

Christian Feminism Today

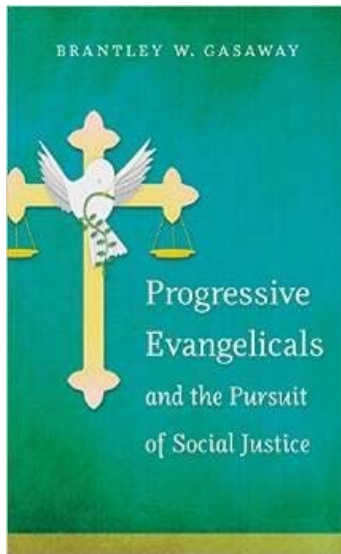
Book Review

Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice by Brantley W. Gasaway
reviewed by Mark William Olson

Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice

by Brantley W. Gasaway
University of North Carolina Press, 2014
Paperback and E-book, 324 pages

A review essay by Mark William Olson



Writing a review of a historical narrative in which you yourself play a supporting role is inherently awkward. When that same book focuses almost exclusively on periodicals, people, and groups with whom you once learned, schemed, planned, edited, and worked, it can be downright difficult.

Nevertheless, I'm awfully glad Brantley Gasaway's book is finally in print. It has an important and true story to tell. It expands the historical record in valuable ways.

Focusing on six major issues over the last fifty years—racism, feminism, abortion, homosexuality, economic inequality, and war—*Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* documents the sometimes fruitful and sometimes incredibly foolish ways that a certain subgroup of Christians sought to address these issues. They pursued this objective through producing books, periodicals, public statements and actions, conferences, and the creation of membership organizations. Many individuals who played key roles in the development of EEW-C-Christian Feminism Today or the still fondly remembered *Daughters of Sarah* are

included, though the three groups that Gasaway probes most thoroughly are *The Other Side* (where I was long an editor), *Sojourners*, and the ongoing organization Evangelicals for Social Action.

An introductory chapter explores what Gasaway calls “the rise of the contemporary progressive evangelical movement.” This is followed by a look at the simultaneous adoption by some in this movement of “an implicit political philosophy” that he calls “a public theology of community.” He describes this as a theology in which “the image of God” is not singular but communal. It's a theology that stresses the divine importance of “neighbor” and the pursuit of “the common good.”

Gasaway, now an assistant professor of religion at Bucknell University, portrays some notable developments that, especially in retrospect, seem to shine with courage and insight. Many of the writings and insights and organizing efforts that he documents come across as admirable, visionary, and Spirit-drenched.

A Discomforting Read

Nevertheless, for me, there was something about reading this book that proved strangely discomforting. It wasn't the quality of his research, for he seems to have read and thoughtfully categorized a huge amount of material. Rather, what sometimes proved discomforting for me was the *substance* of what he found. Every chapter, it seems, exposes its share of stark and sometimes shameful missteps.

Mark William Olson's review of *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* by Brantley W. Gasaway. Published on the *Christian Feminism Today* website, April, 2015. © 2015 by Mark William Olson and *Christian Feminism Today*. <http://www.eewc.com>

Christian Feminism Today

Book Review

Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice by Brantley W. Gasaway
reviewed by Mark William Olson

On one level, that's not surprising. As "enlightened" people of faith, we can *mean well* but stumble badly. Too often, our best efforts are beset with a fumbling naïveté, short-sighted confusion, a willingness to let Mammon and its delusions be our master, misaligned priorities imposed by an overly rigid fixation on our defining theology, or sometimes simply a gross and biblically unjustifiable timidity. The latter, I suspect, is sometimes a natural byproduct of the incredibly tiny—but whopping big to us—social, political, and religious worlds we all inhabit. In fact, in foolishly trying to "save" our lives and "preserve" our identities within a religious movement that tends to exclude rather than include, we sometimes end up "losing" our place on the very journey to which we are called.

