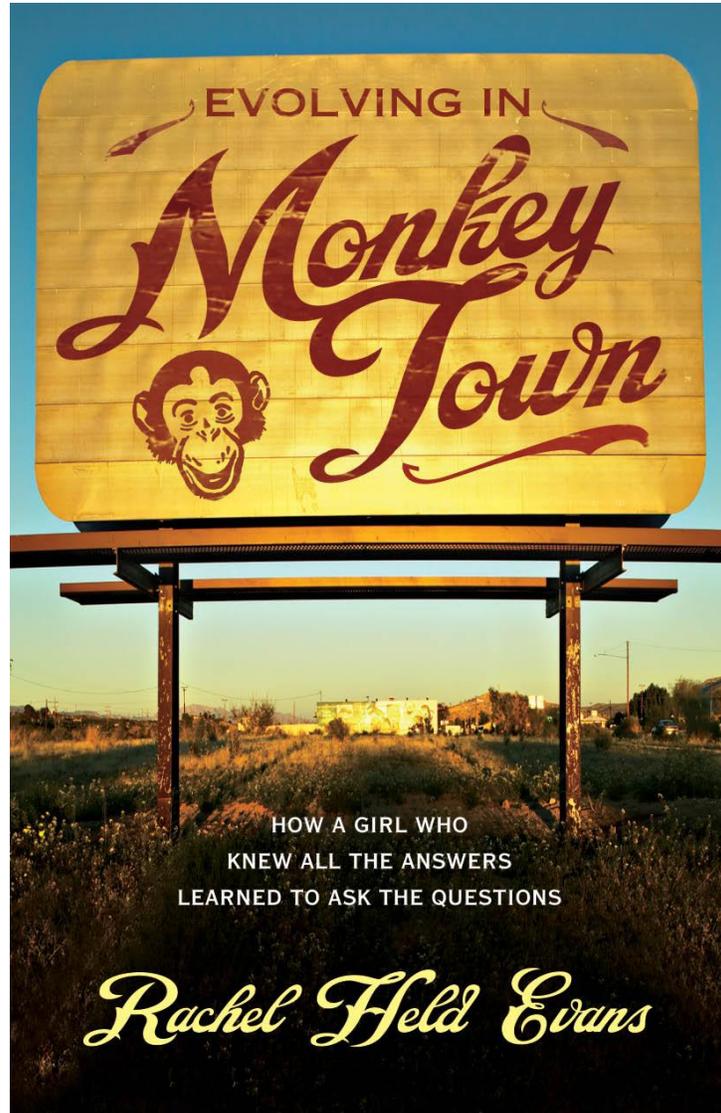


Evolving in Monkey Town

How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask the Questions

- by Rachel Held Evans -



Group Discussion Guide

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Introduction

1. What initially drew you to this book?
2. What has been your experience with the debate surrounding evolutionary theory? How did you feel about evolution growing up? What are your thoughts about it now?
3. Rachel's friend Adele defines fundamentalism as "holding so tightly to your beliefs that your fingernails leave imprints on the palm of your hand" (p. 17). How do you define fundamentalism?
4. The introduction refers to some of the mistakes Christians have made in the past, such as insisting on an earth-centered universe, selling indulgences, persecuting Anabaptists, and promoting slavery. Can you think of others? What can we learn from these mistakes?
5. What does Rachel mean when she says she is an evolutionist—"not necessarily of the scientific variety but of the faith variety" (p. 21)?
6. Have you recently changed your mind about a big theological or political issue?

Chapter 1: The Best Christian Attitude Award

1. Chapter 1 focuses on Rachel's religious upbringing. Can you relate to her story? Which parts?
2. Growing up, did you ever have doubts about the faith with which you were raised?
3. Do you think you would have been friends with Rachel in high school? Why or why not?
4. At the end of the chapter Rachel writes, "Sometimes I long for the days when I was so certain, when faith was as sure a thing as thunder after a lightning flash or the scent of almond cherry at night" (p. 43). Are you as certain about your faith now as you were as a child?
5. What do you miss most about the faith of your childhood, and what are some things you are glad you grew out of?

Chapter 2: June the Ten Commandments Lady

1. Have you ever encountered someone like June? How do you feel about the fact that she claims to be a Christian?
2. How should Christians respond to people like June?

Chapter 3: Monkey Town

1. Were you familiar with the Scopes Trial before reading this book? What did you learn about the trial after reading Chapter 3?
2. How would you assess William Jennings Bryan's performance on the witness stand? What was his best moment? What was his worst?
3. Imagine yourself in Bryan's shoes. Would you have answered differently?
4. Do you think that the Christian community—particularly the evangelical community—has changed since the Scopes Trial? How so?

