

WHEN
DID WE
START
FORGETTING
GOD?

THE ROOT OF THE EVANGELICAL CRISIS
AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

MARK GALLI

FOREWORD BY RICHARD J. FOSTER
author of *Celebration of Discipline*

Praise for *When Did We Start Forgetting God?*

Mark Galli thinks we have an evangelical crisis. So we'd be wise to listen. He shows how in the long-standing tension between "doing" and "being," we have too many Marthas and not enough Marys. But we couldn't cure this crisis with a thousand sermons on how to have a better marriage or job or a bigger bank account. Instead, Mark shares ancient and biblical wisdom that can help us remember where we left God and how to find him again.

COLLIN HANSEN

Editorial director for The Gospel Coalition, coauthor of *A God-Sized Vision: Revival Stories That Stretch and Stir*, and editor of *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor*

Mark Galli gets it! As a Christian committed to both vertical and horizontal planes of the Christian message—righteousness and justice, embracing the grace of God and expressing the love of God—Mark offers an excellent rubric for those of us committed to changing the world in the name of Jesus. This book reminds us of a sacred balance that must be maintained where our prophetic activism never trumps our vertical pursuit of righteousness. We must love Jesus more than we love doing justice in his name. Thank you, Mark!

SAMUEL RODRIGUEZ

Lead pastor of New Season Church, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, author of *You Are Next!*, and executive producer of the movie *Breakthrough*

For those of us who have been at all shaped by American evangelicalism (or even ex-evangelicalism), *When Did We Start Forgetting God?* will challenge our assumptions and oversimplistic thinking about what the church is and what it is for. Galli calls the church to faithfulness and catholicity in practical and profound ways. Drawing upon the wisdom of the historic church, he casts a vision for the place of preaching, prayer, worship, the sacraments, and the community in the renewal of the church in the twenty-first century. This book is helpful, rich, and vital for any who care about and want to serve the church in America.

TISH HARRISON WARREN

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CONTENTS

Foreword *vii*

Introduction *i*

PART I: THE CRISIS

CHAPTER 1 Monomaniacs for God *11*

CHAPTER 2 We Have Forgotten God *27*

PART 2: THE CHURCH

CHAPTER 3 Rethinking the Church:
The Problem with a Missional
Mind-Set *45*

CHAPTER 4 Rethinking the Church:
A Biblical Picture *53*

CHAPTER 5 Rethinking the Church:
A More Balanced Diet *71*

CHAPTER 6 The Focus of Worship *83*

CHAPTER 7 What Ever Happened to
Communion? *93*

CHAPTER 8 Back to the Bible *101*

CHAPTER 9 And Now, the Star of Our
Show . . . *111*

CHAPTER 10 Making Small Groups Bigger
in Purpose *123*

PART 3: DEEPENING DESIRE

- CHAPTER 11 Shaping Desire 137
- CHAPTER 12 Love and Loathing 149
- CHAPTER 13 The World, the Flesh,
the Devil, and Religion 155
- CHAPTER 14 No Other Gods 171
- CHAPTER 15 Remember the Sabbath 183
- CHAPTER 16 The Bible Tells Me So 191
- CHAPTER 17 Contemplative Prayer 201
- CHAPTER 18 Suffering 209
- CHAPTER 19 Confession 217
- CHAPTER 20 Loving the Neighbor While
Loving God 227

Acknowledgments 237

Notes 239

About the Author 245

FOREWORD

I AM GLAD FOR THIS BOOK, *When Did We Start Forgetting God?* It pointedly addresses critical issues throughout the entire Christian community and especially for evangelicals in North America. As editor in chief of the evangelical flagship magazine *Christianity Today*, Mark Galli has been in a strategic position to view the multiple strands of evangelical faith around the world and most specifically in North America. My guess is that he is on a first-name basis with all the major players in American evangelicalism. Hence, when he speaks, we do well to listen.

Galli speaks to us not as some outside critic but as one on the inside who loves the church and loves the evangelical movement in all its manifold expressions. Galli believes that American evangelicalism is in deep crisis, and he is concerned to speak to what he considers the most critical issues at hand. He takes contemporary evangelicalism to task on multiple fronts.

