

# Philip Yancey - Book Review

(January 2002)

In recent times there has been much talk of bestselling author Philip Yancey. Christian Bookshops are buzzing with advertisements and promotional material concerning his books. Recently he was sponsored to Australia by the Seventh Day Adventist organisation. A recent bestseller is titled '*Whats So Amazing About Grace?*'

On opening the first page of the above book I was immediately struck by the list of endorsements. One was by Tony Campolo, a powerful speaker and environmentalist.\* Yancey quotes him as once saying: '*The United Nations reports that over ten thousand people starve to death each day, and most of you don't give a sh--.*' (P.201) Dr. Campolo's heresies are myriad\*. He is liberal on Homosexuality and believes Jesus is a real presence and mystically present in every person we meet.\*

**Illustrations:** Yancey is no doubt a brilliant writer and his use of illustrations captures the attention of his readers. The book reads like a novel moving quickly from one story of '*ungrace*' to another. There are no doubt some passages that worthily and poetically describe grace.

Yancey, however, continually slamdunks the traditional Christian church as legalistic, sad and solemn. In opposition to this he paints a picture of a loving, happy and smiling God. His books are full of his painful perceptions of his early years in church. He says he was viewed as a '*deviant*' and demon possessed when at Bible College and he felt '*harassed*' and '*confused*'. Almost all his illustrations are about extreme legalism or worldly stories of '*ungrace*'. By these Yancey attempts to show what grace *is not*.

Throughout the book Yancey begins with scant references to Scripture before launching into illustrations. With regard to Peters reaction to the unclean foods in Acts 10: '*...the closest parallel I can think of would be if, in the midst of Southern Baptist convention in texas stadium, a fully stocked bar supernaturally lowered onto the playing field, with a booming voice from heaven urging the*

*teetotallers to 'drink up!' I can imagine the reaction: 'Surely not Lord! We're Baptists. We've never touched the stuff.' That was the kind of conviction Peter had against unclean foods.'* (P.148)

Most of the book contains illustrations straight out of the world and psychology. He uses movie stars, movies, IRA terrorists and extreme stories of injustices.

**'Straw men':** Yancey is a master at setting up 'straw men' and shooting them down. He continually shows examples of hypocrisy and 'ungrace' in Christianity and says this is *'one of the most common reasons why people reject Christianity'*. (P.203)

He sets ex-president Clinton up as a Christian who is the object of 'ungrace' and 'hatred' by Christians. Yancey excuses Clintons sinful life and cites his good works. Yancey says *'Sure, he messes up during the week - doesn't everyone? - but comes Sunday he goes to church, confesses his sins and starts over.'* (P.227) He also speaks 'of Hilary Clinton's *'spiritual gifts'*, (yet mentions nothing of her interest in the occult).

To top it all off he speaks of *Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)* as one where he found grace displayed as in the NT church (P.275). This is a poor example of grace considering *AA* was founded by non Christians and the group denies the name of Jesus and substitutes instead a *'higher power'*!

**Roman Catholicism/Ecumenism:** The Roman Catholic religion is presented in a most favourable light. Throughout the book Yancey favourably quotes Catholic leaders and mystics, as he does ecumenical organisations such as *Promise Keepers*. He says Catholics receive 'the gift of grace' at their communion. (P.277) The Pope is portrayed as a man of grace. Yancey tells how he was involved in a forum with 10 Christians, 10 Jews, 10 Muslims and stayed at a Catholic retreat, and watched a Gay Mardi Gras while in town. He says *'society needs religion, and it matters little what kind. The nation of Islam helps clean up the ghetto; the Mormon church makes Utah a low-crime, family friendly state...'* (P.249)

**Doctrine:** Yancey admits he avoids doctrine and there is no clear doctrinal teaching on grace in the entire book. His understanding of Scripture is questionable. He says of the Salvation Army: *'William Booth's lump of yeast now leavens societies around the world.'* (P.254) However, *'leaven'* in the NT is actually a symbol of *evil* rather than good. He also says it was the *'saints'* who arrested Jesus and not sinners. (P.274)

**Homosexuality:** Yancey has much to say about a homosexual pastor friend. Yancey says: *'I have no desire to delve into the theological; and moral issues surrounding homosexuality...'* He says he can find *'very little'* related to Homosexuality in the New Testament ( P.236), and was in fact more concerned about his friend divorcing his wife, than the homosexuality. At this mans request Yancey attended *'the first gay march on Washington, in 1987...I went...as Mels friend. He wanted me nearby as he sorted through some of the decisions bearing down on him.'* (P.164) Yancey then describes how an opposing crowd which included Christians, tormented the homosexuals. *'On the one side were Christians defending pure doctrine...on the other side were 'sinners' ...yet the more orthodox group spewed out hate and the other group sang of Jesus' love.'* Yancey than attended some of the services of the homosexual churches and says *'He heard nothing suspect in the theology preached from the pulpit.'* (P.166)

Yancey went to meet the media with his gay friend who said to the press, *'I don't know how Philip feels about every aspect of the issue of homosexuality, and to tell you the truth I'm afraid to ask. But I do know how he feels about me - he loves me.'* (P.172) (Could this be grace without truth?) In conclusion Yancey says of his friend: *'how should I treat him? What would grace have me do? What would Jesus do?'* (P.168) Yancey argues that Jesus *'was a friend of the sinners'* (P.175) but what Yancey does not inform the reader is - *these sinners came to Jesus!* (Matt.9:10; Mk.2:15; Lk.5:29;15:1). Jesus never *fellowshipped* with them and did not remain around people who were in disagreement or who would not listen, (Jn.8:59). Would not real grace have Yancey obedient to Scripture and *separate*? To back up his liberal views Yancey quotes a gay man: *'As a gay man, I've found it easier for me to get sex on the streets than to get a hug in church.'*

In conclusion Yancey says ‘*God loves us anyhow. Grace declares that we are still God’s pride and joy.*’ (P.171) Yet Yancey's grace shown by his own illustrations of 'ungrace' would appear cheap and closer to the worlds definition of Grace than it is to Scripture. Yancey says, ‘*how is it that Christians called to dispense the aroma of grace instead emit the noxious fumes of ungrace?*’ (P.229). One wonders if Yancey has ever met an imperfect Christian who shows grace?

Yancey himself sums up my feelings completely: ‘*On the surface the word [grace] may seem a shorthand expression for the fuzzy tolerance of liberalism...*’ (P.172) This is the exact impression I gained throughout the whole book!

We warn readers of Philip Yancey and his books. His view of grace is cheap, worldly, humanistic and seductive. Grace is not taught or shown by contrasts with the ungrace of the world. Grace does not excuse sin. Grace changes a person to be a follower of Jesus and His Word. Grace is given through *faith* in Jesus Christ and with *repentance* towards God.

## **Terry Arnold**

\*See *Diakrisis*, Dec/98 ‘*Gotta Have a Hope*’



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