

Chapter 1

What is a Radical?

The word “radical” has quite an interesting origin. It comes from the Latin word *radix*, which means “root.” So, something radical is a thing that pertains to or proceeds directly out of the root. It is something that reaches to the center, core, foundation or ultimate source. The word, though, is used in much broader ways than one might think. We use it in mathematics, philosophy, botany, anatomy, chemistry, linguistics, politics, and even in common speech.

In everyday speech, we generally think of a radical as someone who has very extreme views. Those extreme views may either be completely different from the root of some particular philosophical belief, or firmly tied to it. Because of this wide-ranging usage, the word can be used in totally contradictory ways. A radical can be someone who moves extremely away from some foundational root or someone who holds unshakably to it. Alinsky’s radicalism is the former type, while Christian radicalism comes from the latter. Alinsky geared his radicalism toward ripping a society from its founding principles. Christian radicalism, on the other hand, is focused on anchoring itself to God’s revealed purpose in the world and working to move society in a direction which reflects that purpose.

Radicalism Alinsky Style

For Alinsky, a radical is an activist – but not just any activist. He specifically aimed his activism at creating radical changes in government or social institutions. He especially sought to create changes which would level class inequalities. His bottom line purpose was to make things “fair” by lifting up the “have nots” and breaking down the “haves” in society.

The foundation of his philosophy is Marx’s dialectical materialism. Dialectical materialism formed the official philosophical basis of Communism based on the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The core belief in this philosophy is that all of reality is material and that change takes place through “the struggle of opposites.” Marx and Engels expressed this belief using the terms thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The starting belief is called the thesis. This is the one that needs to be overturned. The thesis is, then, opposed by its antithesis. This creates a struggle which ends in a synthesis. So, while Alinsky claimed not to be a Marxist, he had no problem borrowing from Marxist ideology. In Alinsky’s world we begin with the “haves” (the thesis), who are opposed by the “have nots” (the antithesis), and the struggle between the two creates a new situation where the “have nots” become the new “haves” (the synthesis). For Alinsky, this then creates a new set of “haves” (thesis) who must then be opposed by another set of “have nots,” (antithesis) and the struggle starts again. He believes that this process is never ending.

In Alinsky’s philosophy, there are two abiding moral expressions. First, he believes there is no absolute basis for morality. Because of that, any action whatsoever is potentially moral. And although he sides with the “have nots,” he has no objective moral reason for picking the “have nots” over the “haves” – he just does. Second, his philosophy begins with the belief that the ends justify the means. In his writing he tries to avoid actually claiming that he believes this fully. He asserts that he only believes it as it relates to specific circumstances.

But since the “special circumstances” are always the ones his activism addresses, he cannot avoid the implications of this belief. There simply is no objective foundation for his moral notions. Since, for him, there is no such thing as absolute morality, his own personal desires necessarily become the standard. So, based on his foundational moral criteria, whatever measures are necessary to accomplish his goals are acceptable.

Another important aspect of Alinsky's radicalism relates to leadership. In his system, he claims that the "masses" are the ones who need to decide what the goals should be. But in actual practice, that is not generally how it works. In reality, the goals usually come from the leaders. Of course, the leaders often come out of the masses and have the same mindset. Still, in the end, all the leaders need is for the masses to agree to their goals. The leaders are typically the ones who do all of the thinking, organizing and planning. In fact, a big part of the work of leadership is to figure out the best ways to get and keep the masses on board so that the tactics for accomplishing their goals will succeed. As will be seen later, some of his rules actually deal with this very issue.

Finally, Alinsky's whole approach is based on using various tactics to put pressure on the "haves." The purpose is to get them to submit and transfer wealth to the "have nots." As mentioned above, there are no moral boundaries governing this. Whatever works is considered morally right, and moral wrong is simply that which does not work. In the end, the creative development and implementation of tactics is the work of the radical.

