

GROUP STUDY GUIDE

AFTER Evangelicalism



THE PATH TO A
NEW CHRISTIANITY



David P. Gushee

Study Guide written by Steve Watson

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FOREWORD

I wrote *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity* because there are so many of us who are getting lost in the evangelical maze: inerrancy, indifference to the environment, deterministic Calvinism, purity culture, racism, LGBTQ discrimination, male dominance, and Christian nationalism. I wanted to offer a clear assessment and a new way forward for disillusioned post-evangelicals.

I love the communal expression of our faith. In other words, I love church. I love being with people and sharing thoughts about God, Jesus, and how to live as Christians. But we are in a time when we must reconsider and recast how we think and act as Christians. In *After Evangelicalism*, I propose new ways of Christian believing and of listening to God and Jesus today. I try to help post-evangelicals know how to belong and behave, going from where they are to a living relationship with Christ and an intellectually cogent and morally robust post-evangelical faith. I try to show that you can have a principled way of understanding scripture, a community of Christ's people, a healthy politics, and can repent and learn to listen to people on the margins.

Although this study guide is meant for anyone to use, it's especially designed for groups. It's an opportunity to talk openly and candidly about how we are supposed to be Christians in our changing world. I hope you will find others with whom to do that necessary work.

I'm so grateful to Steve Watson, who has written this study guide. He's a wise, experienced pastor, has taught the content himself, and has a good sense for how to direct conversation. Enjoy!

David Gushee

INTRODUCTION

Like David Gushee, I am a Christian who was also once an evangelical. I also pastor a church that, to be free and faithful as we understood our call, needed to leave our former evangelical associations behind. So both in my own life and in work as a pastor, I wrestle with all the issues raised in *After Evangelicalism*. David Gushee's writing is one of the great gifts and guiding lights to those of us seeking to follow Jesus and remain Christian, while leaving some of the problems and sins of evangelical culture behind. I have preached some of the concepts in this book in the church I serve, taught a class based on this material, and have recommended this book to many. Not all the paths forward in this book are truly new. As David would eagerly acknowledge, he is steeped in the pragmatic realities of our time and place while also seeking to maintain and retrieve some older, enduring qualities and practices of the faith. In all this, David Gushee's *After Evangelicalism* is both an authoritative and humble guide for paths to a new Christianity, or at least a *renewed* Christianity, for our times.

This guide is meant to encourage people to read and reflect together on *After Evangelicalism*, to help people and communities keep moving forward in our faith. It can be used by an individual to accompany the reading of the book, but it will be most helpful when used by a group. This group could be two interested friends, a book club, a small group inside or outside of a church, or a church class or program. Former evangelicals looking for new ways forward, current evangelicals who have tensions with their affiliation or faith, as well as other people—Christian or not—who are curious about the impact of this movement, can benefit from reading this book.

The guide is structured in five sections, which mostly deal with two of the book's chapters each. Each week of the guide

offers three sections. Feel free to use them or not in any combination, depending on time and preferences. There are also spaces provided for writing in your own answers and reflections. For the ebook version of this guide, use the note taking feature of your reading device.

- **Getting Ready** - This section provides a one or two sentence summary of the big ideas from the book as well as questions for personal reflection and connection in advance of the reading or discussion. This section could be used by a group to begin a meeting or be optional material for participants to review in advance.
- **Group Discussion** - This section provides five or six discussion questions, each with a space where you can write in responses. Each starts with a quotation and short summary of part of the book, to help people remember what they read or assist people in participation if they didn't have a chance to read all the material in advance. Feel free to use every question or to only choose two or three to focus on.
- **Paths Forward** - This section provides supplementary material for going further or deeper. There are one or two spiritual practices people can try and an optional simple Bible study. Parts of this section could be used by groups who want to devote more time to this work or could be optional material for people to work with on their own.

SUGGESTED NORMS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

All groups benefit from some norms, expectations, or ground rules for their time together, helping the conversation have a mix of freedom and structure, and helping the conversation be open and safe for all. Have a conversation in your discussion group about how you'll use these guidelines for your time. Feel free to adapt this list or develop your own. These are short and simple norms for discussion that I have found helpful.

