "*I need to state very clearly that I oppose every aspect of this version of evangelical Christianity.*"

In chapter 5, you'll find his exploration of "Jesus according to" highly compelling, not to mention comprehensive and insightful.

If you've been staying home most Sundays because church seems more and more like "a consumer culture" and an "outpost of a political party," you may discover in chapter 6 that your departure doesn't mean that you've actually rejected church, but rather that you've wisely turned away from "a negation of what Christ intended the church to be."

In chapter 7, what David means by Christian humanism will become starkly clear—in clear contrast to "inhumanity in the name of Christ," and you'll find his discussion about human sexuality to be refreshingly realistic and humane.

Then comes chapter 8, where David lays down this provocative gem: "There is no way that the Bible can be said to produce a single coherent political vision or ethic. It has proven to be usable for endless alternative politics: theocratic, royalist, authoritarian, fascist, ethno-nationalist, slavocratic, colonialist, Christian democrat, revolutionary, reformist, liberal, libertarian, socialist, communist, anarchist, quietist, millenarian, and even today's social-conservative white evangelical Republicanism."

I think that chapter 9 will be one of the most quoted chapters in David's body of work to date, outlining seven commitments for post-evangelical politics.

If a nonfiction book can be said to have a climax, you'll reach it in the final paragraphs where David offers a confession and apology that are sobering, pointed, and unforgettable . . . and, I hope, contagious.

For all these reasons and more, as much as I've loved all of David's books, this one strikes me as his magnum opus, the one most not-to-miss, the one that should not be put on your shelf until you have read through to the last page, come what may.

Thank God, David Gushee is right: there is indeed life after evangelicalism: life abundant, full, and free.

Introduction

EVANGELICALISM'S CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

This is a book for people who used to be “evangelicals”¹ and are now post-evangelicals or ex-evangelicals or #exvangelicals or somewhere painfully in between.

I am one of them. One of you. In the United States alone, there are millions of us.

According to the Pew Research Center’s landmark 2014 Religious Landscape Study, adults who had been raised evangelical but who had either switched to another religious tradition or no longer identified with any religious tradition comprised roughly 8 percent of the total US population. That’s about 25 million people.²

White US evangelicalism, in particular, is in trouble. This comment is from Daniel Cox of Public Religion Research:

Nearly one-third of white Americans raised in evangelical Christian households leave their childhood faith. . . . The rates of disaffiliation are even higher among young adults: 39 percent of those raised evangelical Christian no longer identify as such in adulthood. . . . As a result, the white evangelical Protestant population in the U.S. has fallen over the past decade, dropping from 23 percent in 2006 to 17 percent in 2016. But equally troubling for those concerned about the vitality of evangelical Christianity, white evangelical Protestants are aging. . . . The median age of white evangelical Protestants today is 55.³

Michael Gerson, a dissenting evangelical⁴ who served as a speechwriter for President George W. Bush, also worries that evangelicals are in serious trouble as they hemorrhage their young people: “About 26 percent of Americans

65 and older identify as white evangelical Protestants. Among those ages 18 to 29, the figure is 8 percent. Why this demographic abyss does not cause greater panic—panic concerning the existence of evangelicalism as a major force in the United States—is a mystery and a scandal.”⁵

Evangelicalism’s recent declines take place against the broader backdrop of a declining Christianity in the United States. Various polls reveal that the number of people claiming Christian affiliation in this country has been dropping by just over 1 percent a year, and those claiming no affiliation are rising at almost the same rate—making it look like a direct swap of Christianity with disaffiliation.⁶ It has also been clear for a while that millennials—those born between 1981 and 1996, now twenty-four to thirty-nine years old—are the least religiously affiliated group ever polled.⁷ Early indications suggest that the generation rising after them—now called Generation Z, basically the college kids and younger seminarians that I teach—may be even less interested in religion.

For a long time, US evangelicals comforted themselves with belief in their immunity from the overall Christian decline. *We* were fine; *they* (those other, less faithful Christians) were in trouble, because of their liberal theology and lack of vitality. That was the story. But now, well, not so much. Evangelicals are experiencing the same downward trend.

People are leaving evangelical Christianity, young people most of all. That’s a fact. Some are leaving their evangelical churches, families, and friends. Some are leaving evangelical theology. Some are leaving the evangelical subculture. And some are leaving God, Jesus, the Bible, the Holy Spirit, the whole thing, Christianity, all of it.