Perhaps that's why I occasionally found this book's carefully documented, searingly accurate portraits more humbling than uplifting. We all fall dreadfully short of that to which we aspire. I know I do. Light calls. Love leads. But half the time or more, or so it seems, I stumble and grope. At least in part, I plug my ears. At least in part, I shut my eyes. I'm seldom, if ever, ready to comprehend the fullness of Wisdom's whisper. I'm seldom, if ever, ready to glimpse more than a modicum of God's let's-push-back-the-waters glory. I may say—in the abstract—that I want to move closer to Christ and Christ's ways, but when it comes right down to it, I'm a whole lot more comfortable just waving my arms and kicking my feet in confining nets of my own making.

Yet, humbling though parts of the story may be, this is a history that needs to be heard. It isn't wholly a story of stumbles. It's also a story of honorable words and courageous actions, often undertaken in the face of great hostility. For that, we can all be thankful. It's also a non-static story of growth, evolution, and change. Again and again, you'll find evidence of that Wind that blows where it wills.

A Story Told in Many Voices

Gasaway's book is actually one of a handful of helpful recent volumes exploring a religious reality that has too often been overlooked or misperceived. Two years ago, David Swartz's *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012) zeroed in on certain individuals who had played prominent roles in the Chicago Declaration of Social Concern and some of the organizational efforts that emerged from that statement. Last year, Randall Balmer's *Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter* (Basic Books, 2014) devoted a significant amount of space to the role of politically progressive "evangelicals" in initially supporting Jimmy Carter's pursuit of the presidency—and then later abandoning him when he seemed to fall far short of their hopes.

Balmer also effectively demonstrates the cynical ways in which certain political strategists, seeking to advance the rich against the poor and corporate America against the global good, conspired to undercut certain "progressive evangelicals" by fomenting a widespread religious outrage about abortion, when in fact there were absolutely no valid biblical grounds for treating it as a moral issue at all. (Sadly, as both Balmer and Gasaway point out, some "progressive evangelicals," failing to be as shrewd as serpents, fell into the carefully constructed trap that had been laid and allowed themselves to become unintended pawns in a right-wing, grossly anti-Christian agenda.)

Attempts to Define "Evangelical."

As I pointed out in [my review on this website of David Swartz's recent volume](#), there is an almost unsurmountable problem with all books that attempt to discuss the role of "progressive evangelicals." How does one define the group about which one is talking?

Mark William Olson's review of *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* by Brantley W. Gasaway. Published on the *Christian Feminism Today* website, April, 2015. © 2015 by Mark William Olson and *Christian Feminism Today*. <http://www.eewc.com>

Christian Feminism Today

Book Review

Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice by Brantley W. Gasaway
reviewed by Mark William Olson

Swartz, Balmer, and Gasaway each make some effort to define their labels, but it's ultimately an almost impossible task. Gasaway, for example, suggests that certain "defining theological principles" reveal who is an "evangelical." These include, he argues, "the primacy of biblical authority, the need for personal conversion and faith in Jesus' atoning work, and a dedication to evangelistic and humanitarian efforts." But none of these "theological principles" actually has any fixed meaning. In practice, identical words can be interpreted in different ways by different people—and often are.

Gasaway also attempts other definitions. He describes the group in question as a "trans-denominational network of theologically conservative Protestants who broke from the separatist subculture of fundamentalism in the mid-twentieth century and adopted the self-identity of 'evangelical.'" This, too, leaves many terms begging to be defined. Yet within this statement there is an important—and deeply problematic—kernel of truth.

As Gasaway has rightly perceived, at its core, "evangelical" is and always has been a *self-identity*. It's an amorphous, constantly shifting, self-defined network that conforms to no official or outward criteria. You can't be an "evangelical" by holding membership in a particular denomination (though affiliating with certain denominations or religious traditions could, on the other hand, definitely cause you to be viewed with suspicion). You can't be an "evangelical" by having or not having a certain level of education (though having a degree from certain institutions would likely cause you to be held at arm's length). Nor can you be an "evangelical" by merely affirming certain general theological "principles" (though failing to make regular use of certain in-group language would almost certainly cause you to be seen as an outsider).

Like all informal, self-defined subcultures, this network has always aggressively decided who is in—or out—*not* on the basis of any objective criteria but rather on highly subjective impressions, including your adherence to the network's prevailing social, political, and hermeneutical priorities. Boundaries become all the more important—and all the more perverse—when one is seeking to maintain an artificially constructed, self-defined, self-created identity.

