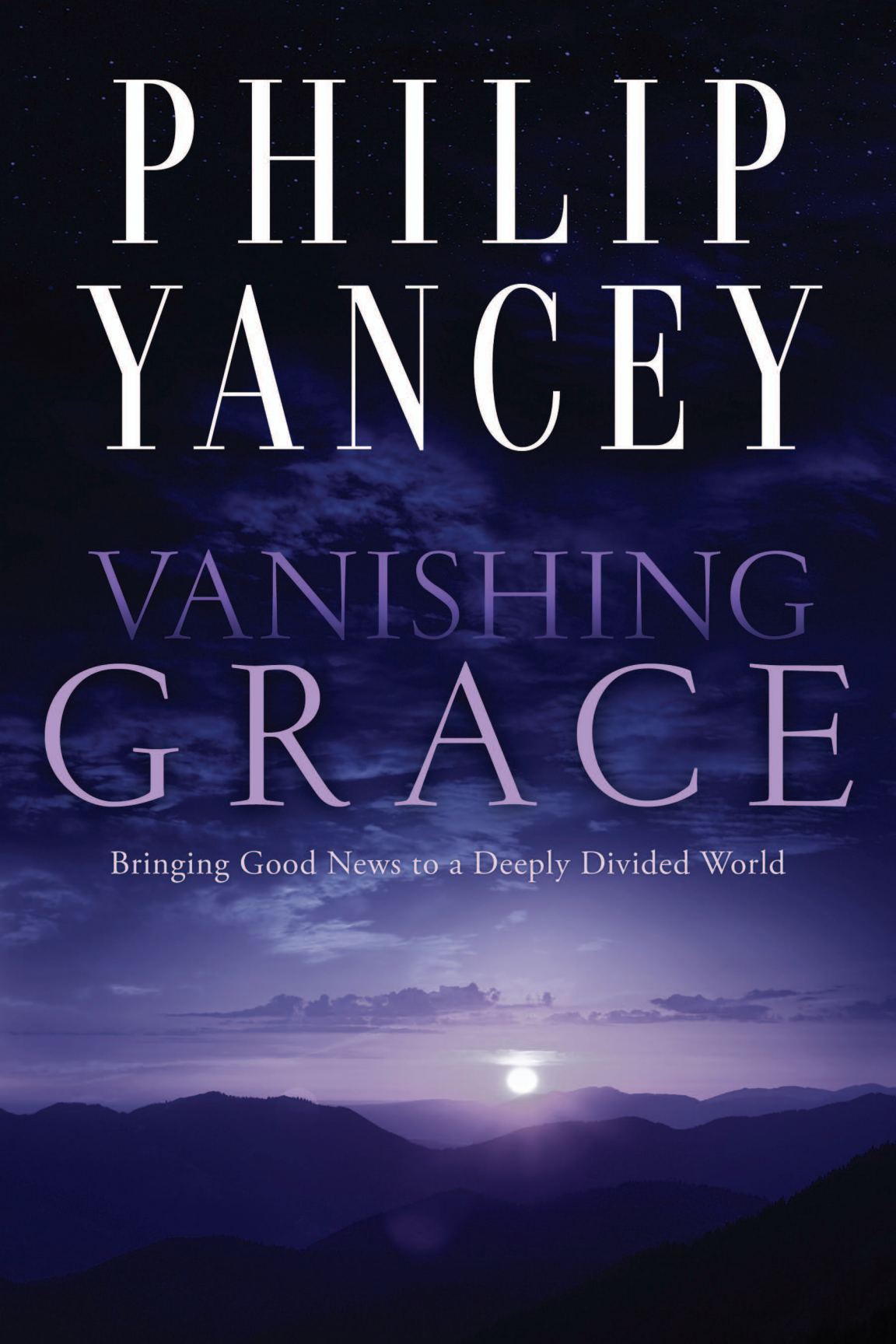
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See to it that no one misses the grace of God . . .
Hebrews 12:15

PREFACE

I set out to write a book on the endangered state of grace and ended up writing four short books, all related and bound inside the same cover.