It must be acknowledged that every religious tradition produces dissidents and exiles. The faith with which one is raised does not always fit. And sometimes people leave their childhood faith as much as a declaration of independence from Mom and Dad as anything else.

Undoubtedly this helps to explain why evangelicalism is losing some of its young. But the evidence suggests that much more is going on. What we are seeing is not just rebellion against parents or normal ebb and flow. We are witnessing *conscientious objection*. Ex-evangelicals are leaving based on what they believe to be specific offenses against them personally, or against their family and friends, and specific experiences of trauma that have left lasting damage—like clergy sexual abuse, sexist exclusion and mistreatment, and every kind of indignity against gay, lesbian, and trans people. Some are leaving based on intellectual problems that they could not resolve within the evangelical tradition—like biblical inerrancy, evolution, and overall closed-mindedness. And some are leaving because they believe the ethical posture of evangelicalism—on sex, race, worldly politics—reeks with hypocrisy or is, in fact, unethical.⁸

This is a book about, and for, these people—evangelical exiles for reasons of conscience. I am not writing about, or for, mere religious preference-switchers. I am writing about evangelical exiles, trauma, and conscientious objection.

ARE/WERE YOU AN EVANGELICAL? TAKE OUR SIMPLE TEST AND FIND OUT!

Let's take a test to see if you qualify as an "American evangelical." Put a check in the box beside the item if you know what I am referring to in any of the following twenty-five references:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> "Lord, I Lift Your Name on High" | <input type="checkbox"/> Bob Jones |
| <input type="checkbox"/> John Piper | <input type="checkbox"/> Biblical inerrancy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Complementarianism | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>I Kissed Dating Goodbye</i> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 700 Club | <input type="checkbox"/> John MacArthur |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>The Message</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Eugene Peterson |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wheaton College | <input type="checkbox"/> Purity rings |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Azusa Pacific | <input type="checkbox"/> Reparative therapy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Moody | <input type="checkbox"/> Left Behind |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Veggie Tales | <input type="checkbox"/> Hell houses |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Zondervan | <input type="checkbox"/> Tim LaHaye |
| <input type="checkbox"/> God didn't make Adam and Steve | <input type="checkbox"/> Tony Evans |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Christian Zionism | <input type="checkbox"/> The rapture |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Father, hold me | |

If you checked twenty or more boxes, you are, or were, an evangelical. Congratulations! Your prize is a boxed set of all the writings of John MacArthur!

Yes, if you checked most of those boxes, you know quite well the world we are leaving or have left. It wasn't all bad. But it is a world we cannot live in anymore.

But even those who know they must leave do not always know where they are going. Many individuals have made their decisions, of course. But overall, post-evangelicals do not know whether they are leaving church, or leaving evangelicalism, or leaving their denominations, or leaving faith, or leaving the Bible, or leaving Jesus, or just leaving. They do not know whether they are now to be mainline Protestant or Catholic or spiritual-but-not-religious or agnostic or just disillusioned.

This book is about where we might want to be going more than what we are leaving. And yet it is impossible to think deeply about where to go next if we don't think deeply about what went so wrong where we were. Throughout this book, we will need to do both.

MY JOURNEY OUT OF EVANGELICALISM

In my book *Still Christian: Following Jesus Out of American Evangelicalism* (published in September 2017), I told my personal faith story.⁹ I hope you have read it or will read it soon! But here is a summary. I share it because it is always important to be honest about the experiences one brings into a book, especially one like this.

I was born into a Catholic family in northern Virginia and left the church at the age of thirteen despite the strenuous protest of my Irish Catholic mother. Three years later, I underwent a dramatic and most unlikely conversion to evangelical faith in a Southern Baptist congregation. I was all in from that point on, later attending Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and becoming an ordained Southern Baptist minister.

This means my first entry into an evangelical subculture was in the born-again Southern Baptist world of the late 1970s. I didn't know I had become an "evangelical." The term wasn't used at that time among Southern Baptists and had only just begun to catch on in national media.

The fact that I wasn't raised in an evangelical family, that I became a Southern Baptist, and that Southern Baptists really did not identify as "evangelicals" until they were led to do so by conservative Baptist leaders in the 1990s, makes my journey different from that of many other post-evangelicals. That I am old enough to have a history with evangelicals that goes back to the late 1970s gives me a somewhat longer historical frame than those who are younger. And finally, the fact that my evangelical experience was generally wholesome and untraumatic—until I took on controversial ethical issues as an adult—also shapes me and the approach I take here.

