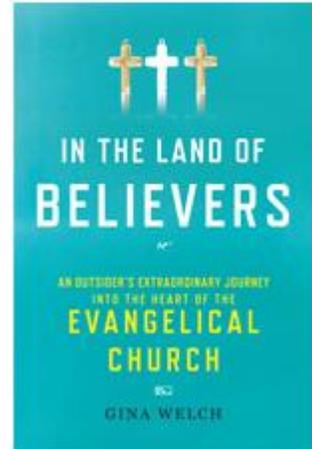


Review of *In the Land of Believers*

By Denny Burk



Gina Welch's *In the Land of Believers: An Outsider's Extraordinary Journey into the Heart of the Evangelical Church* is the narrative of the author's two-year sojourn in the late Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church (TRBC) in Lynchburg, Virginia. As a life-long liberal atheist, Welch had always regarded evangelicals with an elitist contempt. Uncomfortable with her disdain, she goes undercover and joins the church in order to find out what evangelicals are really like.



At the outset of her project, Welch observes miles of ideological distance between her and the subjects of her study. With respect to Jerry Falwell, she writes, “I considered him a homophobe, a fearmonger, a manipulator, and a misogynist—an alien creature from the most extreme backwater of evangelical culture” (p. 2). Of herself, she says, “I cuss, I drink, and I am not a virgin. I have never believed in God” (p. 2). The distance between her and Falwell represented, she believed, the cultural divide afflicting American culture—the divide between liberals like herself and the evangelical heartland. Evangelicals were pro-life; she was pro-choice. Evangelicals believed in God; she did not. Evangelicals held to myths in order to explain the world, she held to science. Evangelicals were conservative; she was a liberal. Welch came to see that this antipathy formed the basis of many of the most divisive political and social issues of our time. She also saw the divide as the basis for liberal intolerance of evangelicals—a position that she believed to be fundamentally at odds with being liberal. So Welch justifies her undercover operation as an attempt to promote understanding and tolerance between evangelicals and their cultured-despisers. “The collateral damage of going undercover, I thought, was mitigated by the possibility that the enterprise would open channels of understanding writ large between Evangelicals and the rest of us” (p. 9).

Through twenty-eight chapters, Welch tells her compelling story of deceit and discovery. In part one, the author describes going into “The Rabbit Hole,” which is her initiation into the culture of TRBC. She wrestles to master evangelical jargon (e.g., “God told me,” “personal relationship with Jesus”) so that her feigned conversion might appear authentic. She realizes that she will have to walk down an aisle, pray a prayer, and get “saved” in order to get in. So that is exactly what she does. She gets [baptized](#), she takes communion, and she joins the TRBC singles group. All the while, no one at TRBC suspects anything to be amiss with their new “sister.”

In part two, Welch describes “The Microwave Effect” that began to take her over. Even though she despised evangelical beliefs, she found herself *warming up* to evangelical believers. In particular, she nurtures a growing admiration for the singles-pastor “Ray,” who becomes a sort of father-figure to her. He’s the real deal, and she knows it. She also forms a close bond with a single woman named “Alice,” who by the end of the book becomes Welch’s best friend at the church. Welch even describes her growing esteem for Falwell himself. She writes, “One look at Jerry Falwell’s life showed that he was no hypocrite: he lived precisely according to the message he preached, bilious as

it often was” (p. 169). Against her better judgment, Welch’s esteem for Falwell blossoms into genuine respect and affection:

“Against logic, as a liberal secular Jew, born to a Communist father, raised in Berkeley, educated in the Ivy League—I had been charmed by Jerry Falwell. He was an entertainer. I could have listened to him read an engineering textbook. That was one of the main reasons he had such a large following, I think—he had tremendous charisma, and you had to reason your way out of liking him” (pp. 172-73).

When Falwell dies in 2007, she is astonished to find herself grieving along with the other members of TRBC: “Disturbed by my own sadness, unable to explain the odd couple of my affection for Jerry Falwell and my loathing of his ideals, I drove down to Thomas Road that evening to mourn his death” (p. 167). Throughout this middle section of the book, her affection for the church and its people ironically grows while her belief in its most cherished ideals does not.

