

Personal God



Personal God



Can you really know the One
who made the universe?

Tim Stafford



For Chase and Harriette



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Foreword

Several months ago my wife and I began an experiment that is still continuing as I write. We decided to go through the listings in the Yellow Pages under “Churches” and visit every one included in our local phone book. Even though we live in a small town, we found representatives of all the major denominations and most of the minor ones as well as several unaffiliated churches, a couple of dozen congregations in all. Some have organs and choirs; most have worship bands with electric guitars and drum sets. At some, people dress up; at others they show up in blue jeans and cowboy boots. Churches meet at 7:00 a.m., 9:30, 10:30, and 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning, a few meet on Saturday night, and one nontraditional church meets on Thursday night.

Visiting these churches, I learned to detect how “evangelical” they were almost immediately. They did

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not divide on the basis of theology: some individual churches in so-called liberal denominations proved quite conservative theologically, and some churches in conservative denominations seemed almost atheological and lifeless. Rather, the difference that stood out to me centered on the issue that Tim Stafford writes about in this book, the notion of knowing God personally.

I have attended churches in other countries where that notion would seem almost bizarre: a Coptic church in Egypt and an Orthodox church in Russia in which the priests speak an ancient language that no one in the congregation understands, and even a Reformation Day service in a Berlin cathedral in which the liturgy is predictable, formal, and impersonal. Evangelical churches, however, hold out the breathtaking possibility of having a direct and personal relationship with God. You can sense it in their prayers and especially in their songs, which bear a strange resemblance to the kind of love songs you hear on Top 40 radio stations —only with the words addressed to God, not to a human lover.

That the phenomenon of megachurches in the United States, let alone the dramatic growth of Christianity in many other countries, is taking place in evangelical churches points to the hunger that such a promise taps into. It is an exalted prospect that evan-

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gelicals offer, with an equally exalted potential for misunderstanding and disappointment.

Only in evangelical churches do I hear phrases like “The Lord told me . . .” and “the Lord led me . . .” Worshipers speak as comfortably and as casually of their relationship with God as they do of their relationship with family and friends. To visitors reared in a more formal church setting, not to mention agnostics and atheists, such language seems like something from another planet. And, as I often hear from readers who write me, such language also causes consternation even among those who earnestly seek such a personal relationship.

Books that pour forth from evangelical publishing houses often use such language without really reflecting on it. How, indeed, do we have a personal relationship with a God who spun off quasars and galaxies and who is invisible Spirit?

I have known Tim Stafford for more than three decades, and we have held many conversations on this very topic. Indeed, my own books *Reaching for the Invisible God* and *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* stem at least partly from some of those conversations. No skeptic or iconoclast, Tim is a faithful follower of Jesus who has the temerity and honesty to ask questions that most of us wonder about but few of us voice aloud. I am delighted that he has now written

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this short, readable account of his explorations. Tim is a trustworthy guide as well as a fine writer who illustrates his ideas with poignant stories and sharp, helpful analogies.

This book does not promise one more secret that will transform your encounter with God. Rather, it takes an honest, realistic look at what may be the most important question any of us ever faces: Can we truly know God?

PHILIP YANCEY

1

A Personal Relationship with God

Even though it was long ago, I remember the conversation perfectly. Two friends of mine were in an animated discussion. Daniel had been a sincere churchgoer all his life; Thom was a recently converted, enthusiastically born-again Christian eager to explain his faith. As the conversation proceeded, Daniel grew mildly agitated. It began to dawn on him that for all his religious involvement he was somehow not seen as truly, fully Christian.

Thom was trying to explain that Christianity is much more than good religious deeds like saying prayers and going to church. He finally blurted out, “I’m not talking about religion. I’m talking about a *personal relationship with God!*”

I knew that phrase well, for it was part of the evangelical environment I’d grown up in. That day, for the first time, I heard it the way others sometimes do, as

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self-confidence tipping toward arrogance: “I actually know God. He may be theory to you, but not to me.”

Truly, it’s a jaw-dropping claim. When you say you have a “personal relationship” with a prominent person, it means you can get to that person outside official channels; perhaps you can call him at home. Other people may know him by reputation, but you know *him*. You are not just associates; you are *friends*. Was that really what Thom meant? Did he really know the Creator of the universe *personally*?

In the classic film *Sleeper*, Woody Allen plays a Rip Van Winkle character who, after being frozen in a scientific experiment, wakes up in some distant future. He is given a stack of photographs from our times to identify. This prompts a series of hilarious one-liners. Billy Graham’s picture comes up. Allen pauses, then says, “Billy Graham . . . claimed to have a personal relationship with God.” The audience is meant to crack up. That is how absurd the idea sounds to some.