Radicalism Christian Style

Before we move to a more in-depth treatment of Christian radicalism, it is important to make a distinction between one who is a Christian radical and one who considers himself a radical Christian. These are my definitions and the ones I will use throughout the book.

Using my definition, a radical Christian can be almost anything. It all depends on how the term Christian is defined. In fact, there are many different ways people use this word. Those who claim to be Christian because they were born in America, were baptized as children, are members of a church which considers itself Christian, or the like, are not necessarily biblical Christians. There are actually several different versions of "Christian" theology which are not based on biblical concepts at all. These are generically referred to as liberal theology. Those who follow these strands of theological belief replace the biblical belief of soul salvation through Christ with what they call social justice. Someone who is an adherent of one of these liberal forms of theology might easily feel free to use Alinsky's approach. When the notions of social justice take the place of biblical theology, the philosophical foundation is more closely related to Marx's beliefs than what is written in the Bible.

Christian radicalism, on the other hand, is different from Alinsky's. For biblical Christians, a radical is one whose sole purpose in life is to accomplish the purpose of God. In specific terms, the purpose of the Christian life is to give glory to God, bring people to Christ, and to bring God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. One who has this as the bottom line foundation of life is not a radical Christian but a Christian radical. Christian radicals are not obnoxious or legalistic persons. They are people who are committed to doing God's work God's way. They are persons who have given their lives away to God in order to become his servant (slave), and who serve him in the position of a steward (manager).

When it comes to the moral basis for the actions of a Christian radical, only biblical morality is acceptable. The Christian faith knows nothing of "the ends justifying the means." God exists as a person with a particular character, and true disciples of Christ have committed themselves to expressing that character in their own lives.

The roles of leaders and followers, for Christian radicals, also take a completely different path from Alinsky's philosophy. In the Christian faith, God determines all the goals. Based on his purposes, God calls leaders to lead out in the various venues in society in order to accomplish his purposes. Additionally, it is not up to the leaders to keep the followers motivated. Rather, all believers are to be committed disciples of Christ who get their marching orders from God himself.

The work of the leaders is simply to equip the believers in the basics of the Christian faith. With this kind of preparation, “regular Christians” are able to become active radicals who go into the world to accomplish God’s purpose in the area of their calling.

When it comes to tactics, Christian radicals are not free to just do anything they want. The ends do not justify the means in the Christian faith. Christians must do God’s will using only methods which are morally in line with biblical teachings.

Who Are the Christian Radicals?

Sadly, the number of genuine Christian radicals is relatively small in the universe of all who claim to be believers. Most Christians are content to be spectators who watch the more active believers “perform” the Christian role.

In spite of the fact that only a minority of those who call themselves Christians are active in their Christian faith, EVERY true believer in Christ is called on to be a Christian radical. All are called to become equipped to do the work of ministry, share the gospel of Jesus Christ, and bring glory to God through their service as his stewards in the world. For those who do not have this desire, there is really no point in reading the rest of this book. It was written for those who want to be activist Christians. If that is your desire, read on and you will find the formula for transforming yourself into a legitimate Christian radical.

Is this Really What Jesus Wants from Us?

There are those who truly believe that God only calls a small number of special people to do his work in the world. They believe that the job of the majority of believers is simply to give support to those specially called ones. But no one who takes seriously what Jesus taught could ever come to that conclusion. Jesus was very adamant about what he expects out of his followers, and that expectation is quite radical. He seriously wants those who follow him to be activists in the world to accomplish the work of God. Following are some of the things Jesus said to make his point.

God is Our Only Master

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Matthew 6:24-25

Jesus made no bones about it. The highest priority for our lives must be God and his purpose. God does not call everyone to be poor or rich or powerful or weak or anything else in order to do his work. Every person has their own specific calling – their own particular placement in the body of Christ. And God is the one who decides what that will be. It is up to individual believers to discern their proper place and submit to it fully – no ifs, ands or buts.

