

Going Radical

YOUNG MEGACHURCH PASTOR

IGNITES A MOVEMENT TO RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP

Robby Butler

Dr. David Platt, the 32-year-old pastor of The Church at Brook Hills in Birmingham, AL, is challenging the Western church's reinterpretation of Jesus' teaching by which we justify neglect of the nations, the lost and the poor while heaping up treasures here on earth: "We are giving

join him, in light of the reality that billions are lost and starving while thousands of people groups remain unreached, in wrestling with God's commands throughout Scripture for His people to care for the poor.

In 2009 Platt and his wife, with their sons Joshua and Caleb (adopted from Kazakhstan), responded to his own message by downsizing to a smaller home. As Platt recounts the story, one member of his church then told Platt:

"I think you're crazy for saying some of the things you are saying." Then he paused, and Platt wasn't sure what direction this conversation was going to go. He continued, "But I think you're right. And so now I think I'm crazy for thinking some of the things I'm thinking."

For the next few minutes, he described how he was selling his large house and had decided to give away many of his other possessions. He talked about the needs in which he wanted to invest his resources for the glory of Christ. Then he looked at Platt through tears in his eyes and said, "I wonder at some points if I'm being irresponsible or unwise. But then I realize there is never going to come a day when I stand before God and He looks at me and says, 'I wish you would have kept more for yourself.' I'm confident that God will take care of me."⁵

While Platt emphasizes making Luke 14 disciples rather than attracting numbers, he defies the assumptions of the "Seeker Sensitive" movement by drawing more than he is driving away.

RALPH WINTER: "OBEDIENCE TO THE GREAT COMMISSION HAS MORE CONSISTENTLY BEEN POISONED BY AFFLUENCE THAN BY ANYTHING ELSE." — TWEETED BY DAVID PLATT ON 3/24/10

in to the dangerous temptation to take the Jesus of the Bible and twist Him into a version of Jesus with whom we are more comfortable, a nice, middle-class, American Jesus. A Jesus who doesn't mind materialism and who would never call us to give away everything we have."¹ He has suggested his congregation consider selling its multi-million-dollar campus and give the money to the poor.² His book *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith From the American Dream*³ is a runaway best-seller, despite its strong exhortations to rediscover Christ as our sole treasure, to hunger for a deeper understanding of His Word, and to pursue God for the desire and power to obey His commands to deny ourselves and disciple all nations.

Focusing on What it Will Take to Reach the Lost

Stirred by a missionary friend to ask "What will it take to reach the lost?" instead of "What can we spare?," Platt started an eight-part sermon series in September 2008 on *The Radical Demands of the Gospel*⁴. Through this series Platt engaged Brook Hills to



Having served with the USCWM from 1980 to 2004, Robby Butler is now pursuing and promoting effective models for discipleship that lead to discipling nations. He welcomes interaction through RobbyQButler@gmail.com.



Photo by Chase Kuhn

As of late September 2010 at Brook Hills:

- 450+ participants are immersed in Brook Hills' own Theological Education by Extension (TEE) program.
- Demand exceeds capacity (over 2,500) for biannual 6-hour *Secret Church* Bible studies, modeled after "underground" church meetings, to prepare disciplers to train local leaders in mission lands.⁶
- 70 families are currently helping meet the county's foster child and adoption needs, with 15 more in training.
- 500 people have participated in Brook Hills short-term outreach, beyond their normal context, while several hundred more have gone with Brook Hills' Missions Partners.⁷
- 40 families are committed to exploring relocation to minister in inner-city Birmingham. Seven have already moved, and six more have their homes on the market.
- Over 200 individuals are in various stages of preparing for long-term cross-cultural service.
- 2010 budgeted expenses were cut by 18%, affecting everything from worship to Sunday School snacks, while general budget mission giving rose to 24%, on top of \$1,000,000+ in designated mission giving.