1. *Respect* - The material of this book hits on several deep, important, and controversial topics for people of faith. Seek to share your own perspective honestly, while also seeking to show respect for what are sure to be a divergence of views in the room, as well as respect for others who aren't present. Two easy ways to do this are, first, to use "I statements" when you share ("I think or I feel that..." rather than "this is true"). And, second, if you have to bring up people or churches that aren't in the room to share your experience, speak your truth but don't name names.
2. *Freedom* - All perspectives are welcome in the group as long as they stay respectful to others present. For the sake of our discussion, there are not right and wrong answers. We're all finding our way forward in our own way, at our own pace, as best we can.
3. *Community* - We seek to show up for others in the discussion, so we can thank people for sharing, ask them if they'd like to say more, offer our empathy, or if the group agrees, ask clarifying questions about what people meant. But we won't offer unsolicited advice to one another or otherwise comment on each other's thoughts and experiences.
4. *Vulnerability* - Each person is in charge of their own participation. People can be encouraged to speak openly or vulnerably, but each person should also only share what they are comfortable or ready to share. Anyone can choose to not speak to questions or topics they'd rather not, for any reason. No one will be pressured to share more or ask to speak to things they would rather not at this time.
5. *Sharing the Space* - Each person will seek to limit the time they speak, to encourage good listening and time for everyone to participate. This means waiting for others to share if you have already and can also mean agreeing to limits of how long any one person will speak at a given time (two to three minutes maximum for instance) as well as a discussion leader

who will monitor the time and gently remind people to share the time and space.

6. *Confidentiality* - What is said in the group stays in the group. Broad themes and personal experience can be shared with others, but names and details stay private among group participants.

WEEK ONE

GETTING STARTED

Post-Evangelical Experience

Introduction

Chapter 1—Evangelicalism: Cutting Loose from an Invented Community

GETTING READY

Big Ideas

Evangelicalism in America went from a fundamentalist rebrand to the most powerful expression of Christianity in America to a movement from which many people are fleeing, sometimes while seeking to maintain an evolving, adapted Christian faith.

Questions for Reflection

- When you hear the word “evangelical,” what comes to mind?
- If you are or were an evangelical Christian, list the years of that affiliation/association in your life. In your experience of your own faith as well as organized religion, what are the best and worst qualities of these years?
- Entering these discussions, how do you feel? What are you looking forward to talking about or discovering? What, if anything, are you tense or concerned about?

GROUP DISCUSSION

As with each week, feel free to discuss each question or simply choose one, two, or three questions that most resonate with, encourage, or challenge your group.

1. “*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.*” (p. 9) Rather than beginning with a history or definition of evangelicalism, Gushee names some features of its culture and describes why many people are leaving this form of faith.

Have you ever been an evangelical Christian? If so, how do you relate to these patterns of leaving or this dynamic of exile? Does it resonate? If so, how?

2. “A term used for a reform movement and religious rebranding within the fundamentalist orbit became the term of choice for millions of flesh-and-blood Christians to describe their core religious self-identity.” (p. 21) Some people define evangelicalism through its theology—the authority of the Bible, the centrality of the cross for salvation, the need for personal conversion, and a calling to mission and activism. Gushee defines evangelicalism more by its culture and history. It was an effort within fundamentalist Christianity to be less reactive and separatist and more accessible. It is defensive against culture and science and pluralism. And it is mostly white, patriarchal, authoritarian, conservative in culture and essence, and deeply aligned with conservative politics.

What, if anything, about American evangelicalism is or has been most appealing to you? What, if anything, about

American evangelical Christianity is or has been most troubling to you?

3. “The pattern is clear: *dissent, lose, and leave* (or be forced out).” (p. 25) Gushee explains how evangelical Christianity rarely tolerates dissent.

Have you had personal experience of dissenting or disagreeing within evangelical community that followed this pattern or a different pattern? Have you seen it in others’ lives?

4. “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.” (p. 12) Scanning the table of contents, you’ll see that on this journey, we’ll be reviewing many powerful, important, and sometimes controversial or painful topics.

