

A Review of David Platt's *Radical*  
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David Platt makes a needed challenge in his book, *Radical*, as condensed in the subtitle, *Taking Back Your Faith From the American Dream*.<sup>1</sup> He summarizes the book with these words:

Throughout this book we have explored a variety of bold claims about our purpose in life that are contained in the gospel yet contradicted in the American dream. Claims such as these: Real success is found in real sacrifice. Ultimate satisfaction is found not in making much of ourselves but in making much of God. The purpose of our life transcends the country and culture in which we live. Meaning is found in community, not individualism; joy is found in generosity, not materialism; and truth is found in Christ, not universalism. Ultimately, Jesus is a reward worth risking everything to know, experience and enjoy. (183)

He then challenges his readers to try a radical experiment: for one year, to pray for the entire world, read through the entire Word, sacrifice their money for a specific purpose, spend their time in another context (such as a missions trip), and to commit their life to a multiplying community (church). (185)

Many of the principles in the book hit the mark, and provide a cry for believers to get out of their comfort zones and follow the Jesus of the Bible (13), a cry that churches and Christians need to hear. He wants the reader to abandon the "American Dream" version of Christianity, with focus on the self, and instead radically follow Jesus. He wants the church to actively and radically commit to global missions, including giving generously to the poor. I agree wholeheartedly with his overall goals. However, the problems in the book prevent me from recommending this work to anyone except those with a strong knowledge of the Scriptures who can "filter out" the problems and appropriately apply those principles that are biblically valid. The problems center on the author's view of the gospel and evidence of salvation in the life of the believer.

Platt begins with a challenge that the church, as a whole, has "missed what is radical about our faith and replaced it with what is comfortable" (7). He believes that following Christ demands total devotion to Christ, and a willingness to give up anything ("radical abandonment", 10) in order to follow Him. He acknowledges the high cost of discipleship but wonders (rightfully), if the cost of nondiscipleship is even greater. So, he asks, do we really believe He is worth following as Jesus commands us to follow, not as "a nice, middle-class, American Jesus" (13)? "We need to return with urgency to a biblical gospel" (19).

In developing his definition of the gospel, Platt says that it is fundamentally "the revelation of who God is, who we are, and how we can be reconciled to him" (28). And so he summarizes:

This is the gospel. The just and loving Creator of the universe has looked upon hopelessly sinful people and sent his Son, God in the flesh, to bear the wrath against sin on the cross and to show

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<sup>1</sup> David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith From the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2010). Future references to the book will list within the text of this review the page number(s) cited from the book.

his power over sin in the Resurrection so that all who trust in him will be reconciled to God forever. (36)

If Platt had stopped here, his gospel message would be clear and concise. It is at this point, however, that the author takes a wrong turn. Even though he used the words “all who trust in him”, he then invites the reader to “consider with me the proper response to this gospel” (37), which, he says “surely evokes unconditional surrender of all that we are and all that we have to all that he is” (37) and that each of us “need to consider whether we have ever truly, authentically trusted in Christ for our salvation” (37). He presents a caricature of many gospel presentations, adding what he sees as correctives:

We have been told all that is required is a one-time decision, maybe even mere intellectual assent to Jesus, but after that we need not worry about his commands, his standards, or his glory. We have a ticket to heaven, and we can live however we want on earth. Our sin will be tolerated along the way.... Here the gospel demands and enables us to turn from our sin, to take up our cross, to die to ourselves, and to follow Jesus... Jesus is no longer one to be accepted or invited in but one who is infinitely worthy of our immediate and total surrender. (38-39)

He recognizes that his words sound like salvation is a result of obedience, but says we are saved from our sins by a free gift of God of grace. This gift of grace, however, changes our hearts so that we “want Him so much that we abandon everything else to experience him. This is the only proper response to the revelation of God in the gospel” (39). I agree with the author’s desire to challenge believers to radically follow Christ, but his gospel definition has blurred the distinctions between our change in legal standing before God (justification) and our practical living (sanctification). He here (and throughout the book) implies that one who has truly, authentically trusted Christ is necessarily a disciple / follower of Christ. He necessarily links certain actions and attitudes of the person to their eternal standing, as will be seen in his discussion of reaching the poor. And so, at best, what is required for salvation becomes unclear.

