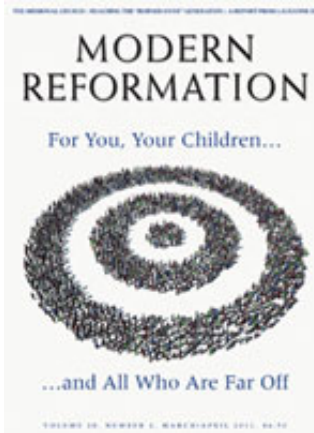


MODERN REFORMATION

Confusing Law and Gospel

"Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream" by David Platt

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David Platt's book *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* has taken the American evangelical scene by storm. According to *Mission Frontiers*, 370,000 copies have sold since May 2010, and it is in its eighteenth printing. His aim is to call the church back from its idolatrous pursuit of the "American dream" and exhort Christians to abandon their lives to a "radical gospel" for the sake of "radical obedience" in fulfilling the Great Commission.

Platt calls attention to several valid areas of concern. The number of remaining un-reached people is a staggering 4.5 billion (76). Mobilizing the church to reach them should be a priority. Furthermore, the Christian faith certainly involves the sharing of possessions, as well as concern and care for the weak, the poor, and the marginalized of this world (2 Cor. 8:1-4; Gal. 2:10; James 1:27).

Platt explains, however, that we need to become aware of how a secularized worldview has influenced our understanding of the gospel and its implications for how we live and order our churches (48-50). The destructive health-wealth "gospel" certainly contradicts the genuine biblical gospel (3). It unquestionably reflects a crass materialism more than the good news announced in Scripture (32). The widespread biblical illiteracy of churches, the lack of hunger for the Word of God, the lack of intentional prayer for the spread of the gospel, and the scarcity of sound Bible expositors in pulpits are all real issues and lamentable problems (40-41, 186-90).

To call the church back to its identity and mission, Platt seeks to "explore the biblical gospel alongside our cultural assumptions with an aim toward embracing Jesus for who he really is, not for who we have created him to be." He therefore proceeds to "look at the core truth of a God-centered gospel and see how we have manipulated it into a human-centered (and ultimately dissatisfying) message." By embracing this "biblical gospel," Platt writes, "we will determine not to waste our lives on anything but uncompromising, unconditional abandonment to a gracious, loving Savior who invites us to take radical risk and promises us radical reward" (21).

While much of Platt's diagnosis is well founded, his remedy is crucially flawed. The fundamental problem with *Radical* is its radical confusion of law and gospel. The law and gospel are so connected throughout that the law ultimately absorbs the gospel. Though Platt uses many of the right phrases and clichés, and rightly criticizes Joel Osteen (31), he ends up confusing law and gospel just as much as the famous television "pastor." While a gentle moralism (e.g., "Your best life now") abounds in much evangelical preaching today, what issues from *Radical* is only a taxing legalism.

First, Platt repeatedly issues a call to "live the gospel" (20, 94, 109, 136, 198, 200, 212). Whether this arises from a lack of precision or from the standpoint of theological conviction, the misrepresentation of the gospel for readers is much the same. Nowhere does Scripture issue a command for believers to live the gospel. This is the unique work of Christ alone. The Scriptures call us to believe the gospel and to obey the law (Titus 2:10; Phil. 1:27; Eph. 4:1). This is no theological hair-splitting, but a fundamental and critical distinction. Law and gospel are to be as carefully distinguished as Christ's work on the cross is from loving your neighbor. When it comes to this distinction, one cannot be too precise. Calvin's successor Theodore Beza wrote, "We must pay great attention to these things. For, with good reason, we can say that ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the principal sources of the abuses which corrupted and still corrupt Christianity" (*The Christian Faith*, 41).

Second, confusion of words and concepts abounds in Platt's examination in chapter 2 of "the foundations of the gospel" (28). Misunderstanding the uses of the law, Platt mistakenly attributes the spiritual effect of the law to the gospel. For example, Platt writes, "*The gospel* reveals eternal realities about God that we would sometimes rather not face" (emphasis added). These realities include God as a wrathful Judge who might damn us (29). Put another way, "the gospel confronts us with the hopelessness of our sinful condition" (31). Therefore, whereas for Reformation theology it is *the law* that brings us up short, this is a task erroneously attributed to the gospel on too many occasions to count. Platt writes, "The biblical gospel says, 'You are an enemy of God, dead in your sins, and in your present state of rebellion you

are not even able to see that you need life, much less to cause yourself to come to life." These propositions, Platt concludes, bring us to recognize "the beauty of the gospel" (32).