Why Biblical Feminists Were Perceived as Threatening

Perhaps that's why the erasing of gender distinctions by biblical feminists was so threatening to many of the network's leaders. Boundaries were being elbowed away. The Bible was being used to undermine the "clear identities" that many of the "evangelical" network's leaders had once viewed as sacred. If gender distinctions could be erased, how would this artificially constructed "evangelical" movement maintain its own self-created identity?

By 1979, Harold Lindsell, then serving as editor of *Christianity Today*, the self-defined leading "evangelical" journal, was issuing accusations against Letha Scanzoni, Nancy Hardesty, Virginia Mollenkott, and other boundary-questioning women. I suspect that what made their writings all the more galling for people like Lindsell is that they regularly appealed to scripture in support of their positions. To see scripture used in this way seems to have been deeply troubling for those who saw themselves as divinely anointed protectors of evangelicalism's inherent "us–them" way of thinking. Lindsell responded by accusing Scanzoni, Hardesty, Mollenkott, and others of sliding down "the slippery slope" to heresy.

At about the same time, in his book *Worldly Evangelicals*, Richard Quebedeaux maligned biblical feminists for having adopted, to use his words, "traditionally liberal methodology" in their biblical interpretations. For those who regularly used words and labels to erect walls and fences over which the

Mark William Olson's review of *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* by Brantley W. Gasaway.
Published on the *Christian Feminism Today* website, April, 2015. © 2015 by Mark William Olson and *Christian Feminism Today*. <http://www.eewc.com>

Christian Feminism Today

Book Review

Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice by Brantley W. Gasaway
reviewed by Mark William Olson

Spirit of God was never to leap, any biblical methodology that might have ever been used by those who were, to their mind, outside the fold of God was automatically wrong. When you are committed to an “us–them” mentality, methodologies become “wrong” not because they are objectively inappropriate or misleading or ineffective but rather because these methods have an association. They are associated with “them,” and everything about “them” is thought to be outside the realm of God.

Thus it becomes clear that, contrary to what was often proclaimed, adherence to “biblical authority” was *not* what made you an “evangelical.” What mattered instead was adherence to a certain predetermined understanding of how the Bible should or shouldn’t be understood, a certain predetermined understanding of what the Bible does or doesn’t say. “Biblical authority” was thus the exact opposite of how leading evangelicals often sought to maintain their identity.

If you tried to be true to what you heard “the Word” saying, and if what you heard “the Word” saying was somehow different from what the self-appointed leaders of the self-constructed network had predetermined it would say, then you clearly weren’t a part of the movement. You had started down that “slippery slope” from which you would never return.

Sadly, that’s probably why many of the so-called “progressive evangelicals” portrayed in Gasaway’s book seem to devote so much time and effort to maintaining their evangelical “credentials,” backpedaling at times on key positions, mouthing “reassuring” positions on subjects that might be deemed important by influential insiders, repeatedly announcing their personal cherishing of the “evangelical” label, or perhaps going out of their way to show how they differ from the conveniently slandered “secular left.”

Part of what makes Gasaway’s book so valuable is its honesty about all of this. He doesn’t blame or accuse—or take sides. He simply describes what happened in the six key areas on which he focuses, even if, in retrospect, the truth makes some of us cringe in shame.

Gasaway is also refreshingly honest about how positions and understandings evolve and change over time. For example, he cites some articles on Christian feminism that Letha Scanzoni wrote for *Eternity* magazine in the 1960s. In today’s context, these articles come across as exceedingly cautious and tentative. Yet the fact that she was a willing and growing channel for God’s Spirit is cause for rejoicing. Her sensitivity wrought wonders of faith and hope among many of God’s beloved children, and her emerging insights are a reminder that even a “mustard seed” can sprout and grow when it’s watered from Above.

Gasaway acknowledges and explores the pioneering spirit of the Evangelical Women’s Caucus, which later became the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women’s Caucus and is now primarily known as Christian Feminism Today. He draws quotes and examples from the rich publishing legacy of *Daughters of Sarah*, as well as from books and articles by such people as Letha Scanzoni, Nancy Hardesty, Virginia Mollenkott, Reta Finger, and others.

