

“I am tempted to say that this is no ordinary book. In a culture that rhapsodizes over every achievement and idolizes many of those who stand out, it is easy for the church to drink from the same intoxicating elixir and swoon over gifted exceptions. How refreshing to read a book that tries to locate spiritual and theological maturity in ordinary faith and obedience, in ordinary relationships, in ordinary service, in ordinary pastors. Michael Horton does not mean to depreciate believers with exceptional gifts, but he rightly warns us against erecting shrines to them — shrines that blind us to the glory of the gospel worked out in the faithful discipleship of ‘ordinary’ Christian living, shrines that make us forget we serve a God who will not give his glory to another. That we need a book like this is more than a little sad; the book that addresses the problem wisely and well is, frankly, extraordinary.”

—D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Michael Horton’s *Ordinary* is, well, extraordinary. It can be described in many ways, and one is this: a call to love God and neighbor in freedom and grace, in the neighborhood you already inhabit, with the gifts and talents (and weaknesses!) you already possess. Spiritual heroes need not apply.”

—Mark Galli, Editor, *Christianity Today*

“In an age of ‘radicals’ always promising us the next best thing, Michael Horton wisely and winsomely points us to God’s faithfulness in the ordinary means of grace. In an era where everyone seems to have a nonprofit start-up that aims to change the world, Horton reminds us of the joy found in ordinary, oft-unnoticed congregations where the Spirit dwells. In an age where everyone seems to be writing their memoir, Horton shows us that God delights in lives that quietly but faithfully care for lost souls. Forget ‘the next best thing’; God is at work in small, good things.”

—James K. A. Smith, Gary & Henrietta Byker Chair
in Applied Reformed Theology & Worldview, Calvin College

Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

—Conclusion to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

or·di·nar·y

Sustainable Faith in a Radical,
Restless World

MICHAEL HORTON



ZONDERVAN

Ordinary

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PART 1

radical and restless

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CHAPTER 1

the new radical

Radical. Epic. Revolutionary.
Transformative. Impactful. Life-Changing.

Ultimate. Extreme. Awesome.

Emergent. Alternative. Innovative.

On The Edge. The Next Big Thing. Explosive Breakthrough.

You can probably add to the list of modifiers that have become, ironically, part of the *ordinary* conversations in society and in today's church. Most of us have heard expressions like these so often that they've become background noise. We tune them out, unconsciously doubting what is offered because it has become so predictably common. As my grammar teacher used to say, "If you make every sentence an exclamation or put every verb in 'bold,' then nothing stands out."

To grab—and hold—our attention, everything has to have an exclamation point. We've become accustomed to looking around restlessly for something new, the latest and greatest, that idea or product or person or experience that will solve our problems, give us some purpose, and change the world. Although we might be a little jaded by the ads, we're eager to take whatever it is "to a whole new level."

"Ordinary" has to be one of the loneliest words in our vocabulary today. Who wants a bumper sticker that announces to the neighborhood, "My child is an ordinary student at Bubbling Brook Elementary"? Who wants to be that ordinary person who lives in an ordinary town, is a member of an ordinary church, and has ordinary

friends and works an ordinary job? Our life has to *count!* We have to leave our mark, have a legacy, and make a difference. And all of this should be something that can be managed, measured, and maintained. We have to live up to our Facebook profile. It's one of the newer versions of salvation by works.

Still, I sense a growing restlessness with this restlessness. Some have grown tired of the constant calls to radical change through new and improved schemes. They are less sure they want to jump on the next bandwagon or trail-blaze new paths to greatness. You know that something's afoot when a satirical newspaper like *The Onion* pokes fun at this fad, reducing our hyperbolic lives to a sarcastic joke:

CAMDEN, ME—Longtime acquaintances confirmed to reporters this week that local man Michael Husmer, an unambitious 29-year-old loser who leads an enjoyable and fulfilling life, still lives in his hometown and has no desire to leave.