As I read his passionate analysis, several phrases kept bubbling to the surface of my mind—phrases that I hope will help us draw near to the heartbeat of this book.

One phrase that immediately came to my mind was *bibli-cally rooted*. In saying this, I am not suggesting that Galli is a

Biblicist who scours the Bible for verses to proof-text every jot and tittle of his observations. To be sure, Scripture passages abound, but they serve the purpose of allowing the biblical worldview to inform his experiences and teachings. Galli is, I believe, seeking to follow the biblical path wherever it leads.

Another phrase that kept surfacing was *bold critique*. The word *bold* is carefully chosen here. Galli does not spare cherished organizations in the evangelical movement. For example, he provides a biting critique of both social justice advocates and those who uncritically embrace a chief executive with “blatantly immoral behavior and speech.” I think it best for me to leave the specific names and groups for you to discover in the text itself. But there is far more than critique here. Galli provides us with a thoughtful historical perspective from the great evangelical awakenings in North America from the 1730s onward. Especially helpful is his careful discussion of the 1801 Cane Ridge Communion Revivals in Kentucky. For Galli, these provide us with something of a paradigm for his hoped-for corrective.

A third phrase that repeatedly came to my mind was *evangelical fidelity*. Galli seeks to restore evangelicalism to a robust faithfulness in both devotion and practice. I am glad he has not given up on the word *evangelical*. It is, after all, a deeply biblical word, and it has a glowing history at critical junctures in the Christian story throughout the ages. To be sure, contemporary expressions are more clouded, but the jury is still out on the future direction for evangelical faith. So I applaud Galli’s efforts to call evangelicalism to a purer, more faithful future.

Far and away the most persistent phrase that kept echoing in my mind throughout my reading of *When Did We Start Forgetting God?* was *longing desire*. Galli is calling all of us—personally and corporately—to a flaming love for God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. He urges us to keep first things first and second things second.

Galli's use of the term *desire* is taken from a long and honored tradition of Christian moral formation. Perhaps a recent experiment of mine will help unpack what he is after here. At the outset of the New Year I sought God's guidance for a prayer that might carry me through the entire year. After a few days the prayer that emerged was a simple four-part petition:

*Lord Jesus, please . . .
purify my heart,
renew my mind,
sanctify my imagination,
enlarge my soul.
Amen.*

Most often I will pray in this way over a morning cup of coffee. At times I may sense a divine invitation to linger over one particular area. Instruction or guidance may be given, and, perhaps, confession from me. Most of all is the stillness of a familiar friendship. I seek to pray in this way even when the intentions of my heart are far from pure. Sometimes—not always, but sometimes—this prayer will follow me throughout the various activities of my day. *Purify . . . renew . . . sanctify . . . enlarge.*

I am now eight months into this simple experiment in

prayer. And one change I am noticing is a gentle shifting in my desires. Some desires are dropping away and others are rising up. For example, ever so slowly I feel myself drawn to experience those life-giving words of Frederick W. Faber:

*Only to sit and think of God—
Oh, what a joy it is!
To think the thought, to breathe the Name—
Earth has no higher bliss!*

Stepping further back in Christian history, I am finding myself more recently attracted to the experience that Catherine of Siena describes in her *Dialogue* where she has God speaking to her, saying, “The soul cannot live without love. She always wants to love something because love is the stuff she is made of, and through love I created her.” Of course, I am far from entering into all the dimensions of living that are described here, but I desire such a life more now than when I first began my little prayer experiment at the beginning of the year.

Isn't this what we all desire . . . or at least desire to desire? Through all the vicissitudes of life, our desire is for this white-hot love for God to be our very first order of business. Nothing is more central. Nothing is more important. Nothing is more critical. Not good deeds. Not faithful service in the church. Not missional labor in the name of Christ. Nothing. We love God alone. We adore God alone. We worship God alone. We are blinded to all other loyalties.

Richard F. Foster

INTRODUCTION

IT'S HARD TO KNOW when the current evangelical crisis started, because one characteristic feature of the movement is its relentless self-criticism. Evangelicalism is a reform movement, and one object of evangelicals is to reform themselves.