Photo by Jason Wallis, Jason Wallis Photography

Platt's Passion

Dubbed the "youngest megachurch pastor in history" by John Vaughn (who coined the term "megachurch"), Platt undermines a driving assumption of megachurches. He observes that Jesus didn't focus on the many, but the few, and He didn't measure success in the size of His audience, but in obedient disciples equipped to disciple the nations.⁸

Platt is passionate to see God glorified through the discipling all nations, and to serve the Spirit of God in employing the Word of God to disciple the people of God to accomplish this objective. Platt's 2006 message *Ultimate Disconnect*⁹ could be taken straight from a *Perspectives* lecture on "blessed to be a blessing." The Christian life, Platt asserts, is not to be lived in seclusion from global needs, but in following Christ to address those needs. "My mission is to make disciples of all nations and mobilize other people to do the same."

Pivotal influences in Platt's passion include:

- Deep devotion to the Word of God, including extensive study and memorization,
- Platt's own adaptation of a prayer from David Brainerd's journal: "God, let me make a difference for you that is utterly disproportionate to who I am."¹⁰
- Short-term experiences teaching believers hungry for God's Word in lands where following Christ may bring imprisonment or worse, and
- *Operation World*: "Years ago I was introduced to *Operation World*, an invaluable book by Patrick Johnstone that has revolutionized my prayer life more than any book outside the Bible."¹¹

Rising from the Wreckage

The Platts lost everything in 2005 when hurricane Katrina submerged their house. Platt recounts:

It was a sanctifying time for me and my wife, as the stuff of this world was ripped away and we found ourselves [in] an incredibly satisfying place, stripped of the comforts of this world in order to find our sufficiency in Christ.

But it didn't take long. Within a year I had been invited to preach at a large church in Birmingham and they asked me to [become their] pastor. And less than a year after losing everything, we had more than we ever had before. We moved into a nice large house in Birmingham, where we were surrounded by the comforts of this world. And to the eyes of the world, even the church world, I was living out the dream.

But inside I had this sinking feeling that I was surrounding myself with so much stuff that I was losing a grasp on what it means to trust in the sufficiency of Christ. I saw that in my life, and I saw that in the church God has entrusted me to lead. We have filled our Christianity with so much stuff; so many comforts in this world, spending our millions on ourselves and our buildings and our programs for ourselves, and we do it all in the name of church growth: "In order to reach the world we need to appeal to the desires of the world." But the reality is we are appealing to the desires of our own selfish hearts in order to fill ourselves with the stuff and tack Christ on to it.¹²

Tackling Biblical Ignorance and Illiteracy

Platt, like Ezra, has given his life to the study and teaching of God's Word (Ezra 7:10), and came to Brook Hills at 27 with the humility of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:6-7): "Coming into this role, I have nothing to bring to the table apart from His Word." Youth aside, Platt is passionate about tackling biblical illiteracy and serving the work of God's Spirit rather than substituting for it:

We have severely dumbed down the Word, and shown a lack of trust in the sufficiency of the Word in the way we preach. We find

it necessary to supplement it with entertaining stories and quips or good practical advice for living the Christian life that are not based in the Word. This deficiency transfers into people content with a little "Word for the Day," in a devotional book at best, as opposed to deep knowledge of Scripture. . . .

The purpose of God's Word is to transform us into the image of Christ. The Word radically changes the way we live. This is why it's more important for me to preach Leviticus than to give tips on parenting. The reality is that Scripture is not a guidebook for a lot of the things folks are going through. It's given to us for one purpose: to make us look more like Christ. When we look more like Christ, then when we're walking through grief or a parenting challenge, we find ourselves in touch with the Holy Spirit of God, who is able to walk us through those things we're battling day in and day out. No other book in the Christian bookstore can get them in touch with the Holy Spirit of God.¹³

As a corrective to the superficial influence of Scripture on many Christians, Platt digs deeply into God's Word during hour-long sermons, offers biannual six-plus hour *Secret Church*¹⁴ Bible studies stripped of the enticements customary in the West, and is developing a "best of seminary" form of TEE (Theological Education by Extension).¹⁵

Loving the Rich Enough to Tell Them the Truth

Platt asserts that Christians have misunderstood the freedom Christ brings us. Christ doesn't free us from obedience (Rom 6:22). It is when Christ saves us that "For the first time . . . , we're free to obey commands." And as the Word works in our hearts, we find our sole treasure in Christ and the Spirit changes us to want to obey Christ's com-

comfort and security in this world, because now we're free to live for Christ."

