

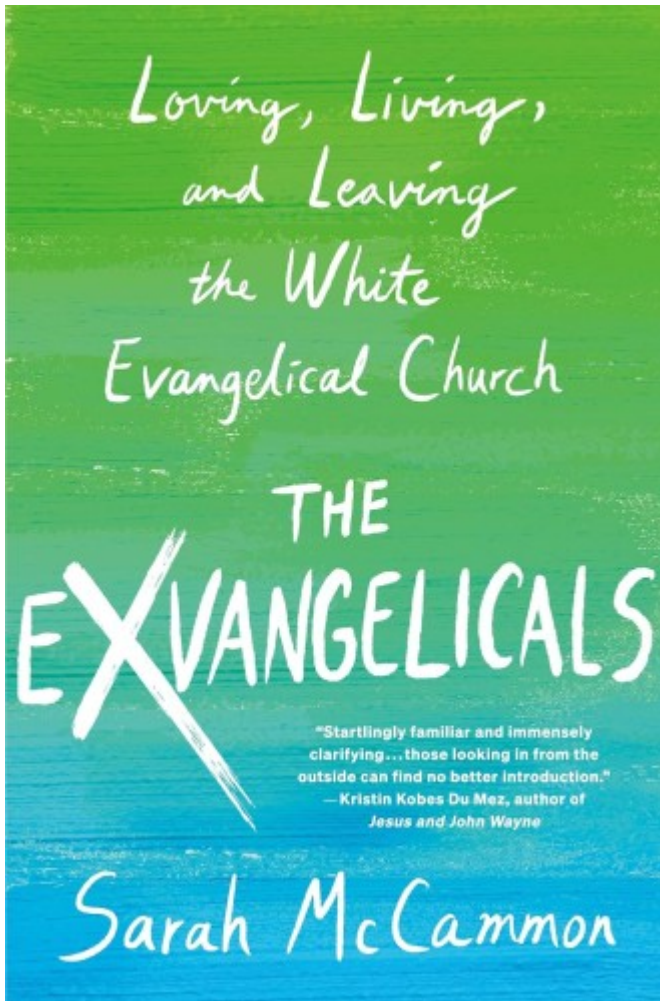
Trending topics: Exvangelical women's memoirs