I do remember when I became aware of a personal crisis that gave me insight into the challenge we all face. It came in dribs and drabs of insight, like the morning I sat down in my home office, wake-up coffee in hand, to once again try to kick-start my daily devotions. It was early winter, and from my easy chair I looked out on the trees in our neighborhood. The morning sky was just being lit by the rising sun, and the bare limbs of the trees stood out in stark outline.

Next came a thought that may be trite as a metaphor but startling in its meaning. The dead limbs pictured the state of my spiritual life. My Christian life was, well, lifeless. I didn't have any yearning to know and love God. I wasn't angry with him. I didn't doubt his existence. I wasn't wrestling with the problem of evil. I was being a faithful Christian as best I knew how. But it occurred to me that I didn't feel any love for God.

As I sipped my coffee, my mind slowly got in gear. I also realized that although I prayed and read Scripture regularly, even if in spurts, not much in my life would be different if I didn't pray and read my Bible. I was living as a practical atheist. My personal relationship with God did not really affect anything I did or said except the formal trappings of Christianity. I was at the time managing editor of *Christianity Today*, so naturally I edited and wrote a lot of things that were Christian to the core. But I realized that if I never prayed again, I could still be a very good editor at a Christian publication and a very good church member at my local parish. I knew how to get along with others, manage staff, work with my superiors, interact with fellow church members, get things done, and so forth. But prayer wasn't necessary to do all that. Those were all learned skills that had more or less become good habits. My personal relationship with God really didn't make any difference.

My next thought was, *Well, if I call myself a Christian, I should have a greater love for God and desire to know him more deeply. Perhaps I should pray for that.* And yet that morning, like others, it occurred to me that I wasn't sure I wanted that. I recognized this was an odd admission for a person who claimed to be a Christian. But there it was. I didn't think I really *wanted* to love God more.

I'd immersed myself in enough Scripture and Christian theology to know that there was no greater desire than to yearn for God, no greater joy or happiness than to know God with increasing intimacy. And yet I had to admit that as I looked at those bare limbs and into my cold heart, I had little to no interest in that.

I realized at that moment that there was no hiding all this from God and that God had known the state of my heart and my will for some time and was patiently and mercifully waiting for me to see it for myself. That's when I also realized that the most honest prayer was simply "Lord, help me to want to love you."

There is a danger to universalizing one's personal experience to apply to others, let alone an entire body of believers. But I actually believe it worked the other way. For some decades now, as evidenced in my writing, I've believed that American Christianity has been less and less interested in God and more and more in doing good things for God. We've learned how to be effective for him to the point that we don't really need him any longer. It was that continuing concern that finally took hold of me, making me realize that this was not just someone else's crisis but a crisis we all share. Embedded as I have been in evangelical Christianity, I was particularly concerned about my own tribe.

And I've not been alone in thinking there is an evangelical crisis. If I were to pick a moment when the current crisis started emerging in our consciousness, I'd point to the 1995 publication of Dave Tomlinson's *The Post-Evangelical*. He described the book's genesis as two years earlier when, at the Greenbelt Festival in Britain, a friend made a passing reference to "we post-evangelicals." Although he wasn't sure what that meant, Tomlinson decided to figure it out since the term resonated with him and his friends. The book, in his words, is a "pastoral essay directed at those (and there are many) . . .

who struggle with restrictions in evangelical theology, spirituality and church culture.”¹

The book made a big splash in Britain, and the like-minded in America began to take notice. From this and other influences arose the Emergent church movement, which sought, among other things, to adapt evangelical theology to postmodern sensibilities. Perhaps the most well-known attempt was Brian McLaren’s *New Kind of Christian* trilogy, begun in 2001, which blossomed into *A New Kind of Christianity* in 2010. By the publication of the latter book, McLaren was not merely questioning evangelicalism but also orthodox Christianity. For him and many other Emergent leaders, the crisis of evangelicalism was also the crisis of traditional Christianity. Both, as McLaren argued, were mired in the spirit of “modernity,” theological rigidity, and a literal reading of Scripture and were cold to mystery, more interested in proclaiming answers than in “living the questions.”

McLaren’s “disillusionment” was intensified by the increasing alignment of conservative Christians with the politics of the right.² Fast-forward to November 9, 2016, the day after Donald Trump was elected president, and the disillusionment had spread and turned into anger for many evangelical leaders when we were told that 81 percent of white voters who identified as “evangelical” voted for Trump.