After seminary, at age twenty-five, I decided to attend the liberal Union Theological Seminary in New York, where I received doctoral training in Christian ethics and wrote a dissertation about Christians who rescued Jews during the Holocaust.¹⁰ This dissertation became crucial in launching my career and forming my moral vision. I learned then to care deeply about the moral effects of Christian faith, for good or ill. I became certain that the goal is not just to make more Christians. The goal is to make better Christians.

During a pivotal two years of that six-year doctoral process, I worked on the staff of the estimable Ron Sider, who initiated me into the broader evangelical world of the early 1990s. His version of evangelicalism was derived from his Mennonite faith. It was hopeful (rather than pessimistic or angry), center-left politically (rather than right-wing), and oriented to peace and justice (rather than end times, abortion politics, or apologetics). Sider helped me figure out who I was going to be religiously.¹¹ It was under his influence that I

embraced the evangelical label, both personally and professionally. His name will appear in this book several times. He is one of the best.

Gratefully accepting the only teaching job available to me upon graduation in 1993, I returned to Southern Baptist Seminary for a soul-testing three years. When I was hired there, it looked like Southern was going to become not just a Southern Baptist school but an explicitly center-right evangelical school. Part of the agenda of the new leaders at Southern was to bring Southern Baptists into the evangelical world, and to do that they were hiring self-identified evangelicals like what I had become. I hoped that my center-left evangelicalism would fit well enough and would allow me to find and hold a place there. But under then-youthful new president R. Albert Mohler Jr., the school lurched to the right and threw many of us off the bus. The pivotal issue at the time was women in pastoral ministry—which I was for, but Southern decided it was most definitely against.

As an imperfect but salary-paying escape hatch, in 1996 we moved to the Bible Belt town of Jackson, Tennessee, where I taught for eleven years at another Southern Baptist school, Union University. It was there that I became truly drenched in turn-of-the-millennium conservative evangelical culture—not just at Union University, but also in our Willow Creek–affiliated local Baptist congregation (which I helped pastor),¹² in the two very conservative Christian K–12 schools to which we sent our children, and in the evangelical establishment. By that, I mean the array of evangelical Christian colleges, seminaries, magazines, publishing houses, and other institutions that I began having opportunity to serve in my rising career and which will be an important part of the story told in this book. If you attended an obscure evangelical college somewhere in America, I probably lectured there between 1996 and 2007. If you don't remember it, you must have missed required chapel that day.

During the latter stages of this period, I became a visible activist on two causes that left Union University's 95 percent Republican constituency unhappy with me: climate change and post-9/11 US torture of prisoners in the "war on terror."¹³ (I took the "liberal" position by being concerned about both and by calling evangelical Christians to resist Republican positions on both.) This was uncomfortable enough for all concerned that when a more politically diverse, moderate to liberal, post–Southern Baptist school, Mercer University, invited me to a distinguished university professor role in 2007, the answer was an obvious yes. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Yet even here at Mercer, though our family moved out of the Southern Baptist and evangelical subculture in both church attendance and employment, I remained a self-identified progressive evangelical. I was still trying to call US evangelicals to essentially the same vision that Ron Sider had

imprinted on me in the early 1990s, and I was still holding a national center-left evangelical audience that had been building for twenty years.

But then in 2014 I wrote *Changing Our Mind*, a book gently making a biblically based argument for full evangelical acceptance of LGBTQ people in church life on the same terms as straight people.¹⁴ This work rocketed me—against my will—right out of the evangelical world that had nurtured me and that I had served for two decades. But this forced exit from the evangelical institutional world, the broken friendships, online attacks, and canceled speaking appearances, led to my entry into new communities of Christian exiles and dissidents. It also, quite gradually, opened my eyes to the deeper theological and ethical problems within evangelicalism that are the focus of this book.

I was “following Jesus out of American evangelicalism,” as I said in the subtitle of that memoir. But the memoir was mainly about “out of American evangelicalism,” not “following Jesus somewhere else.” I had not developed my thinking about where to go next, and I was not sure I would write about it if I ever did. The wounds were still too fresh.

TODAY’S EXVANGELICALS AND THEIR PREDECESSORS

I might have left it there, but a remarkable experience at the American Academy of Religion meeting in November 2018 made that impossible.¹⁵

I was serving as president of this large global association of religion scholars, and my presidential address carried the announced title “In the Ruins of White Evangelicalism: Interpreting a Compromised Christian Tradition through the Witness of African-American Literature.”¹⁶ I will say more about that address later.

