

A MORE LOVING WAY  
TO DISAGREE

# GRACE

IN THE

# GRAY

SNEAK  
PEEK



SAMPLE  
ONLY

UNCORRECTED  
PROOF

MIKE DONEHEY

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

*Finding God's Life for My Will*

**GRACE**  
*IN THE*  
**GRAY**

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WATERBROOK

GRACE IN THE GRAY

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## INTRODUCTION

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# The Art of Elegant Disagreement

My wife is really good at disagreeing with me. I'm sure I'm not unique in this experience. But what might be unique is that I've learned to love it. Well, I'm learning to love it. I'll be posting a video online or texting some advice to a friend, and she'll joyfully stride in, peek over my shoulder, and say, "Are you sure you want to say it like that?"

I used to cringe at those words, but even though it's taken me years, I've come to welcome her critique. It helps that she's tactful, but trust me when I say that my learning to love her dissent has been a journey in and of itself. I would even say that learning to love her opposing point of view has been instrumental in the writing of this book. Her considerations helped shift my initial idea. This book started out as something else entirely.

At first, I thought this was going to be a book outlining my

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personal positions on divisive topics. I was going to address every controversial matter the world has ever known. I'd do extensive research. I'd do a deep dive into a myriad of commentaries. I would eventually dazzle you with such scholastic brilliance that you'd realize my conclusions were so astute and insurmountable you wouldn't even dream of drawing any others. (I'm sorry if that's what you were hoping for. I really did try.)

I would begin with the topic of alcohol—a perfect choice because the opinions on drinking, at least within the church worlds I've been a part of, are varied and can be vitriolic. I even had a great chapter title: “Help! My Girlfriend Ordered a Beer!” Building off a true story, I would woo and wow you into complete agreement. *Brilliant, right?* Because of my expansive research and ingenious insights, I was certain a new humanity full of peace and understanding would undoubtedly emerge. I was going to solve the alcohol conundrum, and millions of relationships that had been broken because of the issue would be restored. *Hallelujah.* Once I wrapped up my bulletproof treatise on alcohol, I would move on to refugees and then politics and then vaccines, just for fun. Through this book, I was certain I would lead a unifying movement within the church and out in the world that would never again be rivaled. Or so I thought.

You know what happened?

My wife read it. She said, “I don't know if you've really covered the argument.” I read it over. I cried inside. I didn't want her to see she was right. So, I had second thoughts. I began to wonder, *Maybe certain topics are divisive for good reasons. Maybe both sides of controversy have pretty good arguments. I know what stance I would take, but does my viewpoint necessarily negate the other side's? Will my conclusions lead to greater displays of grace and unity, or will they just become another bullet in the chamber for one side to blast the other?*

I ruminated.  
I prayed.  
I repented.  
I decided against it.  
I pivoted.  
I rejoiced.

### WHY GRACE IN THE GRAY?

My positions might have been sound, but my posture had a lot of growing up to do. I ended up calling this *Grace in the Gray* because I began to think that maybe God left some gray spaces on purpose. Maybe God wove some mystery into the world because He's more interested in cultivating great lovers than He is great debaters. And when I say great lovers, I don't mean the honeymoon-infatuation type. Falling in love is the easy part. It's all color and sparks. That's not the love I'm aiming for. Perhaps God wants us to learn to stay in love, even when it's hard, even when it's complicated. Even when it's long and arduous and not all black and white. Maybe staying in love truly is an art form all to itself. Yeah, I think that's it.

This book is about learning the artful elegance of loving one another in the gray spaces.

After all, gray is everywhere we look.  
Try to resist it, but there's no escaping the truth.  
The world is not always black and white.  
Live just a little and you'll find it's true.  
In fact, the gray isn't just in the way we see things.  
The gray spaces are all around us.  
They are built into the very fabric of the universe.

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They are where the horizon lines disappear.

They are where the sky bleeds into the sea.

The gray is in the early morning fog rising off the rivers.

