

Introduction

Dad, Are You Home Yet?

One day I came home early. I had piles of work on my desk in the church office but had promised myself and my wife, Cheri, I would spend some “quality time” with my six-year-old son, Kyle. Quality time for Kyle sometimes meant watching cartoons with him, and today that was just what I needed; some vegetative TV watching. I plopped myself next to him on the couch, joining him in his cartoon reverie.

And then I noticed that I was really tired. But not just physically; I was tired of ministry and the kind of life it seemed to require of me. I was preaching, teaching and creating programs about living the Christian life and getting to heaven, but I was living in what seemed like a kind of hell on earth.

I had grown up a pastor’s kid, and time spent at church or in ministry activities often edged out time at home. I was now modeling to my family what I had been shown as the right way to serve the church and God. Consequently, Cheri and I were having arguments about how I was spending my time. Too many nights out each week, long hours and preoccupation with ministry were not what she had signed up for when saying “I do.” Looking back on it now I can see that I was pursuing a twisted idea of

success, not in the secular forms I regularly preached against but in the sanctified activism and workaholism often seen in professional ministry. A growing church, defined mostly by higher attendance at church services, more and more programs, and bigger budgets and buildings, was the marks of a successful ministry in the clergy circles I ran with. I was not alone in this pursuit or the harried kind of life it seemed to require.

More often than not, at denominational conferences the conversation would soon turn to church attendance figures or building programs. A subtle form of ambition seemed just below the surface of our desire to grow our ministries. Although uneasy with the practice, I often found myself comparing my age and the size of my congregation with my father's at the same age. At thirty my father had one thousand at worship. I had five hundred. I lose—both at ministry and family.

So on that day while vegging out with little Kyle at my side, a jolting question broke the drone of the TV.

Without even looking at me he asked, “Dad, are you home yet?”

His question hit me as strange and surprising. Home yet? What did he mean? Hadn't I been sitting there with him for at least twenty minutes, watching his favorite cartoon?

I didn't quite know how to answer his question. It reminded me of my wife's complaints of how absent or distant I had been to her. His question shined a searchlight on what I had excused as my spiritual duty. The life I was living had become deformed and driven. I was standing at the center of an orbit that was spinning out of control and about to split in a million directions, fueled by just as many good intentions.

A GAPING HOLE

Kyle's question had awakened me to some gaping holes in the

fabric of my life. At the center was the hole in my heart that I had thought ministry would fill. I did not have a fulfilling life with God but needed to act like I had one. And then there was the hole in my social life. Besides the distance between Cheri, Kyle and me, we didn't have the kind of friendships in or outside of the church we could trust. There was the hole in my character. I was filled with worry, lust, anger, contempt and ambition, and a sense of the hypocrisy of preaching and teaching how-to sermons on living for Jesus that weren't working in my own life. I had claimed and reclaimed forgiveness for these issues, but I wasn't experiencing any release or growth. So, I began to measure the distance between who I was and who I wanted to be, between what ministry was and what it should be, and prayed that somehow God would fill in the holes and close the gaps.

But was any other kind of life possible? Was there another way to live? Was there a way home to the life I sometimes caught a glimpse of in Scripture but didn't think possible in real life? And if so, where would I find it?

About this time a friend suggested I read Dallas Willard's *Spirit of the Disciplines*. The book helped me see things in the Bible in such a different light that I began to hope for a different kind of life. I read that life in Christ was more than just being forgiven of sin; it was having power over sin and a new kind of life, one rich in relationships. Christ's commandments, which call us to the reality of a life not ruled by anger, contempt, worry, lust and the isolation these produce, were meant to be obeyed so that we could live like Jesus and love others as he did. And freedom from these sinful attitudes and behaviors could actually become the atmosphere of our lives rather than occasional whiffs of an existence found only in the afterlife. Willard also claimed that the process of becoming like Jesus is not to be a "pose or by a constant and grinding effort, but with ease and

power,” which he called the “easy yoke” or way of Jesus.

Dallas Willard not only thought change was possible, he said it might even be easier on the soul and body than disobedience, or as Scripture puts it, Jesus’ commands are not burdensome, and the life Jesus offers is a “winning” one that others will desire when they see it in us. This is what God actually intends and is planning on, the fact that *we* would become the change needed in our churches. We pastors and leaders are his program, “the program” he wanted for whole life transformation in his church.