Fuller Theological Seminary president Mark Labberton summarized the crisis of evangelicalism at a national gathering of evangelical leaders at Wheaton College in 2018. He called it “political dealing,” and he castigated evangelicals for grasping at political power, for racism, for nationalism, and for a

lack of concern for the poor.³ As is clear, he was only talking about conservative evangelicals, but to him and many evangelical leaders, it is these evangelicals who constitute *the* crisis of evangelicalism today.

There is no question that the crisis today is more intense than it has ever been, with many evangelicals (usually those who want to distance themselves from anyone who supports Donald Trump) dropping that label, preferring to be known as “followers of Jesus” or “red-letter Christians” or just “Christians.” That discomfort with the name has been around for years, starting with those who felt more attuned to labels like *post-evangelical* or *Emergent*. So troublesome are these developments that InterVarsity Press commissioned a book devoted to the meaning and future of the movement: *Still Evangelical?: Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning* (a book to which I was a contributor).⁴

Of course, others have located the crisis at the other end of the political and theological spectrum and did so some twenty years earlier in *The Compromised Church: The Present Evangelical Crisis*, an anthology with contributions by Mark Dever, Al Mohler, and Phil Ryken, among others. For these writers, the evangelical church had become shallow theologically, biblically, and in its worship. Their views also have a lot to commend themselves.

Another view of the crisis comes from journalist and historian Molly Worthen. In *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism*, she argues that evangelicalism is rife with contradictions and confusion because the movement has never had a single authority to guide its life and faith.⁵

This may have been an insight to nonevangelicals, but it was hardly a revelation to those within the movement. This lack of structured authority is the great strength and weakness of evangelicalism. Having only the Bible and each person's reading of it has allowed evangelicalism to be a dynamic movement that shapes the faith attractively to each generation and each culture. But that lack of a central authority inevitably creates arguments and divisions and, therefore, an ongoing crisis in some ways.

These are but a few of the crises that those inside and outside the movement name, and each of the critics has been right in more than one respect. As editor in chief of *Christianity Today* and as someone who has been embedded in the culture of evangelicalism for over half a century, I've not only heard these many complaints, but I also recognize the measure of truth in each of them. They are not to be dismissed with a sweep of the hand.

There is indeed a political crisis (but in my view it's on the right *and* the left). And a crisis of racism (certainly among whites but also increasingly among minorities). And a theological crisis. And a biblical crisis. And a crisis in worship (and not just because of thin worship songs). A crisis in marriage and family. A crisis in evangelism. A crisis in social justice. A crisis in pastoral care. A crisis in discipleship. And on it goes.

Along the way, we've seen increasing predictions of evangelicalism's demise. Ten years ago, the late blogger Michael Spencer sparked one of the first social media conversations about the viability of evangelicalism with his essay "My Prediction: The Coming Evangelical Collapse." Among other things, he said this:

This collapse, will, I believe, herald the arrival of an anti-Christian chapter of the post-Christian West and will change the way tens of millions of people see the entire realm of religion. Intolerance of Christianity will rise to levels many of us have not believed possible in our lifetimes, and public policy will become particularly hostile towards evangelical Christianity, increasingly seeing it as the opponent of the good of individuals and society.

The response of evangelicals to this new environment will be a revisiting of the same rhetoric and reactions we've seen since the beginnings of the current culture war in the 1980s. The difference will be that millions of evangelicals will quit: quit their churches, quit their adherence to evangelical distinctives and quit resisting the rising tide of the culture.

Many who will leave evangelicalism will leave for no religious affiliation at all. Others will leave for atheistic or agnostic secularism, with a strong personal rejection of Christian belief and Christian influence. Many of our children and grandchildren are going to abandon ship, and many will do so saying "good riddance."⁶

I was skeptical at the time he wrote this and said so in print. But today I admit that Spencer was more right than wrong. Recent events and surveys bear out many of his predictions. We truly are in a moment of crisis in American evangelicalism.

