

The Future of Faith in American Politics: The Public Witness of the Evangelical Center, by David P. Gushee.

Baylor University Press
2008
ISBN- 978-1-60258-071-8

Reviewed by Jim West

The volume at hand consists of two main parts and a series of appendices. Part I: Evangelicals and Public Life Across the Political Spectrum; and Part II: Finding the Center: Key Issues for Evangelical Public Engagement.

In Part I Gushee examines the Evangelical Left, Center, and Right and securely situates himself in the middle, which he calls ‘the emerging center.’ And in Part II he discusses that center’s notions of torture and human rights, marriage and the law, creation care and climate change, and Evangelicals and war.

I was convinced from the very opening pages that I would hate this book. I hated the fact that the foreword so arrogantly asserted that the whole evangelical world should read it. I hated that it was about politics. I particularly hated it when Gushee opined in the preface that ‘This book is about [the] evangelical center and makes a case for its great importance for the future not just of evangelicalism but of the United States’ and that this ‘center’ is also found in the ‘vision of some of our most important churches and their pastors’ (p. xvii). The entire bit smacks of arrogance and self importance. Who is Gushee to determine what is or is not important in a society as large as America and when was he enlisted to decide which churches and which pastors were important?

When he moved into the actual argument of the book (chapter 1) I was again stricken, and must confess so, by his imperious tone. ‘I argue that the emerging evangelical center offers a more faithful and more fruitful rendering of Christian convictions in the public arena than that which can be found elsewhere’ (p. 4) and in my mind all the speeches of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and other Fundamentalists came flooding back along with their blind sychophantism in connection to the Republican Party and its use and misuse of faith to further its agenda.

Oh no, I thought, here we go again. Another Fundamentalist parading around as an Evangelical setting up a series of straw men which he can swat down in furtherance of yet another thinly disguised political agenda pretending to be Christian in order to manipulate the foolish and easily deceived.

My mood didn’t change when I discovered this particular statistic: ‘... some 25 percent of the U.S. population meets this definition ... [of what it means to be an evangelical] (p. 18). If 25% of the population is Evangelical (whatever that means) that implies that 75% aren’t. This further suggests that 25% of the population have a clear agenda- to persuade the entire society to see things as it does. Naturally this leads to the inevitable comparison with the homosexual community (which describes itself as consisting of 10% of the population). How is the Evangelical Agenda different from the Homosexual agenda when both, clear minorities of the population, desire to assert some significant measure of control or at the very least to have their point of view widely

announced, embraced, and encouraged? And when Gushee suggests on the very next page (p. 19) that Evangelicals ‘... represent an identifiable and massive portion of the American population. That much, at least, is sure,’ I had to do a bit more math in my head. When did 25% become a ‘massive portion’ of anything? If I only got 25% of my paycheck I wouldn’t think it was a massive portion- I would think it a small fragment. So would Gushee, I imagine.

My earlier presentiment that Gushee was going to offer Fundamentalism renamed was legitimized, I believed, by the statements and statistics already described. So when he wrote on p. 21 ‘This global, holistic moral vision [of evangelicalism he will present in Part 2] is precisely what our culture needs, and precisely what represents the best rendering of Christian morality’ I was seriously ready to toss the book aside to the garbage heap. We need the Sermon on the Mount applied to daily life more than we need another Fundamentalist Falwellian telling us how best to be Disciples.

But I’m glad I didn’t toss it aside- because the more I read in the next pages, chapters, and sections, the more I came to, at first, like what Gushee was saying, and then to frequently nodding my head in agreement.

The turning point came when he scathingly critiqued the Falwellian Fundamentalism I had suspected he was secretly promoting. “...the most important thing that is wrong with the evangelical right is that it has given up its fundamental allegiance to Jesus Christ in aligning itself so tightly with the Republican Party” (p. 49). Hallelujah! The truth. Finally. From a politically minded and oriented Evangelical.

No more willing to accept the evangelical left’s politicization than the rights, Gushee offers a centrist perspective that is both sensible and Christian. And yet not so political as to abandon Christian theology’s central and clarifying role in societal engagement by believers.

This book really did turn out to be the ‘must reading’ that it was described as being. Gushee’s agenda isn’t Gushee’s agenda but a carefully crafted theological statement with political overtones. His isn’t politics with a spoon of theology to make it go down; his is a theology with just enough political engagement to make it relevant.

Don’t let the beginning of the book fool you. If you remain patient and follow the discussion all the way through to the end you’ll not regret it. I know I didn’t.