The gray spaces are in the skies above us.

God built them into the earth and sky and stars.

At dusk, when does the day end and the night begin?

At dawn, where is the sun when it's still behind the hills?

Solar pathways, lunar movements . . . we marvel when the sun is eclipsed and the light gives way to gray.

The gray spaces are in between us.

They are in our theologies and attempts to understand.

They are clouded in our limited perspectives.

We set our courses for unavoidable collisions of color and consequence.

The gray spaces are like bumper guards.

We have unique upbringings. We have unique views. We have biases.

We have limitations that we are sorely unaware of.

Sometimes I wonder if God put a little gray in the world to keep us all from killing one another.

As we go about our everyday lives, we will undoubtedly find ourselves standing in gray places.

We can choose to go toe to toe, or we can help carry one another through.

That's the aim of this book.

This book is not about agreeing to disagree. I've never much liked that phrase. It sounds as if two parties have decided to momentarily lay down their arms until a better opportunity to shoot each other arises. No. This isn't a treatise on tolerating the people who infuriate us. It's not about living with the ones who annoy us. It's not about how to reach a truce in cold, mutual disappointment

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where neither side is able to prevail. It's not a book on the art of stalemate—it's not chess. I have more in mind than the silent pushing away from a cluttered board because neither party could envision a way forward.

This is a book about a different strategy altogether: How can we can more lovingly disagree? It's about leaning in and longing to understand. It's about admitting when we're wrong and not always assuming our views are the correct ones. It's about curiosity and kindness and asking better questions. I don't just want to try on another man's shoes; I want to live in them for a while. I want to explore what it might look like to forge ahead in friendship when it feels impossible to do anything but retreat.

In the book of Ephesians, Paul says that Christ “himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (2:14). There's a whole lot to that sentence, but among other things, it means we have peace in the midst of misunderstanding. It means the body of God was broken so that our communities could be put back together. It means that the walls of hostility were torn down between parties who otherwise would never have gotten along. It means we get to worry more about building bridges rather than looking for ones to burn down.

Though nuance is never easy, I believe it's worth fighting for. And when we fight for love in the gray spaces, we might find we've stopped fighting one another.

### ***WHERE ARE WE FIGHTING ONE ANOTHER?***

I'm thinking here about denominations worshipping exactness.

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I'm thinking about politics serving policies and forgetting about people.

I'm thinking about people disowning family instead of being devoted to them.

If Christ came to destroy the hostility between us, then that must mean there is a unity far deeper and more beautiful than anything we have settled for thus far.

The purpose of this book is fourfold. I hope to help us

1. subjectify those we've objectified,
2. empathize with those we've vilified,
3. humanize those we've deified, and
4. see that our posture is just as important as our position.

I want to show you how in everything you say and everything you do, your posture can be one of love. No matter your viewpoint, you can stay in love when you disagree. We forget that even when our positions are clear, our intentions sound, and our arguments foolproof, if our postures are crooked, it won't matter much in the end. We won't be heard. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1). We can make a great point, but if we don't make it out of love for the other person, then it will often pierce and wound like a spear, not momentarily sting like a healing swab. Our great argument won't make nearly as much difference as we hoped it would. If it does, it will be in the wrong direction.

Have you noticed—especially in these past few electric years—that if you force your view on someone else, they're only more likely to dig in their heels or run for the hills? In the pages that

## INTRODUCTION

follow, I might not effectively change your position on some things, but I do hope I can help you reconsider your posture.

Because true worshippers will worship in Spirit and truth.

That is to say, truth without love isn't truth.

Love without truth isn't love.

I want to be honest on all these pages. I'm aware that my viewpoint, as an American male musician who is Protestant and white, comes from a distinctly privileged position. My ability to elegantly disagree begins when I acknowledge my own boxes and biases. We all have them; we just might not recognize them yet. I do stress *yet*. I don't know what led you to pick up this book, but I can tell you why I've written it. I want to love more, listen more compassionately, and never stop learning—which I hope you will be inspired to do as well.