Total Obedience to God

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ Matthew 7:21-23

Not everyone is willing to submit to God in this way. Those, however, not willing to do it can never consider themselves Christian radicals. It is not enough simply to do good works. Even nonbelievers can do that. We must put ourselves in a position to know God's will and give ourselves to it fully.

Extreme Servant Spirit

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Matthew 20:25-28

Christian radicals must not only be servants of God, but also willingly put themselves in the position of servants to man. This does not mean that we simply do whatever anyone tells us to do. The purpose of servanthood is not, ultimately, to serve other human beings, but to serve God. It is essentially an attitude before God that makes us willing to do anything necessary to accomplish his will to bring other people to him – even if that means physically serving them. That is, there is never any pride of position which would prevent us from doing anything necessary to effectively be God's instrument to bring others to Christ.

Profound Humility

For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.
Matthew 23:12

Humility is not simply a matter of showing deference to others. It is also not an expression of weakness. Rather, it is a spirit which puts the needs of others above the needs of oneself. Sometimes doing that requires people to act in ways another person may not like. Sometimes other people don't know what they really need. The only way this can be expressed properly is for the believer to truly put the purpose of God above self-interest. In doing this, individuals can stand strong on principle while displaying a loving spirit toward others – even toward those who are attacking them.

Intense Self-Denial

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." Mark 8:34-38

Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels." Luke 9:23-26

Christian radicals are characterized by the kind of self-denial that makes them ready to lay their lives on the line for God's purposes. They will not compromise principle for money, power, or even life itself.

Absolute Devotion to God

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good — except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'" "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy." Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. Mark 10:17-22

Ultimate devotion comes from the heart. It represents such a profound love that nothing else matters except the object of devotion. Christian radicals are those who love God so much they are willing to do anything, and give up anything, to be sure they remain in intimate relationship with him.

Willingness to Accept the Hate of Others

Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Luke 6:22

It is a natural human desire to be liked by others, and many are willing even to compromise their moral principles to maintain that liking. But that can never be the position of a Christian radical. The fact is, those who refuse to compromise their Christian principles are going to be hated and attacked by those who are tied to Satan. Christian radicals are willing to accept that and continue to stand strong in their faith.

Love of God above Every Other Relationship

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters — yes, even his own life — he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Luke 14:26-27

Certainly it is not necessary actually to hate one's family in order to be a Christian radical. That said, comparatively speaking, one must love God so much that every other relationship is almost irrelevant. Thus, it becomes clear that if the will of God and the will of a friend or family member come in conflict, there is no doubt which will win out. The purpose of God is always primary.

Should You Commit to Christian Radicalism?

Honestly, it is God's will that EVERY Christian live life as a Christian radical. That is the automatic result of taking seriously the verses listed above. Unfortunately, the percentage of believers willing to commit to that lifestyle is very small. A person doesn't become a Christian radical simply by accepting Christ. It happens when an individual makes an intentional decision to do it, puts forth the effort to become equipped, then actually steps into the lifestyle.

So, the simple answer is, yes you should commit yourself to this life. But if you decide to do it, go into it with your eyes wide open. It will require that you put aside deliberate sin from your life. This does not mean you will never sin again. But if there are lifestyle issues which are contrary to God's will that you have not deliberately decided to put aside, you will have to get serious about it.

It will also require that you begin a life of learning and growing. There are knowledge and skill sets you will need to master. If you are not willing to devote yourself to a life of deliberate, continual growth, you cannot be a Christian radical.

Finally, you will have to commit yourself to becoming an activist. There are many different places where this activism can be expressed, and God has one that fits you perfectly. It does not necessarily mean you will be standing on the street corner preaching or attending protest rallies in front of abortion clinics. In every case, though, it does mean that in the places where God directs you, you will be willing to stand up and be counted in the face of those who may oppose you.

If you are not ready to walk this walk, there is nothing in this book you will find useful for your life. If, however, you are ready, you will find the following pages to be a profound guide for moving forward.