Claiming that the aimless slouch has never resided more than two hours from his parents and still hangs out with friends from high school, sources close to Husmer reported that the man, who has meaningful, lasting personal relationships and a healthy work-life balance, is an unmotivated washout who's perfectly comfortable being a nobody for the rest of his life.

"I've known Mike my whole life and he's a good guy, but it's pretty pathetic that he's still living on the same street he grew up on and experiencing a deep sense of personal satisfaction," childhood friend David Gorman said of the unambitious, completely gratified do-nothing. "As soon as Mike graduated from college, he moved back home and started working at a local insurance firm. Now, he's nearly 30 years old, living in the exact same town he was born in, working at the same small-time job, and is extremely contented in all aspects of his home and professional lives. It's really sad." ... Additionally, pointing to the intimate, enduring connections he's developed with his wife, parents, siblings, and neighbors, sources reported that Husmer's life is "pretty humiliating" on multiple levels.

Husmer's ordinary life is debt-free and he is perfectly content to stay put while many of his high school friends go off to the bright lights and big cities. He doesn't care about impressing total strangers every day as he climbs the corporate ladder, when he can invest

in the lives of those closest to him. He doesn't have a thousand "friends" on Facebook, just a close family and circle of friends in town. "I'm just glad I got out of there and didn't end up like Mike," said Husmer's cousin Amary Martin, 33, an attorney at a large law firm who hasn't seen Husmer, her closest childhood playmate, for nearly six years. "The last thing I'd ever want is to have a loving family nearby, feel a sense of pleasure when reflecting on my life, and be the big failure that everyone runs into when they visit home once a year for the holidays."¹

There is a lot of truth in the portrait of "poor" Mike Husmer. Ironically, today, it isn't all that difficult to pull up roots, and become anonymous—starting life all over—with a new set of relationships. Our mobile, individualistic culture makes it possible for us to reinvent ourselves whenever we want a fresh start and a new set of supporting actors in our personalized life movie.

Even the Lego company piled on with a blockbuster 2014 film that parodies the culture of corporate hype of which it is a part. As one review of *The Lego Movie* explains, "It's about a Lego minifigure named Emmet, whose empty mind has been filled with a blind devotion to an indifferent commercial empire. Thanks to the evil mastermind known as President Business (and later, Lord Business), Emmet watches the same stupid TV shows and listens to the same insipid pop songs over and over again ('Everything is awesome!...')."² At the end of the movie/infomercial, Emmet appeals to Lord Business: "You don't have to be the bad guy. You are the most talented, most interesting, most extraordinary person in the universe." Then Emmet immediately adds, "And so is everybody." The reviewer noted this is part of a growing trend in corporate advertising: to mock the hype even as they engage in it.

I'm not saying that there is something wrong with moving to the city to pursue an adrenaline-racing calling. And I understand the fact that advertisers have always targeted our longing for self-importance. The real problem is that our values are changing and the new ones are wearing us out. But they're also keeping us from forming genuine, long-term, and meaningful commitments that actually contribute to

the lives of others. Over time, the hype of living a new life, taking up a radical calling, and changing the world can creep into every area of our life. And it can make us tired, depressed, and mean.

Given the dominance of The Next Big Thing in our society, it is not at all surprising that the Christian subculture is passionate about superlatives. Many of us were raised in a Christian subculture of managed expectations, called to change ourselves or our world, with measurable results. There always had to be a cause du jour to justify our engagement. Otherwise, life in the church would simply be too ordinary. Like every other area of life, we have come to believe that growth in Christ—as individuals or as churches—can and should be programmed to generate predictable outcomes that are unrealistic and are not even justified biblically. We want big results—sooner rather than later. And we've forgotten that God showers his extraordinary gifts through ordinary means of grace, loves us through ordinary fellow image bearers, and sends us out into the world to love and serve others in ordinary callings.

