AT: Welcome to the infinite women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by Bethany Mannon, assistant professor of English at Appalachian State University and author of *'I Grew Up in the Church': How Evangelical Women Tell Their Stories*. Bethany is here to discuss contemporary evangelical Christian women writers. And I'd like to start with more nuance about what is evangelical Christianity in terms of beliefs and community because I feel like this is a group that is often presented as a monolith and not in a good way, shall we say, from a feminist perspective. But of course, we know that there are very few large groups of people that actually all think and act the same way. It's just the loudest ones who get the most attention.

BM: Yeah, absolutely. And it seems like every study of evangelicals has to start with “now, what are we talking about here? What is our definition?” And people will debate, is it a historical phenomenon? Is it a set of common theological distinctives? Is it a political identity? Does it depend on affiliation? Do you have to own the term evangelical to be an evangelical? There are people I look at who say it's a pop culture. It's people who know who grew up watching VeggieTales and know where to buy a purity ring. That's maybe a little bit older reference. I don't know if purity rings are still a thing.

AT: Oh no, am I an evangelical Christian? Because I grew up in Indiana and I definitely watched VeggieTales and could have told you which stores probably sold purity rings. (laughter)

BM: Yeah. Would you say you grew up in sort of a hegemonic evangelical space?

AT: I grew up Catholic, but there were a lot of flavors of Christianity. But that was the one that we actually went to church, was Catholic. But even at school you get this kind of thing like abstinence only sex ed. So it's very in the culture and you watch VeggieTales at elementary school or whatever.

BM: Oh wow. Anyway, so I think that's tricky. I think defining evangelicals is tricky. I don't have a great answer and I'm not trying to adjudicate those different definitions. But in this book, I spend my first chapter defining what evangelical rhetoric is. I think to some degree, evangelicals are linked and maybe can recognize each other by the kind of language that they're using and the way they're using that language. So I look at the history of evangelicalism. I look at some of those different definitions. A lot of people will point to the Bebbington Quadrilateral, which is the historical definition that across time, evangelicals have coalesced around really high regard for the Bible, insistence on conversion or being born again. You have to go through that experience. A sense of mission or outreach, spreading the word, and then a personal relationship with Jesus, with God. So for example, right now, I've seen a lot of discourse about Pope Francis and what do evangelicals really think about him. So I absolutely remember growing up and hearing, are Catholics Christian? Maybe not if they don't really have a relationship with God. All the other parts of faith and faith practice don't matter if that piece isn't there. Anyway, so that's the historical tenants of the faith. So looking at those, looking at, yes, the pop culture history in the United States, I propose that we can recognize evangelicals and they can recognize each other by the ways that they construct arguments and speak to each other.

AT: So I think those core attributes that you've mentioned, I think that may be part of why, at least from my perspective, there may be negative sentiment around evangelicalism because any religion that considers a core tenant to be pushing their religion on other people, I find… troubling, shall we say?

BM: Yes, and of course, evangelicals, getting back to your point about this, not being a monolith will interpret that in different ways, and I don't want to overstate how much that divides along gender lines, but definitely the women that I'm looking at are motivated to talk about their faith in a way that makes it understandable and legible and maybe appealing to other people, but without drawing on what I would call common places of

evangelical rhetoric like biblical authority, certainty, combat, these building blocks of argument that are so characteristic of evangelical rhetoric and so alienating to a lot of the people that they are trying to reach, which includes other evangelicals, but also people outside the church.

AT: Well, let's get more into that. Because I definitely feel like you see this with rhetoric more broadly in terms of not necessarily how women express themselves because this is how they feel, but how women express themselves because they know how it will be received and perceived if they talk in certain ways. Men have more latitude and they often have this more aggressive language. Broadly speaking, that's a huge generalization. Would you say that tracks on the evangelical rhetoric?

