Moving Toward the Core of Faith
An Interview with Philip Yancey

Philip Yancey: I usually interview people and get to ask the questions, so I don’t know if I like this idea of being interviewed. But we’ll see how Sharon does.

Radix: You’ve been a columnist in Christianity Today for many years and, for some of us, our favorite part of C.T. was hearing what you had to say on that back page of the magazine. Now you’ve recently announced that you’ve written your final column, which can’t have been an easy decision.

Yancey: Yes, I started it 26 years ago, and I’ve written about 200 of those columns. A book usually takes a year-and-a-half or so of solid work, at least for me, and all that time I’m in a rut. The Christianity Today column was about the only spontaneous thing in my life, because I usually wrote it in one day. Often it was about something I read the night before, or a trip I just returned from, or somebody I met. I liked that.

But I have devoted more of my time in recent years to travel. We take about four international trips a year, and they do eat into my schedule. Many times I’d come back thinking, “Oh, no, this column is due tomorrow,” and it became almost an irritation: “Now what am I going to write about?” Anytime something seems like a chore rather than a privilege, it should be reevaluated. It was hard to let go, but I felt it was time.

Radix: Your voice will be missed. I want to talk a little about your beginnings. In the first year of your life, your family was struck with tragedy. Your father was a polio victim who died after being taken off life support in faith that God would heal him, and that was at the instigation of

—Sharon Gallagher
church elders. That early life-changing incident might have embittered some people and put them off faith entirely. But you've not only remained a person of faith, you've encouraged many of us in our faith. You're Billy Graham's favorite writer; you've even encouraged Billy Graham! But even as a child, it must have bothered you that those church elders were so wrong. How did you maintain your faith in those circumstances?

Yancey: Several times in talking with my publisher I've raised the possibility of writing a book called Lies My Church Told Me, but they've said, "No, we're not quite ready for that, Philip."

My church was wrong, profoundly wrong, about some very serious things, and that was certainly one of them. My father was going to be a missionary. He was 24 years old, had two young sons. My brother was three, I was one when my Dad got polio. He was in an iron lung, because he couldn't breathe on his own.

My parents already had a base of Christians who were going to support them in prayer and financially as missionaries. Those Christians felt, "Well, it couldn't possibly be God's will for this young, dedicated, 24-year-old man to die." They believed that he would be healed, and had him removed from the iron lung. And then he died.

I have lived my whole life under the impact of that on my father, who was left with a tough set of circumstances to deal with—no training, not much education, in poverty. As I later looked at it, I thought, "Well, they were wrong theologically. They felt they knew God's will, and they were wrong. They didn't know God's will. Theology matters, ideas matter."

My church was wrong about other things, too. I've written openly about the blatant racism that was taught from the pulpit. They were wrong about science.

When you realize you've been deceived about something important, then, of course, you start questioning everything: "Maybe they're wrong about Jesus; maybe they're wrong about all these other things." Why did I hang on? I've often reflected on that question. There were just two of us, my brother and I, and my brother strayed and is still far from God—as he would say himself.

I was blessed by coming in contact with people who demonstrated the kind of person I wanted to be. Dr. Paul Brand was one of those people; some of my first books were with him. I almost have this vision of God looking down—of course, metaphorically—saying, "Okay, Philip, you've seen the worst that the church has to offer; I'm going to show you the best."

Dr. Brand was one of those people. I spent 10 years following him around, getting to know him and his faith. At his funeral I said, "I was given the charge of giving words to his faith, and in the process he gave faith to my words." For 10 years I was able to write about a person I truly believed in and could write with total confidence what he believed, even though I wasn't sure myself. In the process of doing that, my faith grew.

I was a journalist, and in the early days, I was editor of Campus Life magazine. We would interview two types of people: some whom I call "stars," and they would be the famous people: professional athletes, politicians, movie stars, people we put on the covers of our magazine. Over the years, I've interviewed some really famous people. Then there's another group of people, like Dr. Paul Brand, whom I call "servants." They usually don't have a light shining on them; they don't get a lot of attention. But I have been privileged to meet many of them in different parts of the world, people who work in garbage communities in Guatemala and the Philippines, or who spend 40 years translating the Bible to a tribe in Ecuador where only 400 people speak that language—those kinds of people.

When I looked at the "stars," my first instinct was to think, "Oh, wouldn't I love to be one of those people." But when I got to know them, I didn't really want to be like them. Some of them became stars because they didn't really like themselves very much. They weren't comfortable with themselves, so they became performers.

