

STILL CHRISTIAN

*Following Jesus Out of
American Evangelicalism*

DAVID P. GUSHEE

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PREFACE

IT'S NOT LIKE I'M OLD. WELL, I TURNED 55 THIS YEAR, and there's plenty of gray in my beard and more and more in my hair, and my high school yearbook picture is really kind of odd to look at right now. But I've still got some kick left in me, and it's a little early for a deathbed confessional.

I'm not at the end of my journey, I hope. But I am at the end of a major stage of it; that much feels certain. Maybe it's the forty-year thing. As of this writing, I am approaching the forty-year anniversary of the summer of 1978, the season when I set out on the path I've followed ever since. It's when I became what used to be called a born-again Christian.

That year also more or less marks the beginning of a social movement that has constantly intertwined with

my own personal journey—and has probably had a lot to do with yours as well. It was the time when fundamentalist and evangelical Christian conservatives were gearing up to create the Christian Right, whose purpose was to take back America for God, primarily by taking effective control of the Republican Party and getting people into power who would advance their agenda. A subplot of that story (in which I would also eventually become entangled) was the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention.

When I said that simple yes to Jesus in July 1978, I had no earthly idea that my path as a Christian, then a minister, and then an academic, and then an activist, would take me directly into the crosshairs of this movement. I did not know that I would be wrestling in and with Southern Baptist politics, Christian Right politics, evangelical politics, and American politics for forty years. This is an account of what I have experienced in my effort to follow Jesus amid the maelstrom of all this Christian right-wing politics, and a fair amount of Catholic, liberal, mainline, radical, and secular politics as well.

It has been an eventful journey. Somehow right now it feels very much like I am leaving it behind, as if the journey is ending. But I need to try to make sense of it, for me if for nobody else. I need to ask myself how I got here; who I was and who I have now become; and where, if anywhere, was Jesus, the one to whom I have pledged my commitment each day of these forty years. I need to give an account of myself, and make an inquiry into where my God has been in this journey among those battling believers who all claim to be God's people.

And I want to help you understand your own journey up to this point, and the one that lies ahead.

At least if we are talking about the American Christian landscape since 1978, I've pretty much seen it all. I was raised a post-Vatican II Catholic, became a Southern Baptist through a mystical teenage conversion, became a Baptist minister, almost abandoned the whole thing for Episcopalianism, discovered liberal-radical Protestantism by full immersion at Union Theological Seminary in New York, almost lost my faith studying the Holocaust, met evangelicals I really liked, met evangelicals I really didn't like, became a Christian ethicist, got a teaching gig at a school that tested my convictions, hung out briefly with really powerful evangelical leaders and helped them figure out some things about abortion and racism, went to a small evangelical college, got involved in national environmental and antitorture activism that embarrassed that university's leaders, moved to a "moderate" university where I was initially distrusted as too conservative, got dazzled and then a bit disillusioned by Barack Obama and his people for a while, became every liberal's favorite evangelical, changed my mind about gay people, wrote a book about it that got me in trouble with a lot of evangelicals, got elected president of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Christian Ethics, worked against Donald Trump, and taught Sunday School every week to recovering addicts and professors and everyone in between.

When it comes to bitter cultural divisions fueled daily by religion, I'm Forrest Gump. For whatever reason, I've been in the scene, where the conflicts are, where red and blue meet. Like Waldo, if you just look hard enough,

you can find me. My journey has taken me through and across and around and amid some of the messiest fights, most interesting moments, and most fascinating people in recent American religious life. I've been on the red side and the blue side, with the Christian Right and the Religious Left, and everyone in between.

If you live in that space as well, if you find that the labels we use to decide whom we can and can't like don't fit you, if you want to look for God outside the boxes the religious wars have tried to put God in, then maybe my journey has something to say about yours.

And here's the thing: I've kept track. Little did these unsuspecting Christians know, but I'm a compulsive journaler and record keeper. I have kept every lecture and speech I've ever given, and pretty much all of my important correspondence. And all along the way, I've been journaling almost every day about most every important thing I've experienced. So I have contemporaneous notes on, for example, the day in 1987 that I was told that white men had better remain quiet in a course on liberation theology, the day in 1995 that I was invited to sell my soul for a nice future working with a conservative seminary president, the evening in 1995 in which the Holy Spirit burned out of me any capacity to hate that same president, the days in 2006 when I received hate mail for opposing torture while my daughter lay unconscious in the hospital, the day in 2007 when I was interrogated intensely for having spent way too long working with conservatives, the day in 2008 when I figured out I was being used by the Obama campaign, and the day in 2011 when a very bright philosopher at a very conservative Christian college said to me, "We know we

are supposed to oppose gays, but we can't really give any good reason for it anymore."