BM: Absolutely. A couple of different things. I think women have to prove their authority to speak, especially to speak on spiritual matters. Writing in personal narrative mitigates that a little bit, or that can be a little bit of an acceptable avenue. You're witnessing to God's work in your life, you're telling the story of your faith journey, these very acceptable, familiar forms. That's never been off limits to women. In this period I'm looking at from 2008 to 2018, the decline of white Christian America, women are using these very familiar, acceptable, congenial forms to make new kinds of arguments. But they're also drawing on this long tradition of women saying, “I absolutely have the right to preach. Read the Bible for what it really says, not for the white patriarchal interpretation that's been layered onto it.” Women were the first people to spread the good news of Jesus's resurrection. They make arguments like that as well. During this period, memoirs are a really popular form, but they do have to think about the publishing industry. Not only what will my audience think, what will the reviewers and gatekeepers think, but what will publishers give a contract to? There are probably times when you can see them being a little more friendly, softening their argument for that reason.

AT: There's a really interesting book called *The Authority Gap*. When you said right off the bat, they have to establish their authority to speak, Mary Ann Sieghart in *The Authority Gap* talks about the triple bind, where women are assumed to have less authority, to be less qualified to speak on a given topic. The triple bind is that in theory, the best way to offset that is establish your credentials. But then because we're women, if you say, “I have a doctorate in this, I've been doing this for 10 years,” or in your case, “I have all of this lived experience.” When we present those qualifications, we're seen as arrogant and arrogant women are less likable and less likely to be hired, promoted, etc. You've got this triple bind of not just a catch-22, but a catch-33, so to speak.

BM: Yeah. What I see some of these writers doing like Rachel Held Evans, I write about her establishing an ecological ethos. This idea that ethos or credibility or authority doesn't just come from your qualifications. She has a bachelor's degree in English. She'll say over and over, “I'm not a theologian, I haven't gone to seminary.” I think she considered it at one point, but never did. Read a ton and drew on all these other theologians. The thing that really gave her credibility and authority was her ability to take pretty sophisticated, dense theology and read it and sit with it, and then present it to a public audience and connect it to her life, connect it to their lives, and also to draw in other voices for perspectives and experiences that she thought her readers need to hear about, but weren't necessarily her own. Expanding this idea of ethos and credibility and authority to include, “here's where I sit and here's who I'm listening to, and here's who I'm connected with.” But also, “here's what I care about. Here's my goodwill towards my audience” is a big piece of what they're working with.

AT: I had another conversation about Margaret Guenther, who was an Episcopalian who opened up this idea that anyone could be a spiritual advisor. It didn't just have to be someone within the church hierarchy, you could have spiritual guidance and someone walking you through these processes. As you're talking about relationship to God/Jesus, she really made that much more accessible and removed the hierarchy and saying, “this doesn't have to be a priest, this doesn't have to be someone who

Listen to Melissa Chim on Margaret Guenther and the Episcopalian Church or read the transcript.

holds a position of authority in the church." I found that really interesting because a lot of times in churches, these hierarchies are used to uphold patriarchy. Again, see the Catholic Church. Is this something that you see with the writers that you focus on as well? Are they also dealing with these entrenched hierarchies and trying to break them down?

BM: They are, but they are also setting up alternative spaces where women can speak to each other without the oversight and intervention and gatekeeping of those hierarchies. And also, where queer Christians can talk to each other, where atheists are welcome to join, just like on Rachel Held Evans's blog, you'll see people say, "I'm an atheist, but I'm really interested in this," and join in the conversation and be welcomed and be listened to. So to some extent, yes, you do see them making these arguments for women to hold positions of authority and leadership in the church, but also, and I think this comes with the expanded media landscape. The sermon is not the only place where evangelical rhetoric is happening, or where powerful evangelical rhetoric is happening. It's in podcasts, online, social media, back in the day blogs, I guess now Substack newsletters, and print memoirs that are sometimes bestsellers and incredibly popular.

AT: Earlier, you mentioned the decline of white Christian America, and I'm confused because unfortunately, it doesn't seem to have declined. And particularly now in the era of Trump 2.0, it seems to be stronger than ever in ways that I would not consider Christian. Like a lot of the things that you hear Christian nationalists saying basically go directly against what Jesus was saying. And I say that as someone who was a star pupil in Sunday school. I know enough of the Bible to know that a lot of that rhetoric is not what Jesus was talking about, guys. So what do you mean when you say the decline of white Christian America, and how are different people within evangelicalism responding to this?

