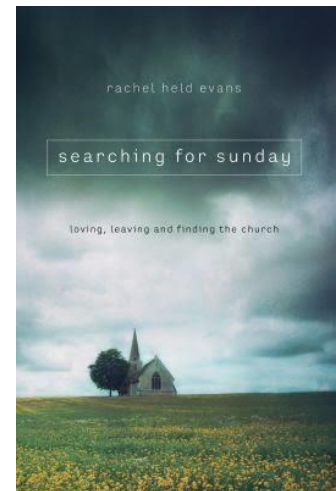


Searching for Sunday Rachel Held Evans (2015)

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This guide is provided as a free resource from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. We encourage you to use it with a reading group when discussing Rachel Held Evans's Searching for Sunday. You can hear more from Rachel June 10-11, 2016, at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. She'll be joined by Nadia Bolz-Weber and together they'll reflect on what it means to "be church." Learn more at www.pts.edu/Being_Church.



In the prologue, Held Evans pitches this book as a discussion as to why Millennials (at least herself) seem to be less interested in the Church. While we celebrate the Seminary's Summer Youth Institute's 20 years of ministry, the math necessitates that the program has catered to a great number of Millennials who have lived the opposite experience: falling in love with and learning how to serve the Church. Why do you think the same generation experiences such dramatically different responses to similar concerns?

Held Evans prizes honesty in the Church and wonders in her powerful turn-of-phrase style of writing if the propensity of churches to put on fake happy faces and feign perfection turns away a generation which values the genuine over a production. How can the Church foster honesty and allow for sinners to acknowledge their brokenness?

When the author recounts her attempt at church-planting, she articulates her ideals of a church including the buzzwords: authentic, intentional, and missional. This section also includes a discussion of the "Epic Fail" conference which allows for pastors to recount their failures instead of comparing their successes. How do you feel these three characteristics stack up to most churches? Do you think a conference that focuses more on the complications and dirty realities of ministry serves clergy more than its positive minded counterparts?

Communion is, at its heart, communal and yet it has been a topic of division, not only in matters of theology (how exactly is this Christ's body and blood?) but in matter of practice. Held Evans supports the idea of an open table which welcomes everyone regardless of faith commitment and speaks at length about the power of eating together. Does "giving thanks" with the Eucharist have that much power of binding people together, even those who view it merely as Sunday morning snack-time? She suggests that we like to dine with those either like us or those that we most wish to be like: in this case isn't it most important that we are all sharing it with the Lord in a quest to be holy as He is holy?

"Confirmation" is perhaps the most interesting part of the book because it is where the reader realizes that the author isn't "done" with her quest. As much as none of us will be "done" in terms of pursuing a relationship with our Savior this side of heaven, she still confesses to not be a regular attendee or confirmed at the Episcopal church she has deemed least offensive. How do you view one's relationship to a church? Is church-shopping an acceptable enterprise? How important is becoming an actual member?

Perhaps the most repeated phrase throughout the book is "Pay attention." It is mostly said in reference to the action of the Holy Spirit and our propensity to ignore that phrase we'll happily sing that "our God reigns." A Quaker along her journey told her that he feels like he "fits" at every church he visits because if you just "pay attention" you can find the Holy Spirit anywhere. Do you think our lack of seeing God's presence in certain congregations is our failure to pay attention? Is there something holy to find in every congregation?

Scent is emphasized as a way to recognize God; to remember God's promises and provision by the scent of the oil used in anointing or the incense of mass. What scent do you associate with God? Do you agree with the author that anointing is something we don't do enough of in the Church?

Held Evans condemns the knee-jerk reaction of Christians to try to "cure" problems rather than to "heal" them. She believes the distinction is that a cure is a quick-fix that denies the severity of the issue while healing involves sitting with the problem; taking the time to understand it and its roots. How pro-active does healing need to be? How does personality come into play in regard to people who want to feel heard more than be offered solutions, compared to those who are looking for potential fixes?

A complication within *Searching for Sunday* is the author's tempestuous relationship with Evangelicalism. While she is the first to admit that she has a tendency to be overly judgmental, some of the portions of the book seem to directly isolate potential Evangelical readers—especially those who believe homosexual behavior is a sin or in a complementarianism view of marriage. While certainly not faulting her for voicing her own opinions in her own book, in discussions of faith, how can we ensure charity toward those of differing opinions?

Do you agree that the Church goes through periods of death and resurrection? Is the current decline in Church attendance a cause for alarm? What solutions did you see in this book for the issue of Millennials leaving the church?

In the discussion of mystery of the Church's relationship to her Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, Held Evans takes umbrage with an Augustine quote about the church being a whore, but also his mother. She views this as anti-feminist and limiting to the roles of women and goes on to glorify the church if the "ekklesia" is indeed to be viewed in the feminine. Should Biblical language (like the whoredom of the church) be dismissed in light of political correctness?

This is the story of Rachel Held Evans "loving, leaving, and finding the church." How does it relate to your story? What stories reminded you of experiences you've had? Have you seen some of the sins discussed within the various congregations she has visited? Have you witnessed any of the powerful moments which restored her faith in the body of believers?