I began with a concern that the church is failing in its mission to dispense grace to a world thirsty for it. More and more, surveys show, outsiders view Christians as bearers of bad news, not good news. (Part One)

Next I looked for models of how we could do it better, settling on three: pilgrims, activists, and artists. From their examples we can all learn what communicates best to a culture running away from faith. (Part Two)

Then I sensed a need to step back and ask a basic question that Christians may take for granted: Is the gospel truly good news? And if so, how does it stand up in light of alternatives offered by science, New Age, and other beliefs? (Part Three)

Finally, I returned briefly to one of the main stumbling blocks of faith, the confusing role of Christians in a diverse world. For many people, Christians' involvement in politics has drowned out our message of good news for all. How can we avoid being dismissed as one more lobby group? (Part Four)

All four sections have roots in a book I wrote almost twenty years ago. Originally, I had titled it *What's So Amazing About Grace and Why Don't Christians Show More of It?* until the publisher persuaded me to drop those last eight words. The question, though, has only grown more urgent in recent years. Like a sudden thaw

in the middle of winter, grace happens at unexpected moments. It stops us short, catches the breath, disarms. If we manipulate it, try to control it, somehow earn it, that would not be grace. Yet not everyone has tasted of that amazing grace, and not everyone believes in it.

In a time of division and discord, grace seems in vanishing supply. Why? And what can we do about it?

PART ONE

A WORLD ATHIRST

In the novel The Second Coming *one of Walker Percy's characters says about Christians, "I cannot be sure they don't have the truth. But if they have the truth, why is it the case that they are repellent precisely to the degree that they embrace and advertise the truth? . . . A mystery: If the good news is true, why is not one pleased to hear it?"*

CHAPTER 1

A GREAT DIVIDE

In general the churches . . . bore for me the same relation to God that billboards did to Coca-Cola: they promoted thirst without quenching it.

John Updike, *A Month of Sundays*

As a Christian, I have deep concern about how we represent our faith to others. We are called to proclaim good news of forgiveness and hope, yet I keep coming across evidence that many people do not hear our message as good news.

I decided to write this book after I saw the results of surveys by the George Barna group.* A few telling statistics jumped off the page. In 1996, 85 percent of Americans who had no religious commitment still viewed Christianity favorably. Thirteen years later, in 2009, only 16 percent of young "outsiders" had a favorable impression of Christianity, and just 3 percent had a good impression of evangelicals. I wanted to explore what caused that dramatic plunge in such a relatively short time. Why do Christians stir up hostile feelings—and what, if anything, should we do about it?

For more than a decade I've had a window into how the modern secular world views Christians, through a book group I

* Sources, including Bible references, are given at the end of the book.

belong to. These informed, well-traveled readers include an environmental lawyer, a philosopher who got fired from a state university because of his Marxist views, a child-development expert, a pharmacology researcher, a state auditor, a bankruptcy attorney, a librarian, and a neurologist. Our diverse careers and backgrounds make for lively discussion.

After ranging over ideas sparked by whatever book we've just read, the conversation usually drifts back to politics—a sort of substitute religion, apparently. All but one of my book buddies lean strongly to the political left, the sole exception a libertarian who opposes nearly all government. The group views me as a source of information about a parallel universe that exists beyond their social orbit. "You know evangelicals, right?" I nod yes. Then comes a question like, "Can you explain why they are so opposed to gay and lesbian marriages?" I do my best, but the arguments I repeat from leading evangelicals make no sense to this group.

After the 2004 reelection of George W. Bush, the Marxist professor launched into a tirade against right-wing evangelicals. "They're motivated by hate—sheer hate!" he said. I suggested fear as a possible motive instead, fear of society trending in what conservatives see as a troubling direction. "No, it's hate!" he insisted, uncharacteristically raising his voice and turning red in the face.

"Do you know any right-wing evangelicals personally?" I asked.

