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# What's so amazing about grace

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## What's So Amazing About Grace?

Philip Yancey

Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997

292 pages, \$17.99 Paperback

Lutherans probably feel that they don't want or even need another book on grace. After all, Martin Luther has already written a lot on this central tenet of the Christian faith. So have many Lutheran scholars since the fifteen century.

Yet I suspect that some Lutherans—perhaps even most—would agree with retired Lutheran pastor Lowell O. Erdahl when in his *10 Habits For Effective Ministry* (Augsburg, 1996) he contends in his first chapter that “Life-giving pastors live by the grace of God” and in his last chapter that “Life-giving pastors grow in the grace of God”. While each of these contentions is true and laudable, we all know—whether pastors or laity—that the practice of these gifts, the living of these habits, is both demanding and difficult.

In the living processes, we are probably able to identify with what author and philosopher Robert Fulghum said about a decade ago in *All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (c. 1986/1988): “I already know most of what's necessary to live a meaningful life—that it isn't all that complicated. *I Know it.* And have known it for a long, long time. Living it—well, that's another matter, yes?”

*In What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Yancey—who is also editor-at-large for the journal *Christianity Today*—readily identifies how humanly difficult it is to live gracefully both in the world and in the church. In our consumerist and success-oriented society, driven all too often by the Protestant work ethic, we feel that we “must do something in order to be accepted” (71). Much of life is governed by law and experienced through guilt and shame.

As Yancey searches for ways in which “grace” and “ungrace” wrestle with each other, he offers some profound insights and claims: “[g]race comes from outside, as a gift and not an achievement” (35). “I learned grace by being graced” (42). “Grace is indeed amazing—truly our last best word. It contains the essence of the gospel as a drop of water can contain the image of the sun” (13). “Sadly, to a world so desperate for this grace the church sometimes presents one more form of ungrace” (30). “Grace comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it and I am one of those people” (42). “Oddly, I sometimes find a shortage of grace within the church, an institution founded to proclaim...the gospel of God's grace” (14). “I sense, in fact, that is why any person goes to church: out of hunger for grace” (15). “I yearn for

the church to become a nourishing culture of that grace" (42).

This book is divided into four parts. In Part I, *How Sweet The Sound*, the author establishes the amazing nature of grace, a world without grace and yearning for grace, and a church with God's unconditional grace to proclaim but often offering far too much ungrace both to a people and to a world hungry for grace. In Part II, *Breaking The Cycle of Ungrace*, Yancey explores the unnaturalness of forgiveness to break the cycle of ungrace. In Part III, *Scent of Scandal*, we hear, "We're all bastards but God loves us anyway" (142). "What would grace have me do? What would Jesus do?" (166). With these questions, Yancey underscores how God's Gospel of Grace is an inclusive gospel, welcoming all people to the table of grace. "We may be abominations, but we are still God's pride and joy. All of us in the church need 'grace-healed eyes' to see the potential in others for the same grace that God has so lavishly bestowed on us" (175). "You cannot earn God's acceptance by climbing; you must receive it as a gift" (210). In Part IV, *Grace Notes for a Deaf World*, he asks, "How is it that Christians called to dispense the aroma of grace instead emit the noxious fumes of ungrace?" (229). "I believe that dispensing God's grace is the Christian's main contribution" (242).

Yancey develops his reflections on grace with this question: "What does a grace-full Christian look like? Perhaps I should rephrase the question, How does a grace-full Christian look? The Christian life, I believe, does not primarily center on ethics or rules but rather involves a new way of seeing...A grace-full Christian is one who looks at the world through 'grace-tinted lenses'" (227). In quoting C. S. Lewis, Yancey states: "It is easy to acknowledge but almost impossible to realise for long, that we are mirrors whose brightness, if we are bright, is wholly derived from the sun that shines upon us. Surely we must have a little—however little—native luminosity? Surely we can't be quite creatures...Grace substitutes a full, childlike and delighted acceptance of our Need, a joy in total dependence. We become 'jolly beggars'" (273).

Yancey boldly and unashamedly contends that grace is God's gift to the world. It's one thing the church can offer that isn't found anywhere else. But even in the church, grace is often in short supply as Christians live out legalisms. To illustrate how the difference between Christian talk and walk manifests itself, Yancey draws on the example of two early church leaders: Augustine and Pelagius. The former was canonized by the church for his piety and scholarship, the latter condemned by the church for his heretical stance. Augustine preached about grace as a gift one can neither earn nor get rid of. It's about God's unconditional acceptance of humans, no matter how imperfect they are. Pelagius, on the other hand, believed just as firmly that grace must be earned. If you don't work hard enough, you risk not

getting into heaven. Yancey states: "A lot of us talk like Augustine on Sundays and live like Pelagius the rest of the week."

In 1975, William Horden, then President of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon, wrote *Living By Grace*. The thesis of Horden's book was: "my observation of the churches in action leads me to believe that a major aspect of the problem is that Protestant churches *practice* a works-righteousness that speaks more loudly than the words with which they teach justification" (14). Yancey wholeheartedly agrees. Some twenty plus years later, through this book, he brings together powerful testimonies to help us reflect on and practice graceful living in a world yearning for grace in "thought, word and deed".

In reading Yancey's *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, especially through its many personal anecdotes of grace and ungrace, as well as stories from literature, from movies and from a variety of church contexts, I find myself reflecting much on the question: How do I live God's grace within the contexts that I experience within a given day? As I wrestle with this question, I name it and my struggles with it in my teaching and in my leading of seminars. When I do so there is a strong identification on the part of others with both the question and the struggles.

Yancey notes that he usually writes about a concept, puzzle or experience, not to find answers, but to become empowered to grow in understanding and in practice. In *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Yancey does indeed explore rather than define grace. He invites us to engage again and again God's extravagant love and grace in our lives, in the world, and as the heart of the church's gospel ministry. This book has tremendous value for personal reflection, small group study, and congregational ministries.

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## **The Future of Eucharist**

Bernard Cooke

Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1997

61 pages, \$5.95 US Paperback

Bernard Cooke is a Roman Catholic practical theologian who, early in his career, taught at the University of Calgary's faculty of Religious Studies, and presently teaches in San Antonio, Texas. The subtitle of this slim monograph is, "How a new self-awareness among Catholics is changing the