BOOK REVIEW

AMAZING GRACE: A VOCABULARY OF FAITH

By Kathleen Norris

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The continuing challenge for Christian communicators has been to speak and write non nova sed nove—not saying fresh things but speaking familiar truths in a fresh way. Authors, educators, and preachers have borrowed frequently—and shamelessly—from the likes of G. K. Chesterton, Flannery O’Connor, Dorothy L. Sayers, Francis Schaeffer, and most of all C. S. Lewis.

And now from Kathleen Norris, particularly from her 1998 book, Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith (New York: Riverhead Books). Norris’ volume was named winner of the Association of Theological Bookellers’ Book of the Year and Best General Interest Award for 1998. The New York Times Book Review called Norris “an ideal escort along the semantically bumpy road to her conversion,” and The Christian Century said Norris “employs the experience of her own life to breathe new life into the words on which the church has relied for centuries.”

The autobiographical details make her story all the more compelling. After a church-going childhood in South Dakota, Norris abandoned her religious roots during student days at Bennington College in Vermont and as an author in New York City. “A hapless and mortally embarrassed adolescent lurked behind the sophisticated mask I wore in my twenties,” she now admits. “Faith was something for little kids and grandmas, not me” (25).

Returning to South Dakota two decades later, Norris felt “bombarded by the vocabulary of the Christian church.” Even basic terms such as Christ, repentance, and salvation seemed “dauntingly abstract,” even “vaguely threatening” (2–3). After “an hour-long barrage of heavyweight theological terminology” every Sunday at church, she typically felt so exhausted that she needed a three hour nap, only to awake “depressed, convinced that this world called ‘Christian’ would remain forever closed to her.

Instead, she resolved to reconstruct her theological vocabulary, and these formerly forbidding words have come to new life. In the process, she has been “forced to shed the inadequate definitions” she had received as a child (8).

One may surely disagree with some of her definitions, and Norris claims to speak only for herself. We go with her where we may and part company where we must. (We always did that with C. S. Lewis, too, for example, in his assertion in Mere Christianity that we are not obligated to accept any particular theory of the atonement.) Amazing Grace is most helpful where it dresses the familiar in uncommon or unexpected idiom, where it makes us stop to consider a thoughtful insight.

She calls perfection “one of the scariest words I know,” partly because so many Americans are caught in its grip. “Martha Stewart might be seen as the high priestess of Perfection: one dare not let the mask slip, even in one’s house, where all is perfect, right down to the last hand-stenciled napkin ring.” Norris found relief from perfectionism when she learned that the word frequently translated as “perfect” (teleios) is better taken to mean “complete, entire, full-grown.” To be perfect, she concludes, “is to make room for growth, for the changes that bring us to maturity.” Christian perfection means “becoming mature enough to give ourselves to others” (55–57).

Norris frequently inveighs against the inclination to “disincarnate” Christ. “Dignified pagans of Rome considered Christianity a repulsive and barbaric religion because of the doctrine of the Incarnation,” and Christians “have grown adept at finding ways to disincarnate the religion, resisting the scandalous notion that what is holy can have much to do with the muck and smell of a stable, the painful agony of death on a cross.” Jesus’ taking on of our flesh “remains a scandal to anyone who wants religion to be a purely spiritual matter, an etherized, bloodless bliss” (114). Norris quotes Gregory Wolfe in The New Religious Humanists: “When emphasis is placed on the divine at the expense of the human (the conservative error), Jesus becomes an ethereal authority figure who is remote from earthly life and experience. When he is thought of as merely human (the liberal error), he becomes nothing more than a superior social worker or a popular guru” (162).
Norris makes us wince because her remarks are often regrettably on-target. “Many mainstream Protestant pastors take it for granted that their congregations won’t know much about the Bible,” she asserts, citing an incident in which a young parishioner told his minister he could no longer read the Bible because in it he had discovered accounts of human sacrifice. Though granting that it is good advice to “simply pick it up and read it” because “the Bible can and does open itself up to people as an instrument of faith,” Norris rightly notes that Scripture is in fact “an ancient library of divine revelation expressed in a dazzling array of forms—history, poetry, prophecy, lament, and story.” Most people “need a little help” (190–91).

Norris is not surprised at the modern lament that people “can’t find God in church” or in “organized religion.” She once held that opinion herself, feeling smugly superior to those who apparently needed Christianity. Churches “can be as inhospitable as any other institution,” she acknowledges, and belonging to one “is not like joining a hobby club; you will find all sorts of people there, not all of whom will share your interests, let alone your opinions.” Yet she distinguishes between the much-maligned “organized religion” and “religion as people actually live it.” When people complain about “organized” religion, she suspects “what they are really saying is that they can’t stand other people” (258–59).

