

Rachel Held Evans, public theologian

## **She was the C. S. Lewis of her time.**

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [September 11, 2019](#) issue



Rachel Held Evans. Courtesy photo by Macki Evans.

What metaphor does one use to describe the way the work of scholars is passed on to everyday Christians? “Trickle down” is not good, for it implies that the academy is an endless pure font, with only some tainted refreshment making it to the plebs. “Mediation” and “bridge building” are better, both for their christological echoes and their suggestion that traffic goes both ways. “Translation” makes sense if one acknowledges that a good translation is a work of art in itself. I prefer “preaching,” since whatever is true, good, and beautiful serves in the classroom as well as the pulpit.

These musings were prompted by the death earlier this year of Rachel Held Evans, who was one of the great theological translators, bridge builders, and preachers of our time. If you don’t know her work, check out the Twitter hashtag #becauseofRHE and behold the vast, digital church she planted, with moving testimonies from those who, through her work, were wooed into following Christ, called into ministry, and

summoned from despair into an affirmation of life. She is the most influential mainline theologian of her generation, the C. S. Lewis of her time. Ask any seminary admissions officer who their applicants—especially women applicants—have been reading, and you’ll see that the claim is not overstated.

She was armed only with “a library card and a blog,” as she once put it. She never pursued a graduate degree or sought credentials from a denomination. Without past seminary training or ecclesial position, she found a voice online. She was more than a companionable, winsome, self-effacing memoirist of the journey out of fundamentalism. Hers was an intellectual project, and she took on the most daunting of subjects: how does the church read scripture and live it out well. Yet she never drew attention to her studiousness, showed no evidence of anxiety about a lack of academic accreditation, and seemed comfortable operating as a journalist.

Evans can’t be understood without attention to her hometown of Dayton, Tennessee, the site of the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial (which is alluded to in the title of her first book, *Evolving in Monkey Town*). William Jennings Bryan was the lawyer who argued at the trial against the teaching of evolution by John Scopes, and in his honor locals founded Bryan College—Evans’s alma mater.

Evans’s family moved to Dayton when she was 14 so that her father could be a teacher and administrator at Bryan. As a teenager she was quoted in *Christianity Today* supporting President Bush’s abstinence-based sex education, and she later represented her high school’s Bible club on the homecoming court. Before she entered college she was a formidable culture warrior Christian, determined to evangelize an entire town that already claimed to be Christian. (“There were exactly two self-avowed atheists in my graduating class, and I’m pleased to say I converted one of them.”)

But her household of origin was also full of grace, with a father determined to make space for questions and a mother who told her daughters they could do anything. As a student at Bryan, Evans slowly awakened to an absence of grace in the fundamentalist tradition she’d inherited. And she started asking questions: If non-Christians can’t be saved, are victims of terrorism just as bound for hell as their murderers? Are there not obvious similarities between arguments used to exclude gay people now and those used for slavery not so long ago? If every passage of scripture is equally authoritative, shouldn’t we be much more keen to ban Cretans than we presently are (Titus 1:12)?

The grace Evans met at home and in Jesus didn't get expressed in the Christianity around her. She and her friends tried to plant an inclusive, emergent-style church in Dayton. It was decried in town as "the gay church" (though no gay people attended), ran out of money, and closed.

So she left fundamentalism, road-tripped on Sundays to an Episcopal church, and played pied piper to a rapidly growing set of Twitter and Facebook followers. "I definitely believe in the slippery slope," she enthused on one podcast, turning upside down the classic fundamentalist worry that if you question one thing about the Bible, you will end up questioning everything. (The second edition of *Evolving* was retitled, appropriately, *Faith Unraveled*.)

Katelyn Beaty wrote in *Christianity Today* that in an age of uncertainty, evangelicals don't know where the boundaries are. As Evans's fame grew, having a position on her became a boundary-definer. She was, as described in a *Washington Post* headline, the "most polarizing woman in evangelicalism."

Evans was driven by questions, but she didn't dissolve into a muddle of uncertainty. She kept asking difficult questions, and mainline Protestantism provided her some answers. Sacraments are good. So is academic study of scripture. So are non-Protestants. (She reportedly studied Alexander Schmemmann's *For the Life of the World* regularly as she wrote *Searching for Sunday*). And in a real ecumenical twist, Evans admitted that not everything the fundamentalists handed her was death-dealing. She got from them a love for scripture, a narrative in which she had a place, and a community that knew her and recognized her gifts.