The other group of people, the "servants," who didn't get attention, worked in incredibly difficult environments.

Dr. Brand spent his life in India among leprosy patients, most of them in the untouchable caste. Nobody wants to live next to a leprosarium, so they gave him a gravel pit in the middle of a desert. The average temperature in the summer there was about 120 degrees. No air conditioning. But again and again, when I would get to know these servants, I would say, "Those are the people I want to be like." They have a sense of gratitude for life, a sense of compassion and love.

I came to see the truth of Jesus' most commonly repeated statement; in the Gospels He said—I'm para-

I learned about the Creator by studying the shafts of glory that fill this world. I realized, God isn't a cosmic super-cop out to get me; God is a God of whimsy and humor and compassion and grace.
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that fill this world. I realized, God
isn’t a cosmic super-cop out to get
me; God is a God of whimsy and
humor and compassion and grace.
I’ve been privileged to go back and
pick up the stones and scrub them
off and see what’s worth saving and
what’s worth saying. I ended up
probably not all that different theo-
ologically from the church I grew up
in, but a lot different in understanding
and attitude and spirit, I hope.

Radix: When did you first know that
you wanted to be a writer? Do you
remember what your first published
piece was?

Yancey: As a boy I wanted to play
second base for the New York Yan-
kees. Or I wanted to be a fireman, you
know, like all boys. I didn’t go
through life thinking, “I want to be a
writer when I grow up.” In high
school I did work for the newspaper
and the yearbook, so I worked with
words and gravitated toward En-
glish and literature classes.

I did have that introverted,
observer’s personality. I’d been
burned, so I withdrew and made cal-
culated judgments of everybody
around me. And that makes a good
potential writer. If you are from a dys-
functional family, you should be-
come a writer. Because then the
things that drive you crazy become
material.

When my family got together, I
used to go away thinking, “How
could I possibly spend a weekend
with these people?” And then I
started thinking, “I could never come
up with the things they’re saying.”
So now when I’m at a family gather-
ing, I run to the bathroom, pull out a
pad of paper, and write things down.

When I was in grad school at
Wheaton College, I needed a job. In
those days, there were a lot of Chris-
tian organizations headquartered in
Wheaton (many of them have moved
to Colorado since). And the only
place I could get a job was Campus
Life magazine, which was a maga-
zine for young people. I wrote bro-
chure copy; I wrote ads for record
albums. I did whatever they wanted
me to do, cleaned out closets, orga-
nized a photo file.

It was a great training ground, be-
cause often people got Campus Life
as a gift subscription from an aunt
who was concerned about them
spiritually. Johnny gets this maga-
zine and wonders, “What is this

Christian stuff?” As a writer I’ve
spent more than 10 seconds to get him
reading, and then I have to keep
him reading the rest of the article.
I learned early on that the writer
is not in charge. The reader is in
charge, because the reader can
shut you off. You can spend years
working on the perfect poem, ar-
ticle, book, or whatever—but un-
less it keeps the reader’s interest,
you’ll certainly never make a liv-
ing at it.

Radix: You once wrote a column
called “I Was a Teenage Funda-
mentalist.” You went to Colum-
bia Bible College, where you met
Janet, and were once disciplined
because you were holding hands
when you were engaged. At what
point did you realize that you
were no longer a fundamentalist?

Yancey: Actually, I think from high
school days on, when I realized that
the church had distorted and mis-
represented reality to me. Funda-
mentalism is a tight house of cards,
and if you pull one card out, they’re
afraid that the whole thing is going
to collapse. So, no matter what it is—
whether it’s six-day creation, or a
theory of race, or whatever, it’s all in
this tight, small box.

Growing up in that box, I kept see-
ing, “Well, that card’s not true, and
that card’s not true, and that card’s
not true.” So I didn’t buy the box. The
early books I wrote have titles like
Where Is God When It Hurts? and Dis-
appointment With God. I was out there
on the margins, circling warily.

Along the way I worked on a ver-
sion of the Bible called The Student
Bible and it was very helpful to spend
three years doing nothing but study-
ing the Bible. Then, gradually I
moved toward more of the core of
faith: What’s Amazing About Grace?,
The Jesus I Never Knew, and then, most
recently, Prayer.

If you had said 20 years ago,
“Philip, one day, you’re going to write
a book on prayer,” I wouldn’t have
believed it. But I have been privileged
to write my life as it’s happening, in

Radix 3
real time. And I keep thinking, “At some point, I'm going to cross the line and be written off.” When people write me and say, “You've crossed a line,” I respond, “I'm not radical. Jesus is radical.”

