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RADICAL

(Pastor Kirk's book-of-the-month is Radical, by David Platt, who is the pastor of a mega church, 4,000 members, in Birmingham, Alabama. This is not just another inspirational book but a book that is guaranteed to shake up your whole understanding of Christianity and, if you take it seriously, the way you live your life. I am going to start this Newsletter and probably several subsequent ones with excerpts from this book. I have summarized and paraphrased his words at times.)

There I was, the successful pastor of a mega church, living out the American dream, but I was becoming uneasy because my model in ministry was a guy who spent most of his ministry time with twelve men, and when he left this earth he had only about 120 people who were sticking around and doing what he told them to do - - more like the pastor of a mini church. I was trying to draw thousands more people, but he was known for turning away thousands of people. Soon I realized I was on a collision course with an American church culture where success is defined by bigger crowds, bigger budgets, and bigger buildings. I am convinced that we as Christ followers in American churches have embraced values and ideas that are not only unbiblical but that actually contradict the gospel we claim to believe. Are you willing to take an honest look at the Jesus of the Bible and dare to ask what the consequences might be if we really believed him and really obeyed him?

David Platt told about a meeting he had attended in an unnamed Asian country: Imagine all the blinds closed on the windows of a dimly lit room. Twenty leaders from different churches sat on the floor with their Bibles open. They had gathered in secret because in their country in Asia it is illegal to meet like this. If caught, they could lose their land, their jobs, their families, or their lives. A man with a very rough appearance spoke: "Some of the people in my church have been pulled away by a cult known for kidnapping believers and torturing them. Brothers and sisters having their tongues cut out is not uncommon." Tears welled up in his eyes. "I am hurting," he said, "and I need God's grace to lead my church." Others told about threats by government officials and religious neighbors.

They went to their knees, and with their faces on the ground began to cry out to God:

"O God, thank you for loving us."

"O God, we need you."

"Jesus, we give our lives to you and for you."

After about an hour, the room drew to a silence, and as they rose from the floor. I saw puddles of tears in a circle around the room. In the days since then, God has granted me many other opportunities to gather with people like that. Men like Jian, an Asian doctor who left his successful health clinic and now risks his life and the lives of his wife and two kids in order to provide impoverished villages with medical care while secretly training an entire network of house-church leaders. Women like Lin, who teaches on a university campus where it is illegal to spread the gospel. She meets in secret with college students to talk about the claims of Christ, though she could lose her livelihood for doing so. Teenagers like Shan and Ling, who have been sent out from house churches in their villages to undergo intensive preparation for taking the gospel to places where there are no churches. Ling said to me, "I have told my family that I will likely never come back home. I am going to hard places to make the gospel known, and it is possible that I will lose my life in the process." Shan added, "But our families understand. Our moms and dads have been in prison for their faith, and they have taught us that Jesus is worthy of all our devotion."

Three weeks after my third trip to underground house churches in Asia, I began my first Sunday as the pastor of a church in America. The scene was much different. Dimly lit rooms were now replaced by an auditorium with theater-style lights. Instead of traveling for miles by foot or bike to gather for worship, we had arrived in millions of dollars' worth of vehicles. We sat down in our cushioned chairs. To be honest, there was not much at stake. Many had come because this was their normal routine. Some had come to check out the new pastor. None had come at the risk of their lives. That afternoon plans

were discussed for using the adjacent open land to build state-of-the-art recreation fields.

Please don't misunderstand this scene. It was filled with wonderful, well-meaning, Bible-believing Christians who wanted to welcome me and enjoy one another. People who believe God is important in their lives. But I could not help but think that somewhere along the way we had missed what is radical about our faith and replaced it with what is comfortable. We were settling for a Christianity that revolves around catering to ourselves when the central message of Christianity is actually about abandoning ourselves.

In Luke 9 we find a story about three men who seemed eager to follow Jesus, and He seems to have tried to talk them out of it. To the first man, Jesus indicated that he might expect homelessness on the journey ahead. To the second, Jesus refused to allow him to go to the funeral of his father. To the third, Jesus said he should not even go home and say good-bye to his family. Jesus said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." In other words, a relationship with Jesus requires total, superior, and exclusive devotion. This was not an isolated incident in the life of Jesus. He said to a crowd of eager followers, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brother and sister - yes, even his own life - he cannot be my disciple. Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." In other words, "Pick up an instrument of torture and follow me." (That sounds a lot different from, "Just believe in your heart that Jesus is the Savior and pray this prayer after me and you will be saved. Let's all pray this prayer aloud so that we won't embarrass anyone.")