Chapter 4: Greg the Apologist

1. What makes Greg different from June the Ten Commandments Lady or William Jennings Bryan?
2. At the apologetics seminar Rachel begins to wonder if there is really such a thing as one, single biblical worldview or if “there are as many worldviews out there as there are people” (p. 68). What do you think?
3. Why do you think Rachel shares Greg’s story?

Chapter 5: When Skeptics Ask

1. What is your response to the story of Dr. Wise taking a pair of scissors to the Bible and concluding that “either Scripture was true and evolution was wrong or evolution was true and I must toss out the Bible” (p. 71)? Was he right?
2. When you were growing up, did you feel pressure to “always be ready with an answer” in defense of the faith? Do you still feel that pressure sometimes?
3. Chapter 5 describes Rachel’s involvement in the apologetics movement. In what ways can apologetics be used constructively and in what ways can they be used destructively?
4. Rachel says of her generation: “To experience the knowledge of Jesus Christ, we didn’t need to be born again; we simply needed to be born. Our parents, our teachers, and our favorite theologians took it from there, providing us with all the answers before we ever had time to really wrestle with the questions.” Is this reflective of your experience?

Chapter 6: Nathan the Soldier

1. What theological issues are raised in the conversation between Rachel and Nathan in the coffee shop?

Chapter 7: When Believers Ask

1. Do you remember watching the execution footage that Rachel describes at the beginning of this chapter? What was going on in your life at that time? Did it affect you the same way it affected her?
2. What do you think happened to Zarmina after she was killed?
3. Zarmina's execution raises questions in Rachel's mind regarding the eternal destiny of non-Christians. Have you ever wrestled with similar questions yourself?
4. Did you find parts of this chapter to be troubling, even disturbing? Which parts?
5. On page 96, Rachel asks a string of questions. Which of these questions resonate with you the most?
6. What does Rachel mean when she refers to the "cosmic lottery" (p. 98-99)?
7. Have you ever had what might be called a "faith crisis"? What triggered it?
8. Were you disappointed that this chapter did not end on a more hopeful note?

Chapter 8: Jesus God in Sandals

1. Scholar Elton Trueblood once said, “The historic doctrine of the divinity of Christ does not simply mean that Jesus is like God. It is far more radical than that. It means that God is like Jesus.” Does this perspective change how you approach the Gospels?
2. Rachel explains that at some point in her faith experience, “it was as if Jesus packed his bags and moved from my heart into my head” (p. 105). What does she mean by this? Can you relate?
3. What does it mean to build one’s house upon “the rock” (p. 106)? How might this parable offer hope to doubters?

Chapter 9: Survivor’s Guilt

1. When it comes to access to information about the world, how is Rachel’s generation different from previous ones? How might this affect how twenty-somethings approach issues like religious pluralism, the Problem of Evil, and social justice?
2. What does Rachel mean when she says she is suffering from “survivor’s guilt” (p. 111).
3. On page 113, Rachel says that “some Christians are more offended by the idea of everyone going to heaven than by the idea of everyone going to hell.” Do you agree? Why do you think this is?
4. In this chapter, Rachel describes how her doubts affected her relationships. To whom do you relate the most—Rachel (who struggles with doubts) or her friends (who try to help her)?
5. Have you ever encountered “pond scum theology”? Do you agree with Rachel’s assessment of it (p. 116-118)?
6. On page 119, Rachel says, “After I’d thought for so many years that good Christians are always ready with an answer, it was a question that eventually drew me back to belief.” What question did she ask, and why did it give her hope?

Chapter 10: John the Revelator

1. How do you interpret John's vision in Revelation 7 (p. 122-123)?

Chapter 11: Higher Ways

1. In what context do you usually hear or use the phrase, "God's ways are higher than our ways"? Have you ever been in a situation where these words were used dismissively in response to a person who had questions about his or her faith?
2. Do you believe that the human conscience (or moral law) should play a role in developing theology?
3. In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote, "We do know that no person can be saved except through Christ. We do not know that only those who know Him can be saved by Him." What is your response to this statement? Do you agree?
4. On pages 131-133, Rachel touches on some of the biblical support for Lewis' position. Did you find this persuasive?
5. When read in context, what do you think Isaiah means by "higher ways" (Isaiah 55:6-12)? How are God's ways higher than our own?

Chapter 12: Laxmi the Widow

1. Have you ever met someone like Laxmi? What did you learn from that person?

Chapter 13: God Things

1. Have you ever heard something referred to as a “God thing”? In what context?
2. Do you think Rachel is unfairly critical of the term? Why does it seem to bother her so much?
3. On page 151, Rachel says that “in the kingdom of heaven, the cosmic lottery works in reverse.” What does she mean?
4. How do the Beatitudes turn the concept of blessing on its head?
5. Based on the teachings of Jesus, how would you characterize things like money and power—as blessings, curses, temptations, or neutral opportunities that can be used for good or evil?
6. What does Rachel identify as true “God things” (p. 153)? Do you agree?
7. According to Rachel, the characters she most identifies with in Scripture are the Pharisees. Can you relate? Do you ever wonder if you would have chosen to follow Jesus had you encountered him in the flesh?
8. On page 155, Rachel says, “The longer our list of rules and regulations, the more likely it is that God himself will break one.” Have you ever experienced this first-hand in your life?
9. Do you think this chapter will change the way you talk about “God things” or “blessings”? How so?

