

Author of the *New York Times* Bestseller *Radical*

UNLEASHING THE PEOPLE OF GOD  
FOR THE PURPOSE OF GOD

RADICAL  
TOGETHER



DAVID  
PLATT

UNLEASHING THE PEOPLE OF GOD  
FOR THE PURPOSE OF GOD

# RADICAL TOGETHER



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PLATT



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## INTRODUCTION

High atop the Andes Mountains, the rays of the sun strike ice, and a single drop of water forms. It begins to trace a hesitant course downward, gradually joining with other drops of water to become a steady stream. The stream gains speed and strength. Thousands of feet below and hundreds of miles later, what were once single drops have converged to become the mightiest river on earth: the Amazon. Flowing into the Atlantic Ocean at a rate of more than seven million cubic feet per second, the Amazon is more powerful than the next ten largest rivers in the world combined.

In my first book, *Radical*, I explored how the biblical gospel affects individual Christian lives. Simply put, in a world of urgent spiritual and physical need, gospel-believing, God-exalting men and women do not have time to waste their lives pursuing a Christian spin on the American dream. Using the imagery above, I tried to picture what happens when the truth of Christ penetrates our hearts, melts our assumptions, and propels us on a journey of abandonment to God.

But you and I are not intended to plunge down the mountain

of radical obedience alone. That's one of the reasons I love this imagery of the Amazon. The force of a single drop of water descending the Andes is minuscule. Similarly, as long as individual Christians journey alone—no matter how “radical” they are—their effect will be minimal. But as men and women who are surrendered to the person of Christ join together in churches that are committed to the purpose of Christ, then nothing can stop the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

In *Radical Together*, I want to consider what happens—or can happen—when we apply the revolutionary claims and commands of Christ to our communities of faith. I want to contemplate the force of a people who come together to enjoy God's grace in the church while they extend God's glory in the world. And I want to propose that a movement of such people in such churches has the potential to permeate nations with the praise of God.

I am speaking to believers who are ready to lead, influence, or simply be a part of such a movement in their local church. You may be a follower of Christ who desires to live out a more biblical gospel, and you want to see your church do the same. You may be a pastor, staff person, or leader of some other description in the church, and you want your local fellowship to count for the spread of God's glory in the world. You may even be a Christian who is tempted to throw in the towel and say, “My church will never be radical.”

Whatever your circumstance, in this book I invite you to engage God's Word and God's world with a fresh, honest, and open perspective so that together we might answer one question:

How can we in the church best unleash the people of God  
in the Spirit of God with the Word of God  
for the glory of God in the world?

As I pose this question, I do not claim to be an expert on how to answer it. I am merely one pastor in one church, and I have so much to learn. Yet I know that, as leaders and members of churches, we are called to spur one another toward Christ and his agenda in the world. And I am convinced that in the church we can—unknowingly and unintentionally—actually prevent God’s people from accomplishing God’s purpose. If we are not careful, our activities in the church can hinder the advancement of Christ’s kingdom. For this reason I believe certain ideas are foundational for Christians who desire to be a part of churches that are unleashing people into the world with the gospel.

This book is organized around six such ideas. I do not claim they are exhaustive, but as a pastor working out the implications of the gospel in a local church, I do believe these ideas are essential. Here’s a preview:

1. One of the worst enemies of Christians can be good things in the church.
2. The gospel that saves us from work saves us to work.
3. The Word does the work.
4. Building the right church depends on using all the wrong people.
5. We are living—and longing—for the end of the world.
6. We are selfless followers of a self-centered God.

At first glance these ideas may seem fanciful, even untrue. I understand that. But then many of Jesus' statements struck his listeners that way too. Statements like these: "Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first," "For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest," and "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."<sup>1</sup> Though I certainly don't claim the authority or creativity of Jesus, my aim is to put forward ideas that at first may seem confusing, if not contradictory, but upon deeper investigation will bring to light important realities that most overlook.

