



THE RADICAL MIDDLE

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“Since you are neither hot nor cold, but only lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth.” (Rev. 3:16) This scripture quote has always made a deep impression on me. To follow Christ requires a radical commitment – to give up all, to risk security for the sake of Christ. Yet, the word “radical” today has often taken on negative connotations. Radical is linked with extremism, people who take one cause, one view of life and follow it narrowly i.e., someone leaves home and possessions to join a religious cult to which they give their complete devotion. Yet there are also the Peace Corps volunteers and missionaries, whose radical and extreme commitments are motivating to the individual partly because they are so extreme, so all consuming.

On the other hand, we have the tradition from Horace of the Golden Mean – that truth and goodness generally resides in the middle, not in either extreme; that moderation has proved to be the best course.

As I think about these two approaches to faith, it strikes me that the trouble with radicals or extremism is that, although it involves deep commitment, that commitment is sometimes narrow – like a horse with blinders that can see no other truth or reality beyond its’ nose. Likewise, the trap of the moderate is that there is little depth or passion about anything. Apathy and being lukewarm are the danger here.

Reflecting on these ideas led me to coin the phrase *radical middle*. Is it possible for a Christian to have the strength of commitment that is called *radical*, that drives us to stretch our limits and put all at the service of the Lord, but still be a well rounded, sensible person who can acknowledge differing viewpoints?

Sometimes, a radical response to the gospel in the vein of Mother Theresa is appropriate and those called should not shirk it; but for most of us our call probably lies closer to home. It’s a more ordinary call, but not necessarily less intense or less radical. It might take the form of a parent deeply concerned about the sexual morality of youth. This parent may focus her commitment on just one aspect such as teen pregnancy, rather than being active in many moral causes because of legitimate responsibilities to her family. Or, instead of selling all and living among the destitute, it might mean a constant vigilance against undue consumerism at home or an active involvement in Bread for the World, Habitat for Humanity, or a regular presence at a local soup kitchen.

The trouble that I have experienced with these more moderate alternatives is that it’s hard to maintain a *passion*, an all consuming motivation, because the call doesn’t look all that special or dramatic. The pull to mediocrity is then very strong. That’s why the concept of *radical middle* is a challenge for many Christians. To take the ordinary and live the call with the intensity and strength of commitment of a missionary. It might even be harder than a more dramatic life-style – if it’s your call!