Take, for example, the experience of Tish Harrison Warren. Raised in a wealthy evangelical church, sporting WWJD bracelets, she said, "I began to yearn for something more than a comfortable Christianity focused on saving souls and being generally respectable Republican Texans." Her story is typical of what many believers of her generation experienced—myself included:

I was nearly 22 years old and had just returned to my college town from a part of Africa that had missed the last three centuries. As I walked to church in my weathered, worn-in Chaco's, I bumped into our new associate pastor and introduced myself. He smiled warmly and said, "Oh, you. I've heard about you. You're the radical who wants to give your life away for Jesus." It was meant as a compliment and I took it as one, but it also felt like a lot of pressure because, in a new way, I was torturously uncertain about what being a radical and living for Jesus was supposed to mean for me. Here I was, back in America, needing a job and health insurance, toying with dating this law student intellectual (who wasn't all that radical), and unsure about how to be faithful to Jesus in an ordinary life. I'm not sure I even knew if that was possible.

I entered college restless with questions and spent my twenties reading Marx and St. Francis, being disciplined in the work of Rich Mullins, Ron Sider, and Tony Campolo, learning about New Monasticism (though it wasn't named that yet), and falling in love with Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day. My senior year of college, I invited everyone at our big student evangelical gathering to join me in protesting the School of the Americas.³

After spending time in various “radical” Christian communities, Warren began to wonder if ordinary life was even possible.

Now, I'm a thirty-something with two kids living a more or less ordinary life. And what I'm slowly realizing is that, for me, being in the house all day with a baby and a two-year-old is a lot more scary and a lot harder than being in a war-torn African village. What I need courage for is the ordinary, the daily every-dayness of life. Caring for a homeless kid is a lot more thrilling to me than listening well to the people in my home. Giving away clothes and seeking out edgy Christian communities requires less of me than being kind to my husband on an average Wednesday morning or calling my mother back when I don't feel like it.

“Everydayness Is My Problem”

Writer Rod Dreher observes, “Everydayness is my problem. It's easy to think about what you would do in wartime, or if a hurricane blows through, or if you spent a month in Paris, or if your guy wins the election, or if you won the lottery or bought that thing you really wanted. It's a lot more difficult to figure out how you're going to get through today without despair.”⁴ I know just how he feels. Even more than I'm afraid of failure, I'm *terrified* by boredom. Facing another day, with ordinary callings to ordinary people all around us is much more difficult than chasing my own dreams that I have envisioned for the grand story of my life. Other people—especially those closest to us—can become props. “The Poor” can be instruments of our life project. Or fighting “The Socialists” may animate our otherwise boring autobiography. Changing the world can be a way of actually avoiding the

opportunities we have every day, right where God has placed us, to glorify and enjoy him and to enrich the lives of others.

It is all too easy to turn other people in our lives into a supporting cast for our life movie. The problem is that they don't follow the role or the lines we've given them. They are actual people with actual needs that get in the way of our plot, especially if they're as ambitious as we are. Sometimes, chasing your dreams can be "easier" than just being who we are, where God has placed you, with the gifts he has given to you.

American Christianity is a story of perpetual upheavals in churches and individual lives. Starting with the extraordinary conversion experience, our lives are motivated by a constant expectation for The Next Big Thing. We're growing bored with the ordinary means of God's grace, attending church week in and week out. Doctrines and disciplines that have shaped faithful Christian witness in the past are often marginalized or substituted with newer fashions or methods. The new and improved may dazzle us for the moment, but soon they have become "so last year."

In my own life so far, I've witnessed—and been part of—successive waves of enthusiasm that have whipped the church into a frenzy, only to leave many people exhausted or disillusioned. These fads change with every generation. So there are always fresh recruits to take the place of the burned-out enthusiasts of yesteryear. That, however, seems to be changing. For the first time, the percentage of American young adults claiming no religious affiliation has taken the lead (though barely) over those identifying themselves as evangelical Christians.