BM: *The Decline of White Christian America* is the title of a book by Robert P. Jones at the Public Religion Research Institute. And I actually found this sort of late in my research. I was really interested in these women and studying these memoirs and this flourishing of women telling their personal stories for rhetorical reasons that I saw going on. And a little ways into the research, I realized, "oh, the time period I'm looking at when this is happening is after white evangelicalism starts to decline." So numerically, the number of people who identify as white evangelical Christians starts to go down. For several reasons, people are leaving the church. Young people are leaving the church. People are not so much leaving for other denominations. But you see the number of white evangelical Christians suddenly declining after they had been able for decades and decades to celebrate their growth. And they stop growing and in fact start declining. What is not declining is the number of non-white evangelicals. And so the overall number of evangelicals is increasing. But it's because people are joining evangelical churches who are not white. And that's really problematic for a lot of the leaders and commentators and people who care about the evangelical movement being a political and cultural force in the country, because this sort of multicultural evangelicalism is not what they pictured. There's a lot of concern after this shift in the trends over young people leaving the church and over the cultural influence of evangelicalism. And of course, Barack Obama is elected president. There's a very tumultuous decade where evangelicals are hashing these things out. I agree with you that a lot of what white Christian nationalism is trying to exert and accomplish does not look like the Bible. And I think that a lot of people who flock to that movement need to be reminded or maybe told for the first time that Christian means follower of Christ.

AT: What would Jesus do? Not this!

BM: Right, that's right. You see many of the leaders, many of the white male leaders getting really concerned over this loss of influence on politics and culture. (AT: They're freaking out. )They're freaking out. They are. And they're saying, "well, now you can be persecuted for believing the Bible." This persecution narrative has been around for a long time. That gets picked up again. Not to say that women don't do that as well. Absolutely,

some women are reiterating those ideas and voicing those ideas. But what I'm really interested in is people who are responding differently, who are saying “this shift or this decline is not at all a threat. We are part of this culture. We are meant to serve and minister and reach people,” and they're not seeking political influence and cultural dominance. And so they are seeking new ways to engage with culture and engage with these debates that recognizes the changes in American culture.

AT: I want to touch on this false persecution narrative, because I think that is another thing that gets a lot of attention and also turns a lot of people off, because it's it's not just Christians. There are other, you've now got white men complaining about how white men are the most oppressed group, which is just hilarious. But this idea of gaining clout, influence, political power by positioning yourself as the the oppressed, as the victim, as the martyr. Why do you think that that is a particular form of rhetoric that they latched on to? Because I know there's this idea that when a privileged person faces any sort of equality, a lot of times they feel victimized. And so I don't know if that's what's going on here or if it's more than that.

BM: I think that's a big part of it. I think that fear is a really powerful motivator. Fear is one of the common places or argumentative building blocks that I look at. John Fee is the author, the historian who wrote a really great book about that and tracks through all of evangelical history. The fear of Catholics, fear of atheists, fear of communists. It has always been part of evangelical culture and is really embedded in the way that they speak to each other and formulate their arguments and their commentary on the world. When you don't have a ton of power, influence and authority in the movement, you are probably looking at the fact that you have a lot of power and you are probably less threatened by these changes. When I look at these women who are like, “I'm writing my books, I'm speaking to other women. I never expected to have this audience. I'm grateful that I have it. I'm going to do good things with it.” When they say that the number of evangelicals is declining, they're like, “well, yeah, I'll keep doing what I'm doing.” Being at the top of the hierarchy in American culture was never part of the equation for them.
Can I read you a quote from Rachel Held Evans's memoir? This book was published 10 years ago in 2015. And she's writing about the decline of the white evangelical church, millennials leaving, and some of these trends have reversed recently, which is, I don't know if that's a blip or if that's something that will continue. The young people are coming back to church, whatever. We'll see. But in 2015, she writes, “as the shape of Christianity changes and our churches adapt to a new world, we have a choice. We can drive our hearses around bemoaning every augur of death, or we can trust that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead is busy making something new.” And she says, “as long as Christians are breaking the bread and pouring the wine, and as long as we are preaching the word and paying attention, the church lives. And we may as well trust Jesus with that.” And in 2015, I think that meant, is the church declining? And now I read that and I think, is the genuine, faithful, biblical understanding of Christianity declining in the face of white Christian nationalism replacing it? I guess that's a different death of the church. Does that resonate with a different death of the church now? And so as I look at these writers who have, I think, a really strong commitment to the evangelical community, but a really clear critique of it as well, I don't know, I continue to feel pretty hopeful, that there have been these voices throughout evangelical history, throughout recent history, who are reaching people and finding an audience and holding their ground in the face of patriarchal and nationalist influences.