And the good news? There's room for both of us in the gray.

GRACE  
*IN THE*  
GRAY

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## Leaning In

I've never learned anything while I was talking.

—Larry King

**M**y sister once stabbed me in the arm with a pencil. I still bear the mark. If you look just above my right elbow, you'll see a little faded gray circle of lead just beneath the surface of my skin. I'm not trying to paint my sister in some villainous light. The truth is, I deserved it.

I forget what we were arguing about, but I know I had spent the better part of an hour harnessing all the agitative force I could muster to see just how angry I could make her. After enduring my assaults for longer than I had expected any human being to last, she slowly turned her gaze in my direction. With one glance at the wild look in her eye, I recoiled. She made two moves simultaneously. In a flash, she grabbed her mechanical pencil and lunged at me with all her might. I shot away from the table and was able to elude her reach for four or five sprints around the kitchen. She

maniacally waved the pencil over her head and screamed, “I DON’T WANT TO HEAR ANY MORE!”

I slipped as I turned the corner to traverse the staircase. Seizing her advantage, she dove and plunged her writing tool deep into my right bicep. It dangled from my arm for a few moments before falling to the floor. I turned white with shock and finally yelled, “YOU STABBED ME! I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU JUST STABBED ME!”

She did not respond immediately. Rather, she stood up silently, flattened her wrinkled top, and collected herself. Then, with a casual toss of her hair, she said, “Well, now you’ll think twice before you aggravate me.”

She was right. We didn’t fight much after that.

I understand not everyone has lead buried in their upper arm from a childhood grievance, but I do know we all carry scars from the disagreements we’ve encountered throughout our lives. Anecdotal evidence suggests we could all use a couple of lessons on how to handle confrontation.

How do I know? Well, everyone who’s heard me explain the premise of this book has chuckled and said, “Oh yeah, I’d like to read a book on that. I think the world could use a little more grace right now.” While maybe some were just being kind (*thanks, Mom*), I think most meant it. The world could always use a bit more mercy. What if we learned to lean in instead of lunge at one another?

You just proved it too. The fact that you’re reading this likely means you’ve had fights of your own. You wouldn’t read a book on the subject if you didn’t sense your need for it. Let me encourage you—if you’re interested in learning how to disagree in a more loving way, you may not feel it just yet, but change is possible. You proved it by opening this book. Great job. You’re already

on your way. In the following pages, I hope I can help you find a way to lay your pencils down and learn a more elegant way to disagree.

Here's the hardest part. Before we do anything else, we must learn the art of making room by leaning in. If we are to love in the gray spaces—the places where our arguments find justified footing on either side—curiosity and kindness must lead the way. Our desire to be heard must not overpower our need to hear what others are saying. Our desire to be understood must not overshadow our need to understand others.

But how on earth do we do that? When you feel unheard in an argument, it feels excruciating to shut up and listen. How do you lean in when the other party is already lunging? But as I heard during an interview with the great Jeff Goldblum on the YouTube series *Hot Ones* (while he was eating an assortment of increasingly spicy vegan hot wings), Goldblum's acting teacher Sandy Meisner once quipped, "You're only interesting to the extent that you're interested."<sup>1</sup> That might not make sense, so let me unpack it. I think the world would be a better place if we were all a little more like Jeff Goldblum's acting teacher. By that, I mean that when someone is sitting across the aisle from me and they're showing no signs of caring about my perspective, I want to learn to lean in with curiosity rather than demand they pay attention to the brilliance of my argument.

That is the heart of this book. I want to cultivate interest and fascination. Everyone wants to be interesting and fascinating, but those characteristics begin to show up only as a by-product of learning to be interested and fascinated. I want to cultivate a "tell me more" posture. I may win fewer arguments, but I might just learn a thing or two about the other person—and about myself—if I talk a little less and listen a little more. If you're on board with

that aim, if you share that simple desire, let me explain to you how I got there.