He is also honest about the ways in which some “progressive evangelicals,” particularly those associated with Evangelicals for Social Action, sometimes resisted the Spirit-led directions in which Christian feminists were moving. Perhaps these resisters, who sometimes instead openly promoted what they called “family values,” were not yet ready to handle the fullness of God’s call. Or perhaps there were some who felt that fully embracing Christ’s sisters would discredit them in the eyes of that amorphous, self-proclaimed, highly patriarchal “evangelical” network that was all too ready to write them off because of other causes for which they were working.

Mark William Olson’s review of *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* by Brantley W. Gasaway. Published on the *Christian Feminism Today* website, April, 2015. © 2015 by Mark William Olson and *Christian Feminism Today*. <http://www.eewc.com>

Christian Feminism Today

Book Review

Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice by Brantley W. Gasaway
reviewed by Mark William Olson

Homosexuality: Another Controversial Issue

Homosexuality is another issue on which Gasaway finds divergent rates of growth and understanding. I'm thankful that both *The Other Side* magazine, on whose staff I was privileged to serve, and many of the key figures in EEWC-Christian Feminism Today, were pioneers—as early as the late 1970s—in urging God's people to embrace and affirm the full range of God-given sexual identities. Gasaway writes about the work of Virginia Mollenkott and Letha Scanzoni in their 1978 book *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* and about *The Other Side's* special issue on the topic that same year (which was followed by more articles about homosexuality in the years following). Sadly, nothing caused any of us to be “written off” as “evangelicals” any faster than our stand on this issue.

And as Gasaway points out, on this subject we were equally abandoned by others who had courageously partnered with us in other causes and efforts. Indeed, many self-identified “progressive evangelicals” either ran for cover when the subject came up or spewed forth the kind of “compassionate” rejections of lesbian and gay Christians that they felt would somehow insure their continued acceptance by certain leaders in the “evangelical movement.” Although such actions surely brought shame on Christ and set back the work of God's own Spirit, I dare not condemn, for I suspect that we all—myself included—have frequently driven Christ to tears.

Thankfully, among “evangelicals” as a whole, some slow and ultra-cautious changes on this issue may be finally emerging. I pray it is so, for in my mind, scripture repeatedly portrays the Holy One as a loving parent who “gathers into one the scattered children of God” (John 11:52, to cite but one example). Tragically, however, throughout scripture, we find examples of religious leaders becoming mean-spirited and misguided. Acting more like what the Fourth Gospel calls “thieves and robbers” than like “shepherds,” we all—I fear—sometimes erect cruel barriers around ourselves, mocking, sacrificing, or perhaps banishing any “sheep” that don't fit a certain narrow, self-serving mindset. (Could this be, in part, why the same Gospel portrays Jesus as saying, “I have other sheep that you know not of...”?)

Abortion and the Political Trap Some Groups Fell Into

Another of the “issues” explored by Gasaway that causes me some sorrow is the question of abortion. He thoroughly documents the long-standing, vigorous and outspoken moral rejection of abortion by *Sojourners* and Evangelicals for Social Action, which often spoke in one voice on the subject, promoting what they sometimes called “a consistent pro-life” agenda. Both groups often described their position as an example of how they were embodying a “third way,” neither fully identifying with the political “right” or the political “left,” as if that somehow would automatically make their stands on other issues more credible.

In fact, however, as Gasaway and Randall Balmer (in his book *Redeemer*) make clear, on this particular issue, both *Sojourners* and Evangelicals for Social Action had naively become compliant agents of a political movement that was using this issue to advance a deeply un-Christ-like social, economic, and military agenda that would result in the further impoverishment of the poor and the slaughter and/or oppression of millions of innocent people around the world. The “clout” that certain “progressive evangelicals” thought that they would gain by seeking legislative bans on abortion never materialized. Those dreams were only a delusion.