"Not really," he admitted a bit sheepishly, though he said he had known many in his youth. Like most of those in my book group, he had grown up in the church, in his case among Seventh-day Adventists.

Many similar conversations have taught me that religion represents a huge threat to those who see themselves as a minority of agnostics in a land of belief. Nonbelievers tend to regard evangelicals as a legion of morals police determined to impose their notion of right behavior on others. To them, Christians are

anti-abortion, anti-gay, anti-women — probably anti-sex, for that matter — and most of them homeschool their children to avoid defilement. Christians sometimes help with social problems, say by running soup kitchens and homeless shelters, but otherwise they differ little from Muslim fanatics who want to enforce sharia law on their societies.

A research group based in Phoenix was surprised to encounter the degree of abuse directed toward Christians, antagonism that went far beyond a difference of opinion on issues. According to the company president, "Evangelicals were called illiterate, greedy, psychos, racist, stupid, narrow-minded, bigots, idiots, fanatics, nut cases, screaming loons, delusional, simpletons, pompous, morons, cruel, nitwits, and freaks, and that's just a partial list. . . . Some people don't have any idea what evangelicals actually are or what they believe — they just know they can't stand evangelicals."

The good news isn't sounding so good these days, at least to some.

MIXED AROMA

In a clever metaphor the apostle Paul writes of "the aroma of Christ" that can have a very different effect depending on the nose: "To the one, we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life." My assignments as a journalist take me to places where Christians give off a perfumed aroma and also to places where Christians offend the nostrils.

The United States is undergoing a marked change in its attitude toward religion, and Christians here face new challenges. When a blogger named Marc Yoder wrote about "10 Surprising Reasons Our Kids Leave Church," based on interviews in Texas (a comparatively religious state) his post went viral. Instead of a hundred or so hits, his website got more than half a million. "There's no easy way to say this," wrote Yoder, in words that struck a nerve: "The American Evangelical church has lost, is losing and will

almost certainly continue to lose our youth."* If we don't adapt we will end up talking to ourselves in ever-dwindling numbers.

What lies behind the downward trend? I got some insight from a friend of mine in Chicago who once worked on the staff of Willow Creek Community Church, one of the nation's largest churches. Daniel Hill took a side job as a barista at a local Starbucks where, he now realizes, his pastoral education truly began.

One of his customer said, when the conversation turned to religion, "When Christians talk to you, they act as if you are a robot. They have an agenda to promote, and if you don't agree with them, they're done with you." Often Hill heard an anything-goes attitude: "I don't personally follow Christianity, but I figure whatever makes you happy, do it." As one person told him, "Look, we all know that 'God' is out there at some level, but no one has a right to tell another person what 'God' looks like for them. Each person is free to express that however they want, but they should keep their opinions to themselves."

During his time at the coffee shop Hill heard two distinct approaches to the faith. "Pre-Christians" seemed open and receptive when the topic of religion came up. They had no real hostility and could imagine themselves connecting with a church someday. In contrast, "post-Christians" harbored bad feelings. Some carried memories of past wounds: a church split, a domineering parent, a youth director or priest guilty of sexual abuse, a nasty divorce which the church handled clumsily. Others had simply absorbed the media's negative stereotypes of rabid fundamentalists and scandal-prone television evangelists.

Listening to Hill's stories, I thought back to C. S. Lewis's analogy of communicating faith in secular Britain. It's the difference between courting a divorcée and a virgin, Lewis told a friend in a letter. A divorcée won't easily fall for sweet nothings

* According to Barna surveys, 61 percent of today's youth had been churched at one point during their teen years but are now spiritually disengaged.

from a suitor — she's heard them all before — and has a basic distrust of romance. In modern America, Hill estimates, around three-quarters of young "outsiders" qualify as post-Christian, the divorcées of faith.