Aside from graduate school, I have spent my whole life in California. I lived a short drive from Azusa Street, the birthplace of Pentecostalism, and from Angelus Temple, where Sister Aimee Semple McPherson pioneered church-as-Vaudeville. Even closer were Calvary Chapel (the center of the "Jesus Movement" of the 1970s) and the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) headquarters. Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral was just down the road, as was Saddleback Community Church, led by Pastor Rick Warren.

Thousands of pastors flocked to these venues regularly for church growth conferences.

Plagued by controversy, Sister Aimee Semple McPherson was caught up in an alleged kidnapping scandal. In the past several years, Calvary has suffered from various scandals, and it is unclear what shape its “Moses Model” of leadership will take after the recent death of its gifted founder Chuck Smith. “As one pastor said to *Christianity Today*, ‘The Titanic has hit the iceberg. But the music is still playing.’”⁵ Dedicated in the 1980s to “the glory of man, for the greater glory of God,” the Crystal Cathedral declared bankruptcy in 2010 and two years later became Christ Cathedral, part of the Roman Catholic diocese of Orange County.⁶

Using the Crystal Cathedral as a prism, an article by Jim Hinch in *The American Scholar* observes that none of the trend-setting mega-churches in Orange County is growing today.⁷ Rob Bell, author of *Love Wins*, now calls Orange County home, but says that he surfs instead of going to church. “Evangelicals are good at whipping people up into a frenzy,” he told Hinch, “and then you’re like, ‘What was that?’” The rapid growth in the county lies now with the largest Buddhist temple in the world (Itsi Lai) and the Islamic Society of Orange County. Recoiling from “McMansion” churches, many younger evangelicals are forming loose networks of “spiritual communities,” Hinch reports. “In other words, the future of the evangelical church as glimpsed from Orange County might be no church at all.”

The fads of the Boomer generation (those born between 1946 and 1964) were programs oriented around personal improvement and church growth. Boomers believed that traditional church experience was too ordinary—even boring—with its weekly routine of preaching, sacraments, prayer, praise, teaching, and fellowship. What was needed instead was a new plan for personal growth, something that would take our walk with God to “a whole new level.” Boomers tended to make the Christian life—and the church—more individualistic and performance-oriented, removing checks and balances, structures and practices that have historically encouraged sustained growth in faith over the long haul.

Reacting against this self-focused and consumeristic approach, many of the children and grandchildren of the Boomer generation began looking outward, to problems in the world. The mantra swung from “change your life” to “change the world.” Talk of evangelistic outreach shifted to calls for compassionate ministry to the poor, an emphasis on social justice, and an exhortation to live out your faith in a way that made a measurable difference in the world.

Yet both of these generational fads share something in common: *an impatience and disdain for the ordinary*. They share a passion for programs that deliver impressive, quick, and observable results. In both cases, the invitation is to break away from business-as-usual, to “think outside the box,” and to do something big for God.

The tragedy in all of this is that something genuinely important in these calls is actually lost. We are called to grow in a personal relationship with Christ. We are also called to love and serve others—our fellow believers and our neighbors. And yet, the tendency of the evangelical movement has always been to prioritize extraordinary methods and demands over the ordinary means that Christ instituted for sustainable mission. Are we making it more difficult for the church to be a community where sinners are justified and renewed and are being conformed to Christ’s image, bearing the fruit of good works for the good of their neighbors and the glory of God? Of course, it is true that God is doing great things through us. The real question is not *if* God will work through his people; rather, it’s what we mean by “great” and how God has promised to do this work. What do people really mean when they talk about “changing the world”?

But I am convinced that we have drifted from the true focus of God’s activity in this world. It is not to be found in the extraordinary, but in the ordinary, the everyday.

The problem is not that we are too active, but that we are recklessly frenetic. We have grown accustomed to quick fixes and easy solutions. We have grown accustomed to running sprints instead of training for the long-distance marathon. We have plenty of energy. The danger is that we will burn ourselves out on restless anxieties and unrealistic expectations.