Unfortunately for readers, none of these propositions reveal the beauty of the gospel. Instead, they reveal the terror of God's law, the truth and reality of where we stand apart from Christ. God's law discloses our sin and misery (Rom. 3:20). The gospel as extraordinary good news does not impose any commands. It doesn't make known any realities about God that a sinner would not rather face. The gospel does not portray God as a wrathful Judge who damns sinners, but as a merciful Father who has given us his Son. The gospel does not do a law-work, exposing a sinner's hopelessness, but rather holds out great hope. It does not convict us as enemies of God but acquits us as children and friends. Unlike the law, the gospel announces that God reconciles enemies by the death of his Son.

Third, Platt's confusion of law and gospel is evident in his exposition of the story of the rich young man (Mark 10). Platt maintains this story is an example "that Jesus does sometimes call people to sell everything they have and give it to the poor." Because Jesus is "Lord," this text calls us to consider if we are at least "willing to ask God if he wants us to sell everything we have" (120). He explains, "The kind of abandonment Jesus asked of the rich young man is at the core of Jesus' invitation throughout the Gospels" (11).

A better interpretation of this passage, however, does not see it as an invitation of the gospel but as a setting forth of the law to expose the man's pretensions of law-keeping, thereby demonstrating his lack of genuine obedience and righteousness. Jesus was not asking the young man if he is perhaps "willing." The demand of God's law is not, "Do this and be radical." Rather it is, "Do this and live, or else be damned" (Matt. 19:17; Luke. 10:28).

After setting forth the "foundations of the gospel" (28), Platt asks his readers to consider a proper response (36). One would expect him to turn to *sola fide*. Regrettably, Platt maintains that the only proper reaction is "immediate and total surrender" (39). He writes, "Surely this gospel evokes unconditional surrender of all that we are and all that we have to all that he is" (37). Platt appeals to Jesus' words at the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:21-23 as an example of the kind of total surrender the gospel demands (37-38). If such radical surrender is missing, Platt chillingly exhorts, "You and I desperately need to consider whether we have ever truly, authentically trusted in Christ for our salvation" (37).

Again, this advice is pastorally unhelpful for its blurring of law and gospel. Nowhere in Scripture is the demand of the law an invitation of the gospel. The only proper and initial response to the gospel, a truly "radical" proposal given our tendency to want to save ourselves, is to receive and rest in the finished work of Christ. This is a hopeful invitation from God, and setting this free offer apart from the many commands we find in Scripture does not mean that justification can exist without sanctification. It simply means that the call to discipleship is an expression of gratefulness, an encouragement to Christian living that is worthy of such a salvation. Repentance must be preached along with a call to faith, but the two must be distinguished in order to preserve *sola fide* and *sola gratia*.

Whenever the law is confused with the gospel, the remedy is always wrong (e.g., "unconditional surrender" and "willing to sell all"). The problem is so serious that the book must be assessed as pastorally crippling to readers who most likely already have weak souls and afflicted consciences. How does one know if he has surrendered enough? What about Paul's confession in Romans 7:15-19? Even if one "sells all," he has not even come close to fulfilling the radical demands of the law (Luke 17:10). The problem with approaching God on these terms is that a person never has the sense that he or she has done enough. There remains a nagging reality of God's disfavor, which is the enduring point of the law. After the law has humbled a person, he must then be comforted with the gospel without any mention of the law.

In the end, the central message of Christianity is not about "abandoning ourselves" (7). As important as obedience is, it is not the essence of Christianity. What makes Christianity distinctive from every other religion is the gospel. All imperatives must be given and clearly seen as implications of the gospel. "The alternative," Graeme Goldsworthy wisely instructs, "is to preach law and to leave the impression that the essence of Christianity is what we do rather than what God has done. Legalism easily creeps in even when we think we have avoided it. The preacher may well understand the relationship of law and grace, but the structure of the sermon program may undermine it in the thinking of many in the congregation" (*Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, 59).

Platt may understand the relationship of law and grace, but *Radical* undermines a proper biblical perspective for thousands of readers. Ultimately, *Radical's* demands cannot be sustained and its end cannot be achieved, because only the gospel can give what the law commands. Weak, sinful consciences find no comfort or enduring motivation in a confused gospel. Evangelical obedience is nurtured in the soil of assurance. Therefore, the life and ministry of believers must be self-consciously gospel-centered in order to maintain long-term effectiveness for the kingdom of God.

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