What I learned about fundamentalists is that they can't argue with the Bible. They're committed to the Bible. And if you really work hard at grounding the risky stuff in the Bible, they can reject what you say, but they're also rejecting their own Bible when they do that. So I try to go where it takes me. Who is a fundamentalist? Someone said, “It's an evangelical who's very mad!” A lot of it is spirit and attitude, that whole black-and-white mentality, that house of cards. And I moved away from that a long time ago.

**Radix:** You've been writing for some years now, have a lot of award-winning books. My question is, has the way you write changed during that time?

**Yancey:** I'm grateful that the early days of my career were in an office environment, and I've stuck to that daily schedule—I was going to say nine to five; it's really eight to six—that eight to six work schedule ever since. I'm at my desk at eight o'clock, and I stop a little before six o'clock.

When I write, I start with a pretty comprehensive outline, almost as long as the article or chapter itself. Because writing uses both parts of anyone's brain, if you try to use both of them at once, it can be crazy. So I create an outline thinking, “This is the rational part of my brain, and this is where this article is going to go. I'll start here, I'll go here, I won't go here, and I'll end up there.” It makes perfect sense, and I'm sure that's going to happen. Then when I actually sit down to write, forget the outline! But I couldn't do the writing without it. For some reason, the outline frees me from that fear factor, “What am I going to say next?” It gives me confidence.

For the book *Prayer* I probably spent six months before I wrote a single word. I went to libraries and interviewed people. I had that whole preparatory period when I was trying to figure out, “What do I think about prayer?” I usually start a book with a list of questions, as I did with that one: Why pray if God already knows? Does it make any difference whether one prays, or a thousand pray? Why does God want us to keep praying? All those different questions. Then I'll lock myself away and say, “OK, what do I think? What can I say with integrity that will help me answer those questions?”

After spending 40% of my time on preparation—including research, interviews, the outline—then comes the 20%, that middle day of composition, when all the trauma happens, all the paranoia, all the horror. There's nothing on the paper or the computer screen and I have to come up with something. I pull every trick in the book: I promise myself that if I finish I can go skiing in the afternoon, eat ice cream, or do whatever it takes to get through that one day. I actually go out into the mountains, because I don't want to inflict my psychosis on anyone else.

And then the last 40% of time I devote to cleaning up the piece. Getting ready to write, writing it, cleaning it up. I started as an editor, and I do spend twice as much time fixing what I wrote as I spent writing it. The last 40%, the editing stage, is the relaxing time where I can sit back and say, “I probably won't make it any worse, but maybe I can make it a little better.” I feel good during that process. But, boy, that middle time is all pain.

**Radix:** When you did this research for the book, what was the most surprising thing that you discovered about prayer?

**Yancey:** One of the most surprising things was how Jesus prayed. We're used to bowing our heads, closing our eyes, and being quiet when actually that's pretty abnormal compared to the rest of the world. We just returned from Korea, and the church where I spoke has 65,000 members. They have eight services on a Sunday and several different campuses. So in a service you have about 5,000 people at a time. When they pray, all 5,000 pray at once at top volume, with tears streaming down their faces. It's an amazing sound. You can hear 5,000 people sing at once in a megachurch, but to hear 5,000 people say different things at once in a language that you can't understand to begin with—well, it's a different experience.

In Jesus' day the Jews prayed standing up, with their eyes open, their hands outstretched, looking up to heaven, which is very different from the way we pray today. I'm not saying one way is right or wrong; you asked me what surprised me.

Prayer is essentially being wide awake. It's being awake to the world: to the needs of people around me, to the needs of justice, to the big things, and the small things.
asleep. Their eyes weren’t open.

So prayer became, for me, a metaphor of being awake to the world. When we close our eyes, we shut out the world. We don’t want to know about human trafficking, or global warming, or whatever. We just get so oppressed that we want to shut it out. Prayer is an intentional opening of our eyes, and asking God, “Open my eyes; make me wide awake.” It’s not an easy thing. I don’t want to be awake sometimes; I want to sleep. It’s more comfortable to sleep, to shut my eyes. But as Christians we are called to open our eyes.

I pray in the morning. And I usually do pray with my eyes open just because it’s so beautiful, with squirrels and foxes and elk and everything running through the yard. I live in Colorado, a little place called Evergreen (this time of year it’s “ever-white”). Why would I shut my eyes? I want to be awake to this world.

Radix: During the years since you were at Christianity Today, how would you say evangelicalism has changed from when you started there or at Campus Life, and now?

