

# SERVICE ROOTED IN GRACE



**We cannot change the world without changed hearts.**

**E**vangelical Christianity has long been a faith for activists. From William Wilberforce to Chuck Colson, Bible-believing Christians have sought to change the world for Christ through works of evangelism, ministry to the poor, and cultural engagement. We have aggressively used the tools of modern technology and marketing to confront people with the gospel and its implications in all of society. Such activism undeniably has blessed the needy and opened hearts to God's message.

However, there is an unavoidable downside to all this activism: Sometimes we have become so caught up in changing others that we neglect our own hearts. Driven by our kingdom-inspired visions, we become blind to our own failings. Such blindness, which doesn't come upon us all at once, makes us forget who we are—sinners saved by grace—and, more importantly, who God is. It is a blindness that also makes us deaf to his transforming voice. No longer close to our Savior, we plunge on, not noticing the people we trample upon along the way. We need a fresh start. We need to be born again ... again.

**Scripture:** Psalm 46:1–11; 51:1–6; Luke 10:38–42; James 1:19–27

**Based on:** "Born Again ... Again," by Chris Rice, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, March 2010



## Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

*Note to leader: Provide each person with "Born Again ... Again," from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.*

Chris Rice and Spencer Perkins were on a holy crusade to change evangelical hearts and minds about race. These godly men wanted fellow believers to break down racial divides that still plague the church so that the body of Christ can more closely reflect the prayer of Jesus: "that they may be one." There was just one problem: Chris and Spencer were getting to the point where they couldn't stand one another. Rice admits: "At the same time that my African American colleague, Spencer Perkins, and I were traveling the nation preaching about reconciliation, we could hardly sit at the same dinner table at home, where our families shared daily life in an intentional Christian community called Antioch. The long friendship and partnership that we had forged in Reconcilers Fellowship, a national ministry we co-founded, was on the verge of breaking up."

It's an old story. Personal strife has broken up more than one missionary team or congregation. There is an old saying that applies to this lamentable truth: "I love humanity; it's people I can't stand." We know that such strife and animosity in our lives and ministries are ungodly and unacceptable. But in the midst of doing good, how do we *become* good?

### Discussion Starters:

- [Q] Without naming names, describe a time when you faced interpersonal conflict in a church or ministry situation. What caused the problem, and how did you handle it?
- [Q] Would you describe yourself as more activist or as more contemplative? Explain.
- [Q] Which causes really stoke your kingdom passion?
- [Q] Do you have a spirit that readily forgives, or one that secretly "keeps score"?

## Part 2 DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES

### Teaching Point One: God gives us strength and courage amid every storm of life.

Chris Rice and Spencer Perkins and their related ministries were doing good work. Unfortunately, both men were facing burnout—with regard to both their relationship and their ministry. Problems seemed too big and long-lasting. "While Reconcilers Fellowship was vibrant, in my eyes the Antioch community had shriveled up inside," Rice says. "We

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were riddled by unresolved relational difficulties, financial stress, and constant and intensifying busyness. I could no longer live with joy and excitement in one sphere and discouragement and hopelessness in the other. Nor could my wife, Donna. I was striving to make a national impact, but that wasn't enough anymore."

They were soon to discover that busyness is not the sum total of the Christian life—even for a godly cause. In working *for* God, they had lost the ability to hear *from* God. As a result, their ministries suffered, as did their experience of God and fellowship with one another. Looking at the problems that swirled all about them, they neglected to see the Solution.

They may have been able to learn from ancient Israel, who was God's chosen nation and should have faced the future with confidence. But, perched on a strategic land route between pagan superpowers, the people were tempted to fear what might happen. This psalm counsels confidence, not in the nation's goodness or strength, but in God. Read Psalm 46:1–11.

