

Caught in between?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

July 18, 2012

In the aftermath of [Ross-Douthat-bashes-liberal-Christians-gate](#), lots of folks are citing [Rachel Held Evans's post](#) approvingly. And she does make some good points about the tribal quality of some reactions (whether affirmative or defensive) to Douthat.

But I've never quite understood Evans's self-characterization as "caught in between" the evangelical and mainline churches. Here's why she doesn't "'fit' in the progressive, Mainline church":

I love a good Bible study.

I think doctrine and theology are important enough to teach and debate.

I think it's vital that we talk about, and address, sin.

I believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus.

I want to participate in interfaith dialog and cooperation while still maintaining a strong Christian identity.

I want to engage in passionate worship, passionate justice, and passionate biblical study and application, passionate community.

I'm totally down with a bit of spontaneous, group "popcorn" prayer, complete with hand-holding and references to the Holy Spirit "moving in this place."

I'm convinced that the Gospel is about more than being a good person.

With the possible exception of "passionate worship"—I'm a little wary of what that might be a euphemism for—so do I! And I'm a mainliner. This doesn't mean I speak for other mainliners, or that I agree with everything all of them say. And perhaps I lose points because I tend not to equate loving/believing/being totally down with

something with needing everyone else at my church to be on the same exact page. But I'm not caught between anything; the mainline is a good and solid home for me. And for a lot of people with views roughly similar to mine, judging from the people I've crossed paths with at the various mainline churches I've been personally and professionally involved with.

Held Evans acknowledges that she's generalizing, clarifying that she's speaking not of all evangelicals and all mainliners so much as of the way churches tend to conceive of themselves as on team A or team B and define themselves in opposition to the other team. And I've certainly seen this.

But I've seen far more of this: churches that Held Evans's typology would place on Team Progressive Mainline vary significantly, substantively, endlessly. Many of them are themselves hard to place on one team or the other, aside from the fact that they exist within one of the mainline denominational structures. (As, of course, do people and churches that are pretty much on Team Evangelical.) It's not just that there are exceptions to the rule; the rule itself is inadequate.

Held Evans wants to see the polarization between U.S. Protestant factions crumble. It doesn't help to overstate the degree to which it already exists.