What struck me that memorable night in Denver was the rather substantial array of hungry young evangelicals and post-evangelicals who came to hear me. Gathering in the front rows of the lecture space, approaching me afterward, telling me their stories, these promising but troubled (ex-)evangelicals were all around me. They hailed from the best evangelical schools. They were pursuing or had finished doctoral programs in religion and theology. And, to a person, they knew that there was something deeply broken about white US evangelicalism. They were hoping for something from me, some guidance, analysis, or hope. This became apparent in numerous conversations that night and in the days that followed, in person and online.

That is how the seeds of this book were planted. Since then, I have looked around a bit more and seen the signs of distress everywhere. One might even call it a movement.

Depending on how far one wants to zoom out, one can see a US evangelical dissident and exile population, and people trying to chart paths forward into something like post-evangelicalism, extending back quite a while. In this book we will meet evangelical dissenters and exiles—based on politics, race, sex, gender, doctrine, and more—going back many decades.

More recently, the emerging church movement that began in the early 2000s, centered around figures like Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Ray Anderson, and Brian McLaren, now looks like an early expression of post-evangelicalism.¹⁷ Authors like these, as well as those who have followed, like Rob Bell, Nadia Bolz-Weber, David Dark, Jennifer Crumpton, Deborah Jian Lee, Peter Rollins, and the late Rachel Held Evans, all seem to belong in a post-evangelical space.¹⁸

I meet scholars of religion everywhere who came through evangelicalism and left it behind. Visit a religion department almost anywhere in the United States and you will meet some post-evangelicals. Their existence offers happy evidence of evangelicalism's vitality but sad evidence of the difficulty many of evangelicalism's most thoughtful young people find in remaining within their tradition.

Throughout this book, we will keep in mind the complex relationship of evangelicals of color in the United States (and abroad) to white US evangelicalism, which holds most of the power within the evangelical world. While, based on a theological definition, many millions of non-US evangelicals, as well as African American, Latino/a, and Asian American Christians, would count as evangelicals, the power structure and cultural ethos of evangelicalism has been very much US-white-dominated since the birth of the modern evangelical movement in the 1940s. A less polite way to say it is that many evangelicals of color find white evangelicalism hopelessly American and hopelessly racist (see chap. 9).

Relatedly, the very visible, very conservative, very moralistic politics of white evangelicals has both attracted nonwhite evangelicals and repulsed their own dissidents. In other words, moralistic, politicized conservative evangelicalism continually creates and then sheds dissidents. This has been going on for a while. But it certainly seems that the dissident population is growing from all racial and ethnic groups within evangelicalism. The all-powerful, mostly male, white, and American evangelical power structure is being challenged as never before.

Recent dissenting or post-evangelical events such as the *Evolving Faith* and *Liberating Evangelicalism* conferences are emerging exactly at this sore point.¹⁹ Meanwhile, black and Latino/a liberation and womanist theology teems with people raised as evangelicals and now definitely post-evangelical, in large part due to white evangelical racism but sometimes also due to black

and Latino/a evangelical sexism and rejection of LGBTQ people.²⁰ We will engage a number of these voices in this book, for they have much to offer all post-evangelicals.

While this book will mainly concern US evangelicalism and its exiles, at least a brief further word about global evangelicalism seems appropriate. My lectures have taken me to Great Britain, Canada, much of Europe, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, with a dip into Latin America. I have learned much on these travels.

My impression is that Australia is the nation whose dynamics in relation to evangelicalism—in terms of both religious life and worldly politics—most resemble those of the United States. In both countries, the LGBTQ issue has been both a political issue and a religious one. The press for gay marriage, for example, has led to stark challenges to the evangelical establishment in Australia, which in turn clamps down hard on dissent, which in turn produces exiles, which in turn leads to reconsideration of evangelicalism. Keith Mascord, whom I met in Sydney, has written two books documenting this exact journey.²¹ One difference in the Australian context is that the evangelical power structure in Australia is dominated by official Anglicanism, and the issues are uniquely connected to the politics of global Anglicanism.

Overall, no issue is more certain to produce evangelical exiles than resistance to LGBTQ inclusion, and the dynamics are similar in much of the world. My experience is that eastern European and global south evangelicals are more closed to any reconsideration of that issue than are those in other contexts I have visited, with Africa the least friendly context. Indeed, while my *Changing Our Mind* book is currently being translated into Swahili, the identity of the translators is being closely held for their protection. That translation project is being undertaken to ameliorate the great suffering of LGBTQ people in Africa, whose life-threatening situation is partly caused by fundamentalist and evangelical Christian zealotry.