In part three, Welch narrates her experience being “Salt and Light” on a mission trip to Alaska with other singles from TRBC. Surprisingly, she ends up preaching the gospel that she hates. She even leads one little girl to pray to receive Christ as her savior. Welch forms deep bonds on this trip with the other missionaries—but especially with Ray and Alice. As a result, the doubts about the morality of her enterprise begin to haunt her. She writes,

“The moment I admitted to myself I was having fun, bonding, I felt turbulent undercurrents of anxiety. Casting my mind forward, I tried to picture my friends’ faces when they found out who I really was. They would think back on this time, remember me laughing with them, sharing gum, developing a catalog of mildly perverted inside jokes. The smiles would drop off their faces. They were going to hate me” (p. 251).

These feelings quickly convert into a resolve to end the deception and to leave the church once and for all. And soon after returning to Lynchburg, that is exactly what she does. But she does so without any explanation to her close friends, Ray and Alice.

In the Epilogue, Welch describes coming clean with the two people she was closest to at TRBC: Ray and Alice. After leaving the church, Welch cuts off all communication with her friends and for months gives them no explanation for her departure. Ray, Alice, and other friends from the church reach out to her, but she rebuffs all their efforts even as she misses them terribly. Finally, Welch decides to reveal herself to them in advance of the release of her book. She wants to be the one to tell them. Both Ray and Alice are surprised and hurt. Nevertheless, they both respond graciously, and Welch admits a continuing friendship with Alice.

Welch’s target audience for this book is secularists and elites who display open disdain for evangelicals and their faith. Nevertheless, I think that Evangelicals would do well to read this book. Her journey at TRBC gives Evangelicals a chance to see themselves from an outsider’s perspective. It also gives a glimpse into the thinking of an atheist who is resistant to being evangelized.

I can’t remember the last time I felt more personally vested in reading a book than I was in reading this one. As an evangelical Christian, I am hardly a disinterested observer of her subject matter. Three themes in particular kept my attention throughout reading this book.

1. A View from the Outside

Welch's outsider's depiction of Evangelical Christianity is a big part of what makes this book so interesting. She has nothing vested in intra-evangelical controversies, and yet her commentary is often surprisingly insightful. Welch questions, for instance, methods of evangelism that don't appear to result in genuine conversions.

"How can you know if you've saved someone if there's never follow-up, never counseling, never a progress report?... In other words, aren't you simply counting the people who prayed the prayer in that instant rather than counting new Christians?... If you're a Christian you believe all it takes is that instant, as long as you're sincere. Once you've prayed the sinner's prayer, you're good to go... It seemed evident that Evangelicals were padding their rosters" (p. 254).

Welch mistakes this "easy believism" as characteristic of all evangelicals. It certainly is not. Nevertheless, her trenchant critique of such approaches is spot-on.

Another example relates to Welch's description of the emerging church. Welch has no dog in the fight between post-modern/emerging evangelicals and traditionalist ones. And that is what makes her assessment so interesting:

"The emerging church is actually a broad category of formulas designed for inclusiveness" (p. 107).

"The emerging church was the future for born-again, as it acknowledged that Christians needed to mold to the shape of the world—not the other way around" (p. 118).

Here, her evolutionary view of religion comes into full view. In her mind, the emerging church represents a more secular version of Christianity—an advance over the mythologies of a bygone era. Thus it occupies a position further down the road of humanity's graduation from religion. In her way of thinking, it's the only kind of Christianity with a future in modern society.

2. Grapplings with Christian Community and Witness

After leaving TRBC, Welch describes what sounds to have been months of depression. She misses the church and its people terribly. She writes,

"When I started at Thomas Road I expected to go in as a sort of anthropologist. I expected to discover the sociological underpinnings for evangelical wackiness. I never imagined that I would feel a kind of belonging... I missed hearing Ray preach. I really missed my friends. I missed the warmth, the easy smiles people offered me when I walked into the room. I missed singing at the top of my lungs in church. I wanted to be able to go back" (p. 303, 312).

It is in this section of the book that Welch becomes most reflective about the Christian faith that she despises. Her longing for the church drives her to consider what it would be like for her to live as a Christian or, at the very least, what it would be like to keep up the charade for the rest of her life.

