"The Christian ideal," wrote G.K. Chesterton, "has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried."

Philip Yancey personally identifies with Chesterton’s assessment of Christianity’s possibility and its all too common human failings. After much struggle he was able to come to terms with the dilemma of absolute ideals and absolute grace that suffused the teaching of Jesus.

The author of ‘Soul Survivor’ came ‘home’ to the church. He found a more creative and hospitable evangelical Protestantism than the conservative expression he had fled in pain and rebellion as a young man.

“Why am I still a Christian? ... I have spent most of my life in recovery from the church,” he says. From his early years 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 feels he 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. He speaks of the church that wounded him with its duplicity, judgementalism and small-mindedness. Evangelicalism has provided him with a certain freedom to question. It lacks the carping, rigid parochialism of the church he knew. Perhaps more than anything else, it offered community, healthy motivation inspired by the gospel and a safe place to develop as a pilgrim.

Yancey became a writer to sort out words used by the church of his youth. He decided early to scout out people he could learn from; people he might emulate. He found some positive role models - some writers, some social activists, some Christians, some not. The thirteen people he writes about here made a difference; helping 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 on shared intellectual challenges and presents himself as a risk taker. His willingness to admit to profound doubt and his fermentive probing at the edges of common wisdom and accepted faith are only two of his more fetching characteristics.

This book is no diatribe or unfocused rant. It is, rather, 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.

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 social
and professional innovators. Here are some glimpses of what he discovered.

Mohandas K. Gandhi (1969-1948) 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 civil disobedience as a Hindu. When he reads Gandhi’s story
alongside that of Christianity Yancey cannot help wondering what went wrong with the
church. In an odd sort of way, the impact of Jesus’ life and teaching on Gandhi helped to
convince Yancey of the truth of the Christian faith.

Robert Coles (1935-) Harvard psychiatrist, Catholic, and teacher of spiritual literature
was a bridge-builder between the church and secular culture. He interviewed ordinary folk
in real life situations and learned 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.”

Frederick Buechner (1926-) Presbyterian minister and writer, helped Yancey discover that
were there 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 appealed 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 spiritual mentors, this book allows Yancey
to trace his learnings from the early reactive years to a 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. Yancey comes through as transparent and positive. What
shines through the brilliant writing of this once bigoted ‘white trash’ is a redeemed vision of
hopefulness and spiritual vitality.

Reviewer’s Bio: Rev. Dr. Wayne A. Holst is a writer who teaches religion and culture at the University of Calgary.