**[Q]** In verse 1, how is God described and what pictures do these words inspire?

**[Q]** Verses 2–3 say we should not fear. How do verses 4–9 help calm our fears when facing life's challenges?

**[Q]** What do verses 10–11 tell us about the balance between activism and contemplation?

**Optional Activity:** *Pass out copies of Martin Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," and sing or read it together. Ask each member to share which verses or sections are especially meaningful at this particular time in their lives.*

### **Teaching Point Two: We progress in the Christian life when we see our sin as first and foremost against a holy God.**

Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice had crystal-clear views of *one another's* sin. Two friends, John and Judy Alexander, tried to reconcile them, but it wasn't easy. "Our old wounds spilled back into the room—all the painful residue of renegotiating leadership roles, our very different styles, the constant submitting to each other," Rice writes. "My long struggle with being jealous of Spencer was always a card he could play. We each held tightly to our 'lists': 'You did this to me'; 'Well, you did that to me.' John said the problem between me and Spencer was mostly about me. I didn't want to hear that. My list about Spencer was too long, too full of truth. I was tired of such an intense life together. Tired



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of living in a culture of demanding so much from myself and others. Tired of being tired. And all I wanted to do was to win.” What they lacked was a clear understanding of their own sin—which would have softened their hearts toward one another.

They could have learned from David, who had sinned against Uriah, Bathsheba, and an unnamed male child. Only at the prompting of the prophet Nathan did he come clean (2 Samuel 12:1–14). Psalm 56 represents his cry for forgiveness and restoration from God. Read Psalm 51:1–6.

**[Q]** In verse 1, David asks for mercy and the removal of his sins on the basis of God’s love and compassion. When we seek God’s forgiveness, what do *we* bring to the table?

**[Q]** In verse 2, David asks for cleansing from his sin. What exactly is he asking for? How would he know when he has it?

**[Q]** In verses 3–5, the king confesses his sins. Who, primarily, is the offended party (v. 4)?

**[Q]** How does a solid understanding of our sinfulness and God’s righteousness affect how we treat and view others?

**[Q]** God rejoices in us owning up to our sin and promises to teach us wisdom (v. 6). How do the two go together?

**[Q]** How can we apply that wisdom in our relationships and ministries?

**Optional Activity:** *Take time for reflection: What sins do you need to confess and forsake? What wisdom do you need to live differently.*

### Teaching Point Three: Sitting at the feet of Jesus is better than anxious service.

Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice were confronted with their need to give grace to each other—to not only be saved by grace, but also to live by grace. Part of that grace involves a kind of letting go and trusting God, of not thinking that the results of our efforts are up to us. “I hope I have become as radical about receiving the gift of Sabbath as I am about pursuing justice,” Rice says now. “I remain deeply committed to being shaped by Jesus’ story of the Samaritan who crosses social and racial divides to offer hospitality to the other (Luke 10:25–37). Yet I have also sought to be like Mary of Bethany in the story that immediately follows: She ‘wasted time’ listening at Jesus’ feet (‘the one thing needful,’ he said) while her sister, Martha, slaved away doing good deeds in a world of ever-pressing needs (vv. 38–42).”



Read this account in Luke 10:38–42.

**[Q]** In verses 41–42, Jesus gives the unexpected answer and gently rebuffs Martha, saying her sister has chosen more wisely. Sometimes the truth hurts. How does his answer make you feel?

**[Q]** Why did Mary make the right choice and how should her choice to “be still” guide us in our ministries?

**[Q]** Do you have a good balance between reflection and activism? If not, why not, and how can you make better choices?

### **Teaching Point Four: Hearing the Word and doing it go together.**

Nothing in this study should discount the necessity of Christian activism. We always face the danger of going too far in the other direction and falling into a passive faith. But our activism must be balanced—even preceded—by a grace-filled, vital walk with Christ. We must listen to him so that we will be able to rightly help others, as well as ourselves. As Rice says, “rather than starting with activism—‘What should we do?’—grace calls us first to slow down and start with God’s gift of lament: to see, name, and feel the brokenness.”

We see this kind of inner and outer balance in James 1:19–27.

**[Q]** Three commands are given in verse 19. Which ones deal with actions, and which with attitudes?

**[Q]** How might verse 20 bring balance to our life when we are involved in Christian activism?

**[Q]** How could verse 21 help us as we are involved in Christian activism?

**[Q]** What is the point of the “man in the mirror” illustration (23–25)?

**[Q]** List the hallmarks of true religion (v. 26–27). How many are internal and how many are external? Which kind do you find more difficult to practice? Why?



## Part 3 APPLY YOUR FINDINGS

Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice launched an activist ministry promoting racial reconciliation, and through prayer and hard work they began to see encouraging signs of progress in churches. But amid the daily pressure, stress, and busyness, these two godly men found that they needed *personal* reconciliation. They needed not more action but more reflection. So instead of keeping lists of how each had been offended by the other, they began to live in a new way, offering grace to one another.