I hope and pray that accurate theological foundations undergird all my practical exhortations. I am grateful for valuable resources that help us understand the nature and marks of the church.<sup>2</sup> But I want to be clear that my goal here is not to present a comprehensive overview of the church. Instead, it is to build upon biblical foundations in order to consider practical implications for how a right understanding of the church fuels radical obedience among Christians.

Throughout the history of humankind, God has chosen to call out not just individuals but a people for himself. He told the Israelites, "I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people." Through Christ, God brought Jews and Gentiles together as "one body" in which "each member belongs to all the others." Peter told the church, "You are a chosen people, . . . a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." Indeed, God's intention is that "through the church, the manifold wis-



dom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.”<sup>3</sup>

If you and I want our lives to count for God’s purpose in the world, we need to begin with a commitment to God’s people in the church. God has called us to lock arms with one another in single-minded, death-defying obedience to one objective: the declaration of his gospel for the demonstration of his glory to all nations. This is God’s design for his people, and it is worth giving our lives to see it accomplished. It is worth it for billions of people who do not yet know that Jesus is the grave-conquering, life-giving, all-satisfying King. And it is worth it for you and me, because we were made to enjoy the great pleasures of God in the context of total abandonment to his global purpose.

## CHAPTER ONE



# TYRANNY OF THE GOOD

ONE OF THE WORST ENEMIES OF CHRISTIANS  
CAN BE GOOD THINGS IN THE CHURCH.

Before Mark came to the Church at Brook Hills (the church I serve), he had spent practically his entire adult life involved in church programs and serving on church committees. “You name it, and I did it,” Mark said. “I was on finance teams and personnel teams. I worked on capital building campaigns and sat in long-term planning sessions. Every week my schedule was filled with church activity.”

After becoming a part of our faith family, Mark started hearing people talk about making disciples. That’s when he realized that, despite all the good things he had done in the church, he could not name one person outside his family whom he had led to Christ and who was now walking with Christ and leading others to Christ. Mark said to me, “David, I have spent my life doing all the stuff in the church that I thought I was supposed to do.

But I'm realizing that I have missed the most important thing: making disciples." At his workplace and in our community, Mark is now intentionally leading people to Christ and teaching them to follow him.

The story of Mark's life as a Christian should frighten us. The last thing you and I want to do is waste our lives on religious activity that is devoid of spiritual productivity—being active in the church but not advancing the kingdom of God. We don't want to come to the end of our days on earth only to realize that we have had little impact on more people going to heaven. Yet if we are not careful, we will spend our lives doing good things in the church while we ultimately miss out on the great purpose for which we were created.

That's why I say one of the worst enemies of Christians can be good things in the church.

Of course, some will disagree with my claim. "How can good things in the church really be one of our worst enemies?" some might ask. "Sin and Satan are our worst enemies," they might say. And they would have a point. But let me point something out: We *know* sin and Satan are our enemies. We *know* we need to be on our guard against them. But too often we're oblivious to the threat posed by the good things we're doing. We've laid down our defenses against the way that the *good* can hinder the *best*. In this sense, good things can subtly and effectively become one of our worst enemies.

As Christians today, you and I can easily deceive ourselves into thinking that dedication to church programs automatically equals devotion to kingdom purposes. We can fill our lives and our

churches with *good* things requiring our resources and *good* activities demanding our attention that are not ultimately *best* for the enjoyment of the gospel in our churches and the spread of the gospel in our communities.

We must be willing to sacrifice good things in the church in order to experience the great things of God.

#### PUTTING EVERYTHING ON THE TABLE

For this reason I propose that we must put everything on the table. We have to put everything, even good things in the church, up for reconsideration before God, releasing them wholly to him and asking him to show us his priorities and purposes for each.

I'm not talking about biblical essentials and theological non-negotiables. As we will see soon enough, we do not need to change the words of God or the truths of the gospel. To do so would be foolish and fatal.

But everything else belongs on the table. The ways we minister to children, youth, and college students; how we serve women, men, singles, marrieds, and seniors; how we do music and mission; how we approach and implement finances and budgets, administration and communication; all our policies, priorities, and procedures; all the buildings and land we own or rent—all these things (and more) belong on the table. The gospel compels the church to go to God with everything we have and everything we do and then ask, "What needs to go? What needs to change? What needs to stay the same?"