Mark William Olson's review of *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* by Brantley W. Gasaway.
Published on the *Christian Feminism Today* website, April, 2015. © 2015 by Mark William Olson and *Christian Feminism Today*. <http://www.eewc.com>

Christian Feminism Today

Book Review

Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice by Brantley W. Gasaway
reviewed by Mark William Olson

Gasaway correctly notes that, comparatively speaking, leaders among Christian feminists seldom addressed the subject of abortion, for it was a concern that largely grew out of male-dominated “us–them” thinking. He acknowledges, however, that Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty supported a woman’s right to make her own choices about the “agonizing’ questions surrounding abortion” in their 1974 book, *All We’re Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women’s Liberation*.

Gasaway likewise points out that one of the first publications to devote a whole issue to what it rightly called “the agony of abortion” was *The Other Side* in 1980. *The Other Side*, however, used that special issue of the magazine to argue that there was no biblical or rational basis for clarity on this subject. At times, some on the staff took contrary positions, but as a whole, *The Other Side* argued that abortion ought not to be treated as a moral issue on which Christians could or should make pronouncements—or, heaven forbid, seek legislative prohibitions. And as Gasaway points out, after taking this stand in 1980, *The Other Side* largely avoided devoting any space to what it considered a “non-issue.”

Gasaway is somewhat critical of *The Other Side*’s decision not to let abortion become a moral distraction. Perhaps we should have been more vocal more often, repeatedly arguing that abortion was (and is) a matter to be sensitively considered by those for whom it is a personal moral question, not a subject on which God’s people have any grounds for taking a “clear, moral stand,” as some were inclined to put it. But to give the subject repeated space, even to argue that the subject didn’t deserve further attention, seemed—as I recall—like giving in to a perverse agenda that had been set by others, rather than devoting ourselves to a morally important faith journey authentically arising from our ongoing commitment to Christ and Christ’s values, as revealed through Spirit and scripture.

In retrospect, perhaps *The Other Side* and Christian feminists could have done more to quash the almost fanatical devotion to using abortion as a politically decisive issue. It did indeed become one of the major organizing tools for driving more and more self-defined “evangelicals” into the violence-loving, poverty-advancing, deeply racist group that was rapidly taking over the Republican party. But given the tremendous wealth that was fomenting abortion hysteria as a cover for its own cruel agenda, I’m not sure we would have made much difference. And if we had foolishly taken that route, our attention to other, more genuine needs and concerns would necessarily have been lessened. That would have been sad indeed.

Other Concerns that Fell by the Wayside

Of course, we all fail to speak and work with spiritual diligence on every issue that we should. Too often, we lack God’s eyes. We lack God’s priorities. We lack God’s heart. At times, we perhaps even get caught up in tombs of our own making. In the fifty years since *The Other Side* was founded, I’m sure many critically important concerns fell by the wayside. Like those busy, self-protective religious leaders mentioned in Luke’s parable of the “Good Samaritan,” well-meaning staff at *The Other Side*, *Sojourners*, *Daughters of Sarah*, Christian Feminism Today, and Evangelicals for Social Action surely failed to notice the appalling number of injured “victims” lying beside us in the ditch.

Too often, we hurried down the road with other concerns on our mind. *The Other Side*, for example, like every other “progressive evangelical” group mentioned in Gasaway’s book, failed to speak out strongly enough against all war and violence. I am passionately pacifist in my understanding of the challenging call on all of our lives. I don’t think any other understanding fully respects Christ or Christ’s teachings. But I didn’t express myself on that subject very often in print. I’m ashamed of myself.

Mark William Olson’s review of *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* by Brantley W. Gasaway.
Published on the *Christian Feminism Today* website, April, 2015. © 2015 by Mark William Olson and *Christian Feminism Today*. <http://www.eewc.com>

Christian Feminism Today

Book Review

Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice by Brantley W. Gasaway
reviewed by Mark William Olson

There's no mention whatsoever in Brantley Gasaway's otherwise fine volume of one topic that *The Other Side* did address repeatedly. It's one of our nation's grossest sins: the sin of shoving vast numbers of people into prison, disproportionately, of course, people of color and disproportionately, of course, mentally troubled individuals for whom we have cruelly denied even the remotest opportunity of healing. Again and again, *The Other Side* published articles about this destructive horror, a horror at which the United States seems more talented than any other nation in the world.