Five new memoirs by women who left evangelicalism

selected by [Jon Mathieu](#) in the [May 2024](#) issue

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In Review



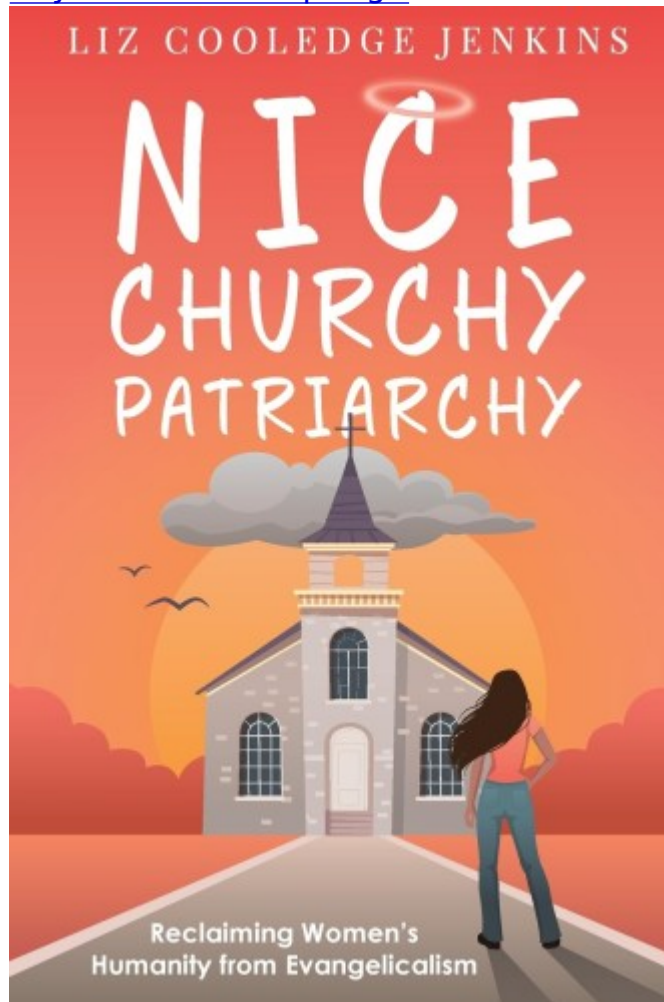
The Exvangelicals

Loving, Living, and Leaving the White Evangelical Church

By Sarah McCammon

St. Martin's

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Nice Churchy Patriarchy

Reclaiming Women's Humanity from Evangelicalism

By Liz Cooledge Jenkins

Apocryphile

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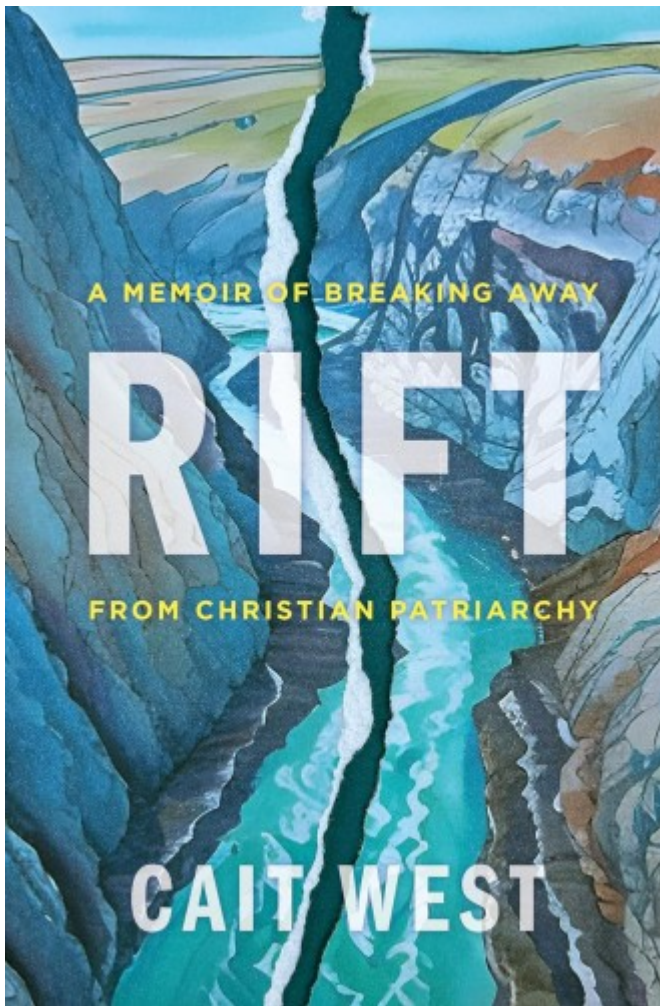
The Woman They Wanted

Shattering the Illusion of the Good Christian Wife

By Shannon Harris

Broadleaf

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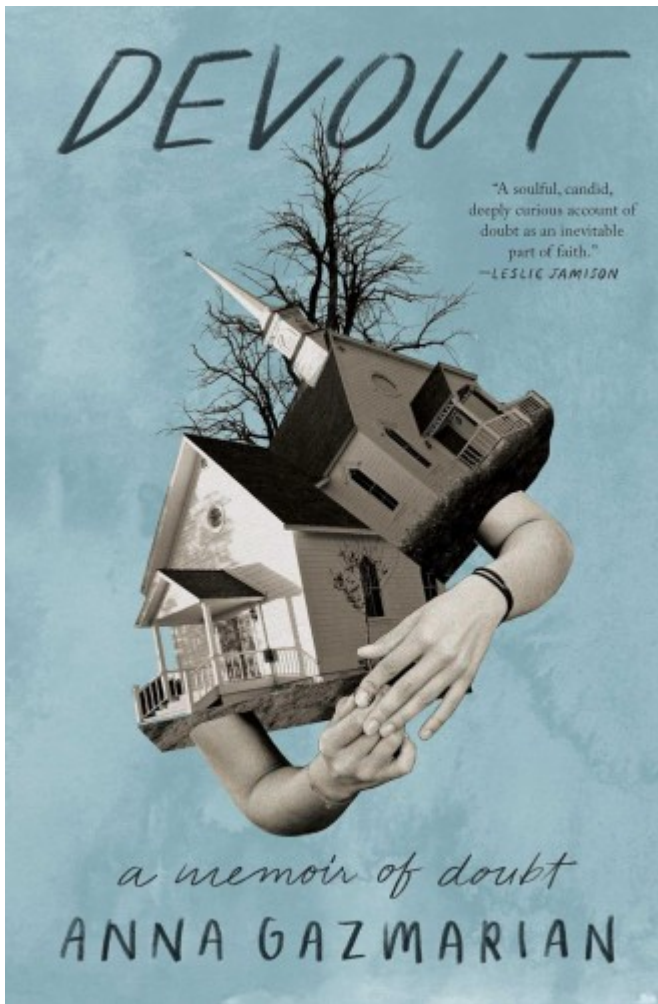
Rift

A Memoir of Breaking Away from Christian Patriarchy

By Cait West

Eerdmans

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Devout

A Memoir of Doubt

By Anna Gazmarian

Simon & Schuster

[Buy from Bookshop.org >](https://www.bookshop.org/buy-devout)

RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

The Exvangelicals: Loving, Living, and Leaving the White Evangelical Church

By Sarah McCammon

St. Martin's

Of these five memoirs by exvangelical women, the one by Sarah McCammon—an NPR correspondent who was the outlet's primary reporter on Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign—offers the most didactic introduction to the exvangelical

movement. For the uninitiated, this phenomenon is, according to McCammon, a “loosely organized, largely online movement of people” who share “a theologically and politically conservative Protestant Christian background, and the decision to leave it behind.” As a former evangelical pastor who is all too acquainted with why and how folks leave fundamentalism, the costs of doing so, and the trauma that lingers, I am probably not the target audience for this book. But I highly recommend it to anyone curious about this exodus who has not lived it. McCammon covers a broad terrain, from purity culture to the religious right to Young Earth creationism. She does not delve into the topic of LGBTQ inclusion until chapter 9, but for me this is the emotional core of the book, featuring a blood-boiling email exchange between McCammon and her mother. The overview the book offers is guided by McCammon’s own journey and bolstered by snippets of interviews with sociologists, historians, adult children of evangelical pastors, and trauma therapists.

RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Nice Churchy Patriarchy: Reclaiming Women’s Humanity from Evangelicalism

By Liz Cooledge Jenkins
Apocryphile

While McCammon’s focus is broad, the next three memoirs zoom in on one of evangelicalism’s chief sins: patriarchy. Liz Cooledge Jenkins notes from the outset of her memoir that her story will not take us to the most glaring instances of patriarchy in the church, those openly misogynistic men’s retreats or oppressive homeschooling movements. Instead, the first half of her book invites us along on her own ministry journey, from a respected “soft complementarian” church to ministry contexts that are explicitly egalitarian. And this is the point: even these ostensibly better churches and ministries employ subtle forms of sexism and gendered subordination. In the second half of the book, Jenkins proposes concrete steps in scripture reading, theological education, and liturgy planning to help dismantle Christian misogyny. A fascinating section on intersectionality analyzes the 2020 vice presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Mike Pence. There are some commonalities between Jenkins’s ministry arc and my own: we both ministered to college students, we were both part of liberal minorities in conservative evangelical churches, and we were both fired when we fully affirmed LGBTQ folks. Jenkins’s book, however, functions for me like an inverse of Taylor Swift’s song “The Man”: As

hard as my road was, how much worse would it have been if I were a woman?

RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

The Woman They Wanted: Shattering the Illusion of the Good Christian Wife

By Shannon Harris

Broadleaf Books

Shannon Harris, ex-wife of '90s purity culture poster boy Joshua Harris, gives us a very different anti-patriarchy memoir. She does not interview experts or prescribe steps for seminaries or churches. She simply tells her painful human story, one micro-essay at a time. Most of the entries—which are often irreverent and very funny—are three pages or less. Together they tell the story of a woman losing her identity under the crushing weight of her church's expectations—and finding it again by leaving church and pursuing music. The book would have been worth reading even without any variety in approach, but I found in it some delightful surprises. Two essays, for instance, put Harris's story on pause and simply deliver critiques of typical evangelical readings of the creation account in Genesis 2–3. In addition, scattered throughout the autobiographical essays are incisive observations of evangelicalism, like this one that stopped me in my tracks: "Christian America likes its leaders to be demigods, and they like to play along." Harris's book gives me painful insight into the little pocket of hell my wife lived through as an evangelical minister's wife at the start of our marriage.

RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Rift: A Memoir of Breaking Away from Christian Patriarchy

By Cait West

Eerdmans

The subtitle to Cait West's debut includes the phrase "breaking away from Christian patriarchy." It is important to know that this does not refer, as other books on this list do, to the broad patterns of male dominance present in most megachurches. West is instead writing about her escape from a very particular Christian patriarchy movement, which she describes as a cult that cuts across different Protestant traditions. This movement, which is largely underground but does feature some prominent leaders such as Doug Wilson and Voddie Baucham, seeks to shape society around men as dominion-takers for God. And so West grew up in "an

environment where [my father] could control every aspect of our lives—my life.” For the homeschooled West, high school graduation didn’t mean a transition to adulthood, just more staying at home and waiting for her father to find her a husband. She includes intriguing segments I can only call geo-poetry: reflections on the ancient movements of the planet, whose plates rift the same way her story does. The arc of this story is not triumphant, as even after her escape West struggles with trauma, OCD, and infertility. In place of triumph is a haunting, beautiful look at healing and resilience.

RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Devout: A Memoir of Doubt

By Anna Gazmarian

Simon & Schuster

This memoir is unique on this list due to its narrower focus on mental health within evangelical Christian settings. Anna Gazmarian begins the book with a scene in her psychiatrist’s office when she was first diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 2011. The memories her mind flashes back to in this scene set the stage for one of the primary conflicts in the memoir: the inability of fundamentalism, with its toxic positivity and its skepticism toward science, to understand or help people with mental illness. We travel with Gazmarian from that doctor’s office to college, to another college, to falling in love with her now husband, and to her pursuit of writing. Along the way, we learn about Gazmarian’s new medications and fears of side effects right alongside reflections on the relevance of biblical figures like Job and Moses to her journey with faith and bipolar disorder. I love many of the scenes and epiphanies—like when Gazmarian hears a reading of Romans 8:38–39 and for the first time notices chinks in the armor of total depravity and feels like God loves her as she is. Or her realization in a college poetry course that poems have become her prayers and the class is her church.