Looking at the table of contents, what chapters or topics are you especially eager to discuss? Which, if any, are you sensitive or concerned over talking about together? What would help you feel safe and prepared for discussing that material?

5. If you haven't already, review the suggested group norms and formats for discussion in the introduction to this guide. Have a conversation in your discussion group about how you'll use or adapt these for your time.

PATHS FORWARD

Spiritual Practices

Grief for the Old, Hope for the New

The subtitle of this book is “the path to a new Christianity.” Sometimes, before walking a new path, we need to make peace with the old. When the old path has been disappointing or worse, it's hard to move forward freely without grief. Using Psalm 77 as a guide, we'll try to write our own psalm of grief and hope for our faith.

- Psalm 77 begins with seeking help from God while in distress. The poet says, “I think of God, and I moan.” When you think of God or your experience with Christian religion and community, what makes you moan? What experiences cause you distress? What about the state of evangelical Christianity brings you grief? Write this into the first third of a psalm, beginning with phrases like, “I think of you, God, and moan because . . .” or “I think of the church, and I'm angry because . . .”
- Next the psalm allows doubts about God to surface, wondering if God's love has ceased, or God has forgotten to be gracious, or if God has changed. Where your experience of the faith or the church has led you doubt God, or not experience God, express that next. You can begin with

phrases like, “God, have you forgotten to . . .” or “God, I doubt that you . . .”

- Lastly, the psalmist thinks of a time when God has been good and powerfully helpful—in their case, the exodus of their ancestors out of slavery in Egypt—and seeks to trust that God will be a good shepherd in their life as God was in the past. Call to mind a situation where in your life or the lives of your ancestors, God has been good and faithful. Write down a very short version of that situation and ask God that your story of faith will also reveal God’s loving kindness going forward.

Bible Study

Isaiah 43:19 says, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” The context is ancient Israel’s return from exile. Exile is a metaphor Gushee uses for people who leave or are forced out of any religious culture or home, including evangelical Christianity. Slowly and meditatively read this verse several times, asking God to give you insight to perceive what new things may be possible in your life of faith and courage to walk into that future with God.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Since 2013, **Steve Watson** has been the senior pastor of Reservoir Church, a post-evangelical church in Cambridge, MA. Prior to that, he served as an urban public high school teacher and principal in Greater Boston and a campus staff minister in an evangelical student ministry.

The through lines in Steve's life and career have been teaching, coaching and mentoring, organizational and community development, and public healing and justice. In addition to his work at Reservoir, Steve is active as a leader in interfaith community organizing for public justice in his city. Steve has a B.A. in music from Brandeis University, a Masters in Education from The University of Massachusetts-Boston, and is enrolled in the Doctorate in Theology and Ministry program at the Center for Open and Relational Theology with Northwind Seminary.

Steve lives in Boston with his wife Grace and three teenage children and loves hiking, running, reading, eating, and new adventures.

Dr. David P. Gushee (PhD, Union Theological Seminary, New York) is Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics at Mercer University, Chair of Christian Social Ethics Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and Senior Research Fellow, International Baptist Theological Study Centre.

Gushee is the elected Past-President of both the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Christian Ethics, signaling his role as one of America's leading Christian ethicists. He is the author, co-author, editor, or co-editor of 27 books and approximately 175 book chapters, journal articles, and reviews. His most recognized works include *Introducing Christian Ethics*, *Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust*, *Kingdom Ethics*, and *The Sacredness of Human Life*. With his *Changing Our Mind* and *After Evangelicalism*, he charts

a theological course for post-evangelical Christians, a course he more personally relates in his memoir, *Still Christian*.

Over a full 28-year career, he's been a devoted teacher as Professor Gushee to college students, seminarians, and PhD students. He's also led activist efforts on climate, torture, and LGBTQ inclusion, and is a keynote speaker at churches, forums, and universities.

For the general media, Dr. Gushee has written hundreds of opinion pieces and given interviews to major outlets and podcasts.

Dr. Gushee and his wife Jeanie live in Atlanta, and you can connect with him and subscribe to his newsletter at davidpgushee.com or @dpgushee on social media.