

## CHAPTER 3

# THAT OTHER GOD

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The inattentive, slovenly way we drift into the presence of God is an indication that we are not bothering to think about Him.

OSWALD CHAMBERS,  
*MORAL FOUNDATIONS OF LIFE*

The only way to avoid the true God is to fabricate a false god that's controllable.

PASTOR TIMOTHY KELLER



## REMEMBER THE GOOD OLD DAYS?

In his writings, C. S. Lewis often referenced the German term *sehnsucht*. It's a word that is almost impossible to translate to English, but all of us have experienced it.

Have you ever been back to your childhood home? In your memory, the house was so big and the neighborhood oh-so-treelined and idyllic! Only now you discover the house is actually tiny and the street kind of a dump. Or what about that *amazing* restaurant you went to on your first date? Remember how delicious the food was? Only now that you go back, you think, *Wow, this food is awful*. That's *sehnsucht*. It's the longing or yearning for something that was probably more imagined than real.

*Sehnsucht* seems appropriate in the context of our fading Christian culture. When Christians look back on those golden days that keep receding into the distance, we like to imagine that it's the world that walked away from our influence. But the harsh truth is that it's Christians who have done the walking away.

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**We have abandoned our faith.  
We're just the last to notice.**

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The first two chapters of this book dealt with Christians' loss of influence in our culture and placed the blame squarely where it belongs: on us—for unwisely chasing influence in the first place. In this chapter, we hope to wrap our hands around the root problem and yank it out of the parched landscape of our once-vibrant faith. (That's Phil's PhD talking right there.)

In any quest to encounter the true God, believers will encounter crises and challenges and crossroads all along the journey. *Sanctification*, the fifty-cent theological word derived from two Latin words meaning “to make holy,” is the journey from who we once were to who we will be in eternity. It's an arduous, lifelong process. Saints aren't made in a day. In theory, the closer we get to sanctification or “holiness,” the more our failings should grieve us.

But hundreds of millions of us have abandoned the narrow road that leads to Christlikeness. Instead, we've ventured off in another direction to a vast, glistening boulevard. Wide and easy is this road, and in the distance, we are beckoned into the presence of another deity. Here is our present-day spiritual home. We find ourselves standing in awe at the temple of That Other God.

It's easy to see why millions of fellow travelers have stopped and remained here. That Other God is incredible! Loving, forgiving, kind, and supportive, That Other God understands where we've been and where we want to go. That Other God isn't vengeful, and he graciously overlooks our weaknesses. That Other God is a faithful and nonjudgmental friend who offers us acceptance and approval and expects only our love in return. That Other God knows that our intentions are pure,

even if our actions prove otherwise. In short, That Other God is all the things we want and none of the stuff we don't.

Who is this wonderful deity we now worship?

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**That Other God is *you*.**

**That Other God is *me*.**

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In Genesis 1:27, God made humanity “in his own image.” But modern believers have inverted this, and we have now made a god in *our* own image. This god of our making doesn't mind if we infrequently attend church, never study His Word, pray to Him only with our laundry list of self-absorbed desires, and only occasionally throw a few spare bucks His way. “You're welcome, God” is now our heart's cry.

That Other God now so dominates our spiritual horizon that the traditional expectations of the God of the Bible now seem excessive, capricious, onerous, and possibly evil. Keeping the Sabbath, fasting, believing hell is a real place, practicing self-denial, sharing the gospel, serving those less fortunate than ourselves, and suffering in any way—these arcane principles are as out-of-fashion as mullets and shoulder pads. That Other God not only shuns such old-fashioned nonsense but sneers at those who dare attempt to burden others with this outmoded morality. That Other God rejects the clear standards of what a transformed Christian life should be.

*Because that's how we like it.*

In the ancient world, men and women would make art to

influence hoped-for outcomes, such as symbols for fertility, talismans for good luck, and carvings to encourage a bountiful harvest. Since these results were beyond their scope of control, people created these sculptures and icons to better their chances of success by bringing the spiritual realm onto their side.

They were called idols.

Modern readers of the Bible quickly skim past the ancient warnings against idol worship, thinking they have little relevance anymore. But should we so casually dismiss these verses? The sin of idolatry was that people created their own idols and imbued them with power. God railed against these imperfect, man-made, self-serving versions of Him.

Sounds a lot like us.

### **THAT OTHER GOD IS *OUR* IDOL**

As Christians, we all must test our own faith in the light of such an accusation. Like the ancients, modern Christians have created That Other God out of our self-serving expectations for the Almighty.

Consider your own spiritual journey. How much do your wants and demands determine your relationship with God? Do you approach the Creator of the universe on His terms or yours? What commandments, verses, and instructions do you consider to be no longer relevant to your contemporary lifestyle? Have you conformed your worldview to God's, or have your ideas of who you think God should be modified His worldview to conform to your own?