“We decided to replace a culture of demands with a culture of grace,” says Rice. “Spencer said it felt like going back to kindergarten—learning a new language and new practices. For us, ‘telling the truth’ had come to mean telling the church and each other how *they* needed to change. But now we saw that the greatest truth was telling and showing each other how much God loves us.”

This study attempts to help us find the balance between activism and reflection, arguing that reflecting on God’s Word will enable us to discover the spiritual resources to begin living that life of grace. When we do, we will see, first, that God gives us strength and courage amid every storm of life. Second, we will understand that progress in the Christian life comes when we see our sin as first and foremost against a holy God. Third, we will grasp that sitting at the feet of Jesus is better than anxious service. Fourth, we will begin to appropriate the truth that hearing the Word and doing it go together.

### Action Points:

- *This week, get up half an hour early (or go to bed 30 minutes later) to reflect on each of the four scriptural passages in this study, one per day. On the fifth day, choose a passage of your own. Use a pen and notebook to record your thoughts and questions for God. Jot down what he might be telling you, particularly with regard to your ministry commitments. What changes, internally and externally, is he asking you to make? Then discuss this with a trusted and mature friend.*
- *Ask God to show you someone to whom you must apologize. Then go do it.*

— *Stan Guthrie is author of* Missions in the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends for the 21st Century *and of the forthcoming* All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us *(Baker). A CT editor at large, he writes a column for* [BreakPoint.org](http://BreakPoint.org) *and blogs at* [stanguthrie.com](http://stanguthrie.com).



## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

📖 Check out the following Bible studies at: [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com).

📖 **Knowing God** J. I. Packer, author of the book *Knowing God*, says that seeking God's truth "enlarges the soul because it tunes into the greatness of God." In this study, he tells how to shrink the self and exalt God, and how to practice repentance. Other articles discuss finding time for intimacy with God and involving both the heart and mind in the search for God.

📖 **Essentials in Knowing God** This 10-session Bible study will deepen your relationship with God by focusing on him and discovering what he is like. This course will also teach you how to repent, find forgiveness, and get rid of guilt. Finally, it will help you fill your prayer life with joy and beauty.

📖 **Who Is God?** This 12-session Bible study will help you think realistically and practically about who God is. It will help you understand what the Scriptures have to say about him, and how to make him a part of your daily experience.

📖 **More Than Equals: Racial Healing**, by Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice (IVP, 2000). When Spencer Perkins was 16 years old, he visited his bloodied and swollen father (pastor John Perkins) in jail. Police had beaten the black activist severely, and Spencer never forgot the moment. He couldn't imagine living in community with a white person after that. But his plans were changed. Chris Rice grew up in very different circumstances, of "Vermont Yankee stock," attending an elite Eastern college and looking forward to a career in law and government. But his plans were changed. Spencer and Chris became not only friends, but yokefellows—partners for more than a decade in the difficult ministry of racial reconciliation. From their own hard-won experience, they show that there is hope for our frightening race problem, that whites and African-Americans can live together in peace.

📖 **Shaking the System: What I Learned from the Great American Reform Movements**, by Tim Stafford (IVP, 2007). Working to make the world better is an American tradition that goes back hundreds of years. Stafford examines reform movements of the last two centuries—including the abolitionist, temperance, suffrage, and civil rights campaigns—highlighting principles to guide Christian activists today. Discover how to prevent burnout, avoid violence, and engage in practical and ethical politics.



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📖 **The Pursuit of God**, by A.W. Tozer (Wingspread, N.D.). In the muddle of day-to-day life, have you somehow forgotten that Christianity is a living, vibrant relationship with a personal God? In this classic bestseller and recipient of both the ECPA Gold and Platinum Book Awards, *The Pursuit of God* reminds and challenges you to renew your relationship with your loving God. In each of the 10 chapters, Tozer explains one aspect of hungering for God and ends with a prayer.

📖 **The Attributes of God, Book and Study Guide**, by A.W. Tozer (Wingspread, N.D.). What is God like? With profound spiritual insight and solid biblical guidance, Tozer examines 20 attributes that reveal God's essential nature.