It was hard to admit, but I didn’t see obedience as more attractive than sin. And sinning sure seemed easier than obeying. How could not being angry be better? It worked so well in getting others to do what I wanted. And what would I do without worry? It was the way I motivated myself into getting things done.

Many of the pastors and congregants I knew were wrestling with the difficulty of trying to live what they read in their Bibles. Some, like me, waffled between either faking it, grinding it out, taking it for granted or giving up entirely—few if any appeared to live in such a way that others would want the kind of life they lived. And now my own life “for God” was distancing me from my family. I couldn’t go back, I was ready for more.

I didn’t start out with noble ideas of becoming some kind of a saint (my family and coworkers will assure you—I don’t ever need to worry about that). I just wanted to have my family back. The process of putting *The Spirit of the Disciplines* into practice is my story of whole life transformation—a change in me that was needed first before I could partner with God for any kind of change in my church. It sparked my imagination. I now understood not only what a truly transformed person would look like but also how a marriage, friendships, a church, the body of Christ in a city, and eventually, in God’s time, a whole world could be transformed.

So I set out on this journey while serving in my second church, where I was senior pastor. It entailed taking a painful but healing year away from ministry. After learning a new way to live I was led back into ministry to serve as executive pastor of the Church of the Open Door. While I am no longer at Open Door, it was the context for much the writing of this book. And I currently share this journey with students I teach at seminaries as well as with pastors at conferences, retreats and consultations.

Having tried and tested this new kind of life and having met others who have experienced the same, I have come to believe that God is calling the church to recover the life that is ours in Christ, a life that the Holy Spirit keeps on breathing into the church. I write as a Protestant evangelical who has found the life of Jesus alive and well in the broader church, both ancient and modern, from expressions such as Roman Catholicism and Quakerism of the West to that of the Egyptian desert communities and the Eastern Orthodox of the East. I hope my story will help you to find your way home, and you too will be able to share it with others. Kyle's question made me aware of how far I was from the life Christ offers, but even more questions were raised as I started to find my way home to transformation.

The Transformation Gap

How could I be so sure of being saved and on the way to my home in heaven when I was so far away from home in my present life? And how did the gap between the two develop in the first place?

My conversion to Christ had brought an initial spurt of change but soon settled down into basically the same old life when measured by my experience of anger, rage, worry, pride and self-centeredness. I wasn't partying hard, but neither were most of my non-Christian friends. What was the difference between them and me? Was it just that I was forgiven? I was leading people to Christ and doing many good things for people, but something was missing. While I preached on loving our enemies, I too often lived in contempt of anyone who got in the way of my ministry goals, and now that included my own wife!

This led me to a reexamination of what the Bible calls "the abundant life." I concluded that there was indeed a difference between the kind of life exemplified by Jesus and Paul, and which Jesus calls us to, and what my expectations were for life in Christ. In my ministry I became aware that most people don't believe the life exemplified by Jesus and Paul is possible today. At best it may have been possible for a few "star athletes," biblical heroes who no longer exist.

But to my surprise I found in my study of church history that deep and radical life change was not only possible but was expected of believers as recently as the late nineteenth century. The transformed life was seen as the church's main mission, and without it others wondered whether a person was saved or if the church was still on task. Somewhere after the Second Great Awakening (1790-1840s) the expectation of transformation was diminished. Among evangelicals the transmission of new life in Christ by example, imitation and training in a "living faith" was reduced to a weakened understanding of discipleship. Disciples of Jesus were no longer made, just converts who were Christian in name and doctrinal beliefs only.

THE TRANSFORMATION GAP APPEARS

Henry Ward Beecher, a great preacher and national leader of the late nineteenth century, exemplifies the shift in Christian expectations. He struggled with his marriage and was at least inappropriate with several women under his ministry. He caused a national scandal by having an affair with a business associate's wife. Much like the biblical King David, Beecher tried to cover it up and intentionally ruined the jealous husband's career, which tarnished Beecher's national work toward abolishing slavery.