Having given his definition of the gospel, he next reminds the reader that the source of the power to live radically for Jesus does not come from their own strength. Even had the author correctly distinguished discipleship and justification, this step makes sense in becoming a radical follower of Jesus. He warns the reader about letting “American dream” mentality creep into the church, instead of relying on the power of God to accomplish His purposes. Referencing the early church, he concludes, “I cannot help but long to be a part of this kind of scene in the church today. A scene where we refuse to operate in a mind-set dominated by an American dream that depends on what we can achieve with our own abilities.... A scene where the church radically trusts in God’s great power...” (53). The source of that power is the Holy Spirit. Platt incorrectly implies, using Luke 11:13 (... how much more will *your* heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?), that God will give us the Holy Spirit in answer to our prayers, rather than understanding that the Spirit already indwells us (Rom. 8:9). Despite this flaw, however, he rightly argues that real power flows from the Holy Spirit, not from our own abilities.

The specific application Platt addresses that requires this power is extending God’s glory to the ends of the earth. “Jesus commands us to go. He has created each of us to take the gospel to the ends of the

earth.” He desires that “our hearts should be consumed with making the glory of God known in all the nations” (77), a desire in line with Matt. 28:19-20. Anything less than radical devotion to this end, he argues, is unbiblical Christianity (64). And, he concludes, the command to take the gospel to the ends of the earth is intended for each follower of Christ. We are to “be consumed with making the glory of God known in all the nations” (77). However, “it is not uncommon to hear Christians say, ‘Well, not everyone is called to foreign missions.’” (72). Unfortunately, he is unclear about whether a follower of Jesus can have a legitimate passion for ministries at home (I use the word “legitimate” to differentiate those who are actively involved in some form of ministry and those who, in reality, use these words to excuse themselves from any ministry). Platt does include a few examples of work on home soil, but in other places, his words communicate a different message:

As we have seen all over Scripture, God’s heart is for the world. So when we say we have a heart for the United States, we are admitting that we have a heart for 5 percent of God’s heart, and we are proud of it. (76)

His use of a percentage like this is misleading. I have a friend who will soon be moving to Kolkata, India. I would never describe him as having a heart for only one quarter of one percent of God’s heart!

I do not disagree that the average Christian in the United States needs to become more globally involved with God’s purposes in the world, but what becomes unclear in Platt’s writings is whether a believer can have a commitment to world missions, with a specific passion to carry it out on a local level. I think of my daughter who has committed five years (and counting) of her life to serving full time in an inner city ministry in a major U.S. city. She has a passion to reach the world, but the venue God has given her is within the U.S. I think his intent is “both / and”, but his words tend to convey only the “uttermost”. Acts 1:8, however, says the disciples would be witnesses not just in the uttermost parts of the world but *also* at home (Jerusalem and Judea).

The next question Platt addresses is, “*How* do we make God’s glory known to all the nations?” (87, emphasis his). His answer is, “The megastrategy of Jesus: make disciples” (90). His views of disciple-making are healthy. “Any Christian can do this” (90), implying that all believers should be involved in making disciples. The process of making disciples, he argues, is not programs and classes (although he acknowledges they have their place), but happens in the context of relationships. And in that context, “making disciples is not an easy process. It is trying. It is messy. It is a slow, tedious, and even painful at times” (93). He challenges his readers to be reproducers of God’s Word, not simply receivers of it. Instead of asking what we can get out of it, he says we should instead ask “How can I listen to God’s Word so that I am equipped to teach this Word to others?” (102).

Platt then moves to a “blind spot” in American Christianity – materialism, and the related issue of neglect of the poor. After a brief introduction to the problem of global poverty, he concludes, “Anyone wanting to proclaim the glory of Christ to the ends of the earth must consider not only how to declare the gospel verbally but also how to demonstrate the gospel visibly in a world where so many are urgently hungry” (109). I agree with Platt that this is a huge global need, one the church cannot ignore.

But, while he makes some valid points which I will discuss below, the connections he makes between reaching the poor and our salvation reinforce the confusing gospel he presented earlier in the book:

The Bible nowhere teaches that caring for the poor is a means by which we earn our salvation. The means of our salvation is faith in Christ alone, and the basis of our salvation is the work of Christ alone. (109).