If we have "clothes to wear, and food to eat, and a house or apartment to live in, and a reasonably reliable means of transportation," Platt says, "then we are in the top 15 percent of the world's wealthy," and the question "What's wrong with having nice things?" only comes up when we close our hearts to Christ, and to the lost and needy outside our door.

Noting that American Christians are unable to conceive of wealth as a potential danger, or obstacle to God's blessing in our lives, Platt observes from the parable of The Rich Young Ruler (Mk. 10:17-31) that "Jesus loves rich people enough to tell them the truth." When we hoard and consume the resources God has entrusted to us for blessing and discipling the nations, and neglect the lost and the poor, we harm ourselves *and* hinder God's purpose:

What if there really were billions of people on this planet who are headed to an eternal hell, and millions of them that haven't even heard the name of Jesus? And what if there were unprecedented numbers of suffering people on this planet? And what if God decided to give His people on this side unprecedented wealth to make a difference among the lost and the poor? *What if that is exactly what He has done?*¹⁶

Guarding Against Folly

Platt resists suggesting what individual obedience in giving should look like, pressing his audience not to look to him for guidance, but to dig deeply into God's Word and focus on knowing Christ, hearing from Him, and obeying Him.

There are many strengths in Platt's message. Yet his emphasis on "*caring for the poor*" has been misunderstood and criticized by some as simply "*giving to the poor*," an unfortunate simplification which is more likely to compound problems than to solve them.

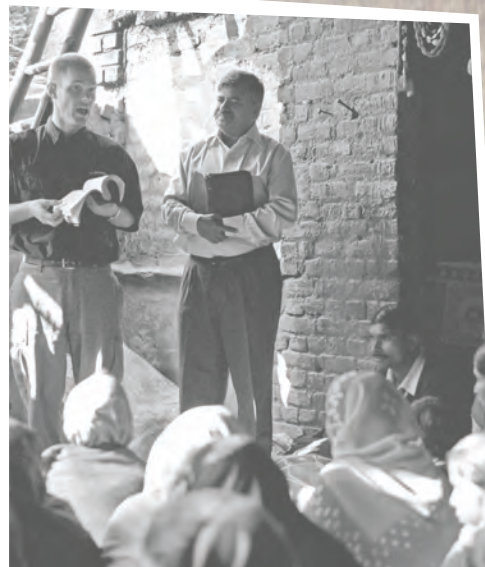
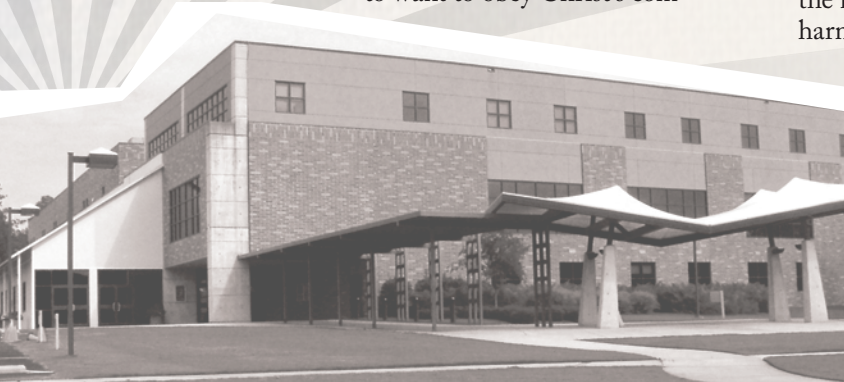