Did you notice that I threw a reference to the Holy Spirit into that last paragraph? You see, through all of this, I haven't been able to stop being a Christian. Despite all the fighting, culture warring, and general craziness that I've seen, I am still doing my best to be a follower of Jesus.

And so this journaling, I should tell you, has been prayer journaling. That's mainly how I have prayed for the last forty years—by writing it all out to God. When I became a Christian at the age of 16, it stuck. It took. I can't claim any credit for it, but it's true. And I've been writing it and praying it ever since.

So the stories I am going to tell you are not the stories of a disillusioned ex-Christian. It's weird, perhaps, but none of the nasty stuff I've seen in churches or denominations or seminaries or colleges or academia has ever really had an effect on my faith in Jesus. Jesus isn't the problem. Christians are. So I'm still a Jesus follower after all these years—or trying to be, anyway.

It's not that Christian people are just a problem. People are a mix of good and bad, and the bad is often just a slightly exaggerated version of the good. That's just as true of Christians as it is of everyone else.

We have an expression in the Gushee household, developed by one of our three very clever children when he was a teenager. I like to quote movie lines, and almost every day I do so, whether family members feel like hearing them or not. At one point my son David said of these quotes, "Dad, you never get it exactly right. You never even get it close to right." He said this with a smile,

and it has stuck in the family lexicon ever since, along with my mangled quotes from *Ghostbusters*, *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, and *Groundhog Day*.

Excuse me for a moment. Back in a second. My wife, Jeanie, called me over to tell me that I am remembering the genesis of “You never get it exactly right” incorrectly. So I guess I never get it exactly right even when it comes to talking about when we started saying that I never get it exactly right.

That Gusheeism is true of Christians, too. We never get it exactly right. We never (or rarely) get it even close to right. But it isn’t for lack of trying. Just about everyone I have encountered in the religious landscape of American life over the last forty years has been trying to get it exactly right. And with just a bit of sympathy, one can see how they got to their version of what trying to get it exactly right looks like, even when in the end I, at least, must conclude that they were partly or even largely wrong.

So this is a book that will try to offer a fair rendering of the flawed people and institutions to be found across the red-blue/conservative-liberal barricades in American Christianity. I think it will not be hard to show the virtues of each strand of Christian I have encountered. But it will also be clear how simultaneously these virtues became their own vices. It seems impossible to have any significant amount of a virtue—such as strong conviction—without simultaneously suffering its correlated vice, which is intolerance.

We are experiencing a moment in American life in which our cultural divides have hardened into mutual incomprehension and demonization. I first wrote that

line long before the election of Donald Trump as president, and it is even truer now. We don't know each other, we don't understand each other, we don't trust each other, and we don't like each other. All we see are each other's vices, none of each other's virtues. If this memoir from both sides of the barricades helps improve this deplorable situation, that is reason enough to write it.

I may not succeed in this project, because I myself bear a number of scars from the battles in which I have fought. I fear an encroaching bitterness and cynicism in my own soul. The further along I get, the less faith I have in a group called "Christians," and the more I see the world from the perspective of those who have been hurt by Christians. But to give up entirely on Christians or that thing called "the church" would be shattering to me. In lieu of many rounds of expensive therapy to figure all this stuff out, I am doing what I usually do—pondering it all with my pen. Thanks for joining me.

We are where we are because of where we've been. If, like me, you're trying to figure out why Christian life is so fragmented and sometimes destructive today, then it will help to see some of the roads Christians have taken to get here. Because my story has happened along several of those roads, you might find it helpful to hear about it. I think I can open some avenues of understanding related to all kinds of things, such as:

- post-Vatican II U.S. Catholicism compared with Catholicism today
- the Southern Baptist Convention controversy and its warring parties
- mainline liberalism and radicalism

- American conservative and progressive evangelicalism
- life as an academic in both secular and Christian institutions of higher learning
- church life in America in a time of decline
- Christian engagement with politics
- the national media, especially its shrinking band of religion reporters
- culture-war fights over specific issues such as abortion, climate, torture, and LGBT inclusion

So this book will resolve my inner conflicts, profile some fascinating people, dish some really interesting dirt, explain the culture wars—and talk about what God might have to do with any of this.

Jesus grabbed me hard back in 1978, and he has never let me go. Even if my Christian critics think I am beyond redemption, I think Jesus has not yet given up on me. I hope that in these pages his elusive, mysterious, tender, gracious presence will be felt. I hope that becoming a religious professional in a conflicted environment during forty years of culture wars hasn't beaten that tender Jesus out of my soul. Read on and find out.