Let's put ourselves in the shoes of these eager followers of Jesus in the first century. What if you were the man whom Jesus told to not even say good-bye to his family or were told to give up everything you had in order to follow Jesus? This is where we come face to face with a dangerous reality. We do have to give up everything we have to follow Jesus. We do have to love him in a way that makes our closest relationships in this world look like hate. And it is entirely possible that he will tell us to sell everything we have and give it to the poor. But we don't want to believe it. So we rationalize these passages away: "Jesus didn't literally mean for us to do those things. What Jesus really meant was....."

We have a nice, middle-class, American Jesus. A Jesus who doesn't mind materialism and would never call us to give away everything we have. In fact, our Jesus wants us to prosper in all things and to inherit the riches of the Gentiles. A Jesus who would not expect us to forsake our closest relationships. A Jesus who does not infringe on our comforts, because, after all, he loves us just the way we are. A Jesus who wants us to be balanced, who wants us to avoid dangerous extremes, and who wants us to avoid danger altogether. A Jesus who brings us comfort and prosperity as we live out our Christian spin on the American dream. Do you realize what we are doing? We are molding Jesus into our image. He is beginning to look a lot like us because that is whom we are most comfortable with. And the danger is that when we gather in our church buildings to sing and lift up our hands in worship, we may not actually be worshiping the Jesus of the Bible. Instead we may be worshiping ourselves. (To be continued next month. And you will be amazed at what God is doing in David Platt's mega church!)

WHAT IS TRUTH?

That is the question that Pilate asked Jesus during Jesus' trial. Jesus told Pilate that He was a king and that He had come *to bear witness to the truth*, and He concluded by saying, *Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice. Pilate then said to Him, "What is truth?"* (John 18:37-38)

The answer to that question may be clear to you, but it has certainly been a puzzle to me. At one time I thought that truth was the same as law, and I remember one occasion when I taught that "truth was summarized in the Ten Commandments but grace came through Christ." But that can't be right, because John 1:17 says, *For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.* (It might be a good idea for you to check out the things I say in my Newsletters and sermons, because I have come to suspect, very reluctantly, that my teaching is not inerrant and infallible. Most of you will be shocked to hear that, but it is probably true.) Note the connection in John 1:17 of grace and truth.

In my effort to comprehend the answer to Pilate's question, I have assembled a number of scriptures from the New Testament, and perhaps you will consider them along with your additional insights on this subject and come up with a simple, clear, explanation which you will share with me. **What is truth?**

- Jesus said, *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.* (John 14:6) So the truth is a Person, Jesus Christ.
- Jesus prayed, *Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.* (John 17:17) So the Bible, the Word of God, is the truth.

- Paul says, *.....that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.* (Gal. 2:5) So the gospel is the truth. Have you heard the expression, "The gospel truth?" The gospel is the good news about Christ: His virgin birth, sinless life, death on a cross for our sins, resurrection from the grave, and ascension into heaven.
- John says, *It is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth.* (1 John 5:6b) So the Holy Spirit is truth, and Jesus says that *the Holy Spirit will guide you into all truth.* (John 16:13)
- Paul says, *....the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.* (1 Tim. 3:15) So the function of the church is to support and transmit to the world the truth God has revealed.
- Paul says, *O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth.....* (Gal. 3:1) Also see Ro. 2:8, Gal. 5:7, 1 Peter 1:22. So the truth is something we are to obey. If we do not obey the truth, God's indignation and wrath will inevitably fall on us. (Read these scriptures.)
- Paul says, *.....that they may all be condemned* ("damned" in the King James) *who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.* (2 Thess. 2:12) So those who do not believe the truth will be condemned. Note the contrast between believing the truth and taking pleasure in sinful conduct.
- Paul says, *Speaking the truth in love.* (Eph. 4:15) So the truth is to be spoken, and always spoken in love.
- Jesus says, *But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen.....*(John 3:21) Also see 1 John 1:6, 2 John 4, and 3 John 3. So the truth is not only something that we are to believe, it is something to be done, to be lived, to be walked out.
- Jesus says, *And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.* (John 8:32) So knowing the truth and living the truth will make us free.