And then wait for God to answer.

Why wouldn't this be what the gospel demands? After all, we follow a Savior who said things like "Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple" and "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."<sup>1</sup> A church is a community of individuals who have lost their lives to follow Christ. Surely it flows from this that we would be willing to lose our programs and our preferences, to sacrifice our budgets and our buildings, to let go of our most cherished legacies and reputations if there is a better way to make his glory known in the world.

#### BREACHED LEVEES AND OVERTURNED LIVES

I will not soon forget the day in August 2005 when my wife, Heather, and I fled New Orleans. It was the day before Hurricane Katrina struck. We were used to hurricane warnings, and it was common to leave the city for a couple of days and then return. So we grabbed some extra clothes, hopped in the car, and drove out of town. Little did we know that this would be the last time we would see our house—and our neighborhood—in the same condition.

Two days later we were serving at an evacuation shelter. We had set up a projector and a screen so people could see the news coming in from the city. After we had arranged everything, we sat down to watch the live feeds. That's when we saw it. As the news helicopter flew over one drowned neighborhood after another, we suddenly recognized the gas station (or what used to be a gas station) just a couple of blocks from our house. As the camera con-

tinued to pan across the lakelike landscape, we saw our neighborhood engulfed in water up to the rooftops. And then we glimpsed a rooftop we thought was ours...

We sat in stunned silence, our thoughts racing. Home for us had just been swept away.

When we took walks around that house in the early evening, we'd wander up to the levee a couple of blocks away. The levee was one of many structures designed to protect the city from the water surrounding it. Thick walls of steel and concrete driven deep into the ground defined the boundaries of Lake Pontchartrain, the Mississippi River, and ultimately the Gulf of Mexico.

But as the floodwaters rose, the walls began to crack. The levee started splitting—at first a little at a time, but then more and more until finally the barricade broke, and millions of gallons of water came rushing out. One of our neighbor's homes was picked up by the force of the flood and carried down the street. Before long, our entire neighborhood, including our house, was submerged.

Like others who lost everything in the flood, Heather and I experienced shock and disbelief. Then we felt confused. In the days that followed, we talked and we prayed and we wondered when "normal" was going to return.

But now we see it in a new light altogether.

For us, the flood depicts the radical call of Christ to Christians and the church. When Jesus calls us to abandon everything we have and everything we are, it's almost as if he is daring us to put ourselves in the flood plain. To put all our lives and all our churches, all our property and all our possessions, all our plans and all our strategies, all our hopes and all our dreams in front of

the levee and then to ask God to break it. To ask God to sweep away whatever he wants, to leave standing whatever he desires, and to remake our lives and churches according to his will.

#### THE HEART OF THE QUESTION

Let me ask: Are you there personally? Is your church?

Specifically, is your community of faith willing to put everything down before God and say, “We will do whatever you want, we will drop whatever you command, we will eliminate whatever is not best, and we will add whatever is necessary in order to make your glory known in the world around us, no matter what it costs us”?

I remember one of the first meetings I had with the leaders at Brook Hills after becoming their pastor. We were talking about the future of the church, and I began with a list of questions:

- How can we most effectively mobilize the people of this church to accomplish the Great Commission?
- How can we most effectively organize the leadership of this church to accomplish the Great Commission?
- Do we need all the staff, teams, and committees we have?
- Does our church budget reflect the desires and design of God in his Word?
- Are our multimillion-dollar facilities the best use of our money for the accomplishment of God’s purposes in the world?

- Are all the programs we have created the absolute best way to advance the gospel from our community to the ends of the earth?
- What good things do we have or what good things are we doing that we need to abolish or alter for greater ends?

When you ask questions like these, people wonder if you're looking for a short tenure as pastor.