Not everyone falls into a neat category, of course, but I found Daniel Hill's perspective helpful. I began to think through my own contacts with people who have no faith commitment. Having lived in Hill's home city of Chicago, I must agree with his assessment of young urban dwellers. No one else in our six-unit condominium went to church, and most of them viewed Christians with suspicion. Some of my book group friends in Colorado also fit the post-Christian category.

On the other hand, large portions of the American South and Midwest remain open to faith and qualify as "pre-Christian." I grew up in the religion-soaked South, and on return visits I'm always struck by the difference in attitudes toward religion there. The Bible Belt largely accepts the framework of the gospel. There is a God (don't our coins affirm "In God We Trust"?); we have sinned (country music spells out the salacious details); and Jesus provides a way to forgive those sins (you can still see "Repent" or "Jesus Saves" slogans on some Southern barns and billboards). Hit the radio's Scan button while driving in the South and there's a good chance you'll hear a testimony from someone recounting their once-wayward life, now transformed by a born-again conversion experience.

On my travels to other places too — Africa, Latin America, parts of Asia — I see the continuing appeal of the basic Christian message. People there associate Christians with missionaries who came to them as pastors, teachers, doctors and nurses, agricultural experts, and relief workers. The gospel answers questions of meaning, holds out the promise of an afterlife, and provides a community of support for those in need. To many in the world it still sounds like good news, a Godspell to break the dark spell that shadows so much of life on earth.

When I return from those trips it comes as a shock when people in my home country speak of Christians more sinisterly. Post-Christians hear the same music as if distorted through cracked speakers. Evangelists who speak of sin come across as shrewish and hectoring: *What gives them the right to judge my behavior, especially when so many of them mess up their own lives?* Doctrines such as the Trinity, the Atonement, Original Sin, and Hell seem baffling, even incomprehensible, and who can legitimately claim truth anyway? People who live in prosperous countries, intent on enjoying this life, pay little heed to the idea of an afterlife. And a string of New Atheists upbraid all religion as bad news, a primary source of fanaticism and wars — one called the atrocities of 9/11 "a faith-based initiative" — and long for the day when the human species will finally outgrow its need for religion.

In Europe, the seat of Christian faith for most of its history, many do not give it a thought. Barely a third of French and British respondents even believe that God exists. While visiting France I spoke to a Campus Crusade worker who had practiced evangelism in Florida before moving to Europe. Carrying a clipboard, he would walk up to strangers and ask, "If you died and God asked why you should be allowed into heaven, what would you say?" That approach got mixed results in Florida, but in France he was met with blank stares; he might as well have been speaking Urdu. Now he leads with the question, "Do you believe in God?" and the typical French response goes something like this: "What a fascinating question! Let me think. I've never really considered it before."

As I travel internationally I feel like a commuter between post-Christian and pre-Christian societies. The cultural divide stands out sharply in the U.S., where Christians remain a force to be reckoned with. Some Christians respond to the divide by making harsh judgments about the people they disagree with — one of the main reasons evangelicals have an unsavory reputation. I cringe

when I hear such words, and respond by keeping mostly quiet about my faith. Neither approach is healthy.

Jesus granted his followers the immense privilege of dispensing God's grace to a thirsty world. As one who has drunk deeply of that grace, I want to offer it to a world adrift. How can we communicate truly good news to a culture running away from it?

GOOD NEWS, SQUANDERED

The Quakers have a saying: "An enemy is one whose story we have not heard." To communicate to post-Christians, I must first listen to their stories for clues to how they view the world and how they view people like me. Those conversations are what led to the title of this book. Although God's grace is as amazing as ever, in my divided country it seems in vanishing supply.

I've asked strangers and casual acquaintances, "Why do Christians stir up such negative feelings?" Some bring up past atrocities, such as the widespread belief that the church executed eight or nine million witches (a figure that serious historians believe is exaggerated by 99 percent). I've heard complaints about strict Protestant or Catholic schools and tales of clergy intolerance—didn't John Lennon get kicked out of his boyhood church for laughing at an inappropriate time? Others repeat stories similar to that of Steve Jobs, who left church when the pastor had no answer for his questions about God and the starving children of Africa. The comedian Cathy Ladman expresses a common view: "All religions are the same: religion is basically guilt with different holidays."