## *RELATIONSHIPS CAN BE LES MISÉRABLES*

As I've already alluded with my pencil-stab story, my upbringing had a bent toward controversy. I'd like to think our parents instilled a deep sense of justice in us at an early age, but for whatever reason, we Doneheys love a good row. My family will sit around a Thanksgiving table for hours "discussing" everything from foreign policy to the best movies of the year. I say "discussing" because the first Thanksgiving my wife spent with my family, she had to retreat to the bedroom on several occasions.

"Why does your family get so angry?" she croaked out between tears.

"Who's angry?" I answered, a bit too emphatically.

Looking back, it's funny now. I was a bit like a frog in a pot of water. I was so used to the heat that I didn't even notice when the atmosphere might be boiling for someone else who was just getting dumped into the pot. I had no idea every family didn't operate like mine. I am pleased to say, we've matured a lot in this area. I'd even say, though we are a tempestuous lot, we don't carry around many hidden grievances. You don't have to wonder where you stand. But the point is, I grew up learning to argue. I guess you could say it was part of our culture at large and my family culture specifically. We never shied away from a good old-fashioned tussle.

Knowing that I was brought up in that environment, you can understand why it's taken me most of my adult life to learn to appreciate the viewpoint of someone who doesn't see things my way. It's been a whole new art form to learn how to lean in with grace

extended instead of jump in with weapons wielded. In my early years, if I couldn't win someone over to my position, I would either assume they were an ambassador of Satan or dismiss them as needing medication. Let's say I didn't exactly possess the gift of inviting criticism or of giving grace. Sometimes I'd rage. Sometimes I'd deflate. Whatever the result, I couldn't stand walking away when things ended in disagreement. In my mind, things were always black or white. Mystery was not an option. There had to be a clear winner and a loser, and that's just the way it was.

What's worse, when a heated conversation would stall, I used to antagonize my opponent until they climbed back into the ring with me. Remember exhibit A, "The Pencil Story"? There was no quitting on me. I'd pester until the tension found traction again. And if agitation failed, I'd switch tactics. If I thought my challenger was wriggling their way out before the fight concluded, I would simply dial up my passion. I found early on that when logic fails, escalation is a simple ploy to keep things interesting. If I couldn't be convincing, I would be loud. The problem with getting louder is that it's often the opposite of leaning in. No one leans toward someone who's shouting. We wince. We pull back. Offense leads to defense, and the battle continues.

Looking back, the louder I got, the more I trapped myself in my own perspective and pushed away the very person I was trying to pull in. Have you experienced what I'm talking about? You get louder in volume and greater in tenacity, and then suddenly everyone else gets a bit more muffled. Cultivating an atmosphere of curiosity will help expose our uninspected tendencies. For instance, if you yell at a football game, no one will notice the noise. But try shouting at that same volume in a library. Every head will turn in alarm.

What helped change my ways? To put it simply, grace hap-

pened. And when it did, the space around me got quieter. It started in the tenth grade while I was reading *Les Misérables* for Mrs. Raney's English class. I had just read the famous scene where the bishop gives the candlesticks to Jean Valjean. Although lesser known, the *next* scene is what began my great unraveling. If you're unfamiliar with it, let me summarize it for you: A young boy, Petit Gervais, comes walking down the path, flipping some coins. He's having a great day, skipping and singing to himself, until he accidentally drops his most valuable coin at Valjean's feet. The convict proceeds to step on it, intending to keep it for himself. The boy marches down the path, straight up to Valjean, screaming and begging for his coin back. Valjean doesn't move. The boy runs off crying while Valjean is left to wonder at his own cruelty. Coming to his senses, he runs after Gervais to return the coin, but it's too late. Valjean runs, screaming for the boy, but cannot find him. Eventually, he collapses with exhaustion, and then for the first time in nineteen years, Jean Valjean weeps. Victor Hugo, the author, writes a few lines here that I think are worth sharing with you:

To this celestial kindness he opposed pride, which is the fortress of evil within us. He was indistinctly conscious that the pardon of this priest was the greatest assault and the most formidable attack which had moved him yet; that his obduracy was finally settled if he resisted this clemency; that if he yielded, he should be obliged to renounce that hatred with which the actions of other men had filled his soul through so many years, and which pleased him; that this time it was necessary to conquer or to be conquered; and that a struggle, a colossal and final struggle, had been

begun between his viciousness and the goodness of that man.<sup>2</sup>

All right, as a twenty-first-century reader, you might not have been expecting words like *clemency* and *obduracy*. Don't feel bad. I had to look them up too. Let me explain this part of the story. In one moment, Valjean was overcome with the reality that receiving the bishop's kindness was "the greatest assault and the most formidable attack" he had ever experienced. Why? Well, he realized that either he must let mercy melt the hardness of his heart or his heart would be hardened forever. "To conquer or to be conquered," as Hugo stated.

I don't know why, but as a sixteen-year-old kid, those words indelibly changed me. I realized that I had been doing a lot of conquering but maybe I needed to let myself be conquered. I don't think enough people consider that when they talk about wanting grace. If you want undeserved merit for yourself, you must then desire that for everyone. Otherwise, you haven't received grace at all, have you? To be forgiven, we have to let our egos lose. We have to lose our right to lord over others as well. We have to let go of earning grace altogether. As Dallas Willard said, "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning."<sup>3</sup> Grace was a surrender I hadn't experienced before, but when it began to make its way into my operating system, I started living under a whole new paradigm. For me, this was the beginning of finding a more loving way to disagree.

## GRACE PARADIGM

A lot of us haven't converted to a grace paradigm, and it shows in

the way we handle conflict. If you keep resisting mercy for yourself, be assured you won't have any left for anyone else. Are you still in that place? Are you still living like Jean Valjean, deciding whether or not you'll give in to grace? Are you converting to a way of grace, or are you still living life in the quid pro quo, antiquated eye-for-an-eye system of merciless living? I've got to warn you, friend: There's no peace waiting for you there. When we live that way, we almost always go through most of our lives bouncing between the poles of defensiveness and defeat. It's endless and exhausting. It certainly doesn't help us more lovingly lean in with the people around us. I know this only because I still struggle with jumping to those default settings every day. The ping-pong oscillation of defense and defeat only ever leaves me worn out and alone. Believe me when I tell you, that system is broken.

Reading *Les Misérables* in my tenth-grade literature class changed me. I saw that I needed mercy and that everyone else needed it too.

It changed the way I talked to God.

It changed the way I talked to people.

It changed the way I interacted with everyone.

I stopped stepping on coins. I started giving them away.

I finally stopped shouting and began leaning in to listen.

I didn't have to scrounge and claw and hoard for myself. There was suddenly enough grace to go around.

Or maybe I should say, it is *still* changing the way I interact with others. That's a bit more vulnerable, and it's certainly more true. I'm still learning and relearning how to let grace have its way in me. You can call it justification or sanctification; I call it the great rewiring. Sure, my old system still flares up plenty of times during conflict. My cheeks get hot. My heart races. My palms still sweat when I'm challenged on my opinions. But now my heart

and mind seem to eventually override my body and extend grace. There's a new system at work. It is working. I hope this book helps you do the same.

I've heard of grace-based parenting; imagine grace-based arguing. I think it's possible. You might be thinking, *How does that help with inviting disagreement, though? And why all this grace talk? Just get to the point where I can learn how to win an argument, Mike.* Well, this is not that kind of book. I'm starting with a personal experience with grace because I truly believe we'll never learn to graciously converse with others until that wound is first addressed in our own hearts. When grace is our baseline, being disapproved of no longer feels like being disowned. We can even invite divergence because we know where we stand. We know whose love we stand in.

