PREFACE

A few years ago, on a gray afternoon in New York, I attended a feminist arts festival with my friend Carys. We met in midtown Manhattan and, running late, hurried up to a talk called "Faith and Feminism," which featured a panel of women from different religious backgrounds. As an earnest young academic, I was hoping to meet the editor of *Magnify*, a magazine for evangelical women, who was due to speak about Christian feminism. The panelists—Muslim, Orthodox Jewish, and Christian women—each shared how their faith supported their feminism. The women referred to their own personal stories, at times drawing on scriptures. When, halfway through the event, the chair of the panel turned to the audience and solicited questions, a middle-aged woman timidly raised her hand. The chair of the event gestured for the microphone to be passed to the woman, and members of the audience shifted in their seats as they waited.

The woman brought the microphone close to her mouth, sat up a bit straighter, and then started to speak. "I'm so tired of fighting Christian church leaders to be treated equally. But at the same time, I don't want to leave the church. So, what do I do?" She paused before reformulating her question: "How do I stay?"

Her inquiry was met with silence, as uncomfortable fidgeting moved through the audience. Out of the corner of my eye I glanced over at Carys, knowing full well her similar frustrations with the church. Carys gazed straight ahead, implacable. Her body remained unmoved except for the gentle play of her fingers crisscrossing each other again and again.

That audience member's question stayed with me long after the event. It ended up catalyzing four years of in-depth research with single evangelical women, and it now drives this book. Through the intimate stories of four women, this book grapples with the complex question Why do women stay in a religion that they consider oppressive?

Carys was in her thirties and was working as a pediatric oncology nurse when we met. We bonded instantly at a service at Wellspring Community Church, a large and influential evangelical church in New York City.[1] I had attended the service that wintry evening on the invitation of Liv, a cheerful woman with a heart-shaped face who worked at the church as director of communications and led a feminist group called Women Rise. Among the women profiled here, Liv faced the longest and most painful battle with the church—right up until the end.

The same night I met Carys, I also met Jo, a no-nonsense Midwesterner who wanted to make the church more inclusive for women. Jo grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, where her parents—both pastors—encouraged her to read feminist classics while also learning the biblical justification for feminism. In time, however, she too would question her devotion to the church. Carys, Jo, and Liv all ended up working for Wellspring at some point during my research, and their struggles with the majority male leadership intensified as the church served as both a workplace and a place of worship.

Maddie, the other single evangelical woman whose narrative I trace closely, attended Thames Gathering Place, a popular evangelical church in London. A reserved and stylish artist, Maddie also wanted to be valued as a single woman in Christianity, though she never aspired to church leadership. These four women's desires and ambitions within Christianity vary, as do their opinions on feminism, politics, and theology. Yet through the events that unfolded over four years, their lives collided, and their stories spun together in unpredictable, intimate ways.

I chronicle these women's experiences alongside prolonged, in-depth research I conducted with other single evangelical women in the United Kingdom and the United States over six years. To answer the question of why women stay in the church, I lived among, observed, and interviewed evangelical women—a research method known to anthropologists and sociologists as ethnography. On a practical level, this meant I regularly met with the women casually. We "hung out" a lot. I read the books and magazines they read, participated in group texts, went on coffee dates and for walks in the park. I attended their birthday parties and met their other friends, and sometimes their families, too. Many believers' experience of evangelicalism is all-encompassing, so ethnography allowed me to examine which areas of women's lives their faith touched and which areas it did not. Focusing in on quotidian social exchanges, practices, and ways of being inside and outside of the church revealed the subtle burdens that single evangelical women bear by remaining in the church.

I have conducted more than fifty interviews with evangelical women, the majority in New York, London, and California. These women come from different countries and Christian denominations, and while they all desire to be accepted and

validated in their church communities, they did not all aspire to church leadership. Zibby, for example, yearned for a Christian marriage, children, and a career. A stylish advertising executive in Austin, Texas, Zibby would never call herself a feminist. She hated public speaking and had no interest in pastoring. Another woman, Olivia declared, "My heart's cry is to be married." At the age of just twenty-three when we spoke, Olivia already worried that she might end up like her single Christian friends in their thirties who were still single and experiencing the pain of an unmet desire.

