

Grace note

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [April 11, 2001](#) issue

Harvey Cox chose the title of a revival hymn for the title of his memoir, *Just As I Am*. Cox's journey, which led him to the Harvard faculty, began in a small Baptist church in Malvern, Pennsylvania. Cox describes the revival dynamic he grew up with: the passionate sermon, the urgent "invitation"—"every head bowed and every eye closed"—to those who had not yet made a decision for Christ to come forward, the organ playing and choir softly singing, "Just as I am, without one plea, But that thy blood was shed for me. And that thou biddest me to come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come."

Cox reminisces in a way that reminded me of my own experience: "Was I really acceptable to God, 'just as I am'?—no improvements, no alterations. I could enter the presence of the *mysterium tremendum* (so I later learned to say) just as I am? If true, that was very good news to an adolescent who was always being reminded of my shortcomings and defects."

Later, when Cox read Paul Tillich's famous sermon "You Are Accepted," the old hymn was still humming in the back of his mind. That sermon of Tillich's is printed in a 1947 collection, *The Shaking of the Foundations*. When I came across Cox's reference, I looked it up. It had been a while since I read it. What a sermon! No amusing stories, no illustrations, no tricks, just straight, pure, undiluted, unvarnished theological discourse. Sin is our problem, Tillich argued—sin lower case and sin with a capital S. Sin is a state before it is an act, a state of separation from God, from self and from others. I recalled how clarifying it was when I learned that a helpful way to think about sin is in terms of alienation, separation and the consequent loneliness.

As Americans tried once again to understand what causes an adolescent boy to carry a gun to school to kill his classmates, the theme of alienation kept emerging—alienation caused by bullying and teasing, a sense of separation caused by social rejection. The cause also has a great deal to do with the insanely easy accessibility of guns. Alongside those realities, Tillich's explanation of sin makes even more sense.

If alienation is our problem, reunion is the answer. If rejection is our dilemma, grace is our salvation. Tillich's words are among the most powerful articulations of grace: "Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life . . . it is as if a voice were saying, 'You are accepted . . . by that which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now . . . Do not try to do anything now: perhaps later you will do much. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.'" Just as I am.