AT: I want to bring together two things that you've mentioned, power and fear. Because the sense that I'm getting is those in power fear losing their power, and those who never expected to have power are just grateful for what they have. And it's that whole expectation versus reality. If you are entitled in your mind to that power, anything that threatens that power is scary, and you will do whatever you can to fight against that.

BM: Yeah, I think that's true. There are women that I study who are very, very conservative, in terms of their theological beliefs. But they are the voices that, they are the people that I think see abuse going on in the

church and are speaking out really powerfully against it. So Karen Swallow Prior is one of those. She's not someone you would ever call a progressive. Conservatives call her progressive when they want to dismiss her or marginalize what she's saying. But she is unabashedly pointing out that there is a systemic problem with sexual abuse in the Southern Baptist Convention. And if we believe the things we say we believe, we need to confront that. And so, yeah, yes, exactly, willing to give up whatever position and authority she had within that institution. And you see many, many men who are the heads of large churches and heads of seminaries who are not handling it that way.

AT: And something else that you look into is the diversity of women specifically within evangelicalism. So is that just as you were saying, some are more conservative, some are more liberal? Or is it also that broader diversity that you were mentioning earlier about evangelical Christianity as a whole is getting more racially diverse and more diverse in other ways?

BM: So what is also happening is that people are declining to identify as evangelical anymore. So one of the writers I look at, Austin Channing Brown, wrote a memoir called *I'm Still Here, Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*. And she writes about her work in evangelical nonprofits, evangelical colleges. She has gone to white evangelical churches and she contrasts that with her experience of Black evangelical churches where the rhetoric is very different. I write about her as an evangelical and I maybe misidentify her that way, but because she's writing within that environment and that's definitely a big part of her audience. And she recently said, I wrote something on Bluesky about being one of the evangelical women I'm looking at, and she responds, “I would never call myself an evangelical.” And I would love to ask her, “is that recent? Would you at one time have called yourself an evangelical, but because of the way the meaning has shifted, you don't anymore?” There's another black writer, Trillia Newbell, who was part of the Southern Baptist Convention and for a variety of reasons. She's one of the really orthodox conservative writers I talk about, left and goes to an Episcopal church now. And so I think that, yes, you do see women of color remaining within evangelicalism because they feel a really strong call to do that work. And you see others saying, “this is not something I can identify with anymore.”

AT: You mentioned standing up against abuses against women, specifically in the Southern Baptist Convention, but obviously we know that that happens across all different churches. And a lot of feminists may ask, “why would I stay in an environment or an organization that doesn't care if people in power harm me and people like me?” And I think you could apply that beyond the gender lens. But we do particularly see this with the abuse of women by those in power in different church settings. And again, I say that as a fallen Catholic. This makes a lot of, I would say, particularly women question, why would you stick with a faith, why would you stick with a structure that many people would argue is inherently misogynistic? It's misogynistic from the root. And why would you want to be within that? Why would you want to continue working for this cause that harms people like you?