To be clear, it doesn't matter to me if, as many predict, the movement known as American evangelicalism fades away

with the sunset. God has raised up many reform movements since the Day of Pentecost and has seen many die—some of which I suspect he has killed off. If evangelicalism fades away, he will in his mercy raise up another movement that will revive his people. The future of the church in America does not hinge on the health of evangelicalism; it hinges on the power of God. I'd say we're in good hands.

That being said, American evangelicalism has had a unique beginning, one that energized it and carried it along for two centuries and more. And it has been one of the most revolutionary movements in church history, changing the face not only of North American Christianity, but with the nineteenth-century missionary movement, the entire globe. This history has many troubling elements, as many have noted. This is not surprising because it is a movement full of sinners. But God has been good and has nonetheless used it to enable people from all walks of life and every corner of the world to know the unsurpassable grace of Jesus Christ.

Still, contemporary evangelicalism is in serious trouble. Actually, its crisis is the same one that afflicts all Christianity in America. At the risk of hubris and of merely adding one more item to the seemingly endless list of crises, in this book I suggest that one crisis lies at the heart of what ails large swaths of the American church. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn named it in his speech upon receiving the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion in 1983. He was talking about Western culture when he said it, but I apply it to the American church, evangelical and not:

We have forgotten God.

PART 1

THE CRISIS

MONOMANIACS FOR GOD

IT SEEMS ABSURD TO SAY we have forgotten God, when God is on our lips so much of the time. While the numbers are slightly down from previous decades, Americans worship, pray, read their Bibles, and say in polls that religion is “very important” significantly more than do people in other developed nations. If anything, evangelicals talk about God so much that many in the culture are sick of our God-talk, especially when God’s name is invoked in the public square to support one political cause or another. So how can I say we have forgotten God?

Let me begin in part 1 by picturing what the church looks like when it *hasn’t* forgotten God. From there I will look specifically at how evangelicalism has slowly but surely displaced God from the center of its attention.

In part 2, I will look at the state of the evangelical church, starting with a three-chapter argument that critiques the most prominent view of the church while suggesting an alternative. After that, I'll show how in each aspect of church life—worship, preaching, small groups, and so forth—we are tempted to cast our eyes away from God and upon ourselves.

In part 3, I'll suggest some of the contours of a life of utter devotion to God, as well as some ways we might begin that long and hard and fruitful journey.

But first, what a church that hasn't forgotten God looks like. To put it succinctly, a church that has not forgotten God exhibits one principal characteristic: a desire for God—a desire so intense it sometimes looks like drunkenness or even madness.

The first place to go looking for a picture of this passion is Scripture.

DESIRE FROM BEGINNING TO END

The most vivid example of such desire is King David. David was known as a man of action, a military leader, a nation's king, busy with the affairs of state. He is also famous for his extramarital affair with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her husband. But the one characteristic that seems to have earned him the label of “a man after [God's] own heart” (Acts 13:22) was that he sought God wholeheartedly.

Psalm 63 expresses this most eloquently:

O God, you are my God;
I earnestly search for you.
My soul thirsts for you;
my whole body longs for you
in this parched and weary land
where there is no water.
I have seen you in your sanctuary
and gazed upon your power and glory.
Your unfailing love is better than life itself;
how I praise you!
I will praise you as long as I live,
lifting up my hands to you in prayer.
You satisfy me more than the richest feast.
I will praise you with songs of joy.

PSALM 63:1-5

Believing that God's presence was especially to be found
in the Temple, David also prayed,

The one thing I ask of the LORD—
the thing I seek most—
is to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
delighting in the LORD's perfections
and meditating in his Temple.

PSALM 27:4

Of course, David isn't the only psalmist to yearn for God's palpable presence. Psalm 42 was written by "the descendants of Korah" and famously begins

As the deer longs for streams of water,
so I long for you, O God.
I thirst for God, the living God.

PSALM 42:1-2

These examples could be multiplied, as any reader of the Psalms knows. The psalmists were driven by a desire to know God. Not just to know his will. Not just to do his will. Not just to be wise. Not just to be righteous. But to *know God*, to be with God, to bask in his presence.

Persons of a stoic nature, like me, are tempted to assume such passion is only for highly emotional personalities. Frankly, at times David and the other psalmists seem like emotional wrecks, either lamenting their sorry state or begging desperately for divine aid or longing passionately for God. My instinct is to tell them to just calm down.