Yancey: If I didn’t travel overseas, I would probably have a hard time being upbeat about the church and upbeat about evangelicals. We have so much to learn from other places. Sometimes I think the only reason—this is bad theology—that God puts up with the United States is because we bankroll a lot of good activity in the world. We also pollute things in the rest of the world.

But if you look at Christian history, most of it has been slow-moving and a church-state blending. So in Europe you have the Norwegian state church, the Danish state church, the German state church, the Italian Catholic Church, where the church gets involved in actual politics, not just church politics, but actual politics. Bishops appoint kings, and kings appoint bishops, and things change very slowly. In many places in Europe, if you go to a worship service, you might as well have gone there 500 years ago. It’s exactly the same: the same words, the same language, the same music. Nothing changes.

The United States has a free-market economy and the church reflects that. You can trace it through the revival days of Charles Finney and the camp meetings in Kentucky. The tradition was that the church is free from that relationship with the state. That’s in our constitution, and I think it’s a good thing.

In Colorado, where I live, outside of Denver there aren’t many big towns. You go to these tiny little towns, they have maybe 500 people, and there’s First Baptist Church, First Methodist Church, First Presbyterian Church—and maybe an Episcopal church. A larger town may have a Second Baptist Church, Second Methodist Church. It’s like Coke and Pepsi. You drive through those towns and think, “This is crazy! Why don’t they just get together?” But that’s America; that’s what we do. We like options.

The churches here have taken on the best and the worst of America. The good part is, they evangelized the West. They went to these towns that were full of crusty old miners and whores and converted them and founded churches. So here they are, still in 2010. That’s American evangelicalism, light on its feet; if something doesn’t work, the church reacts quickly. That’s a characteristic of evangelicalism. America is still a creative idea source for the world. But we have a lot to learn from the rest of the world about taking our faith seriously; church isn’t about feeling good and being entertained.

I’m an evangelical in most ways. I still would use that word; it means “good news.” My job as a writer out of that tradition is to keep saying, “If it doesn’t sound like good news, it’s not the gospel.”

Radix: Several years ago you had a very serious car accident. How did that affect your life?

Yancey: In February of 2007 I had been speaking in Los Alamos, New Mexico, and drove back on a remote road in Colorado when I hit a patch of ice. I was in a Ford Explorer when one of the tires went off the road and hit gravel, causing the vehicle to roll over five times. It stopped with its wheels on the ground, but was completely smashed. All of the windows had come out. I knew I was hurt. In the movies, as soon as you have a wreck like that, it bursts into flames. So I thought, “I’ve got to get out of this thing.” So I staggered out and started looking around trying to find things—cell phone, skis, ice skates, my computer.

You could be on that road early on a Sunday morning for three hours and not see another car, but soon these Mormon missionaries came by. One of them happened to be the head of the ambulance corps for that county and he could tell I was hurt, so he made me sit down and he held my head.

I was taken to this little hospital that, amazingly, had a CAT scan machine—but they didn’t have a radiologist. So they took all the CT pic-
Why do we care about AIDS orphans in Africa? Why do we care about the Christians in Darfur who are being persecuted? Why do we care about a pastor imprisoned in China? Because we want to be a healthy body, and a healthy body is a body that feels the pain of the weak.

Continued on page 26
that,” because a healthy body is a body that feels the pain of the weakest part.

I told the Indian congregation, “All day long I’ve been getting e-mails from the United States. America feels your pain, believe me. American Christians know what you’re going through. We have gone through something very similar.” That’s part of what the Body of Christ means; what affects you affects me.

Remember that great scene when God chose Paul, knocked him off his donkey, and said, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” And he said, “You? I haven’t done anything to you. It’s these scumbag Christians down here I’ve been persecuting.” Then Paul heard, “What you do to them, you do to me. They are my Body.”

That’s the message of the church universal, the global church. Why do we care about AIDS orphans in Africa? Why do we care about the Christians in Darfur who are being persecuted? Why do we care about a pastor imprisoned in China? Because we want to be a healthy body, and a healthy body is a body that feels the pain of the weak.

**Radix:** That’s a great analogy. You have a book called *Soul Survivors: How 13 Unlikely Mentors Helped My Faith Survive the Church,* and you talk about all of these interesting people. You wrote the book about six years ago, and I’m wondering, if you wrote the book now, and it was about *How 14 Unlikely Mentors Helped My Faith Survive the Church,* is there anybody you’d add?