Neighborhoods that once welcomed churches now file lawsuits against them, not just because of traffic and parking issues but because "We don't want a church in our community!" Animosity goes public when a prominent sports figure talks freely about faith. A few years ago NFL quarterback Tim Tebow and NBA guard Jeremy Lin attracted praise from Christians who

appreciated their clean lifestyles and their willingness to discuss their beliefs. At the same time sports-talk radio, websites, blogs, and late-night comedians mercilessly mocked the two.

To our shame the church, or pockets of it here and there, can give good reason for aversion. When I took a break from writing this chapter I turned on CNN and watched a report on a pastor in North Carolina who proposes that we round up all "lesbians and queers" inside a huge fence, perhaps a hundred miles around, and air-drop food to them. Eventually they'll go extinct, he crows, since they don't reproduce. That same week a congregation in Indiana wildly applauded a seven-year-old boy who sang his composition, "Ain't no homos gonna go to heaven." And after the Sandy Hook school shootings in Connecticut, a prominent evangelical spokesman placed the blame on gays, iPods, evolution, and Supreme Court rulings against school prayer.

Recently I received a letter from an agnostic friend furious about Christians' behavior at her mother's funeral. She described the "fear-mongering come-to-Jesus-now proselytizing from the pulpit" by a pastor from "Grace (ironically) Community Something Megachurch." She added, "The only reason I did not climb over the pews and flee was the respect for my mother's evangelical faith." Several who attended the funeral said to her, "If one person accepted Christ during the service, then your mother's death was worth it."

The 2004 movie *Saved!* gives a glimpse into how the broader culture views Christians. Directed by Brian Dannelly, who as a kid managed to get expelled from both a Catholic elementary school and a Baptist high school, the movie wavers between biting satire and over-the-top comedy. A prissy believer named Hilary Faye leads a singing group, the Christian Jewels, who kidnap potential converts and try to exorcize their demons. The school's sole Jewish student, a rebel, fakes speaking in tongues and rips open her blouse during chapel. The parents of a gay teenager send him

to a Christian rehab center — with the incongruous name Mercy House — for a one-year treatment program. Meanwhile Mary, who seduced him in an attempt to cure him of homosexuality, learns she is pregnant. The unfolding plot exposes all the Christians as hypocrites, with Hilary Faye at the top of the list, just above her philandering pastor.

In the final scene the gay character escapes from Mercy House and joins others in Mary's hospital room after she gives birth. Even the judgmental hypocrites begin to soften. The message is clear. Why can't we accept each other's differences — in beliefs, morality, sexual preferences, and everything else? Why can't we all just get along?

Nowadays the principle of tolerance rules above all others, and any religion that claims a corner on truth is suspect. Combine that with Christians' reputation for judging others' behavior, and no wonder opposition heats up. As one critic remarked, "Most people I meet assume that Christian means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, anti-gay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn't believe what they believe."

Jesus never commanded us to score well in opinion polls, but as I mull over the list of words people use to describe Christians I wonder how we can act as salt and yeast within a society that views us so negatively.

MODERN SAMARIA

Am I overreacting? I wondered whether negative feelings against religion were a local phenomenon until I came across a poll of eighteen thousand people in twenty-three countries. In preparation for a 2010 debate between Britain's former Prime Minister Tony Blair and the atheist Christopher Hitchens, the Toronto sponsors commissioned a simple survey. Here are the poll results on the question "Is religion a force for good?"

Country	Percentage who answer Yes
Saudi Arabia	92
Indonesia	91
India	69
United States	65
Russia	59
Italy	50
Turkey	43
Canada	36
Australia	32
Great Britain	29
Japan	29
France	24
Belgium	21
Sweden	19

In total, 52 percent of those surveyed judged that religion does more harm than good. Although the poll did not delve into what might lie behind such responses, I could not help noting that with a few exceptions the countries that had the most history with Christianity—especially in Europe—had the least respect for religion as a force for good. In contrast, Russia scored much higher, despite its atheist leaders' attempts to stamp out religion in the last century. I also noted that the poll did not include countries in Africa and South America that are experiencing a resurgence in religious faith.