I returned to these women again and again over the years to ask follow-up questions and clarify certain points, especially as I wrote this book. I chose to focus on a community of evangelical women, who are not bound to a church and who carry their faith with them across various locations, rather than to study one particular church. Even though most of the women featured here attended Wellspring or Thames Gathering Place, many migrated elsewhere. As this book makes clear at various junctures, this is not the story of one single church. It's the story of what it means to be single and female in evangelical Christianity.

In New York, I joined a Bible study group led by Liv, with other single women in their twenties and thirties. We met once a month in someone's home and combined brunch with prayer, Bible study, and conversation. I also attended women's-only events and Sunday services at different churches. My fieldwork journal contains thoughts, observations, and quotes from these interactions, which I have transposed onto these pages. Over the past four years, I have remained embedded in the social circles of several women I met, and as is often the case in ethnographic research, I have become very close to these women. Our ongoing relationships inform the detail and depth of this book.

In what follows, I puzzle out why four intelligent, aware, modern women continue to invest in evangelical Christianity, a movement that, by their own admission, is often unfair to women. The women in my research were aware of the constraints they faced in the church, and I show how their growing resentment toward these limitations hovered like a viscous smoke across all the spheres of their lives, weightless yet ubiquitous. What they were less aware of, according to my evaluation, is just how high a price they paid as evangelical women. The sacrifices and compromises made by these women form the main objective of this book: to expose the costs of being an evangelical woman.

The account I give here is also told through the prism of my own personal story. In my midtwenties I made a slow and deliberate walk out the door of evangelicalism and toward a life that promised more freedom. I lost my religion gradually, piece by piece, as disillusionment unspooled a tightly wound coil of belief. Until I was gone. The years I spent exiting evangelicalism were painful and riddled with family strife, broken friendships, and all-consuming fear. Simultaneously, I felt exhilarated with the thrill of my newfound liberty. During this process an unsettling question persisted: Who am I if not an evangelical Christian? After all, my evangelical qualifications ran deep. I grew up a pastor's daughter in a conservative and patriarchal Baptist church in the United States and was often referred to as a PK (Pastor's Kid), an identity that I despised for its connotations of selflessness and perfection. I attended Christian schools all the way through college, and I remained close to my evangelical family, which included three other evangelical pastors.

Fast-forward seven years and I am living in London, embarking on a PhD, and no longer attending church. In this recreated version of my life, I thought the past was well behind me. And when I began my doctoral research at the University of

Cambridge, I set out to investigate what it meant to be a single evangelical woman today. Since I still had many Christian connections, it was easy to recruit participants for my research, and I soon had interviews lined up. Every single Christian woman I contacted wanted to talk about her experience in the church.

I jumped into my fieldwork, but soon my former selves appeared. They sat there in the figures of the women I met: the one who struggled to unite her faith and feminism, the one earnestly devoted to God, and the one engulfed in shame from a sexual transgression. I was confronted with the realization that when leaving a religion, you don't really leave. Psychic traces remain, whether in the form of memory, nostalgia for the past, or haunting iterations of the self. In her essay "On Keeping a Notebook," Joan Didion warns, "I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us . . . We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget."[2] These were selves I did not want to remember. At times, I felt I was drowning in the experiences of my participants and in my past. My research became driven by rage that I had spent so many years in a patriarchal religious environment where I had no voice.

In time, my anger settled into empathy and appreciation for women who are frustrated with their evangelical community but remain invested in it. Instead of pitying or mocking them, I have grown to respect them, and the choices they make. The evangelical women I have met over the years have reminded me of past versions of myself, but they also differ from me in many ways. Uncovering these points of similarity and difference sheds light on the variable nature of religious identity. As I will explore in the chapters that follow, religion is so much more than theology, beliefs, or ritual. It is precisely because of its plenitude that

religion takes on a Janus-faced character: it is the instrument that injures and the balm that heals. From this position, I make sympathetic but critical claims about the many dimensions of religion and its inseparability from social life. By extension, I bring into sharp relief the complex and often difficult process of deciding to leave or to stay in a religious community.