It's understandable, I suppose, why Gasaway excludes prisons from the topics on which he focuses, for no other "progressive evangelical" publication ever joined us in really addressing this blatant affront to God and God's values. Similarly, it's never been a popular concern in U.S. culture or with any of our nation's political parties. Churches regularly ignore it, despite a Bible that never offers anything but negative words about prisons and the ways in which this sin so easily destroys and debilitates those who undergo its cruelty. I remain proud of the way that *The Other Side* refused to abandon its concern in this area, despite the feeling that we were going it alone. I'm not sure, however, that we "accomplished" much on the topic. We brought encouragement to some, perhaps a degree of motivation to others. But sadly, throughout *The Other Side*'s many years of publication, the prison problem got worse, not better.

Gasaway makes a point of indicating that unlike *Sojourners* and *Evangelicals for Social Action*, *Christian Feminism Today* and *The Other Side* eventually moved away from identifying themselves as uniquely "evangelical." The Evangelical Women's Caucus (EWC) became the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus (EEWC) and more recently has become known as Christian Feminism Today; and *The Other Side*, believing that all socially constructed labels function to exclude rather than include and are thus immoral and unbiblical, explicitly tried to avoid identifying itself much at all.

The "Evangelical" Label

Those who continued to use the "evangelical" label mostly viewed that label as important to strengthening their ministry. At times, they perhaps thought that by using the label, they could bring other "evangelicals" along with them or at least change the public's perception of "evangelicals," which in turn might free up some "evangelicals" to a wider range of perspectives and priorities. Perhaps Gasaway has some sympathy with such thinking. Or maybe not. I can't really tell, which is probably an indication that he's handled the question well.

I grew up in churches that probably self-identified as "evangelical." I say "probably" because I didn't really pay much attention to their language. Even though I refused to be manipulated by certain things in those churches, I was comfortable in them. Spiritually, they nurtured me. They're an important part of who I am today. Later, I went to a college and then to a seminary that self-identified as "evangelical." Everything didn't thrill me in those schools, but I learned much. God was there, though not always in the way that every administrator intended.

When *The Other Side* began in 1965 (then using the name *Freedom Now*), it was focused primarily on racial justice. Its "evangelical" founders believed that to be a Christian—and an "evangelical"—meant that one *had* to be committed to racial justice. Scripture required it. Faith demanded it. For many years thereafter, *The Other Side* was comfortable calling itself "evangelical," though it didn't always make a big deal about the label.

In 1979, about seven years after my first connections with the magazine, I moved from Chicago to Fredericksburg, Virginia. I was looking for a new church community. We had no car, but my wife and I

Mark William Olson's review of *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* by Brantley W. Gasaway.
Published on the *Christian Feminism Today* website, April, 2015. © 2015 by Mark William Olson and *Christian Feminism Today*. <http://www.eewc.com>

Christian Feminism Today

Book Review

Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice by Brantley W. Gasaway
reviewed by Mark William Olson

visited every congregation within a mile and a half or so of where we were living. It soon became clear that where we would feel the most comfortable in terms of Christian values and understandings, and where we would receive the richest spiritual blessing, was with a medium-size Baptist church whose members were 99 percent African American. Over the last thirty-five years, this congregation has manifested Christ to us in marvelous ways.

By the time I joined the church, like many at *The Other Side*, I was already pretty uncomfortable with religious labeling. That understanding was reinforced at this new congregation, for what I discovered, not surprisingly, is that *no one* at this church identified as “evangelical.” No one among this spiritually mature and very Christ-like congregation ever used that term for themselves. In fact, few even seemed to have the slightest knowledge of what the label meant, though I suspect that some had a vague feeling that it was a term of identity used by politically and theologically conservative white folks who couldn’t be trusted on racial or political issues. In such a context, there was no way I wanted to be called “evangelical.” Self-created labels have always worked best among those who created them.

Occasionally thereafter, *The Other Side* would acknowledge that its origins or “roots” had been in a religious world that called itself “evangelical.” But for a variety of reasons, we tried to refrain from applying exclusivist labels to ourselves any longer. It was clear to many of us that such labels do more harm than good. Wasn’t it enough simply to be one of the many diverse children of that remarkable Holy Word that was so mysteriously “made flesh” in Jesus? Wasn’t it enough to seek a deep strength and wisdom from that Wind from Above that forever blows where it wills, opening doors and fostering journeys that go beyond anything we might imagine?