That night at Brook Hills, folks responded to my questions with thoughtful questions of their own. "What does this mean for us, Pastor?" "What positions do you think are unnecessary in our leadership structure?" "Are you saying we need to sell the building?" "What programs are you suggesting we alter or abolish?"

I remember well some of the ensuing discussions. We talked about various programs and activities in the church, and it was not uncommon to hear the question, "Well, what's wrong with doing these things?" One person would ask, "What's wrong with having a fall carnival for children?" Another would ask, "What's wrong with having a basketball league?"

We all quickly realized, though, that asking what's wrong with certain programs and activities would get us nowhere. No one was going to say that children having fun at a carnival or people playing basketball was a bad thing. The conversation would change only when we asked, "Are these programs and activities the *best* way to spend our time, money, and energy for the spread of the gospel in our neighborhood and in all nations?"



All of a sudden we found ourselves open to letting go of good things in order to achieve greater purposes. Our perspective had radically changed.

Now, that didn't make it easy to let go of good things. To be honest, we have not always done a good job of letting good things go. Sometimes we have moved too quickly or too slowly. Sometimes our communication about change has been confusing at best. As a result, some have left the church, and I grieve over any unnecessary thing I have done to cause that. At Brook Hills we have learned that letting go of good things is one of the hardest things to do in the church.

But even as we talked together on that first night, we realized we didn't have to answer every question immediately. None of us, including me, had answers to all the questions, and we still don't. The key is simply to ask the questions. For in honestly asking, we begin to grasp how much the good things in the church have a hold on our hearts.

We begin to discover our dangerous tendency to value our traditions over God's truth, just as Jesus warned.<sup>2</sup> We find ourselves defending a program because that's what worked before, not because that's what God has said to do now. We realize how prone we are to exalt our work over God's will, our dreams over God's desires, and our plans over God's priorities.

We see up close a propensity in our budgets to value our comforts over others' needs. As I write this, more than five hundred million people in the world are starving to death. They lack food, water, and basic medical care. Children are dying of diseases like diarrhea; many who live will suffer lifelong brain damage from

early protein deficiency. Others will be sold into forced labor or trafficked for sexual exploitation. Nearly one hundred fifty million children are orphans. Yet judging by what we hang on to in our churches, convenient programs and nice parking lots are still more important than such children and their families.

One pastor who contacted me recently was upset about *Radical*. His church was starting a multimillion-dollar building campaign, and some of his members who had read the book were expressing hesitancy about moving forward. I told him—as I would tell any other pastor—that my goal is not to incite division. I obviously cannot claim to know what a church should do in every situation. I simply and humbly want to ask the question, “Amid all the good things we are doing and planning, are there better ways to align with God’s Word, mobilize God’s people, and marshal God’s resources for God’s glory in a world where millions of people are starving and more than a billion have never even heard of Jesus?”

Some would say that’s not a fair question. I’m convinced it is a question we cannot avoid.

#### CHANGING FOCUS

My conversation with our team at Brook Hills that night led us down a road of continually rethinking our use of resources. Yet I found myself longing for a catalyst to spur us toward a more sweeping reprioritization of our time and money.

During the fall of 2009, we were studying the book of James as a church. (Warning: don’t engage honestly with the book of

James unless you are ready to put everything on the table!) When we came to James 2, we were confronted with the reality that those who have received mercy extend mercy. Grace in our hearts overflows in goodness from our hands. James makes it clear that people who claim to be Christians but who fail to help poverty-stricken fellow believers are in fact not saved.<sup>3</sup> It's not that acts of mercy are a *means to* salvation, but they are clear *evidence of* salvation. (For more on this, see chapter 2.)

At the same time we were studying James, we were going through our church budgeting process. To be honest, I hate budget season. As a pastor, I believe that is when the church comes face to face with how prone we are to give our resources to good things while ignoring great need. Christians in North America give, on average, 2.5 percent of their income to their church. Out of that 2.5 percent, churches in North America will give 2 percent of their budgeted monies to needs overseas.<sup>4</sup> In other words, for every one hundred dollars a North American Christian earns, he will give five cents through the church to a world with urgent spiritual and physical needs. This does not make sense.