But this over-the-top drive to know and love God is found throughout Scripture, which makes me question my stoicism. For example, we see it also in Isaiah the prophet: “In the night I search for you; in the morning I earnestly seek you” (26:9). We see it in Paul: “Everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him” (Philippians 3:8-9). And we see it in Jesus’ life and ministry—not so much in his yearning to be one with God (that would be absurd for the one in whom God fully dwells) but in his teaching, especially in what he said was the greatest commandment: “You must love

the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength” (Mark 12:30). That pretty much covers the emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical landscape of human life.

To put it another way, Jesus told us we are to be mono-maniacs for God, people whose lives are so obsessed with knowing and loving God that some people might wonder about our sanity. Like Francis of Assisi, whose father was so startled by his efforts to follow Jesus radically that his father locked him in the family cellar until he came to his senses. Like Jesus, whose family thought he was “out of his mind” (Mark 3:21).

Again, people like me—who strive to keep our emotions in check, to navigate life on an even keel, to take things in stride—try to squirm out of this by saying that this first and greatest commandment is merely about obeying God’s commands. We demonstrate our love for God by caring for others in very practical ways—doing favors for friends, listening attentively to troubled coworkers, serving at the food pantry, and maybe even standing in a prayer vigil at an abortion clinic or joining a protest march against racial injustice. Doing stuff that helps others—that’s what it means to love God.

That’s certainly part of it (see 1 John 5:3!). But here’s the rub: Jesus didn’t say that loving our neighbor is the way we show that we love God. He said the first commandment is to love God, and then he announced a second commandment—as if in a different category—which is to love others. This second commandment was not a commentary on the first.

Add to that the unique character of the first commandment. There is something extraordinary about the love of God. We're commanded to love God with the complete range of emotion, with the full measure of spiritual fervor, with unending intellectual effort, and with every calorie of energy.

Jesus, as was his custom, was using hyperbole, because if we were to love God like this we wouldn't have anything left for the neighbor. But the point is made. Jesus was simply putting into command form the passion eloquently found in the Psalms: "Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth" (Psalm 73:25). This is the deep and abiding desire he calls us to pursue.

STARVING FOR GOD

Scripture employs a variety of metaphors to drive home the intensity and the wonder of this desire. One set traffics in the idea of bodily nourishment—hunger and thirst.

We see this first in the Exodus account, where Moses explains one lesson from the miracle of manna: "He humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deuteronomy 8:3).

This, of course, is the verse Jesus quotes when tempted by Satan to break his fast. But this isn't the only time Jesus employs this metaphor. On another occasion, he explains to a crowd that his Father was responsible for feeding the

Israelites in the desert with bread from heaven, but he now offers “the true bread from heaven.”

His listeners reply, “Give us that bread every day.”

Jesus responds, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:32-35).

When his listeners become increasingly disturbed by this teaching, Jesus doubles down, saying something that no doubt startles them: “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have eternal life within you. . . . For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him” (verses 53-56).

It is a violent, frankly cannibalistic image meant to shock them into a deeper reality—the intense and personal nature of our union with God. Just as food and drink nourish and sustain us and become part of our bodies, so Jesus can sustain, nurture, and become one with us in spirit. And if we want such an intimate and life-sustaining union, we will hunger and thirst for it like nothing else.

I and many of my readers live in lands of abundance, so the biblical metaphor probably does not quite register. Our pangs of hunger needn't last but for a few minutes. Within ready reach—in a refrigerator or store or vending machine—is something to nourish us. Hunger for us is a mere inconvenience and food an entertainment. We watch reality TV shows that revel in the abundance of food and in the creativity of chefs, and some of us pride ourselves in being “foodies.”

The biblical writers knew little of the affluence we enjoy.

It was not uncommon for them to endure periods of drought or famine. Food was neither a hobby nor about satisfying cravings but often a matter of life and death.