Photo by Chase Kuhn



The Church at Brook Hills

mands. Finally we have what is necessary to put these truths into practice, and "we don't have to try to work or earn or do [what] we don't want to do. . . . No, we do it because Christ is changing our hearts and it overflows into our obedience. And the beauty is, now we are free, absolutely free from ourselves and our possessions and our stuff and our living for

Uninformed giving is not Platt's goal. He observes that, as we give beyond our scraps, our responsibility to give wisely increases. Beyond merely sending money, he advocates going and being with people, and has all of Brook Hill's small group leaders reading Fikkert and Corbett's *When Helping Hurts: Alleviating Poverty Without Hurting the Poor ... and Ourselves*¹⁷

As he urges the Western Church to engage wholeheartedly in discipling all nations and caring for the poor, Platt also urges us to learn all we can from those who have preceded us, recognizing that they didn't do everything perfectly, but neither will we. He is embedded in the rich Southern Baptist tradition that has long embraced effective principles for multiplying church movements, and has wisely enlisted an experienced field missionary, with continuing involvement in reaching an unreached people group, to head up Brook Hills' global discipling.

All for His Glory!

While Platt is concerned about the biblical illiteracy and syncretism that enable American Christians to store up riches on earth to our own harm while neglecting the lost and the poor, his deeper passion is for the glory of God to be revealed through His people as we obey His command to disciple all nations:

As we explore what it means to be radically abandoned to Christ, I invite you simply to let your heart be gripped, maybe for the first time, by the biblical prospect that God has designed a radically global purpose for your life. I invite you to throw aside gospel-less reasoning that might prevent you from accomplishing that purpose. I invite you to consider with me what it would mean for all of us—pastors and church members, businessmen and businesswomen, lawyers and doctors, consultants and construction workers, teachers and students, on-the-go professionals and stay-at-home moms—to spend all of our lives for the sake of all of God's glory in all of the world.¹⁸ 🌐

Footnotes

- ¹ *Radical*, p. 13.
- ² Birmingham News at AL.com blog.al.com/living-news/2010/06/birminghams_church_at_brook_hi.html.
- ³ Multnomah Books, 2010.
- ⁴ For free Brook Hills sermons (video or audio), visit BrookHills.org/media and select a podcast (on right). This series is 9/6/08–

10/25/08. For free transcripts of the *Radical* sermons contact Ann Coe acoe@brookhills.org.

⁵ *Radical*, p. 123.

⁶ Q & A with David Platt – Part 12, Secret Church sbts.edu/resources/interviews/q-and-a-with-david-platt-part-12-secret-church.

⁷ BrookHills.org/global/pray_go_give/go/organizations.html.

⁸ Q & A with David Platt – Part 15, First Senior Pastorate sbts.edu/resources/lectures/gheens/q-and-a-with-david-platt-part-15-first-senior-pastorate.

⁹ *Ultimate Disconnect* (2/4/06) BrookHills.org/media (select podcast on right).

¹⁰ Q & A with David Platt – Part 1, Journey sbts.edu/resources/interviews/q-and-a-with-david-platt-part-1-journey.

¹¹ *Radical*, p. 189.

¹² *The Cost of Following Jesus*, 14:40ff, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Chapel (posted 2/25/10) <http://sbts.edu/resources/chapel/chapel-spring-2010/the-cost-of-following-jesus>.

¹³ Christianity Today: The Word Does the Work (8/10/09) ChristianityToday.com/ct/2009/augustweb-only/132-11.0.html.

¹⁴ Secret Church BrookHills.org/secretchurch.

¹⁵ *TEE: Birth of a Movement* by Ross Kinsler (May, '09) MissionFrontiers.org/pdf/2009/03/24%20Kinsler.pdf.

¹⁶ The Gospel Demands Radical Abandonment, part 3 (10/25/08) BrookHills.org/media (select podcast on right).

¹⁷ Moody Publishers, 2009.

¹⁸ *Radical*, pp. 82–83.