Knowing this, one night our pastors took a hard look at the realities of the world, from the vast numbers of our brothers and sisters who are starving to the great multitudes who have never heard the gospel. Then we looked at our budget. And then we took action. We decided to drastically change our spending to better align with the will and ways of God.

This began with reallocating budget overages. Our staff had already been frugal, and we had saved more than \$500,000 for the future. But James caused us to realize that we had brothers

and sisters around the world who already needed it. So we decided to give it all away—specifically through partnerships with churches in India, where 41 percent of the world’s poor live.

Then we began looking at our 2010 budget. We decided to ask the staff to go through the budget with a fine-tooth comb and cut every expenditure possible so we could give more around the world. When I sat down with our leaders, I tried to soften the blow of what cuts might mean for individual ministries. But as I was sharing, one of our preschool leaders spoke up. “David,” she said, “you don’t have to go soft on us. We realize from God’s Word that this is something we need to do, and it is something we want to do. So let us get to work and start cutting our budgets!”

With that said, we split into different teams to reevaluate our budgets. What happened next was amazing. Whereas the budgeting process usually involves leaders vying with one another to see who can raise their budget the most, this year our leaders were competing with one another to see who could cut their budget the most.

There were big cuts—our worship ministry leaders sliced 83 percent from their budget. And there were little cuts. For example, preschool leaders looked at every detail in their budget, including snacks. They reasoned that the kids on Sunday morning have a great breakfast and a great lunch, so why do they need a full assortment of snacks in between? They decided to simplify the snacks and save hundreds of dollars.

One Sunday some weeks later, I was driving home from Brook Hills with my family, and I asked my then-three-year-old son, “How was your time at Brook Hills today, buddy?”

Looking downcast, he replied, “We didn’t have any Goldfish today, Daddy.”

After a short pause my wife chimed in. “You know, that is your daddy’s fault, Son!”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or hide. But that’s when it came home to me that these changes wouldn’t affect just the leadership in the church. They would affect the entire church—all the way down to the preschoolers.

Others were seeing the same thing. So we believed it was important to have the entire church vote on moving forward in this direction, and that’s what we did. We put a proposal before our church family that said:

In love to God, in light of the needs around the world, and in obedience to Scripture (Proverbs 14:31; 21:13; 28:27; Matthew 25:31–46; James 2:14–17; 1 John 3:16–18), the leadership of the Church at Brook Hills proposes that the church body affirm the following actions:

- We will immediately begin radical saving as a church during the remainder of 2009 for the sake of urgent spiritual and physical need around the world.
- Our leadership will work together over the next two months on a 2010 budget that saves every expenditure possible for the sake of urgent spiritual and physical need around the world.
- We will immediately designate up to \$525,000 of our current excess cash to serve impoverished churches across India.

A couple of weeks later, the church voted overwhelmingly in favor of reallocating resources in this direction. We were able to free up an additional \$1.5 million from our 2010 church budget. With that money we began to focus more on spreading the gospel in Birmingham and around the world.

Locally, we identified an area of our city with particular needs, and we committed time and money to partner with other churches, organizations, and schools to share and show the gospel in tangible ways there. Not wanting to give our money without going ourselves, we challenged every member in our faith family to pray about leaving their comfortable neighborhoods and moving into this area of the city. Since that time, several individuals, couples, and families have done exactly that.

Globally, we focused on northern India, home to six hundred million people, but fewer than 0.5 percent are evangelical Christians. Based on relationships we already had and new partnerships we were able to form, we committed time and money to meeting urgent needs there. During the year, through local Indian churches, we were able to provide food, education, medical care, and, most important, the gospel to more than a thousand families in unreached and extremely impoverished areas. In addition, we were able to work with other Indian churches to build a hundred wells that would provide clean water for tens of thousands who previously didn't have it. On top of these things, we were able to train hundreds of national church leaders, mobilize church planters to engage hundreds of villages for the first time with the good news of Christ, and give millions access to the Bible in their language for the first time.