Underneath his hypocrisy was a strong belief in the God of love, but not the God who loved him enough to deliver him from sin. Sometime before his affair he expressed the dilemma his theology created in regard to God and his sins, "I know that he will forgive them—but will he deliver me from them?" he asked. "It is not a want of faith in Christ for the past that I lack—but, O, that I might have a Christ who should assure me of rescue and purity in every period of my life to come!"

It is uncertain whether he really came clean and owned up to

his sin. He ended up being ridiculed but blindly supported by his church during a civil trial that held the nation's attention. The preacher was acquitted due to a "he said, she said" morass of circumstantial evidence.

His pitiful cry captures the growing ambiguity today regarding what change is possible for the followers of Jesus in this life. This tortured example of the fall of a well-known and productive Christian figure is one that has been repeated many times since. Sadly such behavior is not as shocking now as it was then. We do not flinch when famous or not-so-famous pastors fall. Pastors were once respected and trusted more than all other professionals but now fall just behind politicians and dangerously close to lawyers in the polls. How did this change come about?

Historian and theologian Richard Lovelace has correctly identified a gap or hole in current evangelical theology and experience. He termed it the "sanctification gap." The gap falls between God's initial work of justification and his final work of glorification. Sanctification is the process of becoming progressively more like Christ by cooperating with God to become holy. In terms of Christian spiritual formation, it is the *life change* or transformation that occurs after conversion and before death. In church history, sanctification is the element missing for the last one to two hundred years, at least since the last of the great American revivals. It is a "caught" more than "taught" living faith and is the "spiritual capital" of the church. Lovelace makes the point that, historically, revivals or awakenings resulted in radical change of life for individuals and for the society they lived in.

THE GAP'S LOWERED EXPECTATIONS

Since the appearance of the sanctification or transformation gap, the American church has experienced many more figures like Henry Ward Beecher. And these figures mirror what the

average Christian now believes is possible for their own character development and growth in Christlikeness. Leaders like Billy Graham, whose lives evidence integrity, now seem to be the exception rather than the rule for church leaders. And their life is not viewed as the norm for the lives of ordinary believers.

At a conference on formation I recently attended, one speaker shared his sadness and disappointment that his fellow speakers were referring to “nominal evangelicals,” those who didn’t share the heart and life of the gospel of Jesus but still claimed to be born again. The expectation of the average Christian for the sanctified life has been lowered. We are in need of leaders who once again set the bar high and personally evidence whole life transformation as normal and expected for all Christians. Until the recent past, the church has had these kind of leaders, who were the source for inspiration and revival.

At a time when the church was being domesticated by the Roman Empire, Augustine of Hippo was delivered from sexual promiscuity to pen a confession that has helped so many to settle their restlessness in God’s presence and love. And when the medieval church was in ruins, Francis of Assisi, a notorious and well-dressed disturber of the peace, took vows of poverty and peacemaking, and single-handedly attempted to stop the Crusades. And at a time when the church needed reformation, Theresa of Ávila, a beautiful and self-centered young woman, turned her body and soul into a castle ruled by God and was overcome with the love of Christ for her. Through her writing many have been introduced into that same intimate love.

Amazing Grace is the title of a Hollywood film about the life of William Wilberforce, the English evangelical who led parliament in a thirty-year fight for the abolition of slavery in British Empire, which cost him his health and wealth. The self-proclaimed former “wretch” and slaver trader, John Newton,

who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace,” is featured in this film, which recounts the changed lives of these men and their powerful influence on their world and culture.

The church also has a body of literature that recorded exemplary Christians’ way of life for others to imitate. The fourteenth-century classic on formation titled *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis, was instrumental in bringing John Newton to faith and to a radically new life in Christ. This book calls for transformation of life as the sign of genuine conversion and is second only to the Bible itself in Christian literature. It addresses tangible changes in behavior (e.g., forgiving our enemies and keeping the tongue from slander and gossip). It expects a change of life for those who know Christ and specifically calls into question those who can articulate theological concepts like the Trinity but show little evidence of trinitarian life and love. It is no wonder that it had an effect on Newton’s conversion, leading to change in his character, occupation and worldview.