Chapter 14: Mark the Evangelist

1. What was your reaction to Mark's sermon? Have you ever heard one like it?
2. How do sermons like these make you feel—guilty? motivated? fearful?

Chapter 15: Judgment Day

1. What do you think about the Judgment Day houses Rachel describes in this chapter? Are they effective ways to share the Gospel? Why or why not?
2. Do you recall the first time you responded to an altar call or prayed the Sinner's Prayer? Did the presence of heaven and hell influence your conversion to Christianity?
3. In the Gospels, Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of Heaven more than any other topic. To what is he referring?
4. On page 173, Rachel wonders if "perhaps being a Christian isn't about experiencing the kingdom of heaven someday but about experiencing the kingdom of heaven every day." What do you think?
5. What comes to your mind when you hear the word "salvation"? From what are we saved?
6. On page 175, Rachel says, "...While I still believe Jesus died to save us from our sins, I'm beginning to think that Jesus also lived to save us from our sins." What does she mean?

Chapter 16: Adele the Oxymoron

1. Do you have any gay friends? What has their experience with Christianity been like?
2. Is it fair to call Adele an oxymoron?

Chapter 17: Sword Drills

1. Why was Rachel confused by the concept of “biblical womanhood” (p. 181-186)?
2. Can you think of everyday situations in which the Bible is used as a weapon? Has it ever been used as a weapon against you?
3. Do you think the word “inerrant” is a useful one to use when describing the Bible? Why or why not?
4. Are there passages of Scripture that trouble you? Which ones?
5. On page 192, Rachel says, “My worldview affects how I read the Bible as much as the Bible affects my worldview.” Do you agree?
6. How do we keep our Bibles from becoming idols made in our own individual images (p. 193-195)?

Chapter 18: Sam the Feminist

1. According to Sam, most evangelical Christians “are only interested in winning arguments, converts, and elections” (p. 201). Is there some truth to that?

Chapter 19: Adaptation

1. Do you agree with Rachel that the world is changing and Christianity is changing with it (p. 205)? How so? Is this a good thing or a bad thing?
2. In what ways has your faith changed over the past few years?
3. Has your faith changed since reading this book?
4. Were you surprised by how Rachel was treated by Christians when they found out she voted for a democrat? Why do you think evangelical Christianity has become so intertwined with politics?
5. On page 207, Rachel says, “I am convinced that what drives most people away from Christianity is not the cost of discipleship but rather the cost of false fundamentals.” Do you agree? What are some “false fundamentals” you have encountered in your own faith journey?
6. In writing about the interpretation of Genesis, St. Augustine noted that “in matters that are so obscure and far beyond our vision, we find in Holy Scripture passages which can be interpreted in very different ways without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such cases, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search for truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it.” How might these ancient words apply to the current debate surrounding faith, science, and evolutionary biology?
7. What is your reaction to the idea that love is the most fundamental element of the Christian faith?
8. What does Rachel mean when she says that “followers of Jesus Christ are a transitional species”(p. 212)?

Chapter 20: Dan the Fixer

1. Have you ever tried to “fix” someone who was struggling with doubt? How did that go?

Chapter 21: Living the Questions

1. In this chapter, Rachel explores some of the benefits of doubt. Are you comfortable talking about doubt in this way, or do you feel that doubt is unequivocally wrong?
2. On pages 219-220, Rachel makes a distinction between doubting God and doubting one’s beliefs about God. Is this a helpful distinction? Are there times when it is a difficult distinction to make?
3. Why do you think so many Christians are afraid to say “I don’t know”?
4. Did Rachel’s treatment of 1 Peter 3:13-17 (p. 222-223) change your perspective on what it means to “always be ready with an answer”?
5. Rachel’s friend David says, “Belief is always a risk, a gamble—an adventure, if you will. The line between faith and doubt is the point of action. You don’t need certainty to obey, just the willingness to risk being wrong” (p. 223). How might this tie in to the conclusions Rachel reaches in Chapter 8 about building her house on the rock? (See page 106). What are the practical, day-to-day implications of this approach?
6. What do you think it means to have a childlike faith?
7. What were some of your thoughts/feelings at the conclusion of the book?

**To contact Rachel about meeting with your group,
visit <http://rachelheldevans.com/contact>**