"Could I be a Christian woman to a Christian man? Could I hold his hand and my zipper-bagged Bible as we hurried into church together? Could I look at him across a basket of bottomless fries and be content knowing he considered it part of his Christian duty to treat me well? Could I consider it part of my duty to have his children? Maybe I could be like Ray, living on having prayed the prayer, but secretly not really believing it until one day the truth opened and washed over my real life, like a black-and-white movie blooming into Technicolor. And then, could I be satisfied living on the reassurance that God was on my side?"

“I couldn’t. I couldn’t work back from who I was or what I believed, and in truth, I didn’t want to. I preferred analysis, reason, and the satisfying realism of hard truths. I didn’t mind leaving some corners of the universe cast in the shadow of ambiguity. Moral structure might have been the key to happiness, but maybe happiness wasn’t the only thing worth unlocking” (p. 304).

In reading this book, I found myself pulling for Welch, even as I was appalled by her deception and manipulation of the members of TRBC. She never comes around to embracing an evangelical point of view, but there are numerous points throughout this book in which shafts of light seem to break through. For instance, at the end of the book, Welch describes hearing Psalm 139 read to her for the first time:

“The beauty of this Psalm unfurled in me like great spools of ribbon. God-love—I felt I finally saw it. Human love was this awkward thing, like the most delicious fish you could ever hope to eat but you had to eat it alive. Sometimes it made you feel desperate and crazed, as though you’d have to become the person to ever have enough of them. But God-love, the love in the psalm, the love in Jesus loves you—that was Mobius strip love, love with no beginning or end, love that was both calm and complete, unflinching in the face of anything you could reveal about yourself. Who wouldn’t want that? I certainly did, especially in that moment—knowing the secrets in my own heart, knowing that they’d be revealed. But wanting it still didn’t make me believe it” (p. 309).

Welch describes other experiences like this one—including countless instances of being impressed by the community of TRBC.

“They seem to have, as I came to appreciate, a kind of bottomless spring that keeps their happiness lush. I started to believe it was perfectly authentic, and I wanted some for myself” (p. 152).

“In some ways I guess I was beginning to act like them, too. I was sunnier, gentler, friendlier to strangers. I didn’t have that infinite pasture of happiness like Evangelicals, but I had a kind of miniature golf course approximation” (p. 187).

“What I envied most about Christians was not the God thing—it was having a community gathering each week, a touchstone for people who share values, a safe place to be frank about your life struggles, a place to be reminded of your moral compass. Having a place to guard against loneliness, to feel there are others like you” (p. 187-88).

Sadly, Welch’s atheism prevents her from tracing this love back to its Source. She prefers secular reason over what she deems to be a desperately unreasonable faith. In the end, she reconciles her loathing of Evangelical belief with her love of Evangelicals in this way:

“So this—this became the basis of my love for Evangelicals: I was going to choose to see the mystical oneness. And once I started to see it that way, loving them wasn’t very hard to do. In some sense these days I’m just as I always was: godless and churchless, sure that when we die, we’re dead. There is no part of me that’s me forever” (p. 317).

3. Struggles with the Morality of Her Quest

Welch understands that her deception is morally suspect, and she tries to justify her dishonesty with an end-justifies-the-means kind of an argument. She writes:

“Are the revelations I’ve gathered about Evangelicals eclipsed by the methods I’ve used to gather them? I don’t think so... If we don’t love Evangelicals, if we don’t make an effort to understand and accept them,... we’ll always be each other’s nemeses” (p. 315).

Welch thinks her story humanizes Evangelicals in such a way that even their cultured despisers won't have to despise them anymore. In other words, her subterfuge inaugurates new possibilities of tolerance between believers and secularists. For Welch, this possibility justifies her deception. I couldn't disagree more with her on that point. I wonder if she could live with such a rationale if the shoe were on the other foot and she were the one being investigated by an interloper.

Welch paints pictures with her words. She is an outstanding writer, and her book is a delight to read. I could hardly put it down despite the ethical difficulties with her subject matter. One might expect an evangelical reader to be offended by this book. She lied to and manipulated Christians for the sake of a project from which she stood to profit. Her actions were deceptive and hurtful to her friends at TRBC, and her narrative was patronizing at times to her evangelical subjects. Nevertheless, I find it difficult to be angry with her. I'm still praying that she may yet acquiesce to a gospel perspective. The Lord's arm is not too short to save (Isaiah 59:1), and I am holding out hope that it may yet reach her.