Today, leaders and books calling for and expecting significant change in believers are rare. Instead, we find award-ceremony testimonies of celebrity athletes or stars who thank God for their success, calling it his blessing. Some writers even suggest that significant progress in obedience in this life is not possible. There is a growing acceptance of the transformation gap being the normal Christian experience. Grace settles our eternal destiny, but we will have to wait until we get to heaven for it to do much more for us. Our life on earth becomes more of a waiting room than an adventure or journey with God.

Sadly, now even pastors and leaders no longer expect significant life change for Christians. The kind of life Jesus presents in the Sermon on the Mount—free of worry, lust, anger, contempt, gossip and greed—is not seen as possible. As the bumper sticker

says, “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven.” Progress in holiness is not expected in this life despite the many Scriptures that admonish us to grow in grace. It seems that God’s amazing grace is not so amazing; it just offers us unconditional acceptance and freedom from guilt and shame.

THE GAP REVEALED IN OUR GOSPEL

I have found that the transformation gap is best illustrated in the message we communicate when we share the gospel. And even more significant is how we tell it, our tools and methods. I believe our reduced expectations of life change comes from a reduced gospel. This reduced gospel has impoverished and unhealthy results, both for those sharing it and those receiving it. Several stories from ministry illustrate how the transformation gap shows up when we try to share our faith, but that faith isn’t working for life change.

In my former church we used an evangelism program that trained people to visit our church guests with the intent of making an evangelistic presentation. After a ten-minute “get to know you” time, usually feeling awkward and artificially friendly, we would get down to business and ask the unsuspecting host permission to ask a couple of questions. Never mind that these are about the most personal questions we could ask—about a person’s spirituality and relationship to God. We felt we had earned the right to be heard through our ten-minute chitchat.

The first question, “If you died tonight, are you sure you would go to heaven?” would be followed by a second, “What would you say if God asked you why he should let you into his heaven?” It didn’t matter if a person was sure of getting into heaven, if he or she didn’t give the right answer to the second question, we would proceed with our presentation, assuming that an incorrect answer meant the person didn’t know Jesus.

We could tell a person's eternal destiny by knowing them for a few minutes. That this was similar to selling soap or cosmetics door to door escaped us. So did the fact that we were reducing salvation to a kind of "deal" with God rather than a relationship with him and a community of believers.

I was getting more and more uncomfortable with it. It was "soul winning" at its best, and it led to a bragging time after we got back from our witnessing. What many saw as genuine conversions, I saw as quickly sealed deals for heaven with an assured customer as our greatest prize. What some saw as a rejection of the gospel, I came to see as a response to our offensive and intrusive behavior. Saved people were those who had right beliefs and could spit out correct theological answers.

On one of the last visits I went on before calling the program into question, the young man we were visiting answered that he was fairly sure he would go to heaven but sometimes had doubts due to his struggles with sin. He shared warmly about his love for Jesus and attempts to live for him, but he didn't correctly answer why God should allow him into heaven. His answer almost brought me to tears. When faced with what he would say to God he very seriously and yet passionately exclaimed, "Why, I would cry out, mercy!" That answer, good enough for Jesus to proclaim a tax collector justified (Lk 18:13), was not good enough for my team of soul winners.

What kind of followers of Jesus were we producing that couldn't see the life of God in someone who so obviously and humbly was giving witness to it before our eyes. He didn't have the assurance that our team was looking for. When people made a decision for Christ, we went to great pains to prove to them that because they had prayed a certain prayer and agreed with certain doctrines they were definitely going to heaven. But for much of church history, assurance has been linked to demon-

strating the fruit of obedience in daily life. If there was little or no fruit, we should not be so sure of our salvation. Paul clearly expects such fruit in genuine conversion and doubts the salvation of those without it (see Acts 26:20; 2 Cor 13:5-6).

The young man's honesty was refreshing to me. His humility was more a sign of his salvation than the easy assurance our team looked for. Assurance that is based on a "deal" to take care of our sins or a decision to be "born again" is not biblical assurance. Real salvation produces evidence of constant and progressive growth in "life from above." Admittedly, we can have more assurance than the young man had. In fact, our life should evidence such progressive growth that there would be no way to mistake whether or not we are a Christian. Our life with God, even with all its struggles, should put any doubts to rest.