To be clear, it's not as if all of the values being promoted today by calls to be "radical" or invitations to change the world are wrong-headed or unbiblical. Taking a summer to build wells in Africa is, for some, a genuine calling. But so is fixing a neighbor's plumbing, feeding one's family, and sharing in the burdens and joys of a local church. What we are called to do every day, right where God has placed us, is rich and rewarding.

Isn't This an Excuse to Be Comfortable?

When I return from spending time in the majority world, I'm convicted by the depth of my own addiction to comfort—having everything my way. Yet, there is a difference between an idol of comfort and genuine biblical contentment. Being content with life means accepting the circumstances in which God's providence has placed me. That can mean being content with poverty, if God so chooses. But it can also mean being content with my place as an average middle-class guy in an American suburb with a wife and four children—someone with various callings to my family, church, and neighborhood.

I never quite finished quoting from Tish Harrison Warren's provocative post. As she continues, she recalls a college friend who dedicated his life to teaching in the most at-risk schools. After a nervous breakdown, he moved back to his hometown, working as a waiter. Gradually, he recovered.

When he'd landed back home, weary and discouraged, we talked about what had gone wrong. We had gone to a top college where people achieved big things. They wrote books and started non-profits. We were told again and again that we'd be world-changers. We were part of a young, Christian movement that encouraged us to live bold, meaningful lives of discipleship, which baptized this world-changing impetus as the way to really follow after Jesus. We were challenged to impact and serve the world in radical ways, but we never learned how to be an average person living an average life in a beautiful way.

A prominent New Monasticism community house had a sign on the wall that famously read: "Everyone wants a revolution. No

one wants to do the dishes.” My life is really rich in dirty dishes (and diapers) these days and really short in revolutions. I go to a church full of older people who live pretty normal, middle-class lives in nice, middle-class houses. But I have really come to appreciate this community, to see their lifetimes of sturdy faithfulness to Jesus, their commitment to prayer, and the tangible, beautiful generosity that they show those around them in unnoticed, unimpressive, unmarketable, unrevolutionary ways. And each week, we average sinners and boring saints gather around ordinary bread and wine and Christ himself is there with us.

She says that she still longs for a revolution and wants to make a difference in the wider world. She still disdains mediocrity.

But I’ve come to the point where I’m not sure anymore just what God counts as radical. And I suspect that for me, getting up and doing the dishes when I’m short on sleep and patience is far more costly and necessitates more of a revolution in my heart than some of the more outwardly risky ways I’ve lived in the past. And so this is what I need now: the courage to face an ordinary day—an afternoon with a colicky baby where I’m probably going to snap at my two-year old and get annoyed with my noisy neighbor—without despair, the bravery it takes to believe that a small life is still a meaningful life, and the grace to know that even when I’ve done nothing that is powerful or bold or even interesting that the Lord notices me and is fond of me and that that is enough.

The call to “radical discipleship,” Warren notes, helpfully challenges our addiction to comfort. “But for those of us—and there are a lot of us—who are drawn to an edgy, sizzling spirituality, we need to embrace radical ordinariness and to be grounded in the challenge of the stable mundaneness of the well-lived Christian life.” She concludes:

In our wedding ceremony, my pastor warned my husband that every so often, I would bound into the room, anxiety etched on my face, certain we’d settled for mediocrity because we weren’t “giving our lives away” living in outer Mongolia. We laughed. All my radical friends laughed. And he was right. We’ve had that conversation many, many times. But I’m starting to learn that, whether in Mongolia or

Tennessee, the kind of “giving my life away” that counts starts with how I get up on a gray Tuesday morning. It never sells books. It won’t be remembered. But it’s what makes a life. And who knows? Maybe, at the end of days, a hurried prayer for an enemy, a passing kindness to a neighbor, or budget planning on a boring Thursday will be the revolution stories of God making all things new.⁸

Quantity Time

Think of the things that matter most to you. How do you measure your relationships? How do you “measure” your marriage, for example? When my wife and I talk about our relationship, we often have different takes on how things are going. Looking back over the course of our married years, we have seen many ways in which the Lord has bonded us together since our first year together. We can see steady growth and identify ways in which we’ve deepened in our relationship. But when we shift our focus to the short-term, the week-to-week, it becomes harder for us to get an accurate gauge on how we are doing. The extraordinary weekend retreat was memorable, but it’s those ordinary moments filled with seemingly insignificant decisions, conversations, and touches that matter most. This is where most of life is lived. The richest things in life are made up of more than Kodak moments.

