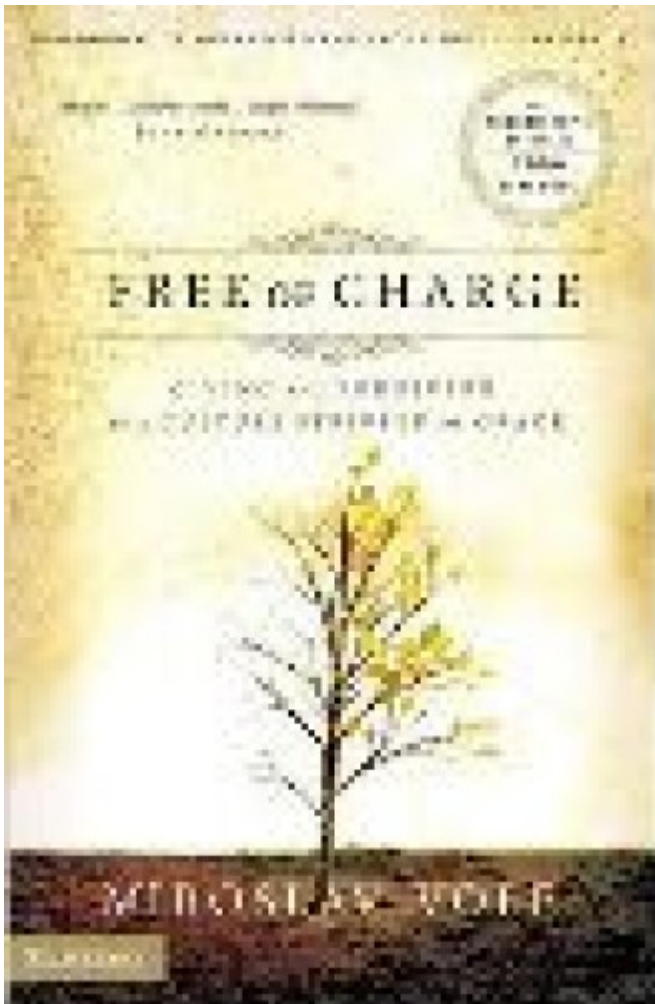


Free of Charge

By [Jason Byassee](#) in the [March 7, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace

Miroslav Volf
Zondervan

There are good books, there are great books, and then there are books that make you want to send copies to all your friends and pass them out to strangers. Miroslav Volf's book is one of the few members of that last category.

How often can one offer such praise to a book by a theologian at an Ivy League school like Yale? It is possible partly because Volf's writing doesn't fit the stuffy stereotype, as readers of his pieces in the Christian Century's "Faith Matters" section over the years can attest. Each of this book's two parts is anchored by a tender reflection on the nature of faith drawing on Volf's own experience, accompanied by stories about his growing up in war-torn Croatia, receiving his adopted son from the child's birth mother, forgiveness in the wake of mistakes that led to his brother's childhood death, and an imagined conversation with a skeptical reader in a coffee shop.

There are reasons to be skeptical here, for Volf calls readers to reflect on the manner in which God gives and forgives, and invites us to give and forgive as God does. Is it possible to give without expectation of return? Can we forgive when someone has committed an unspeakable atrocity?

Volf's ability to speak gently and wisely to such gut-wrenching questions is a hallmark of his work generally. He addresses these protests with the trinitarian pattern of this book's organization. Each of the two parts begins with God as giver and forgiver, whose nature it is to forgive "as a duck's is to quack." The second chapter of each part asks "How should we give?" and "How should we forgive?" with a focus on Christ as God's gift and forgiveness among us. Christ enters into human misappropriation of God's gifts to return us to the "flow" of inner-trinitarian giving that "spills over" in creation and divine forgiveness. The third chapter of each part asks "How *can* we give/forgive?" and attends to the Holy Spirit's power to transform us into Christlike givers and forgivers.

Readers of Volf's academic work will recognize familiar themes: the Trinity as a pattern for human relationships and Christology as a source for rethinking enemy-forgiveness and for rethinking politics in the wake of unspeakable violence.

Volf's theological skills are all patently on display here, from his rigorous and lively biblical exegesis to his gracious reading of church history, in the form of a running engagement with Martin Luther. Yet the themes are all recast in language that is almost entirely free of academic jargon. This book could introduce (or reintroduce)

Christianity to seminarians, undergraduates, motivated laypeople or the interested skeptic. It is not merely a worthy entry as the archbishop of Canterbury's 2006 official Lent Book, though it is that. It has the feel of a book that could become a minor theological classic.

Volf's book will have this kind of wide readership partly because of his appealing use of literary vignettes, using sources ranging from children's stories to Christianity's toughest skeptics (Nietzsche is a regular conversation partner); partly also because of his ability to present complex theological themes in accessible ways: "God is a giver more the way ducks are quackers than in the way I'm a biker"; but most of all because of a literary style that can steal a reader's breath: "Christ stands before the closed door of a grace-resistant heart and knocks gently with a nail-pierced hand."