I went away that night convinced that our evangelism program needed to revert back to the changed lives of our people. The program for evangelism we were using was a convenient way for people to avoid change. They could witness on Thursday night and live any way they wanted the rest of the week. In fact, the leader of the evangelism program was one of those unofficial church bosses who wielded control and power over other members.

One of the evidences of our reduced gospel is the tools we use to bring people to Jesus. For many of us, evangelistic presentations such as "The Roman Road," "The Colored Book," "Four Spiritual Laws" and "Steps to Peace with God" introduced us to a version of the gospel reduced to privatized experience, just between God and me, that results in forgiveness of sins, personal peace and a wonderful plan for our life. The call to obedience or a different way of living is left to another tract or discipleship program that in effect makes obedience optional. The spiritual growth of these follow-up programs is usually defined

in terms of developing habits of going to church and daily devotions, not significant character growth. Following Jesus into a radically different way of living is not part of the program. This kind of gospel doesn't reach into everyday needs, like how to love a spouse or deal with the lust, anger and contempt.

A GOSPEL WITHOUT HOPE FOR LIFE SITUATIONS

A friend mine told me about one of the many times she had been witnessed to before she came to know Jesus. The presenters had shared their tracts on forgiveness and getting to heaven, and asked her if she would like to say the sinner's prayer. She had a hard time listening to them because she and her husband had been fighting and were now talking about a possible divorce. Finally she interrupted the well-meaning presenters and told them of her marital problems, her fears for the future and her struggles to love her husband. She hoped that these people who claimed to know God would be able to help her with these problems. The presenters again offered her forgiveness of sins and assurance of heaven. This somehow would solve everything for her.

In desperation she tried to turn the conversation back to her present dilemma and in frustration exclaimed, "What will accepting Jesus as my Savior do for my marriage?" They had no answer for that question. "Just accept Jesus," they said, "and things will automatically be different." She declined their offer. It didn't seem related to her need for reconciliation with her spouse.

My friend said she has often wondered if her marriage would have been saved if someone could have shown her how God's grace applies to this life as well as to her eternal destiny. After the pain of a divorce, several further attempts at relationships, and an abortion, she was led to Jesus by a loving church community who, over a couple of years, helped her find healing. Now that she understood and was changed by the gospel, she

found it odd that those who had earlier witnessed to her made no connection between God's love for her and how it could change her broken marriage.

I have been trained in premarital counseling programs that prepare couples to commit themselves "until death do us part." The training usually covers money, communication, sex and so on. However, these programs rarely teach couples how to love a spouse who has mistreated them and maybe even betrayed them sexually, but desires change.

In *Speaking of Faith*, Krista Tippett shares candidly from her own experience of divorce. She wonders if she and her former husband could have been offered more grace than they were willing to receive. She describes it as a kind of "dare from God to work things out" that she and her husband could have taken. This dare is one where we see marriage as not just a place of getting relational needs met but as a "school of love" that forms character or, if you will, a sacrament through which God's life is imparted.

What if those who claim to know God could demonstrate that kind of love to those who desperately need hope to receive love from those around them? What if we had the power to dare others to be formed in marriage rather than changing partners?

C. S. Lewis describes the challenge every marriage faces to move from a "young love" to a "great old love" in his advice to Sheldon Vanauken in *A Severe Mercy*. Every marriage starts with an immature love centered on what my partner does for me in meeting my needs. The relationship must grow or it may result in exchanging partners for another young love. The person who is transformed by the school of love will reflect God's love and be recentered on meeting the needs of his or her marriage partner. And together they will form the kind of family that will subsequently school children and others in the school of love. These kinds of families become a transformational force in soci-

ety. Our life in Christ isn't just about forgiveness of sins and the afterlife, but transformed relationships, even with our spouse.

A GOSPEL WITHOUT HOPE FOR THE WORLD

Another pastor told me of his attempt to share the gospel with a neighbor in his apartment building. One day, as they were getting to know each other, his new friend asked the pastor why he described himself as “a follower of Jesus.” The pastor explained that followers of Jesus admit they are sinners on the way to hell, or separation from God. We need Jesus' saving grace to get us forgiveness and get us into heaven when we die. Shortly into his presentation, the neighbor lost interest in the pastor's explanation and simply said, “Sorry, I'm not interested.”

