

Soul Survivor, by Philip Yancey

reviewed by [Wayne A. Holst](#) in the [December 12, 2001](#) issue

"The Christian ideal," wrote G. K. Chesterton, "has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried." Philip Yancey identifies with Chesterton's assessment. After much struggle he was able to come to terms with the dilemma of absolute ideals and absolute grace that suffuses the teaching of Jesus. His book is a thoughtful reflection on the faith journey of an intelligent, influential writer, who might easily have become part of the church's alumni society had it not been for his dogged quest for truth and the availability of spiritual mentors and Christian communities who helped him on his way.

When Yancy came home to the church, it was to a more creative and hospitable evangelical Protestantism than the conservative fundamentalism he had fled in pain and rebellion as a young man. "Why am I still a Christian?" he asks. "I have spent most of my life in recovery from the church." Growing up in the American South, he absorbed from his fundamentalist Baptist roots some of the worst the church had to offer. Now, gratefully, he believes that he has landed in the loving arms of God.

How does Yancey distinguish between the evangelicalism he embraces and the fundamentalism he rejected? The differences seem to be more experiential and philosophical than theological. The church of his childhood wounded him with its duplicity, judgementalism and small-mindedness. Evangelicalism has provided him with a certain freedom to question. It lacks the rigid parochialism of the church he knew. It offers community, healthy motivation inspired by the gospel and a safe place to develop as a pilgrim.

Yancey became a writer to sort out the words used by the church of his youth. He early decided to scout out people he could learn from, people he might emulate. He found positive role models--writers, social activists, Christians and non-Christians. The 13 people he writes about in this book helped him restore the mislaid treasures of his life. He encourages his readers to locate appropriate mentors for themselves.

Increasingly, mainline Protestants are attracted to Yancey. He writes candidly about intellectual challenges they share and presents himself as a risktaker. His

willingness to admit to profound doubt and his fermentative probing at the edges of common wisdom and accepted faith are only two of his more fetching characteristics.

Yancey's guides range from John Donne to Leo Tolstoy, from Henri Nouwen to Annie Dillard. Most are writers themselves, though a few, like Martin Luther King Jr., were primarily social and professional innovators. Here are some glimpses of what he discovered in them:

Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948) attempted to live politically the principles he learned from the Gospels. Gandhi was a follower of Jesus and a serious student of the New Testament, but he deliberately decided against joining the church and centered his message on spiritual values, love for enemies and Hindu civil disobedience. When Yancey reads Gandhi's story alongside the history of Christianity he cannot help wondering what went wrong with the church. The impact of Jesus' life and teaching on Gandhi helped to convince Yancey of the truth of the Christian faith.

Robert Coles (1929-), Harvard psychiatrist, Catholic and teacher of spiritual literature, is a bridge-builder between the church and secular culture. He has interviewed ordinary folk in real-life situations and learned to value their innate wisdom. After reading Coles on inherent human dignity and the image of God that lives in all people, Yancey realized that in his quest for professional acclaim he had substituted a new kind of fundamentalism for the old: one born of snobbery, not ignorance. "I needed to discover the levelling truth of the gospel. . . . I needed a change in heart as much as a change in thought," he writes.

Frederick Buechner (1926-), Presbyterian minister and writer, helped Yancey discover that where there was no room for doubt, there would be no room for faith, either. God speaks in our everyday, personal lives, and Buechner teaches us to listen to our lives. He appeals to both unchurched sophisticates and conservative Christians. "Truth can be told," says Yancey. "I nearly despaired of any writing about faith until I discovered Buechner."

By focusing on the journeys and discoveries of his spiritual mentors, Yancey traces his growth from his early reactive years to his more self-confident mid-life. Some readers may recoil at Yancey's need to revisit old wounds again and again, but this book will speak to a wide range of Christians whose experience with the church has been, at least at some point, unhealthy. What shines through the brilliant writing of

this once bigoted man is a redeemed vision of hopefulness and spiritual vitality.