

Holy impatience: William Sloane Coffin, critic of the church

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 29, 2004](#) issue

It is a little unusual for a biography (*William Sloane Coffin Jr.: A Holy Impatience*) to be published when its subject is not only alive but is the author of his own just-published best-seller (*Credo*). Bill Coffin, however, is anything but usual. As Harvey Cox says, [reviewing Warren Goldstein's biography](#), "There is only one Bill Coffin."

Cox refers to Coffin's powerful sermon on his son's death. It is indeed one of the most helpful pieces ever written or preached about death, grief and the will of God. This preacher has used Coffin's memorable words many times: "It was not the will of God that Alex die . . . when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."

I have always appreciated the seriousness with which Coffin takes the church and the profession of ministry. While often criticizing the church for lapses in courage, he has communicated his respect for the thousands of pastors working in congregations that are miles in geography and light years in culture from Yale and New York City.

I recall attending a preaching conference at Riverside Church some years ago. Just arrived from a speaking engagement somewhere else in the country, Coffin greeted us with grace, charm and abundant wit, and then sat down at the piano. He said that families gather around the piano to sing together, and that we were a family even though we didn't know one another. He then led us in a few familiar gospel songs, ending with "How Great Thou Art." We felt like we just gained a new older brother and were part of one family.

It may have been at that conference that someone lamented the fact that the press didn't seem interested in mainline churches and ministers any more. "Do something interesting," Coffin advised.

Coffin preached at my church in Chicago once. When he read the lesson, he added "and women" to the text's gender-exclusive "men." A man jumped up from his pew

and shouted, "That's not what the Bible says!" Coffin shot back, "We're trying to be inclusive here! You got a problem with that?"

I often dip into his 1977 memoir, *Once to Every Man*, which contains vintage Coffin stories and great social and theological commentary. It also reveals a conventional believer who wrestles with ideas, loves the world and in an ultimate way trusts Jesus Christ. My favorite comment from the book concerns music: "In times of utter desolation, God alone has comforted me more; and when the world seems bent on madness, its music as much as its literature reassures me of its sanity."