Ironically, the pastor had been reading a few books that suggested a gospel that only calls for forgiveness of sins rather than life change, and is mainly concerned with an individual's life after death and not the whole world now, is inadequate. The pastor began to expect more from his own salvation in terms of life change and a better world now. He realized that his presentation hadn't caught up with his experience with God. After a few prayerful days, he tried to talk to his neighbor again.

This time the pastor started with the fact that God designed the world to be characterized by love and goodness. The concerns that he and his friend often talked about—peace, feeding the hungry, care of the earth—could only come when a new life of love, such as modeled by Jesus, became the way of life for people on earth. His friend interrupted him and said, “Now I'm interested.”

THE REDUCED GOSPEL

When we share a faith that has little to do with the needs of life here and now, we are offering a “reduced gospel.” A reduced

gospel does not reveal the full promise of life under God's rule and will. The root of our immaturity is found in our reduced gospels. What we believe the good news is will largely determine if we are good news ourselves. There are at least three reduced gospels at work in the church today. First, a gospel of the "right" offers forgiveness of sins and a future life in heaven with little expectation for change in the present. Second, a gospel of the "left" seeks change in societal structures but no change in individual lives. Third, a gospel of the "consumer church" offers religious goods and services in exchange for financial support and attendance, but little change is offered for life now.

I (and most pastors I know) fervently preached the gospel of the right and railed against the gospel of the left. But we fueled our ministry with the consumer church gospel. We called the gospel of the left a gospel of works, not grace. But we failed to see how our gospel of grace for forgiveness of sins didn't work for life. Our grace expected neither change in society nor change for those in the church. The best we could do was to offer religious goods and services in hopes that somehow these programs and activities were doing some good.

Looking back on those days, I realize that I had accepted a grace that left people in a mess. Our busy plans for their lives—helping us to grow our churches—didn't help that much and often added to the mess.

NOT-SO-AMAZING GRACE FOR A MESSY LIFE

Two books have helped me understand God's grace: *What's So Amazing About Grace?* by Philip Yancey and *Messy Spirituality* by Mike Yaconelli. They also illustrate our lowered expectations of life change in the present, for both publicly express their doubts that there is much more than some internal change as a result of salvation in Jesus.

God's grace, for both authors, leads to personal forgiveness and an intimate relationship with Jesus, which brings a measure of personal peace with God and relief from trying to earn God's favor. The authors call us to receive God's amazing grace and forgiveness, and they model authenticity and an end to hypocrisy. Having both worked with youth, they minister with complete honesty and transparency. These authors are very helpful, and I hesitate to be critical, but I hope that their honesty and mine will help us find what has been lost to us all.

I had first heard of Yaconelli's book when one of the pastors on my staff asked me to read it and tell him what I thought of it. With the help of a spiritual director and from reading Dallas Willard's *Divine Conspiracy*, he had begun to see progress in his life. He asked me if it was possible to stay honest with himself about his messiness and yet begin to move out of the mess into a more ordered life. Did holiness have to mean hypocrisy? Would God give us only so much grace to accept us "just as we are without one plea," or would he also make us more than we are now, more like him in wholeness or holiness? Yaconelli's idea of what is possible—honesty and intimacy, but not much real progress or growth in character—left my coworker's spiritual appetite hungry for more.

I have used Yaconelli's book as required reading in the doctor of ministry courses that I teach on spiritual formation, wanting my pastor students to be authentic in their pursuit of life change and to wrestle with whether it is possible. I require they do an exercise titled "Willard vs. Yaconelli" and reflect on the different expectations of each for the possibility of life change for Christians. Each time this is done I find they are impressed with and grateful for Yaconelli's honesty about the depth and complexity of our sin problems, his reminder of the nonlinear, zig-zag trajectory of Christian growth, and the admission that his

practice of spiritual disciplines is messy, a refreshing reminder of the reality of our struggle with sin.