📖 CHRISTIANITY TODAY's special online section about racial reconciliation is available at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/special/racialreconciliation.html>.

📖 "Ethnic Harvest: Resources for Multicultural Ministry" is available at <http://www.ethnicarvest.org/index.htm>.





# Born Again . . .

*“All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.”* —FLANNERY O’CONNOR, *THE HABIT OF BEING*

**A**FTER 17 YEARS of intense church-based racial justice and reconciliation ministry in Mississippi, my gospel had largely become a matter of trying harder and doing more. And things I held dear began to fall apart.

At the same time that my African American colleague, Spencer Perkins, and I were traveling the nation preaching about reconciliation, we could hardly sit at the same dinner table at home, where our families shared daily life in an intentional Christian community called Antioch. The long friendship and partnership that we had forged in Reconcilers Fellowship, the national ministry we co-founded, was on the verge of breaking up.

While Reconcilers Fellowship was vibrant, in my eyes the Antioch community had shriveled up inside. We were riddled by unresolved relational difficulties, financial stress, and constant and intensifying busyness. I could no longer live with joy and excitement in one sphere and discouragement and hopelessness in the other. Nor could my wife, Donna.

I was striving to make a national impact, but that wasn’t enough anymore.

I didn’t know it at the time, but I needed to be born again—again. This is how it happened.

# Again



with being jealous of Spencer was always a card he could play. We each held tightly to our “lists”: “You did this to me”; “Well, you did that to me.” John said the problem between me and Spencer was mostly about me. I didn’t want to hear that. My list about Spencer was too long, too full of truth. I was tired of such an intense life together. Tired of living in a culture of demanding so much from myself and others. Tired of being tired. And all I wanted to do was to win.

Over the next two days, John and Judy failed to get me and Spencer to forgive each other. But when human efforts fail—when we come to the end of our own resources and somehow let go to God—the Spirit intercedes.

On October 18, 1997, Spencer and I were interrupted by grace. In the last meeting before John and Judy were to leave, still on the verge of splitting up, somehow the love of God that John had spoken of began to work itself into our bones.

Spencer somehow gave me grace to leave Antioch. “I want Chris and Donna to be happy,” he said, “even if it means them leaving.”

I somehow found the grace to stay.

And we gave each other the grace to make a new beginning.

Spencer told how he had responded to John:

“Yeah, yeah, I know all about grace, I thought. I could quote John 3:16 when I was knee high to a duck. Grace is God’s love demonstrated to us, even though we don’t deserve it. But in all my 43 years of evangelical teaching, I never understood until now that God intended grace to be a way of life for his followers. Maybe I’m the only one who missed it, but judging by the way that we all get along, I don’t think so. Sure, I knew that we were supposed to love one another as Christ loved us. But somehow it was much easier for me to swallow the lofty untested notion of dying for each other than simply giving grace to brothers and sisters on a daily basis, the way God gives us grace. Maybe I’m dense, but I just never got it.

“At our relationship’s weakest moment, Chris and I saw, as clearly as we had ever seen anything, that only by giving each other

grace could we find healing and restoration. We could either hold on to our grievances, demanding that all our hurts be redressed, or we could follow God’s example, give each other grace, and trust God for the lack. We chose grace.”

### GOING BACK TO KINDERGARTEN

A new reality demolished our lists, and the interruption shook our life at Antioch to the core.

We decided to replace a culture of demands with a culture of grace. Spencer said it felt like going back to kindergarten—learning a new language and new practices.



For us, “telling the truth” had come to mean telling the church and each other how *they* needed to change. But now we saw that the greatest truth was telling and showing each other how much God loves us. Our paradigm for daily life had shifted to John’s mantra: “Caring for each other, forgiving each other, and keeping the dishes washed. We are forgiven. All the rest is details.”

Grace’s ripple effects spread further. Spencer had seen his father, John Perkins, the morning after John’s bloody beating in a Mississippi jail cell in 1970. Ever since, Spencer had been on a long journey to understand the power of racial strongholds in American Christianity.

Three months after the October breakthrough, during the closing message of a conference we hosted in Jackson, Spencer told the story of our friendship being restored. Speaking on “Playing the Grace Card,” Spencer translated that breakthrough for the church’s racial challenge in America.