BM: A lot of them do leave. A lot of them think that they can change it, that they have a lot of hope for using their voices for reform. When I was writing this book, I was in a very hopeful place and I still am. But yeah, the Southern Baptist Convention wrapped up its “investigation” - I put that in big air quotes - into this sexual abuse and cover-up. Two pastors were charged, something like that. And other people have written about this much more in depth and focus on this particular issue more than me. People do leave. They stay thinking that they can be a voice for reform or they leave the big denominations and go to affirming, progressive, sometimes non-denominational churches. There's a big shift towards non-denominational, homegrown local congregations, which have their own problems, but are outside of that structure. I grew up evangelical, didn't go to church for 10 years. When I did go back to church, it was a mainline liberal hippie Presbyterian church in Asheville, North Carolina that I loved. My husband and I were like, “should we go to church?” “Yeah, we could

go to church.” And we drove past this one that had a community garden in the front yard and we're like, “let's try that one first.” And we loved it and just went there. I think the people that you're describing who say, why would I continue to support this and belong to this inherently a patriarchal, hierarchical organization? Go find a church with a woman pastor and a community garden in the front yard. They're out there.

AT: And I think that is part of why we have this monolithic view that we started off talking about, is it is not a single cohesive entity like the Catholic church. It is all of these different groups. And like you said, even the criteria for what makes someone evangelical can be a bit amorphous. So do you think that the women who are trying to change the larger, more conservative entities, are they making progress? Because it doesn't sound like the Southern Baptist Convention example really accomplished much. And I'm just wondering, are these women making change or are they being forced out or both?

BM: Both. And that was a question that a reader asked me as I was wrapping up this book. “Do you see evidence that they're having the kinds of effects that they want to have of reshaping the way evangelicals write, bringing more people in, creating these spaces for women?” In my book that I'm working on now, I'm trying to track that down. I'm looking at Rachel Held Evans in particular, and I'm not only analyzing her work, but interviewing people and looking at how readers responded to her and trying to understand what her impact was. So it's a really hard question for me to answer, but important. And so that's where I'm going next. I wish I had the numbers for this, and I don't, and maybe they're findable. I think that there's some loosening up of the ideas around women's leadership in some of the non-denominational churches in particular. I think there's been a big shift in attitudes towards LGBTQ rights and same-sex marriage among younger evangelicals. Like there's a generational change there. This is probably never going to show up in polls, but I do think that there is a sense of, we don't need to be so fixated on certainty. We don't need to be so fixated on winning debates. I read about sermons and apologetics, which is this practice of crafting “rational” or logical defenses of the faith are falling away in popularity and being replaced by a more relational, less combative way of engaging with other believers and with non-believers. So yes, I think and hope that they are gaining some traction there. But it may be only with the people who are in the middle already. I don't know that it's having much impact on the real hardline, real conservative voices. More to look at there.

AT: Wasn't Jimmy Carter evangelical? (BM: Yeah.) So we need more Jimmy Carters and less fire and brimstone types.

BM: Yes. I've talked to some people who are studying the religious left and they see it really active on the city leve; or grassroots community organizations, not on the national politics level. Though, in his 25-hour filibuster, Cory Booker talked about his faith a ton. So there are figures in politics coming from the religious left. Some of them might consider themselves evangelical. I think there's a lot to look at there.

AT: So when we're talking about women who are sort of calling out these abuses. One of the people that you look at is Wendy Alsup. Would you like to tell us about her?

BM: I think she's a little bit underrated. I mentioned Rachel Held Evans. She's famous. Some of the other people I look at are really well known and might be household names for a lot of evangelicals. I like her writing. She's really not a firebrand. Probably not a progressive, probably wouldn't be labeled that way. But she was a leader in women's ministry at a church in Seattle headed up by Mark Driscoll, who became famous as a really misogynist, really radical preacher, known for bringing young men into the church and preaching in a really, he would sound like a stand-up comic. He was not uptight. He was really “relatable.” He would swear. To a lot of people, he was the breath of fresh air. And he was trying to create a new kind of church in the Seattle area, which was a really unchurched secular space. Wendy Alsup was on the staff at his church. So she comes out