But they are also disappointed by the book's apparent conclusion that all we can hope for in this life is to stay honest and intimate with Jesus, and that the pursuit of obedient living will result in hypocrisy and self-deception, or a form of perfectionism and works salvation. They report that God seems to "tolerate sin" in Yaconelli's messy view of growth, rather than moving toward sin's termination in this life. The discomfort these students feel neither reflects a subtle legalism, which would reduce spiritual formation to a set of rules to follow, nor a shallow moralism, which is about behavior change without a deep change of heart and character. Yaconelli's view of being at peace with a messy life does not offer a vision of a life they can give themselves to.

There is little appeal in becoming "spiritual vampires," sucking on the blood of Christ for forgiveness while being barely alive spiritually. My students recognize it often contributes to "the management of sin," an endless cycle of repetitive acts of sin and shame followed by confession and temporary relief through grace. Without an alternative way of living this sets up the sinner for needing ever more relief from sin and never finding the antidote. The students know that obedience is better than sin management. And they are hungry for learning how to put sin to death rather than becoming comfortable with it.

THE PARALYSIS OF GRACE

Lower expectations also haunt Yancey's book. Yancey asserts that God's unconditional love for us in Jesus is the key to life. And, sadly, those who claim to know this, evangelical Christians, offer little grace to each other and to those who are outside of the church. So the amazing thing about grace for Yancey

is that *God treats us so incredibly different than we treat others and ourselves*. He gives examples of those who have offered this grace to others, like William Wilberforce's Clapham group, and how this affects society. Unfortunately, though, the examples are few.

Yancey continually asks why Christians don't exhibit more of what Christ came to give, life-changing grace. He never really answers the question. His book demonstrates from Paul's writings that we *should* be able to forgive and give grace, but leaves us on our own as to how to apply this information. He appears to have little vision for the process needed for a person to become graceful. Yancey seems to assume that just by passively receiving grace, we become forgiving. This helplessness is best illustrated in Yancey's struggle to help a friend who is pondering leaving his wife and kids for another woman. The friend knows this is sinful and wrong, there are no major problems in his marriage. But he feels more alive with this potential partner.

At a coffee shop, his tempted friend asks, "If I go down this road, I want to know, will God still forgive me afterward?" Yancey shares that he drank three cups of coffee while stalling for an answer. In the end he had to admit that God would forgive his friend but that it seemed an abuse of grace. He rightfully warns that his friend will be changed in this act and may not be able to repent later, but Yancey has little to offer his friend that takes him back into his marriage and the opportunity for character growth through struggle. He has no vision of C. S. Lewis's "great old love," which has learned that obedience to Christ is not only right but better and more enjoyable than sin. There is no hopeful vision of who his friend could become if he stayed in the school of love that committed marriage provides—only the prospect that his friend may not find forgiveness as easy afterward.

The book's understanding of grace is not as amazing as it could be since it offers only forgiveness and not a different way of life. Before my own confrontation with the transformation gap, I would have been just as paralyzed in responding to Yancey's friend. But now when faced with similar situations, I don't focus on the negative of sin but on the opportunity to become fully formed in Christ.

Yancey's friend was asking the wrong question. Of course God will forgive anyone of anything at any time. The question needs to be answered with another set of questions: What opportunities are there for you to be spiritually formed in your current marriage? What does your pursuit of someone more attractive and exciting to you say about your soul's dissatisfaction? Why do you think sin is better than obedience? What might your boredom tell you about your love of God and others rather than what others do for you? What about growing beyond the "young love" of your marriage into a "great old love"? What if you began to live selflessly, letting Jesus teach you and your family how to become a transformational force of love?

Certainly God can and will forgive our sin. But he will not force us to have power over sin and enjoy obedience. After his sin, Yancey's friend will need to be not only released from the *penalty* of guilt and shame, but also released from the *power* sin has over him, a power that has increased by giving it more control over his life. Worse yet, sin is diluting his belief in the power of God's grace to give him and others a new kind of life.

There is a subtle kind of paralysis that a weak and reduced grace produces in people who think they only have to worry about forgiveness and not obedience. God's acceptance of us as we are, undeserving, is only the start for his amazing work of grace in us. Truly amazing grace is reflected John Newton's and William Wilberforce's radical change of life. More than bring-

ing about their conversion, it fueled their work to change society's most sinful practice. Not-so-amazing grace results in messy lives that are stuck in sin.