The United States retains a basic respect for religion though it may be following European trends: surveys show a steady rise in the "nones" (now one-third of those under the age of thirty), that is, those who claim no religion, a category now larger than all Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Lutherans combined.

While pondering the poll results, I recalled an article Tim Stafford wrote for *Christianity Today* a few years back. Using parallels to biblical times, he said that Christians in the U.S. sometimes think we live in Babylon, as refugees stuck in a culture that trumpets values hostile to our faith (think Hollywood movies). Actually, we live in something more like Samaria. In Jesus' day the Samaritans lived just down the road from their cousins the Jews, and despite having much in common the two groups could not get along. Like estranged family members, they nursed grudges. To the Jews, Samaritans were heretics, plain and simple. John's Gospel reports, "Jews do not associate with Samaritans."

Surprisingly, groups that are closest to each other may spark the strongest enmity. The world outside Rwanda and Yugoslavia had trouble just keeping straight the differences between Hutu and Tutsi or Bosniak, Serb, and Croat — even as the groups themselves were slaughtering each other over those differences. And now we look at Middle East violence and struggle to understand the rancor between Shiite and Sunni Muslims. People who are the-same-but-not-quite-the-same can somehow generate more hatred than two groups with more obvious otherness. That was true in Jesus' time. The Pharisees used the "S-word" when insulting Jesus, accusing him of being "a Samaritan and demon-possessed." And when Samaritan villagers did not welcome Jesus, his disciples suggested calling down fire from heaven to destroy them.

"The problem is not that my religion is strange," says Stafford. "The problem is that my religion is familiar. Like Samaritans and Jews, Christians and non-Christians have a partly shared worldview (our Western traditions, which include the Bible), a shared point of origin (Christendom), and well-defined points of contention (the exclusivity of Christ). We are familiar with what each other believes. We're suspicious of one another. So we start off with a grudge."

I think of my friends in the book group, who support such

causes as human rights, education, democracy, and compassion for the weak, most of which stem from Christian roots. Yet they now view Christians as a powerful threat to those causes. Meanwhile, conservative Christians look at secularists and also see a powerful threat. *They're the ones who took prayer out of schools and who denounce religious displays at Christmas. More, they betrayed our Christian heritage by redefining marriage and legalizing abortion, and now they're pushing for assisted suicide.* Both groups, secular and Christian, tend to isolate themselves and judge the other without much dialogue or interaction.

I got a taste of the passionate feelings behind the culture wars when I posted a quote from the late Andy Rooney on my Facebook site. "I've decided I'm against abortion," said Rooney. "I think it's murder. But I have a dilemma in that I much prefer the pro-choice to the pro-life people. I'd much rather eat dinner with a group of the former." A mild firestorm erupted as responders posted comments. Some blasted Rooney for being nothing but a TV celebrity with no real credibility. Others defended pro-life volunteers, drawing a contrast between them and the obnoxious other side. One woman wrote, "What point are you trying to make here? That you, like Rooney, find the company of those who support the murder of innocents to be more superficially pleasing than the company of those who believe in protecting those babies? How fleshly of you.... Your post makes me sick."

In short, the responses underscored Andy Rooney's point. Would I want to eat dinner with the flame-throwers who posted comments on my site? I replied—and here is a recurring theme in this book—that the issue is not whether I agree with someone but rather how I treat someone with whom I profoundly disagree. We Christians are called to use the "weapons of grace," which means treating even our opponents with love and respect.