Writing this book, I have reached into the past in order to remember what it was like to be an evangelical woman, and in the process I have mourned the loss of that identity. Paradoxically, it is only by examining my own loss and leaving that I have been able to understand what it means to be religious in the first place. Even now, nine years after I left the church, I continue to slip in and out of the category "evangelical" as easily as I would a lightweight cardigan. When I return home to California and have dinner with my relatives, I am an evangelical once again; over lunch with friends in London, I am not. On a few occasions, the women I interviewed asked me if I was a Christian or what church I attended. In my fumbling responses, I unearthed complicated questions such as who decides what it means to be a Christian, and what practices must one follow in order to lay claim to this identification?

Christians, and evangelicals in particular, carry quite a lot of baggage these days, especially after the majority of them voted to elect Donald Trump as president in 2016 and 2020.[3] Who evangelicals are, and what exactly they believe, however, remains largely misunderstood. It still bewilders me when I meet a stranger at a party in London and start speaking about my research on single evangelical women and their eyebrows lift in surprise as they tell me they didn't know that there were evangelicals in the United Kingdom. In the United States, I encounter a similar reaction; people often say they didn't think any evangelicals live in California or New York City, as if they

are barred entrance to these famously liberal regions of the country.

The truth is, compared to some Muslim or Orthodox Jewish women, evangelicals are not always outwardly identifiable. While many observe modest dress, it isn't recognizable as religious apparel. The women in this book are doctors, social workers, consultants, personal assistants, lawyers, students, and artists. Often, they blend in at their workplaces, without anyone knowing how deep their piety runs. As I tell astonished friends in America and Britain, these evangelical women are "normal." They consume culture in similar ways to most twentysomething Londoners and Californians do; they are attentive to politics, art, and social issues. What distinguishes these women is their devotion to God and their religious community, which sometimes, though not always, includes their church.

In addition to surprise, the other common reaction I receive from nonreligious people is contempt.[4] Sometimes when I tell a stranger about my research topic, they express their pity for the women in my study, who are, to their mind, so trapped. A colleague of mine, a brilliant feminist academic, once told me she wished she could rescue them. She went on to compare evangelical women to domestic violence victims. I wince when I hear these reactions, not only because that was me not so long ago but also because of the way these responses flatten the complexity and evacuate the agency of the women I've come to care about.[5] Within such exchanges, I find myself defending Christianity—much to my surprise. Temporarily relocated from critiquing evangelicalism to defending it is dizzying. Such movements, however, instigate an additional bundle of questions, including: Who is the single evangelical woman? Is she brainwashed and victimized, as many believe, or is she free?

Orthodox Jewish and Muslim women also have been subject to ongoing criticism and attempts to "rescue."[6] Muslim woman, especially, remain the target of ongoing fascination, pity, and censure in an increasingly Islamophobic Western context. Every day, newspapers in Britain and America are littered with images and stories depicting Muslim women as oppressed. This negativity also falls on evangelical women, though, to be sure, it lacks the racialization and political motivation behind the critique of Muslim women.

Interestingly, if you ask single Christian women about their experiences in the church, they feel far from trapped. This is not a case of false consciousness or willful ignorance; these women are aware of the limitations they face and also the benefits they gain. Released from the world of one-night stands, drug-fueled parties, and relentless careerism, one woman told me, "Coming to Christianity, I've never been freer." As I navigated these two opposing perspectives, and two worlds—as she who left but still remains—I found the paradox between freedom and constraint unsettling. How could it be that the same pursuit of freedom driving my departure from Christianity pulled women *into* Christianity? Answering this question first requires a thorough understanding of evangelicalism, and of how it is positioned in mainstream society.

