

Book Review:

The Struggle to Stay: Why Single Evangelical Women Are Leaving the Church

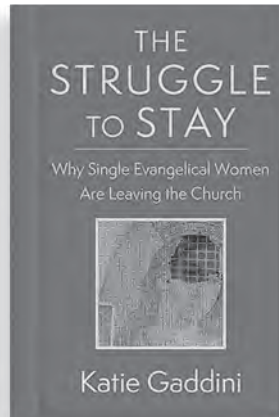
By Katie Gaddini (Columbia University Press, August 1, 2023)

Reviewed by Emma Feyas

Combining deep ethnographic research with personal experience and cultural realities, Katie Gaddini tells relatable stories and asks difficult questions. Her research seeks to understand not merely why single women might leave the evangelical church, but what exactly makes them stay. Walking alongside four women—Carys, Jo, Maddie, and Liv—who move from deep commitment and service to evangelical congregations to “Christian-ish,” Gaddini’s narration provides an empathetic window into the reality of evangelical women, especially single evangelical feminist women.

Gaddini’s objective to “expose the costs of being an evangelical woman” is successful in three distinct ways. First, her storytelling ability brings the reader into the excitement, struggle, pain, and hope experienced by women like Carys, Jo, Maddie, and Liv in their respective journeys into, out of, and away from evangelicalism. The majority of the book reads like a novel full of characters who feel familiar. Second, Gaddini interweaves her own story and journey through the research process. She is not merely an observer or a sterile interviewer, but a friend to each woman and a guide to the reader. Finally, her remarkable ability to elevate complexity demonstrates the care and effort she put into the study and the writing of this book. She asks profound and difficult questions that push the boundaries and uncover the complicated realities of being a single woman in evangelicalism.

In between the narratives of each of the women in the study, Gaddini explains evangelical norms and cultures for readers who may be unfamiliar with them. White, mid-upper-class evangelicalism provides the boundaries for the study. Following a preface and explanation of the purpose of the study, she launches into narratives of the women and of her own departure from evangelicalism. In addition to the primary four women, Gaddini conducted over fifty interviews which provide further context, examples, and insight. Present in most of these interviews is each individual’s story of conversion, or testimony. She begins with the positives of these stories, demonstrating how evangelicalism can feel like a kind of homecoming. There is something warm and welcoming about the context and community, such that even she begins to feel an impulse to participate again. Continuing on, she starts to uncover what is so attractive about evangelicalism for single women vis-a-vis evangelical ideals and practices of community. In every interview and interaction, community was a primary reason women stayed in evangelical spaces even when they felt the larger church had no space for them.



Next, Gaddini begins to highlight the tensions and difficulties that come naturally with evangelical teachings about the world and a believer’s relationship to it. Evangelicals define themselves in relationship to other traditions (i.e., how they are different and what they are not). There are organizational lines and boundaries which are drawn by church leaders and individuals in order to distinguish the Christian from the secular. These lines can be written and rewritten through the journey of life and conversion. For women in evangelicalism, especially those who experienced conversion later in life, these boundaries and guidelines are not necessarily experienced as oppressive or difficult. They describe a slow “changing of appetite” where one no longer desires the things of the “world.”

This discussion on tensions and boundaries naturally leads to the topic of sex and purity culture. Gaddini demonstrates a clear frustration among single evangelical women with the nearly non-existent conversation about sex in the church. In these pages, a familiar scene plays out over and over again of the devout young Christian woman convinced of purity and chastity who ultimately struggles with shame and confusion because of a lack of space for vulnerability and genuine education. Additionally, she highlights the imbalanced responsibility for purity that is placed almost entirely on women to remain pure for themselves and for the sake of the men they are around.

Gaddini goes on to describe the “Ideal Woman.” Highlighting social media influencers and pastors’ wives, it is evident that a particular image exists in the white evangelical space. If anyone does not match this thin, fit, perfect archetype, their singleness will continue, and their value will diminish. Not to mention, this image harms even the women who do fit the type. Most apparent here is the path to leadership and influence that exists for those women who are not single and who marry pastors or pursue ministry as a team with their spouses. Continuing to dig into harder and deeper realities around life in the evangelical church for these four women, it is clear that despite obstacles, these women demonstrate the ability to hold their anger and criticism separate from their own faith. This conversation more distinctly highlights the disparities in leadership and representation of women, even among evangelicals who affirm women in ministry. A disconnect between theological stance and ministerial practice is glaringly apparent. In response to the tensions and difficulties around women in leadership, Gaddini also details the perceived threat of feminism that has been continually reprised

throughout history. Every movement gains momentum and a small bit of ground but ultimately dies until the next generation takes up the task of taking the next step forward.

Finally, the unfinished stories of these four women highlight the need for equality for single women in evangelical spaces. The community, vulnerability, and acceptance these women seek may be enough to encourage them to stay, but if there was space and support for them in leadership positions and influence, staying may no longer be a struggle.

Struggle to Stay is an example of empathetic and serious research that highlights the complexity of reality for women in evangelical spaces. Though Gaddini no longer considers herself a member of this community, she approaches her work with respect and curiosity. For single women struggling with the inconsistencies and obstacles in their own evangelical churches, this book may not provide clear-cut answers, but it does open the conversation and put words to frustrating experiences.

Ultimately, this text demonstrates the need even among egalitarian evangelical churches to create space and empower women in their churches generally and leadership especially. As readers encounter familiar stories, they will find words for the reasons they love their churches and evangelical contexts. They will also find powerfully articulated questions that bring forth the inconsistencies and difficulties they may have faced in evangelical contexts. Gaddini's thoughtful and respectful work will meet and empower women within evangelicalism and, for those who have moved on from evangelicalism, its reminders of what they once enjoyed in evangelicalism may provide healing and closure.



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