Norris is sympathetic toward regards Pentecostals, observing correctly that their exodus from mainstream Christianity “reflected class distinctions as much as theological ones.” Pentecostal friends have helped her realize their “raucous” worship “offers many people a validation of their emotions, and themselves, that is lacking in other areas of their lives” (346–47).

Lutherans don’t fare as well in Amazing Grace. At one point Norris complains about a Lutheran bishop with whom she had a disagreement while attending a continuing education seminar for pastors (170–71; on that one, I agree with the bishop). Her one “brush with greatness” involving our kind of Lutheranism is revealing if not especially pleasant:

Years ago, when I was writing a series of human interest stories for the Rapid City Journal, I interviewed a local undertaker who had grown up in the business. His father had entered undertaking in the classic, old-fashioned sense; as a furniture-maker in a remote frontier town, he was also called upon to make coffins. This man was about to retire after more than fifty years, and he told me that the worst experience he had had in all that time was with a Lutheran pastor—for any reader who keeps track of Lutheran schisms, I should add that he was a pastor in a branch of the church that had broken off from the Wisconsin Synod because it was far too liberal. An infant, the first child of a young couple, had died, but when the minister came to help plan the funeral and learned that the child had died without being baptized, he said, “There’s nothing for me to do. That baby’s in hell,” and walked out. The outraged undertaker was left to counsel the parents, and he quickly called the pastor of a mainstream Lutheran church who provided the family with a funeral service. (313–14)

At a book reading in Milwaukee last April, Norris revealed privately that the incident occurred in a congregation of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. CLC folks were “wonderful people,” she added. They had belonged to their churches for generations but unfortunately had “followed the lead of their pastors.”

Most thought-provoking may be Norris’ reflections on evangelism. Once estranged, she has now returned to church, but not through what she labels “the relentlessly cheerful and positive language about faith” she associates with “the strong-arm tactics of evangelism.” In her view such methodology fails to take seriously “biblical ambiguity” about faith and unbelief.

Evangelism, she says, “a scary word even to many Christians.” She recalls hearing even dedicated church members say they “hate evangelism” or they “don’t believe in it,” and it would seem she counts herself among them. Evangelism is often “personified as the stereotypical glad-handing Christian proselytizer” who would “soon have us spouting a strange new language, all but inaccessible to our family and friends: I’m saved; ‘born again,’ ‘washed in the blood of the Lamb.” Norris fails to mention, of course, in a book subtitled A Vocabulary of Faith, that such words and phrases are indeed New Testament vocables of belief.

The language bothers her less than the strategy. Noting that the bulletin jacket for one Sunday at her church contained an article entitled “Summer Opportunities,” offering suggestions for how seasonal activities could provide Christians with “a God-given opportunity to witness to their faith,” Norris
countered, “Going up to people at a picnic and asking, ‘Do you know the Lord?’ was a good way to get yourself stuck with a barbecue fork. And you would deserve it.” She thanked her congregation for not using such “heavy-handed tactics” as she made her way back to the church and was most grateful that no one pressured her to return. Yet, she added,

The people in the congregation did evangelize in another sense, by saying and doing things they probably don’t remember. Most likely they didn’t think of it as ‘evangelizing’—the name of Jesus, for example, may not have come up—but little things they said or did revealed their faith in healthy and appealing ways. Something about the way they lived their faith—or even failed to live it, failings I could recognize in myself—convinced me to throw in my lot with them and join the church.

She concludes that evangelism is “not a matter of talking about the faith but living it.” Likening it to Ezra Pound’s admonition to poets, “Do not describe, present,” Norris regards real evangelism as “living your life in such a way that others may be attracted to you and your values.” The best evangelism—the “show, don’t tell kind”—arises from “an understanding of relationship that precludes forcing your faith, and the language of that faith, on another person” (300–02).

Here Norris seems to posit a false dilemma. We both talk about what is in our hearts—“out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks”—and we “with our lives our hopes confess.” Evangelism need not involve a dichotomy of life against words, but our words may be (and need to be) authentically displayed in our lives. As an author, Norris must have surely faith in words. She will reach many more minds and touch many more hearts through her words than she ever will even by performing many random acts of kindness.

One suspects she would never paste Come to the WELS on her car bumper and that she would disagree passionately with the outreach method I once heard commended in which an avid evangelizer plotted how he might deliberately crash his shopping cart into the carts of other shoppers at the grocery store in order to initiate witnessing opportunities.