Evangelicalism is a conservative form of Christianity that promotes conversion, full life transformation, and a biblically based lifestyle. Like all religions, it takes on a different form in each social and political location where it lands.[7] In both American and British evangelicalism, there are significant differences along racial and ethnic lines. For example, Black evangelicals in the United States are most likely to identify with the National Baptist Convention, a Baptist denomination, whereas Latinx

evangelicals predominately attend Assemblies of God churches.[8] And there are significant differences in political affiliation. The majority of Black evangelicals tend to vote Democrat, while an overwhelming majority of white and Latinx evangelicals vote Republican.[9] In the UK, many white evangelical churches are Anglican, whereas Black evangelical churches tend to be Pentecostal and to feature a more fervent adherence to proselytizing, fasting, and conservative moral beliefs.[10] For my research, I intentionally interviewed an ethnically and racially diverse group of women in order to have a sense of how different axes of marginality impacted women who attended white-majority evangelical churches.

White evangelicals still constitute the single largest religious group in the United States, with over a quarter of the American population identifying as evangelical Protestant, even though their numbers are now declining.[11] And they are often known for their unwavering alignment with right-wing politics. The religious right, a marriage between conservative politics and Christianity, first developed in the late 1970s in opposition to the desegregation of private schools.[12] As they consolidated their political power, the religious right focused on other issues, such as abortion and abstinence-only education, under Ronald Reagan's presidency in the 1980s. Today, white evangelical Christians remain politically powerful within the Republican Party. Their influence on American politics extends from domestic to foreign policies, to individual voting behavior, to the federal funding of faith-based organizations and the formation of special lobbying groups.[13]

In the UK, on the other hand, the religious–political relationship differs significantly. Scholars refute the presence of a religious right, due in part to the institutional role of the Church of England.[14] As is true across most of Western Europe,

Christianity has suffered a slow and steady death in Britain over the past sixty years, and church attendance is at an all-time low.[15] As of 2019, only 1.5 percent of the English population attended an Anglican church on a given Sunday.[16] Despite an overall decline in Christianity, however, evangelicalism is on the rise in Great Britain, as it is in other parts of the world, though here it's largely due to African and Caribbean immigrant churches.

Evangelicals burst onto the religion scene in the UK in the 1960s, primarily through American evangelical leaders who imported this charismatic, supernatural form of Christianity from the United States.[17] The close relationship between white evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic continues today. British and American evangelicals read the same books and listen to the same music, and well-known evangelical pastors move often and freely between the two countries. Stepping into a Sunday service at Thames Gathering Place in London for the first time, I could have mistaken the service for one of the many I had attended in California over the years. Apart from the British accents, everything was exactly as it was five thousand miles away at Bethel Church in Redding, California—the same smiling, friendly faces, the same worship songs, and the same passionate sermons from male preachers dressed casually in jeans and plaid button-down shirts. It turns out that fervent believers, hoping for a reenergization of their faith, regularly move between evangelical churches around the globe in a pilgrimage-like voyage. The women I met spoke offhandedly of their Christian brothers and sisters internationally, indicating a shared social identity that connected them to other Christians around the globe.[18]

This imagined global community of evangelical believers stretches well beyond the United States and the UK. For example, British churches have started sister branches in Malaysia and

Kenya and have advised the Chinese government on marriage preparation courses. Bethel Church, which I also visited, has developed similar transcontinental connections, including an international leaders' network. A quick glance at many churches' websites reveals the emphasis they place on global links and a widespread reach.

One of the most significant links is Roots International, a pseudonym for a global evangelizing program sponsored by churches, which claims to have reached 24 million people. Many of the women in this book either came to evangelical Christianity or deepened their faith via Roots, and many went on to lead Roots courses at Wellspring and Thames Gathering, sometimes for years. One of the central tenets of the eleven-week Roots course is the incorporation of the supernatural; the course ends with a Holy Spirit weekend, where participants are encouraged to encounter the "gifts of the spirit." Carys reminisced about the Holy Spirit weekend with the warm glow that comes when recalling a first date. "It just radically changed my life," she told me. "It set me on fire."

