

Black and white

by [Kathleen L. Housley](#) in the [May 31, 2003](#) issue

Grace Matters: A True Story of Race, Friendship, and Faith in the Heart of the South.
By Chris P. Rice. Jossey-Bass, 303 pp., \$22.95.

Instead of playing the race card, Chris Rice chooses to play "the grace card," a phrase coined by his best friend, the black activist Spencer Perkins just prior to his tragic death at age 44. By turns funny and serious, Rice is honest to the point of being blunt as he writes about their loving but difficult interracial friendship and their mutual work on justice and reconciliation. Rice is also riven by guilt: not a guilt arising from an inbred sense of racial superiority, but from his concern that the high stress of their relationship contributed to Perkins's death. Only in retrospect does Rice gain the healing insight that their friendship was indeed marked by grace. His definition of grace is pragmatic and simple: "care for each other, forgive each other--and keep washing the dishes," a definition provided to him by his spiritual counselor John Alexander.

Perkins was the eldest son of John Perkins, a charismatic pastor and civil rights community organizer who founded the Voice of Calvary Ministries in Jackson, Mississippi. While the Perkins family carried deep wounds from discrimination, they carried an even deeper faith and a commitment to justice that kept them going in the face of brutality. Rice was the son of missionaries to South Korea during the repressive regime of President Park Chung Hee. Because his family lived in a Korean neighborhood, he learned personally what it meant to be a minority and to be poor, showing up for first grade in a worn flannel shirt, "the trademark hand-me-down of an MK-missionary kid." Human rights abuses were prevalent, and Rice's parents frequently spoke out against them at great risk to themselves. Rice felt like a culture-shocked foreigner rather than a privileged white student when he returned to the United States to attend Middlebury College in rural Vermont.

Rice took a semester off in 1981 to volunteer at the Voice of Calvary Ministries. His early encounters with Perkins were not friendly. At a meeting soon after Rice's arrival, Perkins gruffly asked, "What I want to know is what are all you white people

doin' here?" Immediately, Rice had to gouge out of himself the do-gooder attitudes that had motivated his decision to volunteer. As a white worker serving under black leadership, he had to face the tough questions of equal visibility and voice. So compelling were these questions, so great the need to find answers, that Rice never returned to Middlebury, instead spending 17 years in Jackson as part of the Christian Community Development Association.

He and Perkins slowly became friends and then brothers. They spoke before national audiences, gave workshops, launched a magazine and wrote a book together (*More Than Equals: Racial Healing for the Sake of the Gospel*, Intervarsity Press, 1993). They also established a communal living center, rehabilitating an old mansion into which they moved their families. They named it Antioch, after the city where followers of Jesus first took the name Christian.

Paradoxically, justice and reconciliation on a personal level were also essential to their friendship, because the increasing tensions between them hinged on a racial role-reversal. As the eldest son, Perkins was being groomed to step into his father's shoes. His right to leadership was based on birth as much as on ability. This put in jeopardy the model of egalitarian co-leadership that he and Rice had constructed. Rice tried hard to accept his lower status and to overcome his need to be in control, but his anger kept getting the best of him, much to his regret. Repeatedly the two men confronted each other, prayed together, sought counsel from other wise Christians (including a community of nuns), reconciled and tried again. At their last lecture together in 1998, before a gathering of college presidents and deans, Perkins spoke sincerely about their arduous friendship and the profound change in it that had eventually occurred: "Neither of us was prepared for the overwhelming simplicity, the complete absurdity, and the illogical genius of God's amazing grace."

Rice's book covers many topics: the pitfalls of shared leadership, the trials of living in a racially mixed communal environment, and the poison of personal ambition. But his ultimate topic is a friendship that was severely tested and bent but never broken, not because of the strength of the two friends, but because of grace--simple, absurd, illogical and amazing.