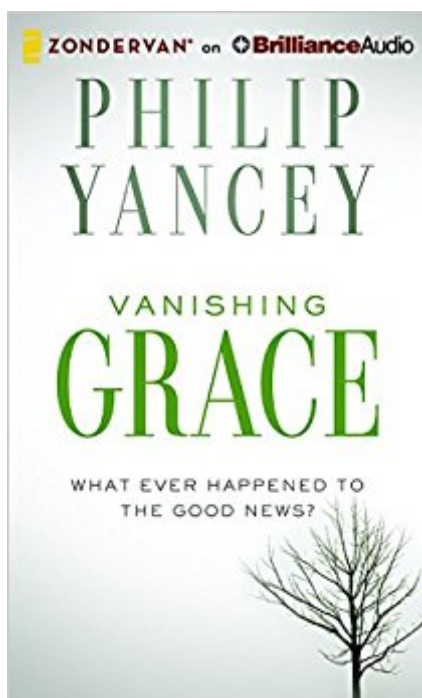


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Vanishing Grace: What Ever Happened To The Good News?



Synopsis

In this important and compelling new audiobook, New York Times bestselling author Philip Yancey explores what may have contributed to hostility toward Christians, especially Evangelicals, and offers illuminating stories of how faith can be expressed in ways that disarm even the most cynical critics. Why does the church stir up such negative feelings? Philip Yancey has been asking this all his life as a journalist. His perennial question is more relevant now than ever. Research shows that favorable opinions of Christianity have plummeted drastically—and opinions of Evangelicals have taken even deeper dives. So what's so good about the Good News? In his landmark audiobook, *What's So Amazing about Grace*, Yancey issued a call for Christians to be as grace-filled in their behavior as they are in declaring their beliefs. He now aims this book at Christians again, showing them how they have lost respect, influence, and reputation in a newly post-Christian culture. Exploring what may have contributed to hostility toward Evangelicals—especially in their mixing of faith and politics instead of embracing more grace-filled ways of presenting the gospel—Yancey offers illuminating stories of how faith can be expressed in ways that disarm even the most cynical critics. Then he explores what is Good News and what is worth preserving in a culture that thinks it has rejected Christian faith.

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Customer Reviews

Journalist and popular writer, Philip Yancey asks why the church tends to so often stir up negative vibes in our society. Here he poses the question, 'How is Christianity still relevant in a post-Christian culture?' Yancey is one of the best writers of our time, with his books already regarded as classics.

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Philip Yancey serves as editor-at-large for Christianity Today magazine. He has written thirteen Gold Medallion Award-winning books and won two ECPA Book of the Year awards for *What's So Amazing About Grace?* and *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Four of his books have sold over one million copies. Yancey lives with his wife in Colorado.

I read *What's So Amazing About Grace* (WSAAG) about 7 years ago. It is one of the best books I have ever read. Period. In it Yancey described real life examples of what grace is and what it isn't. It's a book I reference when I need a reminder of what grace looks like and I quote from it to others. I would've liked the sequel to be more of the same, but *Vanishing Grace* is a sober look at the breakdown of grace in our churches, which has been happening in the time since WSAAG was published. About one year ago I had a little meltdown. After reading the bible for many years and going to church frequently, I felt lost. I had been attending church to learn how to live as a faithful Christian, but I was not becoming a better follower of Jesus. In fact, when I noticed the effects of church on me and my children, I started rejecting what I had absorbed. My church did a great job with its church family and we learned a lot about doctrine, but when I read the NT, I saw Jesus serving the oppressed and poor and hanging out with all kinds of people who would probably not be welcome at my church. The more I thought about it, the sadder I became. We were not hearing the Good News and passing it on, but we did pass judgment, we did keep company with people just like us and we did identify sin as a problem that comes with a hierarchy. During that meltdown, I remembered that there are only two greatest commandments so I looked them up again and I was overwhelmed with hope. These two commandments are so simple and clear. Then sadly, I realized that our church was failing to demonstrate how to love our neighbors as ourselves. I was nearly convinced that the answer for me was outside the church walls. I tell you this story because my experience, as it turns out, is similar to that of many, many people who have turned away from

churches. Those of us who are leaving have not been hearing enough about grace. And we don't like it. In reading *Vanishing Grace*, I felt like Yancey was sharing his wisdom directly with me. With his blend of optimism and realism, he was renewing my hope in his conversational, warm tone. So, a week ago, as I was explaining my meltdown to a friend who is an elder, I told her we need more grace and that she could read about it in *WSAAG*. I can't give up my copy, so promised to order a book for her. As I was ordering it, I saw that Yancey had just published this brand new book. With only one review I ordered it, and it is the wake-up call that we all needed to hear. I will now be buying this for a few elders who are interested in reviving our weary (long story) church. In this book, Yancey tells us the bad news of declining church attendance in the US and Europe and cites many surveys and statistics on changes through the centuries. He also includes many real life examples and suggestions on how to build back up to having grace-filled lives and churches. The book has given me hope and renewed energy that I will pour into a church that will share God's grace in abundance. ***Mr. Yancey, you have my deepest gratitude and thanks. With your divinely inspired keystrokes you ARE an activist and an agent of change in the best sort of way. Without your words, I would feel too much like a rebel to tell the hard truth and to initiate some graceful conversations for change. Now I can use your research as evidence that we need to do much more to model Jesus, and because of your books, we will know what that looks like. God bless you!