Is it any different when you are raising children? The mantra among many parents today, especially dads, is “Quality Time.” But is that true? Think about all that happens in those mundane moments that are unplanned, unprogrammed, unscheduled, and unplugged. Nearly everything! Nicknames are invented, identities and relationships are formed. On the drive home from church, your child asks a question about the sermon that puts one more piece of the puzzle into place for an enduring faith. Everyone in the car benefits from the exchange.

I’ve used the “quality time” line before too, but it’s just an excuse. Can we really compensate for extended absence (even if we are physically present), missing the ordinary details of life, with a dream getaway or by laying out a thousand dollars to take the kids to The

Wizards World of Harry Potter? Any long-term relationship that wants to grow and be healthy needs those ordinary minutes, hours, days, months, and years. This is more than just enduring those moments passively. It requires engaging in intentional thought and effort as well as enjoyment. That's true also of our relationship with the triune God in his body, the visible church.

In the church today, we like to raise the bar, up the ante, and lay out radical calls that most people can't possibly answer. Nor do we expect them to, if we are honest. We understand that some will fly coach while others will find their way to first class. There are those dedicated few who are truly Spirit-filled, victorious, soul-winning, or society-transforming warriors. The rest of us are just "ordinary" believers. We will continue coming to church regularly, receiving God's gifts and sharing them, participating in praise, fellowship, and hospitality, and continue supporting the ministry financially. But we know, deep inside, that we aren't going to change the world.

None of this is new, of course. The same was true in the medieval church. It was fine to be an ordinary layperson, but everyone knew that if you wanted a direct route to a higher experience of God, you needed to be a priest or monk or nun. Marriage was good, but celibacy was seen as far better. Ordinary fellowship in the parish church and callings in the world were fine, but the truly dedicated took vows that set them apart from the ordinary Christian crowd. Some chose the monastic life, with other devoted colleagues. Others even more radically took a hermetic course of private isolation. Some made spiritual disciplines their focus, while others—especially the Franciscans—dedicated themselves to helping the poor.

We Protestants have our own way of programming various "higher" approaches to Christian living. Sure, you could still be a member of the local church, but if you've experienced the new birth you'll belong to the core—the true church that meets in small groups. They were often called "holy clubs" and "conventicles."

Then revivalism came along, sweeping aside external structures that helped to form individual believers into a thriving communion of saints. You may have been a beneficiary of God's covenant

blessings over many years in a Christian family and church. But at the summer camp or revival meeting, none of this matters in comparison with the radical experience of conversion. Again, my point is not to downplay the thrill of conversion experiences. But we can come to expect jaw-dropping testimonies or novel experiences, and as a consequence we have created an environment of perpetual novelty.

You may be “saved,” but are you “Spirit-filled”? You may have been baptized and looked after by Christ’s under-shepherds in the church, joining gradually in the songs of Zion as you matured, and learning to join the church in its prayers and, eventually, at the Lord’s Table. You may have heard and prayed the Scriptures with your family each day, perhaps even learning the great truths of Scripture through a catechism at home and at church. Yet in the evangelical culture of the new and novel, none of this really counts. What really matters is that extraordinary spiritual event, that life-changing experience. In fact, your testimony is likely to be regarded as greater—more genuine—to the extent that the experience happened apart from any connection with the ordinary life of the church, like baptism, profession, the Supper, and the communal prayers, praise, laments, and fellowship of Christ’s body.