Yet similar communities were death-dealing for people she came to love, especially LGBTQ people and women with ambitions outside of the domestic sphere. "I used the word 'post-modern' a lot," she laconically reported about her heavy doubt phase. And finally, in a phrase she should have trademarked, she insisted that she's still Christian because the story of Jesus is the one she's willing to be wrong about.

A student of mine flew across the continent to hear Evans speak. She later told me that Evans had complimented her shirt, asked her about Canada, and later served her communion. "God needed to be fed by woman," Evans said at that conference, in her typical, understatedly brilliant way. It's a statement that is both perfectly orthodox—look at any gallery of medieval art showing images of Mary nursing Jesus—and intentionally designed to annoy the patriarchy.

Evans had a gift for taking the treasures of the gospel off the high shelf and making them accessible. And she did this, as Carol Howard Merritt wrote on the *Century* website, as often as a blog and Twitter feed could be updated.

In her fine chapter on baptism in *Searching for Sunday*, a book designed around the Western church's historic seven sacraments, Evans makes use of William Willimon's books on baptism, which seek to free Baptists from anxiety about baptizing infants. God claims us before we know our own name, and God saves in community through a covenant we can never fully understand, so it's right to baptize this way, Willimon argues. Evans adds her own twist. Evangelicalism keeps giving the impression that God is just for a very narrow range of people: right-thinking and right-behaving white, male, hetero Republicans. In that approach, grace is changed back into judgment. Baptism says something different: grace is bestowed without merit. That's what makes it grace. Baptism, she writes, is "an adoption, not an interview."

It's hard to top that for theological punchiness. Then, riffing off her friend Nadia Bolz-Weber, she adds this about baptism: "The good news is you're are a beloved child of God; the bad news is you don't get to choose your siblings."

Those who despair that Twitter is ruining language, take note. These two lines are not only Tweetably short, but they restructure evangelical faith in ways that annoy fellow evangelicals precisely by being so evangelical. Grace is really gracious. And God distributes grace more freely than we do. That's a faith worth signing up for. Especially if those who count themselves Jesus' closest friends and self-appointed advisers have written you off.

Evans's first best seller, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, describes her yearlong experiment in enacting the biblical commandments as literally as possible. The book could plausibly be read as a long trolling of the simplistic hermeneutic that regards every part of the Bible as equal in coherence, truth, and authority. If we read scripture this way, she points out,

technically speaking, it is *biblical* for a woman to be sold by her father (Exodus 21:7), *biblical* for her to be forced to marry her rapist (Deuteronomy 22:28-29), *biblical* for her to remain silent in church (1 Corinthians 14:34-35), *biblical* for her to cover her head (1 Corinthians 11:6) and *biblical* for her to be one of multiple wives (Exodus 21:10).

This is one reason Evans's evangelical critics were so outraged: she wrests away a cornerstone dogma, that the Bible can be trusted. But she gives one back in return: that Jesus can be trusted, and the Bible can be loved.

Evans looks at places in the Bible where others look away—the so-called texts of terror. And she examines these texts through the lens of gender. “The bible contains a darkness you will only notice if you pay attention, for it is hidden in the details, whispered in the stories of women.”

She bears down on the story of Jephthah's daughter, sacrificed due to her warrior father's impetuous vow (Judg. 11). Unlike the similarly horrifying story of the binding of Isaac, in this case, “no ram was heard bleating from the thicket.” Jephthah's daughter dies. The book of Judges concludes, “From this comes the Israelite tradition that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah” (11:39–40).

What does it mean to take this verse literally? Evans wonders. She enacts an ancient liturgy by convening a group of female friends, one of whom builds a sort of mini-altar of faceless wooden figures huddled beneath barbed wire, nails, and blood. They pray in memory of Jephthah's daughter, the concubine of Judges 19, Hagar, Tamar, and many more women abused in the name of religion. Above the whole diorama are Jesus' words, “As you have done to the least of these . . .”

Evans concludes each of *Year's* chapters with an excursus on a biblical woman, and she chooses no less than Mary of Nazareth to wrap up the chapter on Jephthah's daughter. Although the church's exalted claims for Mary send Protestants “running for their commentaries,” Mary's is the womb where divinity and flesh meet and marry. Evans quotes Madeleine L'Engle: “I believe that each work of art . . . comes to the artist and says ‘Here I am. Enflesh me. Give birth to me.’” After pondering the mother of God for some time, Evans admits, she starts to “see Mary everywhere.”