My purpose in sharing these things is not to draw attention to our church. Anything we have done is merely evidence of God's grace among us. And we know we have a long way to go. I share these things simply to encourage you to consider the possibilities of what might happen when churches decide to put everything on the table and spend our resources intentionally and sacrificially for the glory of our King.

#### DOWNSIZING FOR A GREATER VISION

As you read the numbers I just mentioned, you might have been thinking, *Well, not many churches have \$500,000 just lying around. And not every church is able to give \$1.5 million away!*

But this is the beauty of God's plan. You don't have to possess a certain amount of resources in order to spend it wisely for the glory of God. Every church and every Christian has good resources that can be used for great purposes.

One student minister in a smaller church e-mailed me to share what God was doing in his fellowship.

We have already found about \$15,000 in our budget that we are going to reallocate to things like: (1) a gospel-centered organization that helps impoverished children around the world; (2) a foundation that will enable 40,000 people to be parasite-free for an entire year (parasites kill more people than cancer in third-world countries); (3) encouraging families in our church to adopt by offering scholarships to cover the costs of adoption; and

(4) adding \$3,000 to our mission scholarship fund to enable even more youth to go on a mission trip this summer. In addition, we believe that next year we will be able to redirect even more of our operating budget to needs like these here and around the world.

It doesn't take a big budget to have a large impact. All it takes is a family budget, for that matter. I received another e-mail from a dad who is currently deployed overseas in the armed forces. His wife read *Radical* and told him he needed to read it. He was able to find only about seventy pages of the book online (which didn't even include the chapter on giving), but he told me how the words from Scripture that I referenced had penetrated his heart. Here's the way he described what happened next:

I grew up in the church, and my wife and I attend and give our tithe, but I have neglected the relationship Jesus calls us to. I feel sick about the way I have been living my life, in pursuit of the American dream, living to lift myself up! So about six days ago, my wife and I (over the phone) decided to start selling our worthless possessions. In the last five days, we sold two TVs, an iPhone, a computer, a TV stand, some curtains, and our new car. We also made a commitment to start the adoption process when I get home and hopefully add to the four boys God has already blessed us with.

We had bought our car new five months ago, and I just knew we were going to take at least a \$5,000 hit on it.



When my wife took the car in to the dealership to see what the damage would be, we weren't surprised to hear them quote a price about \$6,000 less than what we owed. Our hearts sank. We decided that she should try another dealership and get several quotes before we moved forward. But as she walked away from the dealership, the sales manager chased her down and said, "Wait! My boss just told me he wants to buy that car for his wife." The new offer was \$800 more than what we currently owed and almost \$7,000 more than the price they had given us only fifteen minutes before! We couldn't believe it. God moved in this situation, and I fully believe it was simply because we stepped out in the faith that only comes from God.

Now, I am not claiming that when you take a step like this the same thing will happen to you. (For the record, when my wife and I downsized and sold our house, the guy buying it didn't offer us a similar deal.) But what's important is that whether we take such steps in our families, small groups, small churches, or large churches, we will find great joy in gospel-driven giving to the glory of God.

And notice the theme in all these stories. In each case it was not an issue of giving up or letting go of bad things. The church programs, the new car, and even my son's Goldfish snack were good things. But they were good things that were preventing far better things from happening.

## WHERE WE BEGIN

If we want to unleash the people of God in the church for the glory of God in the world, we need to let go of some good things. And we need to begin by asking ourselves some questions.

Are you and I personally willing to put everything in our lives on the table for Christ to determine what needs to stay and what needs to go?

Are your church and mine willing to put on the table every program we've created, every position we've established, every innovation we've adopted, every building we've constructed, every idea we've formulated, every team we've assembled, and every activity we've organized? Are we willing to ask God if there is a better way to use the time, energy, and money he has given us for his glory in the world?

Are you and I willing to say, "Lord, we don't want to settle for good things as your people. We want only your best"?

When we take this step of surrender and obedience together, we will find ourselves becoming part of a movement of God's people who are accomplishing God's purpose.