As usual, Jesus shows the way. When the Pharisees taunted him as "a Samaritan and demon-possessed," he denied the accusa-

tion of demon-possession but did not protest the racial slur. He rebuked the disciples for their call for violence against the Samaritans. Pointedly, he made a Samaritan the hero of one of his finest parables. He went out of his way to visit a Samaritan village and commanded his Jewish disciples to take the gospel to other such villages.

Eventually the disciples got the point: when Samaritans became Christ-followers with "great joy" after Jesus' ascension, they received the Holy Spirit through the ministry of Peter and John—the same John who had once called for fire from heaven to destroy them.

SIGNS OF THIRST

Some who spurn faith wear their atheism proudly, as a sign of defiance. (The German writer Heinrich Böll commented, "I don't like these atheists; they are always talking about God.") Others discard faith more wistfully or seek alternatives in New Age or other religions. Still others reject the church but not Jesus. All of them are reacting against a faith that no longer sounds like good news.

The same surveys that track the rise of the "nones," who have no religious affiliation, show that only a small minority of them claim to be atheists. Many still call themselves religious though they have not found a spiritual home. I have tried to listen to the uncommitted, not as opponents but as seekers who are still looking. Why did they leave the church and perhaps the faith? What can we learn from them, and how can we invite them back? Can the good news, once spoiled, ever sound good again?

Jesus "came from the Father, full of grace and truth," wrote John in the preface to his gospel. The church has worked tirelessly on the truth part of that formula: witness the church councils, creeds, volumes of theology, and denominational splits over minor points of doctrine. I yearn for the church to compete just as hard

in conveying what Paul calls the "incomparable riches" of God's grace. Often, it seems, we're perceived more as guilt dispensers than as grace dispensers.

John records one close-up encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. Knowing well the antipathy between the two groups, she marveled that a Jewish rabbi would even speak to her. At one point she brought up one of the disputed points of doctrine: Who had the proper place of worship, the Jews or the Samaritans? Jesus deftly sidestepped the question and bore in on a far more important issue: her unquenched thirst. He offered her not judgment but a lasting solution to her guilt over an unsettled life. To her and her alone he openly identified himself as Messiah and chose her as a grace dispenser. Her transformation captured the attention of the whole town, and Jesus stayed for two days among the "heretics," attracting many converts.

That scene of Jesus and the Samaritan woman came up during a day I spent with the author Henri Nouwen at his home in Toronto. He had just returned from San Francisco, where he spent a week in an AIDS clinic visiting patients who, in the days before antiretroviral drugs, faced a certain and agonizing death. "I'm a priest, and as part of my job I listen to people's stories," he told me. "So I went up and down the ward asking the patients, most of them young men, if they wanted to talk."

Nouwen went on to say that his prayers changed after that week. As he listened to accounts of promiscuity and addiction and self-destructive behavior, he heard hints of a thirst for love that had never been quenched. From then on he prayed, "God, help me to see others not as my enemies or as ungodly but rather as *thirsty* people. And give me the courage and compassion to offer your Living Water, which alone quenches deep thirst."

That day with the gentle priest has stayed with me. Now, whenever I encounter strident skeptics who mock my beliefs or people whose behavior I find offensive, I remind myself of Henri

Nouwen's prayer. I ask God to keep me from rushing to judgment or bristling with self-defense. *Let me see them as thirsty people*, I pray, *and teach me how best to present the Living Water*.

Graham Greene wrote a novel, *A Burnt-Out Case*, with autobiographical overtones about a renowned architect of churches who concludes that his works have been defiled by the worshipers who use them. Finding no more meaning in art or pleasure, and distraught over the suicide of his lover, the architect travels to a leprosarium in Congo run by Catholic missionaries and gains new energy as he oversees the building of a hospital for the leprosy patients.

Meanwhile the architect's servant, named Deo Gratias, disappears in the jungle. In a poignant scene, the architect wanders through the dark thicket calling out for his stumped, leprous servant: "Deo Gratias, Deo Gratias!"

He was calling, quite literally, for the grace of God. In different ways we all do in some form, we Christians, pre-Christians, and post-Christians. We thirst.