The problem is, when people enter adulthood, they soon discover that a memorable experience will not compensate for a shallow understanding of what they believe and why they believe it—over years of everyday exposure to and participation in the communion of Christ with his people. Nevertheless, it’s precisely the ordinary ministry, week-in and week-out, that provides sustained growth and encourages the roots to grow deep. If the big moments in our Christian life are produced by big movements in the evangelical world, the ordinary local church will seem pretty irrelevant. Yet if God is the one who finishes what he starts, then the only reasonable conclusion is to be part of the garden that he is tending. He is the promise-maker and promise-keeper, even when we are unfaithful (2 Tim 2:13).

When she really wanted to single out a recent convert, my grandmother would say, “She wasn’t just saved; she was *gloriously* saved.” Reinforced by all the before-and-after conversion stories, I was pretty

anxious over not having a great testimony, and I was tempted to embellish a little. After all, I couldn't even remember the date of the Big Moment! Unfortunately, it seemed, I was raised in a Christian home and church. I couldn't recall a time when I didn't trust in Christ and sense his gracious hand in my life. Here I was, basking in the benefits of Christ, growing in grace and knowledge of him. Yet I was always looking (and was expected to look for) a cataclysmic tsunami to wash all of that "churchianity" out to sea so that I could finally have a *real* relationship with Jesus.

I tried many of the programs offering a new experience, a new opportunity to grow and accomplish great things for God. I got saved several times (especially after watching "Thief in the Night" and reading Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*). I dabbled in the charismatic movement, followed various "get-spiritual-quick" programs, did Evangelism Explosion, and for a while had a pastor who was drawn to the Shepherding Movement. I was drawn to the Christian Right, later the Christian Left, and by the time that the Church Growth Movement arrived on the scene, I was a little skeptical.

Then there was the emphasis on spiritual disciplines. Drawing on the contemplative tradition of medieval piety, this movement provoked many believers to take their personal walk with the Lord more seriously. There is a great deal of wisdom in this emphasis, particularly when we are distracted on every hand from the things that matter most. Still, it sometimes sounded simplistic and programmed: follow these steps and techniques and you will attain a victorious Christian life. The focus was on what we do alone more than on what God does for us and to us and through us together.

But even these personal disciplines can become too ordinary. What if Jesus actually spoke to you—apart from the words of Scripture? As Sarah Young tells us in the introduction to her runaway bestseller, *Jesus Calling*, "I knew that God communicated with me through the Bible, but I yearned for more. Increasingly, I wanted to hear what God had to say to me personally on a given day." That "more" was "the Presence of Jesus," something beyond the ordinary means of grace. "So I was ready to begin a new spiritual quest," beginning with Andrew Murray's *The*

Secret of the Abiding Presence. After reading *God Calling*, she relates, “I began to wonder if I, too, could receive messages during my times of communing with God.” Even though Paul says that Christ’s presence among us is “as near” as the word of Christ proclaimed (Rom 10:8–17), we long for something more.

In recent decades, the Emergent movement captured the attention of a generation, at least for a while. It promised another radical rebooting: “The Next Christians,” “A New Kind of Christian,” with the slogan, “Everything must change.” Whenever a new generation announces its radical and totally unprecedented culture shift, there is an evangelical movement that pressures churches to get on board if they want to adapt and survive the next wave. It’s doubtful that cultures actually work like that. But it is especially disruptive for the ordinary growth of believers in a covenant of grace that extends to every culture and “to a thousand generations.” There is change, to be sure, but what kind of change, to what end, and through what means? For that, Scripture rather than culture must provide the ultimate answer.

Adapting to the culture—and especially to the profile of each generation—has been a remarkable strength of evangelicalism. Yet growing up into Christ as members of his body, across all generations and locales, is being undermined by frenetic relevance-operations. Patient dedication to the ordinary and often tedious disciplines of corporate and family worship, teaching, prayer, modeling, and mentoring have been eroded by successive waves of enthusiasm.