On this, I agree. But then he adds these strong statements:

Yet, while caring for the poor is not the basis for our salvation, this does not mean that our use of wealth is totally disconnected from our salvation. Indeed, caring for the poor (among other things) is *evidence* of our salvation... Caring for the poor is one natural outflow and a necessary evidence of the presence of Christ in our hearts. If there is no caring for the poor in our lives, then there is reason to at least question whether Christ is in our hearts. (110, emphasis his)

The phrase, “a necessary evidence” trumps whether we should “at least question”. It carries more weight than that. In the realm of logic, a “necessary” condition is “what is required for something to be the case”.<sup>2</sup> In other words, in this case, if care for the poor is missing, the person *is not saved* (justified), based on Platt’s words. I hope he simply chose his words poorly, but this does not seem to be the case: “More pointedly, if our lives do not reflect radical compassion for the poor, there is reason to wonder if Christ is really in us at all” (111), and “rich people who neglect the poor are not the people of God... What scares me most, though, is that we can pretend that we are the people of God” (115), and “Our neglect of the poor illustrates much about where our hearts lie. But even more than that, the way we use our money is an indicator of our eternal destination.” (138).

I agree that care for the poor is a blind spot for many believers and churches and is an issue in which the church must become more involved. Platt, however, makes it a subjective test of one’s justification. But, failure to have a passion for the poor can come from many different problems, including ignorance of the problem and/or how to address it, maturity, disobedience, etc. But these are all sanctification issues, not justification issues. To necessarily link the two results in evaluating one’s legal standing based on works, not on the object of faith, Jesus Christ and his work on the cross.

Despite this serious error, Platt does offer some sound counsel in this chapter. First, he reminds the reader that wealth is not inherently evil; that the Bible does not condemn riches. Second, he challenges the false assumption in our culture that if we follow God, He will necessarily bless us financially. Third, he questions the financial priorities of the American church: “Every year in the United States, we spend \$10 billion on church buildings” (118). Fourth, he raises the question of whether we trust Jesus enough to meet our needs when we give radically. Fifth, he asks, “Why not begin operating under the idea that God has given us excess, not so we could *have* more, but so we could *give* more?” (127, emphasis his). He closes with the challenge that “You and I both have a choice. We can stand with the starving or with

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<sup>2</sup> Julian Baggini and Peter S. Fosl, *The Philosopher’s Toolkit: A Compendium of Philosophical Concepts and Methods* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 158.

the overfed... We can stand with Jesus while we give away our wealth, or we can walk away from Jesus while we hoard our wealth" (140).

After reminding the reader that God has no "Plan B", that is, that God chooses to use His people to carry the gospel to the uttermost parts of the world, Platt closes his main argument by pointing to the "risk and reward of the radical life." After reminding the reader of the concept that the world will hate his followers because it hated Him, he transitions to the reward that comes from following Jesus: "Are we willing to obey the orders of Christ ... Are we willing to risk our lives to go to great need and great danger... to accomplish an eternally significant task and achieve an eternally satisfying reward?" (171). He summarizes:

Yes, Jesus promises great reward, but his reward looks much different than what we might expect. The reward of the American dream is safety, security, and success found in more comfort, better stuff, and greater prosperity. But the reward of Christ trumps all these things and beckons us to live for eternal safety, security, and satisfaction that far outweigh everything this world has to offer us" (171-172).

Although he does not address the concept of reward for the believer at the Bema seat, I agree wholeheartedly with his overall point that the choice that ultimately costs us the most is not following Christ, but choosing to not follow Him. The benefit of discipleship far outweighs the cost. He concludes that *the* key to taking back our faith from the American dream is recognizing that death is a reward and believing that this world is not our home (179).

He closes the book by inviting the reader to the experiment mentioned at the beginning of this review, "to see if radical obedience to the commands of Christ is more meaningful, more fulfilling, and more gratifying than the American dream" (184).

In summary, Platt offers a compelling call to set aside the "American Dream" version of the Christian life, and to radically follow Jesus. This offer calls us to follow the real Jesus, to wholeheartedly embrace being a biblical disciple. As a whole, what he addresses is a necessary wake-up call for the American church. Unfortunately, in the midst of his offer, he offers a seriously flawed gospel and a seriously flawed view of works as "necessary" evidence of the presence of Christ in the believer's life. I would challenge us to take the key concepts presented in the book, rework them in the context of the right gospel, with a correct understanding of the connection between discipleship and our justification, and seriously confront the American church to be radical for Jesus Christ.