The apostle John wrote, "Dear children, keep away from

anything that might take God's place in your hearts" (1 John 5:21 NLT). This wise admonishment was written by a man who spent a lifetime watching people rise and fall on their journey with Christ. Of course, today's Christians are not the first generation of Jesus followers to veer off course. But because of our selfie culture, we have taken idolatry to an impressive new level. The brilliance of *That Other God* is that this made-up version looks, smells, and tastes just like God, but it is a forgery.

We speak not as accusers here, but as humbled coconspirators. The realization that we, too have substituted *That Other God* in place of the one true God in many areas of our lives has caused anguished soul-searching in both of us. How many years has our faith been a golden-calf version of ourselves painted with a thin veneer of Holy Spirit to make it outwardly presentable to our fellow Christians? How long have we chased the Sunday "feeling" of being in the presence of God because it's more convenient than doing the hard work of being in the presence of God every day?

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**Working out is hard.  
But wearing yoga pants is easy.**

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We feel so strongly about this that we almost titled the book *That Other God*.

When you read the Bible, you see how often—even after God does amazing things for His people—they turn back to *That Other God*. They do it because it's so much easier to

worship a God of our own making than it is to worship the true God. And every time the people worshiped That Other God, terrible things eventually happened. So they cried out to God again, and the cycle started all over. And over and over and over.

To see a compressed version of that cycle, reread the story of King Nebuchadnezzar starting in the second chapter of the book of Daniel. Man, that guy just didn't get it . . . but the truth is, he's a lot like us.

Even within generations with people who had actually seen the real God do amazing things (multiple times), once the people got fat and happy, they deferred to the easier God they made up.

That's exactly what is happening today—and why Christians are making so little impact in our culture. We begin to justify our lack of holiness and think things like, *That Other God doesn't care if I miss church. He's much nicer, has no requirements for outdated things like holiness, and understands my affair because he knows my wife is boring, because after all, it's all about acceptance, right?*

Whenever we talk to Christians today about social issues, we hardly ever hear them quote the Bible. Instead, they usually start their answers with, "Well, for *me*, I think . . ."

One of our friends is pastor Joe Champion at Celebration Church near Austin. At his staff meetings, when a team member pitches a new idea for a church outreach, event, or leadership issue, Joe simply says, "What does the Scripture say about that?" And if they can't support their idea from Scripture, they drop it and move on.

*What if we lived our lives that way?*

Sadly, for decades, our churches have unconsciously allowed That Other God to block the way to the altar of the Lord. Just think of all of the sermon topics that pastors now won't dare touch!

In truth, most of these decisions to allow an idol in our midst were reactions to the loss of Christian influence in society. For example, what makes you a Christian in many churches nowadays? It's pretty simple, actually. Just say the "sinner's prayer" for the assurance of eternity . . . and that's the whole ball game. For many churches, that's where obedience ends, and no one who steps through the door is encouraged past that point.

We are now seeing the unintended consequences of setting the bar so low. First, there is little to no evidence of transformed lives in our congregations. Sure, there are a handful of great testimonies in every house of worship (probably from the pool of the 20 percent who are still showing up weekly). But when precious few are seeing tangible differences in their own hearts, when even fewer of their fellow attendees remind them of the heroic characters in the Bible, and when genuine miracles are nowhere to be found, discouraged churchgoers walk away more disillusioned than if we had kept the bar high in the first place.

Does your church prioritize pushing you hard—like a relentlessly encouraging personal trainer for your soul—into a deeper and more profound relationship with Christ? Or do they—like a rose-scented convalescent hospital—specialize in keeping you warm, dry, and comfortable? Odds are, it's

probably the latter. In his book *The Pursuit of God*, A. W. Tozer wrote of our churches, “It is a solemn thing, and no small scandal in the Kingdom, to see God’s children starving while actually seated at the Father’s table.” That was written in 1947—how much worse is it now?

Our secret devotion to That Other God is nothing new. Adam’s original sin was wanting things his own way too. Adam wasn’t alone. The Bible is filled with stories of men and women who were willing to follow God—but only on their own terms. Abraham’s sexual tryst with Sarah’s maid, Jonah’s attempted escape from his assignment in Nineveh, Samson’s, David’s, and Solomon’s spectacular falls from grace, the rich young ruler, Judas—each story ends in tragedy. They serve as a warning to us to stop dead in our tracks and take the way back to a vibrant faith.

But how do we correct a problem that dates back to Adam? How do we keep ourselves from diverting off the path again? How do we fix our churches so that they don’t keep leading us into low expectations? Finally, how do we heal the damage we have done to the brand of Christianity?

To answer these questions, we must go back two thousand years.