REALLY AMAZING GRACE FOR OBEDIENCE

So, what is the really amazing thing about God's grace? Is it just forgiveness from the penalty of sin? Or is powerful enough to transform people such that they can offer it to others? To do that, they need more grace than they are experiencing, the grace to become forgiving people, not just forgiven. The fact is that not-so-amazing grace, grace for forgiveness alone, simply tolerates sin, leaves us in our mess and in sin's power. It gives no hope for becoming amazing people, those who never even wonder about trying to sin.

The acronym I was taught for grace, God's Riches At Christ's Expense, begs the question, how rich are we if we are not able to offer it to others? This kind of grace is poverty stricken. The problem with our view of grace is that we only see it as a death benefit, not as a life benefit or gift of power over sin in our present life.

Grace is, as Frederick Buechner says, "life itself." So we need grace just to live and to be, sinners or not. Each day we enjoy and each breath we take are from God's grace. Paul's appeal to grace isn't limited to dealing with a sin problem but includes our being created and sustained by grace: "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). And when he does deal with sin, it not only separates us from life with God but also from each other. Grace that leaves me at peace with God but in broken and dysfunctional relationships with others is less than amazing.

The reduced gospel of the right, which privatizes salvation, is becoming more irrelevant to a culture increasingly aware of

problems on a global scale. If we cannot go deeper than the gospel of the left, which changes only social structures, and learn a new way to live that embraces others and cares for the poor, the church will be increasingly ineffective and reduced to a ghetto of consumer churches.

THE TRANSFORMATION GAP EXPORTED

The transformation gap experience in the United States has been exported overseas. This was revealed to me on two significant overseas ministry experiences. One was in the East Asia and the other in Eastern Europe.

My first trip was to teach at a seminary in Seoul, South Korea, that subsidizes the cost of the education for international students who want to minister in the 10/40 window, an area extending from 10 to 40 degrees north of the equator and from Africa to China. I taught students from Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Vietnam, Japan and China as well as a few from Indonesia, North and South America, Africa and South Korea. Unfortunately, these students had been thoroughly schooled in a reduced gospel. The idea of significant life change before death was intriguing to them.

Although many of these students had faced persecution, imprisonment and possible death for their faith, their reduced gospel was evident. When I shared how the gospel of the kingdom helps us to love our enemy, several students shared that their discipleship didn't equip them for this.

One of my students, Amos Gurang, a refugee pastor from Nepal, had his family home burned down by Hindu villagers. This tested his reduced gospel. He had accepted Jesus for forgiveness of sins and eternal life, but didn't know how to love his enemies. He shared with me how he was growing bitter and disillusioned with his faith. If God loved him while he was

God's enemy, perhaps God could teach him to love his own enemies. He and the others, many who expected to face similar testing, were hungry for a gospel that would enable them to love and forgive those who sought to take their lives.

My second trip was to the newly democratized country of Slovakia to teach Czech and Slovak retreatants about spiritual formation in the context of democracy and free markets, particularly whether we can be rich and still be a Christian. Two of the pastors shared how they almost gave up their faith during the tumultuous change from communism to democracy. Their faith no longer worked in facing the new conditions of freedom. But like Amos from Nepal, God had begun to show them that there was more to being a Christian than the forgiveness of sins and waiting for heaven.

They too had received a reduced gospel that left them practicing the disciplines legalistically and experiencing little life change. Now that they were facing prosperity and freedom, they needed help. I taught that we need to deepen our character to handle more power in life, specifically financial and political power.

HOPE FOR CLOSING THE GAP

To kindle the kind of character that God wants his servants to have, I assign the meditative exercise of reading one chapter of *The Imitation of Christ* each day. This has been my own practice over the years.

After reading and trying to practice the *Imitation* for some time, we may grow discouraged. But then we come across some marvelous words from Jesus (via Thomas à Kempis). They have encouraged me when I despair of my progress and can't see what God sees. He promises to complete his work in me and to use me for revival in his church and the world.

Fight like a soldier and if you sometimes collapse because of some frailty on your part, get right up again and with greater courage look forward to My additional grace!

Do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid. Believe in me and trust in my mercy. When you think you are the farthest from Me, it is then that I am nearest to you. When you think all is lost, it is then that your victory is close at hand!