They would much more likely identify with the sufferers of modern-day famines. Christopher Hitchens describes one such famine he witnessed on a trip to North Korea:

In the fields, you can see people picking up loose grains of rice and kernels of corn, gleaning every scrap. They look pinched and exhausted. In the few, dingy restaurants in the city, and even in the few modern hotels, you can read the *Pyongyang Times* through the soup, or the tea, or the coffee. Morsels of inexplicable fat or gristle are served as “duck.” One evening I gave in and tried a bowl of dog stew, which at least tasted hearty and spicy . . . but then found my appetite crucially diminished by the realization that I hadn’t seen a domestic animal, not even the merest cat, in the whole time I was there.¹

To hunger and thirst for God in the biblical sense is to be desperate for God. The psalmist, among others, believes he is starved and dehydrated without God, as one whose skin sucks on his bones and exposes his skeleton, whose listlessness fuels his despair, who scours the ground for even a single grain of rice. The psalmist so desires to know God and his love—and here’s where the nourishment metaphor is ironically transcended—that he says it is “better than life itself” (Psalm 63:3).

THE ROMANCE OF GOD

Romantic love is another biblical metaphor that pictures this desire.

In our age, we have recovered the original meaning of the Song of Solomon as a celebration of romantic love between a man and a woman. But for centuries, the church has also rightly understood romantic love as a symbol of the love between God and his people. For example, Bernard of Clairvaux published eighty-six sermons on the Song of Solomon, waxing eloquent on just this theme.

Bernard came by this interpretation honestly and biblically. Perhaps the most well-known use of the metaphor is found in the apostle Paul's discussion of marital love, saying that in some ways it pictures the love between God and us: "As the Scriptures say, 'A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.' This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one" (Ephesians 5:31-32).

And he uses the metaphor elsewhere, as well: "For I am jealous for you with the jealousy of God himself. I promised you as a pure bride to one husband—Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2).

Paul came by this metaphor honestly as well, drawing on the many Old Testament passages that pictured God as the bridegroom and Israel as the bride. Take this from the prophet Isaiah:

"Your Creator will be your husband;
the LORD of Heaven's Armies is his name!

He is your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel,
the God of all the earth.

For the LORD has called you back from your grief—
as though you were a young wife abandoned by
her husband,”
says your God.

ISAIAH 54:5-6

Perhaps the most famous and extended use of the metaphor comes from Hosea:

I will make you my wife forever,
showing you righteousness and justice,
unfailing love and compassion.
I will be faithful to you and make you mine,
and you will finally know me as the LORD.

HOSEA 2:19-20

Jesus picks up this theme, using wedding imagery in his parables to picture our relationship with God in the Kingdom of Heaven: “The Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a king who prepared a great wedding feast for his son” (Matthew 22:2).

And this (along with the nourishment metaphor) is carried through to the end of the Bible, in the vision of the culmination of all things:

“Praise the LORD!

For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.

Let us be glad and rejoice,
and let us give honor to him.
For the time has come for the wedding feast of
the Lamb,
and his bride has prepared herself.
She has been given the finest of pure white linen
to wear.”

For the fine linen represents the good deeds of
God’s holy people.

REVELATION 19:6-8

It is no wonder, then, that Bernard, among other church writers, exploits this metaphor as he opens his sermon series on the Song of Solomon. In sermon 3, in explaining the meaning of “Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth,” he says,

Any one who has received this mystical kiss from the mouth of Christ at least once, seeks again that intimate experience, and eagerly looks for its frequent renewal. I think that nobody can grasp what it is except the one who receives it. For it is “a hidden manna,” and only he who eats it still hungers for more.²

(Note how he employs the nourishment metaphor as well.)

In short, the desire for God is not unlike falling in love, in which the lovestruck desire nothing else but to be with

the beloved. It's like the physical passion young lovers feel for each other. And it's like the ecstasy of sexual union that momentarily satisfies ever so deeply but before long grows into a desire to know ecstasy again.

PROTO-EVANGELICALS

Bernard is one of many proto-evangelicals in his emphasis on the personal, intimate, and passionate relationship we can have with God. As he put it in *On Loving God*,

He is all that I need, all that I long for. My God and my help, I will love Thee for Thy great goodness; not so much as I might, surely, but as much as I can. I cannot love Thee as Thou deservest to be loved, for I cannot love Thee more than my own feebleness permits. I will love Thee more when Thou deemest me worthy to receive greater capacity for loving; yet never so perfectly as Thou hast deserved of me.³

To encounter the living God is to meet with two realities at the same time. The first was expressed no more eloquently than by the philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal, when he haltingly described, seemingly while it was happening, his stunning vision:

THE YEAR OF GRACE 1654, MONDAY, 23 NOVEMBER

From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight—

FIRE.

*GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob
not of the philosophers and of the learned.*

Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.

GOD of Jesus Christ.

My God and your God.

Your GOD will be my God.

*Forgetfulness of the world and of everything,
except GOD.⁴*

Many a saint has experienced this reality, if not in a direct, overwhelming vision, certainly in some encounter they can never shake. They can never shake it because of the second reality that accompanies an encounter with the living God—its insatiableness. C. S. Lewis talked about such an experience as an encounter with joy:

It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me. . . . It was a sensation, of course, of desire; but desire for what? . . . An unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again.⁵

The cardinal mistake in some Christian circles is telling people that knowing God will bring us peace. Yes, in the sense of knowing forgiveness and purpose in life. But in a deeper sense, an encounter with God brings us not only satisfaction but also deep dissatisfaction, not just fulfillment but also longing, and a longing that can never be fulfilled. In her *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian of Norwich called it “an unbearable desire.” She wrote, “If he graciously lets us see something of himself, then we are moved by the same grace to seek with a great longing to see him more fully.” She put it best when she said, “I saw him and I sought him, I had him and I wanted him.”⁶

We are longing for the infinite, for that to which all other desires only point. And when our desires are fulfilled however briefly, we recognize how much more there is in God’s beauty and wonder and love. We can never exhaust God’s wonder and glory—and for that very reason it is the most precious of longings.

Again, a person like me is tempted to say that longing is given only to a few naturally spiritual people. They have a unique desire for God, but most of us desire concrete realities and have special passions for, perhaps, food and drink, or romance and love, or fine music or fine art, or to be in the splendor of creation, and so forth. To each their own. This spiritual passion isn’t for everybody, I think.

And yet Jesus says it is, in that he commands that we all pursue the love of God and pursue it to the fullest extent. This, like all commands, is not as much a “should” as it is a promise: do this, and you shall live. *Really* live.

In our restlessness, we flit from one thing to another as we follow our desires, hoping against hope to find something, anything, that will cure our boredom and satisfy our longings. Everything we pursue—financial security, love, fulfillment in a calling, the joy of a hobby or pastime, and so forth—are mere pointers to something more true, more good, and more beautiful. We remain restless precisely because we mistake these shadows for the real thing.

At our worst, we make idols out of the penultimate things we desire. At our most innocent, we are like confused travelers who rejoice in reaching a milestone as if we've arrived at our glorious destination. In either case, there is something better that awaits us. Augustine, in reflecting on his youth, said, "I sought pleasure, nobility, and truth not in God but in the beings He had created, myself and others. Thus I fell into sorrow and confusion and error. Thanks be to Thee, my Joy and my Glory and my Hope and my God: thanks be to Thee for Thy gifts."⁷

In commenting on this, Augustine scholar Michael Foley has noted that this passage outlines Augustine's theology of desire: "The appetite for physical pleasure is ultimately a groaning for happiness in God, and thus the attempt to satisfy it with created goods instead of the Creator ends in sorrow rather than joy."⁸ The same applies to the yearning for nobility and truth.

Thus there is no one who is not "into God," so to speak. The only thing at issue is whether we are aware of what our desires are for and where they are designed to lead us. As

Augustine famously and succinctly put it, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”

To desire God—this is the sum and substance of life. It’s not just one injunction of many, but the *greatest* commandment. It’s not merely a duty to fulfill but the fulfillment of life itself—to love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength. There is no greater blessing than to give oneself to this pursuit and to enjoy the everlasting longing it produces in us. This is what the Westminster Shorter Catechism is getting at when it says that the chief purpose of men and women is “to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

So the psalmist is not neurotic or an emotional wreck, as I am sometimes tempted to think, but the sanest of human creatures. If this monomania is a mental illness, then let us all share in it. The church is not only a hospital for sinners but also an asylum for those disturbed saints who are monomaniacs for God, who want nothing but to seek after him, knowing full well that the pursuit will never end, and yet knowing too that there is nothing better to do with one’s life: “I saw him and I sought him, I had him and I wanted him.”