Most everywhere, I see a recurring pattern. When LGBTQ evangelicals, their families, and allies start pressing for dignity and even full inclusion, they begin their arguments from within an evangelical theological framework. Eventually they tend to discover that evangelical ways of reading Scripture and, more broadly, of observing reality and discerning truth, may themselves be the problem. This then tends to move some from a dissenting posture within evangelicalism to self-exile from evangelicalism.

Before the LGBTQ inclusion fight created such heartburn, a similar story played out in relation to full equality, dignity, and service for women. Among evangelicalism's exiles from the 1980s and 1990s (and on till today) have been many, many women. Evangelical women often have been blocked from

pastoral service, and in some traditions have been consigned rather roughly to existential spiritual inferiority. This is a global pattern, and global evangelicalism has thus produced a boatload of female exiles, who are now providing leadership in the post-evangelical space; that is, if they have not felt the need to leave the Christian world altogether.

One more foray well beyond the bounds of evangelicalism may be helpful. In conversations with friends who occupy leadership roles in the Jewish community in the United States, I have learned that some similar patterns have become visible there. At least part of the Orthodox Jewish community relates to Jewish faith and tradition in an analogous manner to how many evangelicals relate to Christian faith and tradition. It is interesting, then, to discover a dissenting and post-Orthodox Jewish trend, also especially among the young. The issues tend to be similar: the role of women, LGBTQ inclusion, and politics. For both Jews and evangelicals, how one relates to the policies of the State of Israel is another point of anguish and division.

Do you notice a pattern beginning to develop here? To the extent that US and global evangelicalism (and beyond?!) have been dominated by straight white men, and to the extent that these leaders have interpreted Scripture and tradition in a way that reinforces their power, they have produced exiles from the margins of their community—those who are not white, not male, and not straight. Today, it seems to me, these exiles are being joined by more and more straight white male exvangelicals, sometimes in solidarity with those already pushed out, and sometimes for their own reasons.

In the United States, the precise post-evangelical moment we find ourselves in seems to have begun in 2016—that fateful year—mainly under the #exvangelical label. Blake Chastain created the hashtag and now runs a podcast under that name. Spoken-word artist Emily Joy was involved in starting the #ChurchToo movement to address sexual abuse in evangelical churches. Religion scholars Bradley Onishi and Chrissy Stroop are ex-evangelicals who are writing about the growing movement.²² At the most recent American Academy of Religion meeting, post-evangelicalism received its own session for the first time. Something is in the air right now—that’s for sure.

I feel a profound sense of responsibility to help this surging population of evangelical exiles chart a way forward, if I can offer something that might be of value. I first felt called to be a Christian pastor when I was seventeen years old. Throughout my career I have been responding to a pastoral call. “Feed my sheep,” Jesus said (John 21:17), and that is what I have tried to do. This book is an expression of that calling. *I feel called to help shepherd the lost sheep of post-evangelicalism, especially the most recent exiles*—so many of them heartbroken, angry, and alienated from their churches, their families, and their God. This book is for them.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK: AUTHORITY, THEOLOGY, ETHICS

That's enough background. Now here's a snapshot of where the book will go. The book consists of three sections, each three chapters long. The sections are called "Authorities: Listening and Learning," "Theology: Believing and Belonging," and "Ethics: Being and Behaving." I am making proposals for post-evangelicals in all three arenas.

Part 1: Authorities. How do we learn God's way forward for us? To whom, to what authorities, do we listen? In this section we will consider the history of evangelicalism, the nature and role of Scripture, and the value of other resources and ways of discerning God's will.

Part 2: Theology. What shall we believe and do about God, Jesus, and church? These chapters take a close look at the major narrative threads of the Old and New Testaments and the God we meet there. The church chapter offers some theology and practical discussion of churchgoing options for post-evangelicals.

Part 3: Ethics. What should our character and behavior look like in the arenas of sex, politics, and race, three of the most important ethical concerns driving people out of evangelicalism today?

Those who are at all familiar with my books will see that I am plowing considerable new ground here—only the ethics section reflects much earlier work on my part. I am excited about that. I have learned a great deal in the process, which is one of the main reasons to write a book. Each chapter reflects engagement with a specific, separate scholarly literature—stacks and stacks of books that you will mainly meet in the footnotes. Feel free to engage this material as much as suits you.

