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Two processes, very different results

A friend once said, "I want to be a radical for Jesus!" during a 1970s trip to Minneapolis—a time when being radical was common. Today, however, given associations with violent extremism, the term “radical” may be inappropriate, as it often refers to adopting beliefs against societal norms that can lead to extreme actions. While radicalization has long existed, modern extremists often disregard human life when on this path.

While researching this article, I came across a Fox News headline by Peter D’Abrosca (November 7, 2025): “Radical professor at rural school unleashed fury against Charlie Kirk hours after murder.” The issue of why so many professors become radicalized enough to show intense anger, and hate deserves serious attention. One might argue that these are the type of people the Apostle Paul speaks of in Romans 1:18-32, where three times he states, “...God gave them over...!” In this passage, Paul addresses individuals whose actions and beliefs stray from the values and teachings and central to faith. When Paul mentions that “God gave them over,” he emphasizes a decisive moment in which people, by persisting in their own ways, are allowed to face the consequences of their choices. The repeated phrase underscores a progression of moral and spiritual decline, as individuals become increasingly radicalized in attitudes and behaviors that are out of step with God’s design.

Paul’s observation serves as a warning and a reflection on the outcomes of radicalization that is disconnected from love and truth. Rather than moving toward spiritual transformation and the counter-cultural life exemplified by Jesus’ disciples, these individuals become further separated from what is good, leading to societal and personal decay. This perspective sets the stage for understanding the contrast between worldly radicals and those transformed by the teachings of Jesus.

Let us turn our attention to a group that emerged in the first century and often seen as radical: the disciples, as Jesus called them. In his 1978 book *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, John Stott describes them as the Christian counter-culture. These early followers of Jesus significantly influenced their society—not just in terms of religion, but also in ethical, social, and political spheres. Their deep encounter with agape love fueled a steadfast faith that propelled their persistent efforts in evangelism and disciple-making, driven by a desire to share Christ's transformative power.

The transformation to becoming Jesus' disciples created a Christian counter-culture that influenced society. Acting as salt, social decay was hindered; as light, they revealed truth in darkness. Motivated by love for God and others, their focus was on obedience to Jesus' teachings, promoting spiritual growth and deeper relationships with Christ.

Jesus' disciples are distinct from worldly radicals by embodying teachings such as loving enemies, practicing forgiveness, and valuing humility over power. They value all people and aim to treat everyone equally, regardless of social, ethnic, gender, or religious differences.

Unlike the destructive nature of radicalization observed in various ideologies, the radicalism embraced by Jesus' disciples was marked by an unwavering commitment to love, humility, and service. Their lives stood in stark contrast to the self-centered ambitions and violence that often accompany worldly extremism. Through their actions, they demonstrated that true radical change begins with a transformed heart.

Early Christian communities promoted agape love, rejecting retribution and social hierarchy for greater compassion and forgiveness. They advocated chastity, fidelity, and monogamy, opposed sexual exploitation, and showed care not only for each other but also for society's marginalized groups, such as widows, orphans, the sick, and the poor. Their belief in the sanctity of life led to early opposition to infanticide, influencing later bans by Constantine the Great and Valentinian I in the Roman Empire.

Radicalization can result in division and violence, while making disciples emphasizes love, community, and spiritual growth based on Christ's teachings. This movement demonstrates how faith in Jesus influences societal norms by promoting compassion and justice.

As we consider the influence of Christ-centered discipleship, it becomes clear that this path leads not only in personal transformation but also a collective movement toward justice, mercy, and reconciliation within communities. Embracing this calling means actively seeking opportunities to be the Jesus disciple-making salt and light the world desperately needs.