“Nothing that I have been learning about grace and forgiveness diminishes my belief

in Christians working for justice,” he clarified, “especially on behalf of the poor and oppressed.”

But *how* we work for this justice must change, Spencer said. “Although we must continue to speak on behalf of those who are oppressed and warn oppressors, my willingness to forgive them is not dependent on how they respond. Being able to extend grace and to forgive sets us free. We no longer need to spend precious emotional energy thinking about the day oppressors will get what they deserve.

“What I am learning about grace lifts a weight from my shoulders, which is nothing short of invigorating. When we can forgive and accept those who refuse to listen to God’s command to do justice, it allows them to hear God’s judgment without feeling a personal judgment from us. In the end, this gives our message more integrity. The ability to give grace while preaching justice makes our witness even more effective.”

Spencer’s words that night were not received with thunderous applause. But just three days later, at age 44, Spencer died of a heart attack. Afterward, many told me they were now taking his words *very* seriously.

### GETTING LOVE INTO THE BONES

During the 12 years since being born again—again—I have sought to create more room for grace from God and with others. I used to live as if the psalmist had written, “Be busy, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). I hope I have become as radical about receiving the gift of Sabbath as I am about pursuing justice. I remain deeply committed to being shaped by Jesus’ story of the Samaritan who crosses social and racial divides to offer hospitality to the other (Luke 10:25–37). Yet I have also sought to be like Mary of Bethany in the story that immediately follows: She “wasted time” listening at Jesus’ feet (“the one thing needful,” he said) while her sister, Martha, slaved away doing good deeds in a world of everpressing needs (vv. 38–42). I hope I increasingly embody the difference between trying to be a minister and trying to be a messiah.

What does it mean to pursue racial reconciliation in and through grace?

First, it means to recognize that reconciliation is God's gift; it does not begin with our activism. The language of sociology, marketing, and rights often dominates our talk: "America is changing demographically; therefore, the church must change. Everyone should share in power. Now let's go out and make it happen."

Such visions don't say enough about God's desires and God's power. Second Corinthians 5 offers a far more beautiful and radical vision: God's "new creation" in Christ, and our becoming his ambassadors of reconciliation (vv. 16–21). Reconciliation has already begun with the work of Christ. And God invites us on the journey of reconciliation, the same journey that the early church was on: a journey that includes interruptions (Pentecost, Acts 2), a reconciliation among social divides (Peter's discovery that the gospel is for Gentiles,

in school cafeterias, the faculties of Christian colleges and seminaries, and at 11 A.M. every Sunday morning. But rather than starting with activism—"What should we do?"—grace calls us first to slow down and start with God's gift of lament: to see, name, and feel the brokenness. Only when we experience lament, feel helpless, and let go of control can we open up to our need for God and God's gifts—the only things that can rescue us from our alienation. Getting God's love into our bones gives us a holy boldness and mercy to take the time to see what's going on in our communities and institutions—the residue, the powers, and the imaginations that exclude others or lead to self-sufficiency.

Third, conversion by grace takes time and does not leave us standing complacently where we are. Fourteen years before the breakthrough, our church nearly split over

## **The most important truth in the world is not our trying harder to love God or others, but God's acts of love for us.**

Acts 10), dismantling discrimination (against Greek widows, Acts 6:1–6), a new intimacy (the church in Antioch, Acts 11:19–26), speaking to injustice (Paul confronting Peter, Gal. 2:11–14) and, especially, the Holy Spirit—not Peter or Paul—being the central actor.

Second, it means working for justice with a spirit of mercy. Even during the grip of apartheid, with no guarantee that justice would win, Desmond Tutu preached "no future without forgiveness." And Nelson Mandela, from his imprisonment through his presidency, strove for a future of blacks and whites living together. Different ethnic communities have different captivities, and all are in need of the conversion that grace and the new creation make possible.

But bitterness can blind an African American from imagining why her church should bother building relationships with whites who "don't get it." Legalism can prevent a white Christian from listening to the painful story of a Mexican who crossed the border illegally to feed his family. In everyday situations like these, a lack of grace is tearing Christians apart.

