

'Radical' Living for Christ Stirs 'New Legalism' Controversy

The backlash against striving to be a “radical” follower of Jesus started earlier this year.

Giving your all for Christ—including your life—goes back to the earliest Christian disciples and has been one of the marks of true faith throughout church history. “Radical” living, however, has a more specific meaning in this controversy, stoked by several articles in Christian publications. It refers to the commitment young evangelical leaders, particularly Southern Baptist pastor/author David Platt, have urged American Christians to make.

In a popular series of books and teachings beginning with *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (2010), Platt has challenged American believers to forsake the comfortable, materialistic, watered-down Christianity many of us practice. In its place, he calls for the kind of sacrifice and obedience that might lead some to give up possessions, go to risky places to proclaim the gospel, maybe even suffer and die for Christ. He's been joined by evangelical voices such as Francis Chan (*Crazy Love*), Kyle Idleman (*Not a Fan*) and others calling for a faith that looks more like the one found in the New Testament than the one commonly seen in suburban American churches.

Hold on, respond the critics. You're setting up an elite category of super-sanctified commando Christians, leaving the rest of us feeling like inadequate, second-class believers. What about everyday folks who quietly go about their lives and provide for their families, while faithfully worshipping God and serving others? Are they failing the test of basic

discipleship if they don't leave their homes and families and do something "radical" for Christ?

"The heroes of the radical movement are martyrs and missionaries whose stories truly inspire, along with families who make sacrifices to adopt children. Yet the radicals' repeated portrait of faith underemphasizes the less spectacular, frequently boring, and overwhelmingly anonymous elements that make up much of the Christian life," wrote Matthew Lee Anderson (founder of the influential Christian blog "Mere Orthodoxy") in a March cover story for *Christianity Today* magazine. "[T]here aren't many narratives of men who rise at 4 a.m. six days a week to toil away in a factory to support their families. Or of single mothers who work 10 hours a day to care for their children. Judging by the tenor of their stories, being 'radical' is mainly for those who already have the upper-middle-class status to sacrifice."

Anthony Bradley went a step further in a commentary for the Acton Institute, reprinted in *WORLD* magazine in May. He called the push to be "radical"—and the "missional" church movement generally—manifestations of a "new legalism" among evangelicals. Bradley, a well-known commentator and professor at The King's College in New York, said he reached that conclusion after a long conversation with a Christian student struggling over what to do with his life.

"I continue to be amazed by the number of youth and young adults who are stressed and burnt out from the regular shaming and feelings of inadequacy if they happen to not be doing something unique and special," Bradley wrote. "Today's millennial generation is being fed the message that if they don't do something extraordinary in this life they are wasting their gifts and potential. The sad result is that many young adults feel ashamed if they 'settle' into ordinary jobs, get married early and start families, live in small towns, or as 1 Thessalonians 4:11 says, 'aspire to live quietly, and to mind [their] affairs, and to work with [their] hands.' ... The

combination of anti-suburbanism with new categories like 'missional' and 'radical' has positioned a generation of youth and young adults to experience an intense amount of shame for simply being ordinary Christians who desire to love God and love their neighbors (Matthew 22:36-40). ... Why is Christ's command to love God and neighbor not enough for these leaders?"

This supposed "shaming" of young Christians sure is news to me.

I seldom pass up a chance to challenge young people to get involved in local and international missions – and I'm regularly inspired by their responses. Ask counselors who work with young missionary candidates and campus ministers who mentor students, and they'll tell you the same thing: Millennial Christians want to make a difference in the world. They want to serve the poor and fight injustice. They want to act on Christ's command to take the Gospel to the nations. Sometimes they get impatient with parents and other elders who try to hold them back. And they're willing, even eager, to go to some of the toughest places on earth.

True, not everyone is equipped by God to go to such places. Those who do go need to demonstrate a clear calling from God; otherwise they'll never make it when the going gets hard. But everyone can participate in the task through awareness, prayer, support and local church mobilization. The old division between "regular" church folks and the special few who go to the mission field has been bridged by the vast new opportunities for participation afforded by modern travel, technology and networking – and the rediscovery of the biblical truth that reaching all peoples is the mission of the whole church and everyone in it.

The only non-negotiable requirement is obedience.

One of the young people profiled in Platt's *Radical* is Genessa

Wells. The Texas Baptist teacher lived and served in Egypt for two years—and died there at age 24. She wasn't a martyr; she was killed in a bus accident in the Sinai just one day before the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. I never met her, but I had the privilege of attending a memorial service for her a few days later in Cairo.

Wells, who had an angelic singing voice, had planned to pursue her study of music in seminary after she came home from Egypt. She never made it back, but she packed enough passion for several lifetimes into her brief life. Shortly before she moved to the Middle East in 1999, she wrote: "I could give up (on overseas service) and get married and become a music teacher. All of this is very noble and to be quite honest, sounds good to me! But in my heart, I want to change my world—more than I want a husband and more than I want comfort. I need this opportunity to grow and to tell others about Jesus. One of my favorite praise songs says, 'I will never be the same again, I can never return, I've closed the door.'"

Two years later, in her last email home, she quoted another praise song: "'Open the eyes of my heart, Lord, open the eyes of my heart, I want to see you ... shining in the light of your glory. ...' It seems that everything we do comes down to one thing: His glory. I pray that all our lives reflect that. ... It seems like a floodgate has been opened in my heart [to share God's love]. I have a passion for it I never knew God had given me. He's given it to me for His glory."

She shared her passion for God with Egyptians, with Palestinians in refugee camps, with Bedouin in the desert. If she had lived, she might have gone home to Texas, gotten married, started a family, become a music teacher. Or she might have opted to serve long-term overseas. Either way, she had one grand purpose in life: to love God and praise Him wherever she went and in whatever she did.

That should be the one purpose and desire of every follower of

Christ. It only looks “radical” because it is so rare.

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