Plenty of books seek to pry away their readers' love for scripture or to yank it out entirely. What Evans breaks down, she gives back in better form. She attends to scripture's darkest corners so as to light a candle there.

Several times Evans publicly pondered the idea of earning a PhD in Old Testament studies. But it is hard to imagine she would have departed her hometown to work on it. And Evans's apologetic skills may be something academic work and denominational offices grind out of people. That may be why uncredentialed,

nonordained apologists fill people's bookshelves: G. K. Chesterton, Anne Lamott, Marilynne Robinson. (Calvin himself was trained as a lawyer, not a theologian.)

Evans can't seem to help returning in her writing to the inherent attractiveness of Christian faith, after having heeded with full seriousness all the reasons to doubt it. It is as if, blessedly, she could not flush the apologetic task out of her system.

Rather than offer apologetics for the faith, mainline public theologians have often tried to translate Christian doctrine into the secular sphere. They had some success at that. But ours is a different age. The US president was elected not by masking his misogyny but by reveling in it, and he was supported most enthusiastically by evangelicals. In that context, an evangelical assailing biblical misogyny is doing a sort of public theology.

Evans observes that Americans long for a theology of rightness in a world where rich white men are in charge and everybody else is exploited and quiet about it. The antidote to this poison, she argues, is not distance from scripture but greater proximity to it, intimacy even. She describes the Eucharist this way: "Jesus slips in, through my parted lips." Evans's gospel is nongnostic and scandalously inclusive:

The gospel doesn't need a coalition devoted to keeping the wrong people out. It needs a family of sinners, saved by grace, committed to tearing down the walls, throwing open the doors, and shouting, "Welcome! There's bread and wine. Come eat with us and talk." This isn't a kingdom for the worthy; it's a kingdom for the hungry.

Evans has made Jesus' ongoing invitation through the church plausible, even beautiful. Even Trumpistas are invited. They just have to sit at the servants' end of the table, where the more self-aware sinners are washing Jesus' feet and drying them with their hair.

Evans was inclusive, but she never fell into the trap of stressing the minimum a person could believe and still be a Christian. Once, after hearing a lecturer question the bodily nature of Jesus' resurrection, she turned to an African American colleague, who wondered how a nonbodily resurrection is good news for the ancestors chained in slave ships. Evans seemed to sense that the era of seeing how low the bar can be set for Christian belief is over. Instead, she sought living wisdom on what to take more seriously and what to take less seriously.

Evans had a charming habit of shouting (usually digitally, but in person with no less zeal) the Hebrew phrase from Proverbs 31 *eschet hayil* (woman of valor) when a fellow sister achieved something. Proverbs 31 is often taken in fundamentalist circles as a checklist of female achievement and failure. What God holds out as grace is reduced to another impossible standard with which to shame women. Evans took that chapter back, with help from her Jewish friends, and made it an encouragement, a delight.

She could be more literal than the literalists. (She noted that literalists don't generally sell their children into slavery or take multiple wives or stone adulterers. "Yet," she added.) She believed the Bible's stories are fleshed. God steps into them in person in Jesus of Nazareth: "When God became human, when he wrapped himself in our blood and skin and bones, his first order of business was to touch the ones we would not touch."

Evans's relationship with Judaism was understated, but it was both remarkable and politically crucial. She was open to learning from Jewish thinkers, and she was careful not to be supersessionist. She joked at one point that she didn't know what the word meant and assumed it had to do with Texas's recurring wish to leave the Union. But she knew what it meant—and she avoided it. She loved Israel, her Jewish friends, and the Old Testament.

She crowned this achievement with a greater one still by Christian lights: placing Jesus Christ and his eschatological, saving work at the center of attention. God is faithful to Israel. And God is also personally, climactically, savingly present in one life, nurtured in one Jewish womb. It's hard to be non-supersessionist. It's harder still to be Israel-affirming and also Christocentric.

Evans had no grand political strategy, no missive for the State Department, no plan to translate doctrine into something immediately useful. She was too busy living into the Bible and showing her readers that a more graced way is possible.

Our yearning for a public theologian in recent years has a semiveiled misogyny to it: we imagine male figures like Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King Jr. We have just had a public theologian in our midst. She loved Jesus and she worked hard to love the Bible, the church, and the world, which she saw as full of flaws and full of an even greater glory.

If you want a glance at the sort of Christianity that's coming, look at the little church that closed in Monkey Town and the digital church that now carries on its work. Its witness, like that of Evans, is far from over.

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