There are four parts to this book and even in the introduction Yancey says that this is essentially four different books. I just wish he had tried to do less. The first part is all about the vanishing of grace from the message of the church. This part is five stars and I would like virtually all Christians to read it. He calls on Christians to not only recover grace as the central message of Christ and the church, but also to remember that the method of the message has to be in love. I really don't think that basic message can be emphasized too much in Christianity because the natural temptation of Christians is to change the message of the gospel to one that is about earning our salvation through moralism or tradition. After all, a gospel of moralism or tradition is easy for Christians who tend to be already familiar with tradition and fairly good at presenting a moral facade to the world around them. But that changing of the gospel away from grace fundamentally changes the message of the gospel. Part two of the book is also good. Because we are in a post-Christian world, there are some people that can speak to the world more effectively than others. Yancey talks about the effectiveness of Pilgrims, Activists and Artists to communicate the mystery and beauty of Christianity. Traditional apologetics or door to door witnessing, while occasionally still effective, are less effective when there is not a shared cultural language. So evangelism needs to be more about

longer term relationships and the communication of our art or deeds. Part three was a miss for me. After a wonderful introduction about the need for grace and communication of the mystery of Christianity in part three Yancey wants to lay out a personal theology of evangelism and mission. But for some reason he returns to standard focus on apologetics and against complete relativism. This general apologetic did not work for me and maybe it is just me. (I might have been more receptive to part 3 if I had not read Unapologetic, which I think does everything that Yancey wants to do in setting out a personal theology, but better.) Part three is built around the question 'Does Faith Matter?' which Yancey splits into three parts, Is there another way to God?, What is our Purpose? and How should we Live? This basic idea could have worked, but the underlying assumption of part three is that the world is getting worse and needs to be changed by the words and work of the gospel. And of course I do believe that the world needs to be changed by the gospel. The problem is what that means. I think by focusing on the problems of the world, Yancey misses that the world needs to be changed regardless of whether things happen to be getting better or worse at any particular time or in any particular place. In many ways the world is not getting worse and Yancey's points in the third part really fails if his assumption fails. Crime is near 50 year lows. Yes, out of wedlock births are up, but abortions are lower than in 1973, divorce is way down among most populations, rates of education is up (despite what you may have understood from the news), life expectancies continue to rise, world-wide absolute poverty is the lowest in history, and in spite of threats of global terrorism and problems of Syria and other hotspots, deaths from violence and war are lower in the last 20 years than nearly any time in the last 150 years and by some estimations the rates of death by violence may be the lowest in human history. So the basic assumptions of this section seem to be wrong, if the reader believes as I do, that while the world could be a lot better, it is not on a fundamentally downward slide. (On the other hand, if you are someone that believes that the world really is on a downward slide then this section maybe your favorite part, as it was for at least one reviewer.) What is right about this section is that we do need to listen to others. God does want us to flourish and a complete relativism is not a valid method of approaching the world (although outside of Yancey's reading group example I really don't hear many people calling for complete relativism.) I think the book as a whole would have been better without the third section. In a book written to Christians about recovering the message of Grace, I felt like this section was more about evangelizing me as a reader than laying out a personal theology of evangelism and mission. Maybe there are readers that need evangelism, but not every Christian book needs to evangelize the reader. Sometimes it is ok to just assume that the reader is evangelized already. (This point is somewhat ironic because Yancey makes basically the same

point in part four about the general weakness of Christian books.) Part four is back to the general message of part one, but focused on how Christians can better interact with the world than we have recently. And he is back to the method of part two by focusing on the advantages of the Artist, Activist and Pilgrim. Much of part four is giving specific examples of how Artist, Activist and Pilgrim are actually already doing a good job of interacting with the world. On the whole, this is a book worth reading. If I were Yancey's editor, I would have pushed back hard on part three. I think the idea of part three is valid and could have been a real contribution to the book, but the execution of it was problematic, although maybe more for me than the average Evangelical reader. That being said, I would be thrilled if more books being written for a Christian audience were focused on pushing the church toward being a church for the world as this one is, instead of what is often (as Christian Smith coined the phrase) a church focused on convoluted gospel of 'therapeutic, moralistic, deism'.

This book spoke to some issues I have pondered over the past year as I've tried to understand why so many US churches are ineffective, and to find a context for hurtful things Christians sometimes do to each other in the name of religion. It's clear I'm not the only one with these struggles, and that in the name of tradition or patriotism or (fill in the blank), the grace-filled message of Jesus is too often lost. I'm glad I read this one. Yancey always gives me a fresh take on things.

Like everything Philip has written, this is another classic that begs attention and contemplation in digesting it. A fitting sequel to *What's so Amazing About Grace?*, it picks up the theme more as a hopeful lament than an introductory exhortation to understand and appreciate grace. I think that I have always appreciated about Philip Yancey has been his willingness to address difficult and controversial issues in a forthright, candid manner, yet seasoning his words with love concern and, yes, grace. This is a book and an issue that the Church desperately needs to revisit and take with the utmost seriousness, especially in this polarizing culture with one of the nastiest elections in our nation's history approaching. Too often, the world looks at the Church and instead of seeing a people who are finding contentment in their God and truly seeking to live by and practice grace, they undoubtedly perceive us as charter members of the First Church of the Perpetually Pissed-Off. I am very thankful that there are those like Philip Yancey, Steve Brown and Jerry Bridges (to name a few) who are prophetically calling the Church back to the heart of the Gospel. I recommend his book very highly!

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