Focusing on the Political or on Justice-Oriented Faith Commitments?

Gasaway’s book is called *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice*. The last part of that title connects most strongly with the “public theology of community” that Gasaway sees at work among many of those whom he identifies as “progressive evangelicals.” It’s a theology that caused some, especially *Sojourners* and Evangelicals for Social Action, to unite in a wide variety of highly public political efforts, especially opposition to aggressive wars, support of the impoverished, both in the U.S. and globally, and opposition to abortion.

Gasaway’s focus on the political is justified in some cases, but it also means that he pays less attention to other dynamics. I found no mention, for example, of the way in which the organization that became EEWC (and now known primarily as Christian Feminism Today) has nurtured a strongly supportive interpersonal network that has provided moral support, biblical and theological guidance, and prayerful encouragement to women grappling with issues of faith and identity on what has often felt like an otherwise lonely religious path.

Similarly, in comparison with *Sojourners* and ESA, *The Other Side* was generally less focused on the political process and more focused on the integration of justice-oriented faith commitments with the whole of one’s personal journey. Something similar could be said about the efforts of Christian feminists, although both *The Other Side* and the Evangelical Women’s Caucus were, in fact, vocal in their support of the ultimately sabotaged Equal Rights Amendment. Indeed, as Randall Balmer points out in *Redeemer*, beginning long before the U.S. Supreme Court decided that corporations, foundations, big media, and the immensely wealthy could buy as much political clout in the U.S. as they wanted, *The Other Side* often expressed deep cynicism about compromising delusions fostered by the political realm,

Mark William Olson’s review of *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* by Brantley W. Gasaway.
Published on the *Christian Feminism Today* website, April, 2015. © 2015 by Mark William Olson and *Christian Feminism Today*. <http://www.eewc.com>

Christian Feminism Today

Book Review

Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice by Brantley W. Gasaway
reviewed by Mark William Olson

especially during those lie-laden nonsense times that the magazine once described as “the election circus.”

I have to admit, however, that in many respects, Gasaway has indeed titled his book correctly. The “pursuit” of social justice was at least in part exactly what most of us were engaged in. Sadly, in that pursuit, most of us failed rather badly. I can’t point, for example, to any wars that were prevented, shortened, or stopped. In fact, during the last fifty years, the period on which Gasaway focuses, our nation has engaged in more horrendous atrocities than most of us know how to count. And in most cases, if not all, people calling themselves “Christian” were complicit in approving or endorsing the devil-delighting work of peace destroyers.

Ongoing Challenges and a Glimmer of Hope

Despite fifty years of effort, the poor continue to be shafted. Hungry women, children, and men around the world continue to be hungry. Immigrants are still resented and exploited. In the U.S., economic inequality has accelerated. In fact, it’s more extreme now than it was fifty years ago. Structural changes have allowed Congress and big media to play a more destructive role than ever. Women continue to be discriminated against in both church and society. For a time, some partial social and political progress was made on racial justice, but significant elements of that are now being perniciously unraveled. And environmentally, of course, we’re ever closer to disaster.

On the positive side, through the many groups and publications highlighted in Gasaway’s book, some people were indeed strengthened in their faith. Some found spiritual strength for a divinely commissioned journey that would put them at odds with principalities and powers. Some were blessed with a stronger vision of God’s embracing love. All of this may have contributed to at least the beginning of certain positive cultural and religious shifts, particularly with regard to the role of women in the church and to the social and religious affirmation of people with diverse sexual identities and commitments. The efforts described by Gasaway may also have contributed in some small way to the commitment of those locally focused religious congregations that continue to follow Christ in standing creatively and constructively with the scorned, the abused, and the struggling.