As most of the women in this book make clear, their evangelicalism is charismatic and supernaturally inflected. They speak in tongues, an incomprehensible language used to communicate with God; they believe in miracles and healing; they practice intercessory prayer, an intense form of prayer for self and others; and they relate to God on a personal, intimate level. A few women even referred to God as "Papa" or "Daddy."[19] Their relationship with God guides every aspect of their lives. One woman I spoke to in London even told me she considers intercessory prayer to be her part-time job. She spends her days walking around central London, praying—for people who are suffering, for unbelievers to come to Christ, for her dreams and hopes to come to fruition.

Another similarity between British and American evangelicals concerns the treatment of women. In both countries, women outstrip men in terms of church attendance, at an almost two-to-one ratio.[20] Emphasizing gender differences is a key organizing principle of evangelical Christianity, and perhaps is instrumental to its success as a cohesive religious group.[21] Interestingly, Wellspring, Thames Gathering, and Bethel theologically support women in leadership roles, which many other evangelical churches do not. As I will show, though, such a theological stance frustrates women even more when they are unable to access these positions, since in theory leadership remains within their grasp.

Like many contemporary evangelical and Pentecostal churches in England and America, most of the churches where I conducted research espouse the model of husband and wife "co-pastors." However, even in the case of co-pastoring, it's nearly always the male counterpart who leads the public-facing roles in the church, including preaching, administration, and church leadership.[22] As such, it's the male pastor who is most visible. He makes big decisions for the church; he holds the power.

In both countries, women are reaching a boiling point. There are many reasons for this, as the stories in this book make clear, but one of the biggest is that women feel invisible in their churches. More specifically, they feel invisible for being *single* women.[23] In a context where heterosexual marriage is highly valued, women who do not fit the traditional roles of wives and mothers face a difficult choice: stay and face marginalization or leave.

Many are opting for the latter option. Sociologists of religion propose that evangelical women in Britain are leaving churches in large numbers, and the gender imbalance in evangelicalism has been narrowing, pro rata, more than in any other religious

group.[24] Similar studies are emerging in the United States, where the gender gap has been declining since the mid-1980s, as less evangelical women are attending church services every week.[25] Since the advent of industrialization, women have increasingly worked outside the home, leaving them less time for church duties, a phenomenon that skyrocketed with the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s. This raises an interesting question: If women's participation in Christian churches has kept the religious movement afloat, what will it mean for Christianity as a religion, now that many are leaving?[26]

Beyond numbers monitoring church attendance, the reality of what it means to leave or stay in a religious community is murky and often very difficult to capture. Not only is exit an excruciating choice for women who stand to lose their social communities, their familial ties, and their religious identity, but also many women are deeply committed to utilizing their anger to change their Christian communities from the inside. In what follows, I carefully examine these tensions and explore why single women stay in evangelical Christianity despite the limitations and strictures it imposes. My aim is to show the benefits that women gain from their evangelical religious community, and the costs. "Are there always costs to be paid for the adoption of a collective identity?" asks Denise Riley. "Each collectivity necessitates its own answers."[27]

At the feminist art festival, a female pastor named Lynn Davis responded to the audience member's question "How do I stay?" Pastor Davis, a pastor who has weathered decades of discrimination in evangelical churches, directly and unapologetically stated that not everyone is meant to stay. Some are called to leave the church, some are meant to stay, and we need each other to survive.

This absolution from a pastor, a *female* pastor, at once leveled the guilt I had accumulated for years since leaving evangelicalism. What is more, Davis's words support the many single evangelical women I met who feel passionately convicted to stay and change the church from the inside. After decades of growing up inside an oppressive form of evangelical Christianity, in which I was silenced and sidelined because of my gender, I have found a semblance of healing in writing this book. In *The Hour of the Star*, Clarice Lispector's self-reflective narrator admits, "I write and that way rid myself of me and then at last I can rest."[28]

This book is my pursuit of rest.

THE STRUGGLE TO STAY