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WHY I AM A CULTURAL EVANGELICAL

By Jenell Paris

I am a lifelong evangelical; in the womb I kicked out praises, in grade school I memorized hundreds of verses, and in high school I worked for my church's youth programs. One summer the church pastor (male by theological necessity) called a meeting of our staff: a female director, five female high schoolers and one male high schooler. The pastor informed us that while our positions were identical—summer staff—the boy would be paid more than the girls because he was the only male. "He'll be working harder, because he'll have to mentor all the boys," is what I remember the pastor saying. The amount of money was trivial, but the message was enormous.

I have always been an active church member, but that experience and a few others from before I graduated high school dissuaded me from considering seminary education or church work. Though my dualistic theology valued church or missions work over secular work, all the common sense God gave me insisted that exercising my gifts elsewhere in God's world would be better than dealing with discrimination and repression inside God's house.



Female evangelical leaders hack different paths through the tangled fields in which they labor, and while some join other traditions, many "continue to try to find a place and a voice on the boundaries of evangelicalism and feminism."

In *Living on the Boundaries: Evangelical Women, Feminism and the Theological Academy*, Nicola Hoggard Creegan and Christine D. Pohl interview evangelical or formerly evangelical women who chose the path I rejected, studying or teaching in an evangelical seminary. Whether women remained part of evangelicalism or joined a different tradition, negotiation of feminism and evangelicalism "involves ongoing reflection on identity and regular grappling with the complexity of gender assumptions within evangelical institutions" (47). Female evangelical leaders hack different paths through the tangled fields in which they labor, and while some join other traditions, many "continue to try to find a place and a voice on the boundaries of evangelicalism and feminism" (48).

I still call myself an evangelical, but not for the reasons I once did. Not because I'm hopeful for women's equality to be honored across the evangelical movement; in fact, I'm saddened to see patriarchy alive and well in even the newest generation of movement leadership. It was one thing to be excluded from leadership by men who were my father's age. But now I see many among my generation of male scholars, pastors, and professors mistaking themselves as helpful by advocating "soft patriarchy," a

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kinder, gentler approach to complementarian belief and practice. And not because I am always treated well as a woman in evangelical settings. Not even because I can check off every item on a list of essential evangelical doctrine. I remain evangelical for cultural reasons, which I suppose makes me a cultural evangelical.

Being a "Cultural Christian"

I was taught that a cultural Christian was one of the worst things a person could be. They were nominal and lukewarm, abiding just behind God's pursed lips, about to be spit out. Cultural Christians used church as a social club, enjoying the performance of worship and the meals and friendships of fellowship. In contrast, we committed Christians rested in God's right hand, safe for eternity. We were born again, pursued a personal relationship with God, attended church, and did good works in the world.

I still believe in being born again and cultivating an intimate relationship with my Savior, but I don't set the committed Christians in contrast to the cultural Christians in the way I used to. Anthropology has taught me that culture is more than just something 'lite' added on to the real deal. Culture, the shared beliefs and practices of a group of people, is humanity's home on earth; none of us live without it. Churches and Christians always exist in cultures, in relationships of mutual influence. Being a cultural evangelical helps me remain wholeheartedly engaged with a tradition that too often demeans women in both theology and practice. If I reinterpret the phrase 'cultural evangelical,' I see two good reasons for being one.

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First, evangelicalism is my culture in the deepest sense of the word; evangelicals are my people. Evangelicalism provides me with symbols, words, and rituals for interpreting my world. I read the Bible and believe it is true, and I pray to God and believe God listens. I worship at home to the Gaither Vocal Band DVDs and pray for Billy Graham's health. I feel at home in Christian bookstores; my mom and aunt still work at the one where I used to staff summer sidewalk sales. American evangelicalism is my tradition of birth and my tradition of choice.

As a result of being formed by this movement as a child, I want to use my adult abilities to help shape it. I pay attention to the evangelical movement and consider the impact of my writing, speaking, and teaching on it. Being a cultural evangelical in this sense is not a weak attachment to tradition or to God, but a recognition of how deeply we are shaped by culture, and how successful evangelicalism can be in molding individuals into a Christian way of life.

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I wish my allegiance to evangelicalism were simple and pure, but it's not. It was jolting, as a girl, to be in situations like the summer staff one and to experience the disjuncture between traditionalist theology and my own conscience. Discomfort continues into my adulthood; it's painful to be in disharmony with my tradition, as I sometimes am because of my commitment to gender equality and my lifestyle as a professor-mom with a husband who (mostly) stays home with our three little boys. It is difficult to make choices about what to believe and how to live in a tradition that carries competing voices; there are many affirming, like-minded evangelicals, but there are also many who judge and condemn families like mine.

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This difficulty leads to my second reason for being a cultural evangelical: because my evangelicalism is embedded in American culture. I'm glad American culture socialized me for gender equality, educational success, and a life that includes service in the public sphere. In public high school and secular graduate school I was educated by professional women and female-affirming men, without being limited by my gender. Evangelicalism helped shape my ethics and practice in those settings in indispensable ways, but I was equipped and empowered for service largely by people outside the church.

The culture within which my religion is embedded empowers me to speak against anachronistic elements of my religion.

I have exchanged the church-world dualism of my upbringing for a more holistic understanding of creation. God made everything, so we can expect to see the image of God everywhere, even in people and places that do not acknowledge their creator. Conversely, we can also expect to see sin everywhere, even in people and places that are devoted to God. The culture within which my religion is embedded empowers me to speak against anachronistic elements of my religion. I remain evangelical in part because I am part of a broader culture that is more affirming of women.

Remaining an Evangelical

As an anthropology professor at a Christian college in Pennsylvania, I am now twenty years and a thousand miles away from that summer staff position in suburban Minnesota, but similar inequalities persist. It may not be as blatant as what my pastor said to our summer staff (though sometimes it is), but in the end, men's work is often rewarded and valued more than women's work. These inequalities mark the everyday experience of many evangelical women working in seminaries, churches, para-church organizations, and homes.

Sometimes I want to leave evangelicalism for greener pastures, and I wish blessings to women who do just that. As for me, I'm attached to my tradition with a cord of many strands—my spiritual practice, my family, my community, my intellectual life, my job, and my parenting are all enmeshed with evangelicalism—and it is not easily broken. May we who stay find courage and grace as we work for change.



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