Even Calvinism seems to have gotten back its groove, taking its place on the “Next Big Thing” list. According to *Time* magazine in March 2009, the “New Calvinism” is one of the top ten trends changing the world today. Collin Hansen’s movement-defining book sums it up pretty well: “Young, Restless, and Reformed.”⁹ But does this mean that it too is destined to become just another fad? It’s the “restless” part that is problematic. It threatens to redefine what it means to be Reformed. Gifted leaders form movements. In a digital age, blogs are often more authoritative than sermons. But churches form confessions that live in the trenches that the Spirit digs and populates by his Word across all lands and generations. Joining a

church, even a broader tradition, is not like joining a movement. Personal autonomy has to be surrendered to a communal consciousness of the triune God and his work in history. There is more to being Reformed than “five points.”¹⁰

In many ways, it's more fun to be part of movements than churches. We can express our own individuality, pick our favorite leaders, and be swept off our feet at conferences. We can be anonymous. Although encouraged by like-minded believers, we are not bound up with them so that we should feel compelled to bear their burdens or suffer their rebukes. Yet this movement mentality keeps us restless and makes ordinary life in and submission to an actual church seem intolerably confining.

And terribly ordinary.

In all of these movements, something important was emphasized. Laypeople—including college students—enlisted cheerfully in the evangelistic cause. The call to spiritual disciplines reminded us that the Christian life is not simply a matter of assenting to propositions, but of a personal relationship with the Lord. Like any relationship, it has to be nurtured by daily attentiveness. It is also crucial to our faith that God is saving bodies, not just souls—and calls us to tangible service to others, especially the poor and marginalized in society. Yet the sustained attention of Christians over generations to these emphases is exactly what is at stake when each generation feels that it has to leave its distinctive mark.

For all of the interest in incorporating insights from the business world, many church leaders seem to have missed the suggestion of Thomas J. Peters and Nancy K. Austin in their best-selling *A Passion for Excellence* back in 1985:

So a revolution is brewing. What kind of revolution? In large measure it is in fact a “back to basics” revolution. The management systems, schemes, devices and structures, promoted during the last quarter century, have added up to distractions from the main ideas: the achievement of sustainable growth and equity. Each such scheme seemed to make sense at the time. Each seemed an appropriate response to growing complexity. But the result was that the

basics got lost in a blur of well-meaning gibberish that took us further and further from excellent performance in any sphere.¹¹

We need to recover not only sound doctrine, but sounder practices that serve to deepen us—and succeeding generations—in the new creation that God has called into being. We need to question not only false teaching, but false values, expectations, and habits that we have absorbed, taken for granted, and even adopted with a veneer of piety. Despite the touching sentimentality of my grandmother’s favorite hymn, “In the Garden,” it is simply not true that you come to the garden alone with Jesus and “the joy we share as we tarry there none other has ever known.” If your personal relationship with Jesus is utterly unique, then it is not properly Christian.

Though a proposed cure requires a diagnosis, this book is not primarily a critique. In the first place, I write as someone who suffers with the illnesses I’m trying to understand and treat. Furthermore, I don’t have anybody particularly in mind.

This book is dedicated to all of the pastors, elders, and deacons whose service is as unheralded as it is vital to sustainable discipleship; to all of the spouses and parents who cherish ordinary moments to love and be loved, and to all of those believers who consider their ordinary vocations in the world as part of God’s normal way of loving and serving neighbors right under their nose each day.

And who knows? Maybe if we discover the opportunities of the ordinary, a fondness for the familiar, and marvel again at the mundane, we will be radical after all.

Exercise

1. What are some examples of ways in which you feel the pull toward the “radical” as opposed to the ordinary? Consider/discuss various movements, trends, and programs you’ve encountered that seemed to grab your allegiance and then dissipate.
2. Do you have a problem with “everydayness”? How does the Christian subculture sometimes contribute to this?