of this mega church movement. So she writes about feeling called to go join this church, leave women's ministry there. And she does. But then after some of the really serious financial and abuses of authority come out in that church, not sexual abuses, actually. Spiritual, financial abuses of authority are really the issue there. She's really unapologetic about saying, “I was part of that. And that's something we need to be honest about, this tendency within evangelicalism to hold up really charismatic, apparently really successful male pastors who are ‘on fire for God’ without looking more closely at the issue there.” So she's written a handful of books and they have titles like *Is the Bible Good for Women?* or *The Gospel-Centered Woman* that are on the one hand really right in line with very traditional views of gender in the Bible and biblical authority, but will point out pretty unabashedly where that's being abused and misused and particularly used against women.
And the thing I really like about her is an essay that she wrote and published on her blog where she says “the image of biblical manhood is not a warrior,” which is something Mark Driscoll had really held up. And you see it a lot in white Christian nationalism, like battling the forces of evil in the secular world, fighting for the good news of the gospel, developing discipleship for men around hyper-masculinity. And she says “the image of masculinity we get from the Bible is not the warrior, it's the farmer. This faithful, patient, long-term commitment to a place, to growth, to cultivating.” So it's not combat, it's this other, absolutely includes many of the masculine virtues that evangelicals have always celebrated and masculine strength, like physical strength, but oriented towards cultivating rather than fighting. That speaks to me, that seems to me a message and a voice that is sort of underrated in evangelicalism, not heard often enough.

AT: And I think that is the core of a lot of things that we've been talking about, is this co-optation of Jesus to toxic masculinity. Jesus was Mr. Rogers more so than, other than like flipping tables occasionally, which I love.

BM: And when he does that, it has to do with money. That's the issue there, not people's personal lives.

AT: But yeah, this warrior for Jesus mentality that I think also goes back to that, if you can instill fear, if you can convince people that you're actually the persecuted, the oppressed, that's very powerful as an emotional manipulation tool. Like that's actually something that you see in cults. Like I'm not saying that evangelical Christianity is a cult, that is very much not what I'm saying. But I think that they do use some of the same tools to maintain power. Again, going back to that premise of power and how people gain and keep it.

BM: Yeah, absolutely. I think that women also get co-opted into that and played off of each other in ways that serve the purposes of the male hierarchy in the church.

AT: Now, as anyone who's familiar with my work probably knows, I sort of bounce around all over the place with women's history. And that could be the ADHD. But I'm always curious about what it is about a certain topic that draws people to commit so much of their time and energy to a particular subject. So you've mentioned that, both how you were raised and then later in life, you do have personal connections to evangelical Christianity. But what is it that really inspired you to do this work?

BM: I think I started off processing some of the questions that I had from my experience in the evangelical church. I was curious how other people work through questions about literal interpretations of the Bible and the questions about male authority and women's place like we were talking about. I think that I got really intrigued by the ways that some of these women are relating to the long tradition of women's activism. There's a really interesting period in the late 1800s when evangelicals are very progressive and they are on the forefront of prison reform. And the social gospel is the idea animating that work, that the Bible calls us to be attending to people's physical needs and in the here and now being God's hands and feet to the poorest and most downtrodden among us. So prison reform is post abolition, but Prohibition is part of this. So really, really driving these social movements, even things like public health. And so some of the evangelical women today are

almost like, despite the conservatism of our present time, they remember that history. And that's what evangelicalism has been in the past and could be now and in the future. And so I gave this a lot of my time and energy out of, I share that hope. There were definitely times when I was writing about ideas that I struggle with this, some of the really conservative views of gender that some of these women do hold. And I would have to step away and work on something else. And I would come back to it because I thought there's something very hopeful here. I really think that evangelicalism goes through these these waves of progressivism and conservatism. And I don't know, God will sort it out in the end. And I know this kind of research isn't for everybody. Not everyone is going to admire these women or think they're as interesting as I do. And I'm completely fine with that. I even understand it. And I'm more interested in analyzing this current within evangelicalism than with advocating for it. I'm not saying people should come back to church because look, we have these women. It's a fairly large conversation going on that is not, I think, part of the public face of evangelicalism all the time. And I think that at the very least, people studying evangelicalism should be paying attention to it as well. And that's kind of as far as my argument goes.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast, and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.