

On Being a Radical Evangelical

Much has been made of late of the young “evangelical radicals,” whose writings and ministries provoke and poke and prod what they view as acculturated, complacent American believers.

My friend Matt Anderson has written a gracious, perceptive article about some of them in *Christianity Today*, and even *Backpacker* magazine recently had an article on evangelical “greens” whose passion for “creation care” animates their ministries.

While there is nothing new under the sun, there is also nothing wrong with youthful enthusiasm as long as it is tempered by a (1) healthy dose of humility and (2) sound theology, articulated clearly and carefully.

As a young man, I recall the earnestness with which I read everything from *The Post-American* (later *Sojourners*) to the *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Ron Sider’s book on “nuclear holocaust” and the magazine of the Officer’s Christian Fellowship.

As I developed my own thinking about social and political issues, I was impressed by the newness of my insights and the urgency with which they should be communicated. I recall worrying that a mild illness I had at the time would prevent me from completing my graduate thesis (on evangelicalism and the application of the “just war” theory to the possession and use of weapons of mass destruction), in which case unique and important perspectives—authored by me—would be lost permanently.

In case my intended self-deprecation is not obvious, let me make it so: Neither the wisdom I accrued nor the passion I

felt were unique. Ideas I formulated likely had been thought by others (and probably in long centuries past) and convictions I developed were shared by many Christians throughout the ages.

It is typical of the young to think that because something has occurred to them, it is the first time anyone thought of it. It is also typical of the young to believe that tradition breeds ennui, that conventionality is defined by dress, décor and the size of a building, that life should be a series of “epic” events, that radical Christian living means an extreme haircut, stylized “casual” clothes and a general contempt for everyone over about 35.

I hope that cranky sarcasm reflects more my age than my heart. For the record, I would rather associate with young men and women committed to the Person and work of Jesus Christ than either their spiritually uninterested contemporaries or the self-consciously urbane, oh-so-moderate voices whose signal hallmark is an unwillingness to say anything dogmatically.

Many of the young “evangelical radicals” are also incredibly winsome, highly approachable, burdened greatly for the needs of a fallen world and, sadly, too theologically uneducated to grasp the implications of some of the things for which they argue (of course, I never fell into that last category ...).

The challenge for many older and more traditional evangelicals is that we need to have the humility to draw from our younger brethren new reminders of the need to live wholly for Christ. We need to be willing to think through how most effectively to do this, and not immediately reject proposals by the “new radicals” that might seem imprudent or a bit too self-displaying.

Our younger brethren, at the same time, need to listen to words of caution from older believers who have tried certain things, only to see them fail, and whose standard of living reflects less an unselfconscious endorsement of bourgeois

respectability than a desire to integrate into American economic and social life precisely for the purpose of sharing the Good News and living Christ before what Carl Henry aptly called “a famished and fainting race.”

One of my former pastors used to say that “there’s a lot of living to life.” In other words, not everything is dramatic and not every moment is intense. Sometimes, the greatest ministry one can perform is not selling his car and giving the proceeds to a Christian organization but, rather, using that car to take neighborhood children to and from church activities to which they otherwise would never be exposed. Serving a yelling toddler his lunch might be the most gracious act in which a person can engage on a given day. If it’s obedience to the living God then, given the depravity of our world, it’s a radical act.

Paul did not apologize for coming to the church in Corinth “[without] superiority of speech or of wisdom” (1 Cor. 2). Indeed, he spoke to them “in weakness and in fear and in much trembling ... not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.” Why? “So that [their] faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.”

When he visited Corinth, the only thing Paul cared about knowing was “Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” The idea that a laborer from the small province of Galilee, One who had been murdered on an instrument of public humiliation and torture, was worthy of the worship of sophisticated Roman citizens was scandalous. It also possessed the advantage of being true. Paul saw himself as utterly secondary to that proclamation.

All evangelicals, young and old, eager and plodding, need to remember that our message is not about ourselves. Our goal is not to assuage some uneasy (and likely immature) sense of cultural guilt. It is not to refashion the God of the Bible into something more palatable to our post-Christian society. It is not to generate followings for ourselves. It’s about, and should be all about, Christ.

My mother was an “evangelical radical.” She used to scrimp on various family budget items so she could have a little more money to send to missionaries. My father and she supported children in the developing world long before it became de rigueur for the evangelical mainstream. She felt guilty going to buffets after church on Sunday since the poor had so very little. She loved being with crazy-haired young people who expressed love for Jesus. And to demonstrate her commitment to the unborn and their mothers, she wore, faithfully, a little pin that showed the size of a baby’s feet 10 weeks after conception.

My mother also dressed like the middle-income homemaker she was. She was modest in appearance and soft in speech, but bold as flint when it came to sharing the gospel or challenging false teaching about it. Although a tasteful dresser, she was unconcerned with appearance and self-presentation for their own sake. She wanted to know Christ, and make Him known—period.

Radical Christianity is following Jesus, being burdened for the salvation of the lost, caring for the vulnerable and needy, born and unborn, at home and abroad, in practical ways that don’t just make us feel noble but that actually work.

Quite a gospel, that. And quite a Lord worth exalting, with humility and persistence, on days drab and days dramatic.

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