**Yancey:** Yes. A number of people have asked me, “What about C. S. Lewis? Shouldn’t he be in there?” Well, of course, he should be in there. But there are a lot of books about C. S. Lewis. You know, we don’t really need more comments on C. S. Lewis. (Although I must admit, the book I just turned in will include a whole chapter about C. S. Lewis.)

There were other people I wanted to highlight, but didn’t have enough information. Dame Cicely Saunders was one who came to mind. She was a social worker who noticed as she worked with hospital patients that when the staff knew a patient was dying, they were treated differently. They’d get a little coded mark on their chart. At that point, doctors wouldn’t even enter the room; they’d just stick their heads in, and say, “How are we today, Mrs. Smith?”

Hospitals don’t know what to do with dying people; they want to make people well. So Cicely Saunders thought, “This is a terrible thing.” In those days, in Britain and in a lot of the U.S., they wouldn’t even tell you that you were dying. She thought, “This is wrong; this is the last moment of your life. Shouldn’t you have a chance to prepare for it?” So she came up with a plan called “Care for the Dying” and submitted it to the hospital. They said, “Well, who are you? You’re a social worker. You don’t know anything about patients. We listen to doctors. You should become a doctor.”

In her 40s, she went to medical school and became a doctor. Then she formed the very first modern hospice, St. Christopher’s Hospice in London. And when I interviewed her 25 years ago, there were at least 2,000 hospices associated with her model. She had become a Christian at a Billy Graham rally, and truly believed that it was her calling, her mission in life, to get people ready to die. Isn’t that a human right? She changed the way we all understand death.

**Radix:** I had never heard about her before, and I’m glad to know about her work. What is your next book with the C. S. Lewis chapter?

**Yancey:** When we left Mumbai it was still scary, a scary time. There was shooting in the New Delhi airport the day we left. We were on a United flight, because they were still flying, although KLM, British Air, and others had canceled their flights.

When the plane took off, we just kind of breathed, “We made it, we survived, we got out of there,” and I started thinking, “I’ve had some interesting scrapes here and there.” I started making a list.

For example, I was called to Virginia Tech the week after that tragedy. People said, “You wrote a book, *Where is God When It Hurts?* and that’s what people are asking here. Could you come and speak on that topic?” I was still in the neck brace, not long after my own accident. I said, “I don’t know if I can get permission to fly, but I’ll try,” and so I did.

Another time a guy called me and said, “Could you come speak at a camp next month? We have a hundred prostitutes we want you to speak to.” That got my attention: a hundred prostitutes. He said, “We’re having a conference for ministries working with women in prostitution. These are actually ex-prostitutes, and they’re coming from 40 countries. We want you to talk to them about grace.” I said, “Well, I should probably talk to my wife about going to a conference with a hundred prostitutes.” Finally, I agreed, “I will come and speak to them, if you give me an afternoon where I can interview them about their lives.”

On the plane ride back from Mumbai I came up with a list of 10 scenarios in which I was invited to speak and there was a story going on behind the story. I’ve never seen a book quite like this. It’s a book of 20 chapters, where the first chapter tells...
the story-behind-the-story, and then the next chapter is about what I said to those people.

That’s the book, which will be called *What Good Is God? In Search of a Faith That Matters*. In it, I describe an image I’d used in an earlier book, the tabletop test. In Silicon Valley, they actually have something called the “tabletop test.”

You can have the greatest netbook computer ever made—the sleekest-looking, with the most memory, and fanciest, brightest screen, but the question is, will it pass the tabletop test? Because somebody’s going to be giving a presentation in their boardroom, and say, “Whoops!” and then it falls on the ground and crashes. If it doesn’t pass the tabletop test, if it doesn’t still work, it’s not going to make it. Because this is not a drawing-board world; it’s the real world.

The places I describe in this book became the tabletop test of my faith. It’s one thing for me to sit in my solarium in Colorado with a view of snow-capped mountains and write about how good the world is as elk saunter through the yard. But what about when you’ve lost your child? What about when somebody comes into your classroom and shoots 32 students? What about those situations?

As you know, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris go around saying, “God is not good; the church is the source of most evil in the world,” that kind of stuff. Some very capable people respond by taking on their arguments one by one and showing how they are flawed.

But I’m a journalist. I’m not a philosopher, I’m not a logician, so I want to go out and see, what difference does our faith make in the world? Does this Christian faith we read about, preach about, and come together to worship about—does it pass the tabletop test in the world?

**Radix:** It sounds like a great book. We’ll look forward to it.

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