

Amazed by Grace - Extracts of an Interview with author Philip Yancey

It was Yancey's description of his friendship with Mel White in "Grace" that touched me most deeply. White's story, documented in his own book *Stranger at the Gate*, has been well documented in the gay and lesbian community. White was a ghostwriter for such right-wing leaders as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell until he came out. Shunned by his former employees, White went on to found Soulforce, a social action group dedicated to the spiritual equality of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender believers.

Yancey's steadfast support for his friend Mel, and his own struggle with the sinfulness of homosexuality is documented in the book and is one of the most honest accounts of grace in the face of struggle that I believe I have ever read. It was this chapter that led me to write to Yancey and tell him how much his books had moved me.

He was kind enough to send me a reply that emboldened me to ask for an interview. He agreed to an email interview, given his busy schedule. I was amazed that he would lend his name to a publication like *Whosoever* - and eternally grateful.

I cannot recommend his work strongly enough. If you thirst for grace, peace and joy, read Yancey's works. You will not be disappointed.

Whosoever: You have a new book out "Rumors of Another World" that is really quite extraordinary. What is the main thrust of this book and why did you feel led to write it?

Philip Yancey : I wrote it for people in the "borderlands of faith," people who have a spiritual sense but who, for a variety of reasons, have not found a home in the church. I try to speak their language, not preaching to them about the things they ought to believe but rather starting with that spiritual sense--these are the "rumors of another world"--and trying to track some of those rumors back to the source. OK, I admit that although I had this audience in mind, in truth I write all my books for myself. I started asking myself, "Philip, can you explain your faith in a way that makes sense to someone who sees the world very differently than you do?"

Whosoever: In your book "What's so Amazing about Grace?" you tell about your friendship with Soulforce leader Mel White and your support of him at the March on Washington in 1987. Your description of your friendship with him and your feelings toward the gays and lesbians you met at the march was probably the most grace-filled writing I've ever read from an Evangelical Christian. What is your position on gays and lesbians in the church?

Yancey: You don't beat around the bush, do you? Mel was one of my closest friends for years before he revealed to me his sexual orientation. (He still is, by the way.) He had repressed and hidden his homosexuality, and in fact was married and was making a fine career in Christian publishing and ministry. Mel became a window to me into a world I knew nothing about. He tells his own story in the book "Stranger at the Gate." Readers of your magazine know well how explosive this issue can be. I get hate letters full of equal venom from both sides: from conservative Christians appalled that I would maintain a friendship

with Mel and write compassionately about gays and lesbians, and from the other side wishing I would go further with a full endorsement.

On an issue like that, I try to start with what I'm absolutely sure of, and work outwards. I'm sure of what my own attitude should be toward gays and lesbians: I should show love and grace. As one person told me, "Christians get very angry toward other Christians who sin differently than they do." When people ask me how I can possibly stay friends with a sinner like Mel, I respond by asking how Mel can possibly stay friends with a sinner like me. Even if I conclude that all homosexual behavior is wrong, as many conservative Christians do, I'm still compelled to respond with love.

As I've attended gay and lesbian churches, I'm also saddened that the evangelical church by and large finds no place for homosexuals. I've met wonderful, committed Christians who attend MCC churches, and I wish that the larger church had the benefit of their faith. And at the same time, I think it's unhealthy to have an entire denomination formed around this one particular issue--those people need exposure to and inclusion in the wider Body of Christ. When it gets to particular matters of policy, like ordaining gay and lesbian ministers, I'm confused, like a lot of people. There are a few--not many, but a few--passages of Scripture that give me pause. Frankly, I don't know the answer to those questions. I'm a freelancer, not an official church representative, and I have the luxury of saying simply, "Here's what I think, but I really don't know," rather than trying to set church policy.

The polarization makes me very sad. My church in Chicago spent a couple of years carefully studying the issue. The church had openly gay members, but did not allow practicing homosexuals in leadership positions (as they did not allow unmarried "practicing heterosexuals," whatever that means). The committee studying the issue looked at the biblical and theological and social aspects and finally came down in the same place: welcoming but not affirming homosexuals in leadership roles. Conservatives got mad and left. Many gays and lesbians also left, hurt that the church reinforced their "second-class citizen" status.

I don't have a magic answer, and I can't see one on the near horizon. Whole denominations are struggling with the very same issue, as you know.

Whosoever: How can other Evangelical Christians develop an attitude of grace (if not acceptance) toward gay and lesbian Christians?

Yancey: The only way is through personal exposure. It's amazing how feelings change when suddenly it's your daughter or your brother who comes out of the closet. In my case, it was my friend Mel. The issues I had read about suddenly had a face, a person with a story. When that happened, everything changed. That's one reason why I think it's sad that the churches have so little contact. I have attended gay and lesbian churches whose fervency and commitment would put most evangelical churches to shame. Disapproving conservatives should have contact with those people, and vice versa.

Whosoever: Many gays and lesbians have been harmed by the church's attitude toward them, so much so that they will never set foot in one again. What do you say to these people who have been ostracized from the church and who have perhaps lost their faith?

Yancey: They may need a time away from the church. I am convinced, however, that the Christian life is not meant to be lived alone, in isolation. If a person can't see fit to enter into an institutional church, at least they should look

for a small group or Bible study or some gathering of live human beings struggling along on the same pilgrimage. I also find it helpful for a wounded person to look for a radically different kind of worship experience than the one that wounded them. If they came from an Assemblies of God or Brethren church, try an Orthodox or Episcopal church, which approaches worship very differently and may not trigger the defense mechanisms from the past.

I could tell you stories--and in my books I do tell stories--about the church I grew up in. For sheer meanness and closed-mindedness, it rivals any church I've seen. And yet if I simply gave up on all faith because of my past church experience, I would be the one who loses most.

Whosoever: When my partner and I moved to a new state, we began searching for a church home. I wrote a letter to the local Episcopal rector explaining who we were and asked if we would be welcome in his church. His response, in a nutshell, was that we would be very welcome, if only we gave up our "sinful lifestyle" and sought out good, Christian (presumably Episcopalian) men to marry. This is the reaction of many Christian churches to gays and lesbians. We must give up our sexual orientation to be accepted. What do you say to churches like this?

Yancey: I'm probably not the best person to address a church like that--you are. Obviously, if a church is saying you need to give up sexual orientation, that church needs some education. I know of some ministries who try to change sexual behavior, but none that try to change sexual orientation--all admit that any change involves a lifelong struggle. I would hope a minister or rector is open to dialogue, and I would hope you have the strength and confidence to sit down with him and discuss your own story as well as the biblical objections he has.

I'm not gay or lesbian, so I would probably approach that rector differently. I would point to how Jesus dealt with people who were moral failures--I'm starting where the rector is, who sees you as a moral failure. Jesus chose one such woman, a woman who had had five failed marriages, as his first missionary. I would also ask if he requires all who attend his church to leave their "sins" at the door. Does he interview each person about their sexual activity? Does he exclude people who show pride, hypocrisy, or legalism, which are the sins that seemed to upset Jesus? Does he see the church as a place only for people who see things alike, and for people who have arrived rather than people who are on the way? I'd ask questions like that.

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