Think this through with me. If I'm accepted by God and so are you, then our utmost priority is to believe it and help others believe it. Every argument I engage in is subservient to that aim. I don't need to be as concerned with letting others know I'm right as much as letting them know they're loved. Now, I know truth and love go hand in hand, but let's be honest here. How often are we really concerned about loving others with the truth we're sharing? Put simply, grace makes us better listeners because it helps clear out the condemning voices in our own heads. The space left behind makes discourse possible.

## DISAGREEMENT IS HEALTHY

How differently would your conversations go if you knew your ultimate purpose was to love the other person? You might find yourself being okay with being wrong. You might even be okay when you're misunderstood or the other person disagrees with

you. That's a wild idea for many of us. We tend to believe that a lot of disagreement is the mark of something dysfunctional in our relationships. Lately I'm realizing it's a sign that something is actually healthy about them. Check out the Psalms sometime, and marvel at what it looks and sounds like for David, a man after God's own heart, to be in relationship with the Divine. He's constantly lamenting, moaning, and questioning. That's incredibly intriguing to me. God even calls His chosen people *Israel*, which means "wrestles with God." Maybe healthy relationships with God and people are built not on suppressed compliance but on a mutual trust that makes space for us to vent and work through it all.

I'm learning that when everyone in my life agrees with me 100 percent of the time, chances are I'm not really in a relationship with anyone but myself. It's the same with the Lord. If the God I pray to never refutes me, then chances are I'm actually praying to a God I've fashioned in my own image. If the God I pray to always agrees with me, then I'm probably just praying to myself.

Human relationships are tricky, though. Obviously, God can handle all my questions and blunders. He's God. He really has seen and heard it all. Humans, however, aren't usually quite as merciful as the God of the universe. To see disagreement in human relationships as a sign of health takes a significant amount of reframing. You could even say it's counterintuitive to what makes a relationship in the first place. We tend to get in *relationship* with those whom we *relate* to. It's at the heart of the word. Friendships are formed by relating over similar interests. We bond over the things we have in common. But is it possible to find connection in the places where we dissent?

LEARNING IN  
*STAYING IN LOVE*

Staying in love with my wife has taught me more about this subject than any argument I've ever been in. Romance usually begins with agreement, not conflict. It starts with that shared feeling, that realization of sameness. We connect over quickening pulses and widening eyes. We tend to fall in love with someone based on everything we hold in common. All those relatable qualities are what draw us in. We can't believe it. "*Wait, you like that movie too? Wait, I thought I was the only person who laughed at that. That's your favorite restaurant? I love that place! Incredible!*" Similarities kindle romance. The power of a shared glance lights us ablaze. Sparks fly when we realize we're not alone and someone else sees the way we do.

But anyone who's been in a relationship for any considerable amount of time will tell you that there's a massive difference between *falling* in love and *staying* in love. Falling in love is easy. It's agreement after agreement. But the art of staying in love is learning to love the places we disagree. To stay in love, we must relate in all the ways in which we're different. This is no small effort. Staying in love requires cultivating your appreciation for the other in all the little ways that person confounds and mystifies you. Simply put, we fall in love with our own reflection. We stay in love by truly taking in and beholding the other.

I had a friend once tell me that we fall in love with our similarities but we stay in love by learning to love each other's differences. We say, "Wow! You like curling? Fascinating. It seems strange and boring to me." "I didn't know sponging was a sport. Tell me why you love it." It's incredible how much wonder we can experience if we simply learn to listen more and talk less. We make room when we lean in. Thanks to my wife, I've learned that ap-

preciating dissent in my relationships looks a lot like learning to stay in love.

The chapters that follow capture my journey of learning to look for that mystery in all my relationships. I want to learn how to keep leaning in. Don't you? I want to engage in discussion more lovingly because I'm learning to appreciate someone else's views, even if I think they're crazy. Who knows, they might learn to love me in the places I'm a little crazy too.