But when it comes to dramatic progress toward social justice, one can’t help but read Gasaway’s book with a significant degree of sadness. The publications and pronouncements that he cites, along with the endless energies devoted to frenetic religious and political organizing, seem to have had minimal structural impact. The movement on which he focuses may have been a significant breath of divinely granted fresh air, but none of these publications or organizations ever became very large. Some died. And in the larger scheme of things, none of us ever got very close to achieving even a small portion of the social justice about which we spoke, for which we wrote, and about which we dreamed.

This reality was driven home to me even more deeply by the next book that I devoured, namely, Bryan Stevenson’s incredibly powerful *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (Spiegel & Grau, a Random House imprint, 2014). Many years ago, Bryan Stevenson had written an incredibly moving article for *The Other Side*. He’s not only a fine writer and storyteller but also a great speaker. His long-standing, Christ-like concern for the poor, the imprisoned, and this country’s many domestic victims of social and racial injustice would make him a natural “co-conspirator” with many of the publications and organizations on which Gasaway focuses.

Mark William Olson’s review of *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* by Brantley W. Gasaway.
Published on the *Christian Feminism Today* website, April, 2015. © 2015 by Mark William Olson and *Christian Feminism Today*. <http://www.eewc.com>

Christian Feminism Today

Book Review

Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice by Brantley W. Gasaway
reviewed by Mark William Olson

But Stevenson, unlike most of the publications and organizations mentioned in Gasaway's book, has succeeded not only in redeeming individual lives but also in achieving some deep structural changes that have rolled the stone away—at least for a time—from some of our society's cruelest tombs. Unlike the organizations that Gasaway profiles, Stevenson engages in no overt religious positioning of himself or of Equal Justice Initiative, the ever-growing nonprofit organization that he leads.

Like many of those profiled in Gasaway's book, Stevenson has pursued major changes on behalf of the despised and dispossessed, but Stevenson and his Equal Justice Initiative have never been content to build sand castles on the shores of our devastatingly devilish political seas. Rather, as a skilled attorney, he and his partners in justice have labored diligently and persistently through our nation's deliberately difficult criminal punishment system, entering pleas and fighting battles in a growing number of local, state, and national courts. He hasn't won every case. It's clear that he's had to cry deep tears sometimes. But with great passion and resounding courage, motivated, I suspect, by a Spirit that took root in him when he was young, he's won numerous battles that have knocked down high walls and broken loose cruel chains for legions of God's little ones. If his work isn't "evangelical" in the richest sense of the word—if it isn't the embodiment of divinely blessed good news—I don't know what is.

There is still much ugliness loose in our world. Some of that ugliness arrogantly wears the label "evangelical." Some does not. With or without that label, there is also much grace: Light shining strong even in the bleakest of nights. There is, therefore, much about which we can be thankful.

Brantley Gasaway's richly researched volume—like David Swartz's, Randall Balmer's, and Bryan Stevenson's—tells many true stories. Some of the stories will make you shudder, but, thankfully, others will leave you brimming with joy. Perhaps, however, by thoughtfully learning from the remarkable history in these pages, both the good and the bad, we will all continue to grow and progress, becoming ever stronger and more faithful in our embodiment of God's tomb-opening ways. If so, then we might someday even be justified in using the term that appears on the cover of Brantley Gasaway's book in a new and more inclusive way.

Progressive evangelicals? Let's hope so.



Reviewer Mark William Olson was actively involved with *The Other Side* magazine from 1972 through 1998. He served in many different capacities, including as editor and publisher. After leaving *The Other Side*, he worked with a variety of religious publications. He currently serves as a technical and communications resource person for half a dozen small churches and nonprofit organizations in the Fredericksburg, Virginia, area where he and his wife, Joan, live. He also writes an extensive weekly Bible study guide that serves as the discussion starter for a lively group of folks from various churches that have been talking together for close to twenty years. During June 2015, he will attend a reunion weekend in Pennsylvania for former writers and staff members of *The Other Side* and its related ministries. Although *The Other Side* abruptly ceased publication in 2004, the reunion is functioning as a fiftieth-anniversary celebration of its founding in 1965.

Mark William Olson's review of *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* by Brantley W. Gasaway. Published on the *Christian Feminism Today* website, April, 2015. © 2015 by Mark William Olson and *Christian Feminism Today*. <http://www.eewc.com>