A TROUBLING STORY

A church friend recently told me the following story about a former pastor of his, whom I will call Derek. Derek had a growing church in the state of Oregon. A traveling evangelist came through town, and Pastor Derek was impressed with his prophetic gift and invited him to minister in his church and to stay in a spare bedroom in his home. The church was blessed with the evangelist's ministry, and his visit stretched out to several weeks.

One afternoon Derek felt a strong impression that he should go home immediately. He did so and was shocked to find the evangelist in bed with his wife. Rather than exhibiting remorse, Pastor Derek's wife was furious at him. The evangelist was likewise unrepentant. The couple said that they had fallen in love and had decided to get married.

Derek was heartbroken and spent much time in fasting and prayer. God gave him a very clear word for the evangelist. Derek went to him and said, "God spoke to me and told me to warn you that if you leave town with my wife you are going to die." The evangelist scoffed at him, and the couple left town. Three months later the evangelist died. Derek's wife said she had no intention to come back to him. Derek had a very clear vision. He saw his wife, and a golden thread went from her heart up into the sky. Suddenly the thread was cut, and the thread fell to the ground.

(You might want to read 2 Peter 2:20-22 and Hebrews 10:26-31.)

A COMFORTING STORY

Recently I prayed with a man in the prayer room following a Saturday night service, and he related the following story to me: He said his mother had died only three months before. She had suffered with a rare nerve disease which had withered her arms, and she had gotten down to about 70 pounds and had been in a coma for a long time. As he was sitting by her bedside, suddenly she awoke, her face lit up, she smiled, looked up and said, "Oh, Jesus! Yes, I'm ready!" And she died.

10 WAYS GOD SPEAKS (from Robert Morris)

1. Through the Bible
2. Through circumstances (Jonah and the storm)
3. Through the counsel of others (Proverbs 12:15)
4. Through peace (Phil. 4:7)
5. Through prophets (Acts 21:10), or through anyone (Joab to David)
6. Through dreams and visions (Solomon, Peter, John, Paul, and both Josephs)
7. Through your thoughts (but be careful, because the devil sends thoughts also)
8. Through natural manifestations (thunder, rainbow)
9. Through super-manifestations (burning bush, fleece, bright lights, angels)
10. Through a whisper (1 Kings 19:12)

God is a speaking God. The "Word of God" is one of the most consistent metaphors in the Bible. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice." But note: You can't hear without listening, and that takes time. It is also crucial that we know God's Word, and that takes time. God says, "I tell my friends what I am going to do." Jesus warns us, "Take heed what you hear."

Many times in the Bible God warns that if He speaks to us and we do not obey Him, He will stop speaking to us. In fact, He warns that if we don't obey He will stop listening to our prayers. (There are 12 or 15 places where God says that.)

MINISTRY

Two months ago Jim Schnell and I drove to a prison facility at Ft. Lyon, on the eastern slope. When I signed up for it, I didn't realize it is on the other side of the earth - 385 miles! We drove for eight hours, had a two-hour session on Friday night, but when we went back on Saturday morning for the next session they told us there had been a gang fight on Friday night and everybody was on lock-down and all programs were cancelled, so we drove 385 miles home. Whew! With the price of a motel and gas, pretty expensive. (Please see the box at the bottom if God is saying something to you about giving generously to help the elderly. God also speaks through (11) Newsletters (12) Guilt.)

Two weeks ago, Jim and I from Grand Junction, and Roberta, Cheri, and Donna from Ft. Collins, met at Delta for a two-day seminar. Donna Roth is the founder and director of Freedom Fellowship, the ministry that gets me into prisons, and she is really anointed for prison ministry. We had a good group of 45 guys, and at the end of the session on Saturday afternoon she prayed for a bunch of the guys to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. PTL!

JUST LOST A DEAR FRIEND

I just received word that a dear friend, Burt Swardstrom, had died of cancer a few days ago. I was very shocked because although we have stayed in regular contact he had never told me he was suffering with cancer. We have known one another since we both had churches in Loveland in the 70's, and I count him as one of my closest friends. His son called and said Burt had asked that another pastor friend and I have a part in his service, which I think is going to be July 2nd. Please be in prayer for Burt's family.

God Bless,

Glenn

WEBSITE: glennbrownministries.com

I would like to thank each of you for your support of this ministry.

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