One reason our synodical fathers were reluctant to embrace the English-speaking culture that surrounded them in America a century ago—along with a parochial loyalty toward German language and culture and the fear (real or imagined) that abandonment of the mother tongue would hasten the forfeiture of confessional Lutheranism—was that our forebears found much to dislike in Yankee style and manners. LCMS President Heinrich Schwan early in the twentieth century associated “the American spirit” with, among other things, emotionalism. The enthusiastic outbursts of American revivalists and at camp meetings struck the less expressive Germans as crass and immoderate. Faith was a thing to be held deeply in one’s heart. Our fathers were suspicious of those who so easily wore their hearts on their sleeves.

German Lutherans early in the last century also distrusted the American fondness for advertising when applied to the spiritual realm. Northwestern Lutheran editorial writer Hans Mouussa disparaged “church publicity” in 1916 because it had to be addressed to those who under ordinary circumstances never would attend church.

What will you write in an ad that might interest them? Hardly a statement of your creed, unless that creed is no creed and is attractive to the unchurched masses for that reason. . . . Some may come, if they like the ballyhoo methods and the ballyhoo kind of preaching, but they will not come again if you try to preach a real sermon to them after you once have inveigled them into attendance. . . . Our churches are the most eloquent announcements of our intention to preach the Gospel; by running after unwilling hearers with handbills we only encourage them to wait for more coaxing.

Frederick R. Webber argued in 1918 that “we believe in advertising” but urged it to be left for “the department stores, the tobacco manufacturers, the chewing-gum men, and the automobile manufacturers.” The “true Lutheran knows that such tactics cheapen the church, and repels the sincere worshiper who goes to hear the Word of God, and not to be amused or startled by an eccentric pulpit clown.”

Seminary Professor Joh. P. Meyer admitted in 1929 that he was “not enthusiastic about the canvass method of mission work,” going door-to-door and filling out name and address cards. The entire procedure seemed to him to be “a sign of decadence, smacking too much of modern business methods.”

Having become fully Americanized by mid-century,
responding to increased mission opportunities nationwide, and after formulating a serviceable variation on the “Kennedy” two-key question approach (“If you died tonight, do you know for sure where you would be? “If God were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into heaven?’ what would you say?”), the WELS “discovered” evangelism in the 1970s. One synodical exponent insisted that “shady” meanings of the word, equating evangelism with “hoot’n, toot’n hollering hallelujahs and fire and brimstone sermons” in revival tents, were off the mark. “Evangelism may never be an elective for Christians. It is the heart of the Church.” Outreach workshops and earnest testimonials soon followed.

Some synod veterans resented the implication that pastors and parishioners of previous generations had never done evangelism until the Wisconsin Synod’s *Talk About the Savior* appeared. (I remember one pastor telling me how his father was “willing to talk to anybody on the streets about Jesus” and confirmed many adults during his long ministry in the city. “These young guys didn’t invent evangelism,” he grumbled.)

There may remain among us some reticence about evangelism methods, though I doubt any of us would be as vocal about our displeasure as Norris is. If we have embraced the methodology of congregational and personal evangelism, along with more sophisticated advertising strategies, why is it that membership statistics in the WELS have declined over the past two decades? Is it possible (or even advisable) to look for any sort of cause-and-effect relation between aggressive outreach efforts and the actual number of souls won? Have we asked those who have joined (or, like Norris, rejoined) our churches what role such organized evangelism methods played in their reclamation for the church? And how exclusively can we focus on evangelism, to the neglect of other aspects of spiritual growth, charity, and service in the community?

Kathleen Norris, of course, is a poet and a story teller, not a parish consultant. She quotes a Benedictine who told her dying mother that in heaven “everyone we love will be there.” The older woman replied, ‘No, in heaven I will love everyone who’s there”— a subtle yet significant alteration. “The utter democracy of the heavenly feast, the banquet to which anyone may come and be fed,” has long appealed to Norris. She quotes Augustine on the value of belief in heaven for maintaining vision for life on earth:

> Let us sing alleluia here on earth while we live in anxiety, so that we may sing it one day in heaven in full security. . . . We shall have no enemies in heaven, we shall never lose a friend. God’s praises are sung both here and there, but here they are sung in anxiety, there in security; here they are sung by those destined to die, there, by those destined to live forever; here they are sung in hope, there in hope’s fulfillment; here they are sung by wayfarers, there, by those living in their own country. So then . . . let us sing now, not in order to enjoy a life of leisure, but in order to lighten our labors. You should sing as wayfarers do— sing, but continue your journey . . . Sing then, but keep going. (367–68)

Don’t expect Norris to employ conventional WELS language in her *Vocabulary of Faith*. That alone makes *Amazing Grace* a worthwhile read.

Comments and reactions to this review may be submitted to Dr. Braun via the editor.