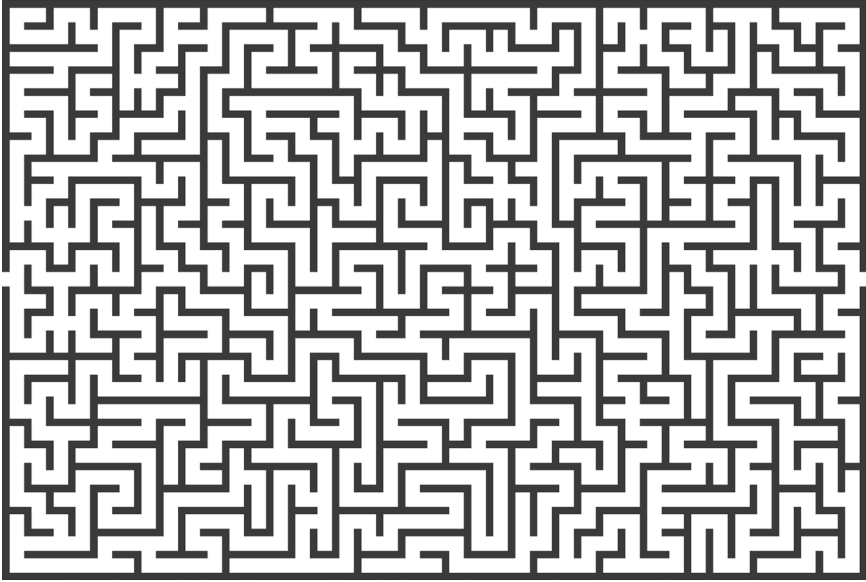
As a Christian ethicist by training, I hasten to add that I do not claim special expertise in evangelical historiography, biblical hermeneutics, or theological method. (Fancy words, huh?!) I have done the best that I can outside my specialty, within the limits of my competence. I hope that others will build on what I have attempted to do here.

FINDING OUR WAY OUT OF THE MAZE

A friend of mine proposed an image to describe what he sees going on right now: Young evangelicals began life on a path that their parents and pastors said would take them all the way through the journey, with Jesus and Truth intact.

Maybe about the time they entered college, they found themselves in a

maze of questions and problems. I picture one of those massive garden mazes like the one at Hampton Court in England, in which the hedges are so tall that you cannot come close to seeing over them. You just try to make your way through this massive maze and eventually come out on the other side. It is surprisingly difficult.



As adults, my wife and I tried the Hampton Court maze. We really had trouble finding our way. I remember feeling just the beginnings of genuine panic when every path we took within the maze led to a dead end. I began to fear that we would never get out, that in the end we would die in the garden maze of Hampton Court, our flesh to be eaten by proper British vultures.

OK, that's a bit over the top. But it was a relief to get out, I can tell you that.

I meet people all the time who can't find their way out of the evangelical maze. They got stuck in the northwest corner over biblical inerrancy, or in the northeast part over male dominance, or in the southern region over sexual purity. They can't get out, can't go back to where they came from, and can't move ahead.

The goal of this book, then, is to offer clues for getting out of some of the most difficult spots in the evangelical maze, in order to come out on the other side—not just alive and intact, but still interested in a relationship with Jesus. It is a tall order, because among the worst failures of evangelicalism has been the damage done to people's opinions about Jesus himself. Evangelical leaders

wanted to be understood as speaking for Jesus, and unfortunately, many have accepted that claim and therefore rejected both them and their Jesus.

Jesus himself needs to be re-presented and reconsidered, and I will do that here. A term I will offer to describe the vision of Jesus I am embracing is *Christian humanism*. It is a new term for me to use in my work, though not a new term in Christian history. It basically means orienting our lives by a version of Christian faith that is compassionately realistic about the human condition, reflects the best of human knowledge, and enables all kinds of human beings to truly flourish. It's humane and for human well-being. I have come to believe that something that might be called Christian humanism offers a good way forward for post-evangelicals. I am confident it reflects Jesus' own way of treating people.

Many readers will have encountered the word "humanism" only in negative connotations, as a way of claiming that only humans matter and that God does not. But I will draw on older, more inclusive uses of the word that celebrate human life and the best human values as gifts from God.

Whether that concept works for you or not, whatever path you pick for getting out of the maze, I invite you to come along with me on a journey into a future that is post-evangelical but still centered on following Jesus, hopeful of making Christians into better human beings, and committed to making the world a better place.

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