At the same time, a major challenge in post-civil rights era America is seeing the depth of racial brokenness. Ethnic communities continue to be segregated, as witnessed

a racial crisis. Yet a spirit of grace kept both blacks and whites at the table long enough for the whites to see the power and privilege we held tightly to, and for African Americans to see their spirit of unforgiveness. This first breakthrough of grace taught us about the continuing power of race, the later breakthrough years about the power of God's love. Both were necessary; both altered people at their very core. So grace not only takes time but gives us time to pursue reconciliation, not with desperation but by embracing long-term practices and disciplines that in the light of God's love become "graces" through which we and our institutions can be converted.

Finally, pursuing racial reconciliation in grace means to journey toward holiness. As my friend Glen Kehrein once said, "I believe in racial reconciliation because it's the best way I know of for a white male to die to self."

Spencer wasn't always the friend I wanted, but he was surely the friend I needed; I don't know who I would be without him, or who he would have been without me. What is at stake is far more than solving the race problem; it's about the renewal of the church—becoming and being a new people. We are deprived and impoverished without one another. Reconciliation is not an event or achievement but a journey that forms the fruits of the Holy

Spirit in us—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Grace insists that segregation in the intimate places of our lives is not normal, inevitable, or acceptable—and that reconciliation is beautiful. When knit and transformed together in visible friendship and common mission for the sake of the gospel, we become not only like Christ, we are also joined into Christ.

### **TERRIFYING, BEAUTIFUL GRACE**

In 1997, we at Antioch declared every October 18 "Grace Day"—a day to remember God's wondrous interruption into our lives. It's a day to remember that if the gospel we live and the social change we seek come to be mostly about trying harder and doing more, it is not good news. It's a day to remember that how we choose to care, forgive, and advocate for a new reality in this world matters greatly—all the while not taking ourselves too seriously. It's a day to remember, as the old folks used to say in Jackson, that "God might not come when you want him, but he's always right on time."

For the good news of the gospel is that it is God's timing, not ours, that matters. We are not the central actors in saving the world's brokenness. In the life and resurrection of the crucified Christ now living in heaven, God has given us everything we need to live well in a broken world through the Holy Spirit. God has already changed everything through the power of a grace we do not deserve.

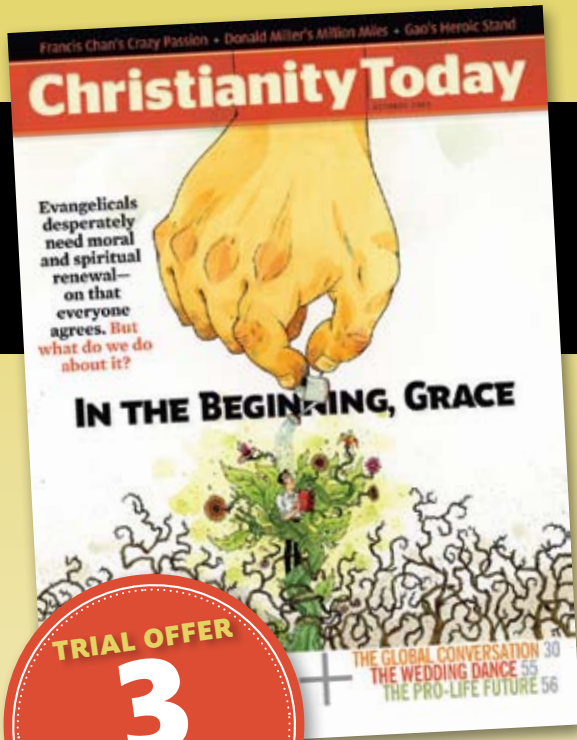
Flannery O'Connor was right: To receive this kind of grace is a bit terrifying. We and our churches and institutions will surely be changed in ways we'd rather not be changed. It is painful to give up our lists about others—and ourselves—for this other way. Grace is not safe or tame. But it is beautiful. If we receive this gift of God deeply into our bones, and speak it into the bones of those both near and far, everything changes about who we are in the midst of a world wracked by injustice and death. Every Grace Day, I celebrate that. ☩

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**Chris Rice** is co-director of the Duke Divinity School Center for Reconciliation. He is author of *Reconciling All Things*, *Grace Matters*, and *More Than Equals*. He writes regularly at the *Reconcilers* blog ([reconcilers.wordpress.com](http://reconcilers.wordpress.com)).

**Go to** [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com) for "Service Rooted in Grace," a Bible study based on this article.





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