What Did My Friend Really Mean?

I had always liked that phrase, but after listening to my friends I began to think seriously about it. What did it mean? I was convinced it did mean something, and I thought I could partly grasp its meaning by thinking of what a personal relationship was not. Perhaps Thom

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was trying to say that he did not relate to God institutionally, as we relate to banks or mortgage companies or the Republican Party. Or perhaps he was trying to say that he did not relate to God as a set of doctrinal propositions or as a force or as a cosmic idea.

Perhaps Thom meant that the center of the Christian faith is Jesus Christ himself, that he is a person, a man who walked and breathed and ate and talked. If we relate to God at all, it must be as one person to another—personally.

But how did Thom connect with this person Jesus? If we examined Thom's life under a microscope, minute by minute, would we be able to see it? Was there a single thing in Thom's life he could have pointed to and said, "There! That's it! You certainly can't have *that* unless you have a personal relationship with God"?

Hungering for a Personal God

For me, this pursuit was not purely a matter of academic curiosity. I was asking these questions because I was increasingly aware of a deep hunger inside myself. I wanted to know God, to experience his presence. I did not want to "work up" a feeling of God; I wanted to encounter God directly.

During times of prayer I tried hard to convince myself that God was really listening. In one low period I

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walked the streets pleading with God to speak audibly, show me some sign, somehow demonstrate convincingly his presence. I didn't have to do that with my friends. They were unquestionably present. Why wasn't God?

At about that time I worked in a Connecticut restaurant washing dishes. Most of my fellow workers were Italian Americans whose version of nominal Catholicism seemed to have inoculated them against any temptation to take God or morality seriously. So a conversation with one waitress, a bone-thin divorcee with too much eye shadow, shocked me. George Harrison's song "My Sweet Lord" came on the radio in the back room. Hearing the song with its recurring words, "My sweet Lord, I really want to know you . . . but it takes so long, my Lord," the waitress immediately told me of a religious experience she had had the day before. While listening to this same song, she had burst helplessly into tears. She was bewildered. "Why do you think I did that?" she demanded.

I would like to be able to say that I told her that her heart was aching for the love of Jesus, but I can't. I was as bewildered as she was. Maybe if she had been a "nice person" I would not have been so surprised at her feelings. I classed her with the tough kids I had left in high school: the boys who took auto shop and went off to join the military, and the pasty, over-made-up girls

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in short skirts who swore. Was it possible that such people too were hungry for God? The song moved me, but I had not expected it to move anybody else in that restaurant. And I did not know how those stirrings related to Christian faith—whether a longing that the songwriter applied to Krishna could be legitimate and not devilishly deceptive.

Later, reflecting on the experience, I began to suspect that many unlikely characters shared my longing for God. Perhaps everyone did.

God keeps popping up in people's minds. Even the anti-Christian diatribes of Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, which are in the media spotlight as I write, suggest a preoccupation with God. What are they so bothered about? The contention that religion is behind the problems of the world strikes me as plain silly. Religion is behind the likes of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao? A belief in God is behind WWI, WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War? AIDS, malaria, child slavery, and global poverty exist because people believe in God?

I think the idea of God disturbs a lot of people. They find themselves longing for the meaning and comfort God could provide. Some get angry because they think the longing is hopeless. Some just feel the longing and wish they knew how to meet it.

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The Big Questions

Like many others, I long for a personal God.

I grew up an evangelical Christian, and in my quest to grasp a personal relationship with God I have never quit that community. Evangelicals have many faults, not least of which is a tendency to talk glibly about God, not humbly. Still, evangelical Christianity has one quality that draws me irresistibly: it speaks openly and often about God's personal presence. I always wanted that. If religion didn't offer God at a deeply personal level, I wasn't interested.

But I still had two questions:

1. Just what could be personal about a relationship with God? Being as clear-eyed and realistically truthful as possible, what could I hope for?
2. How could I experience such a personal relationship—to really know the personal God, not just theological facts about him?

The great Roman thinker Augustine asked, “What place is there within me where my God can come? How can God come into me, God who made heaven and earth? O Lord my God, is there anything in me that can contain you?”

I want to share the answers I have found. For I have come to believe that God's personality does crowd the

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world around me, even inside me. I believe I can know him with the same faculties and in many of the same ways that I know my friends.

If the Bible carries one repeated message about God, it is that *he wants to be known*.

God in Everyday Reality?

Someday, Scripture says, Christians will see God face-to-face, and the sight will transform us. This historical horizon is crucial. It puts our religious experience—and our lack of it—in perspective. The apostle Paul, a man who claimed the closest personal knowledge of Jesus, wrote, “*Now* we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; *then* we shall see face-to-face” (1 Corinthians 13:12; emphasis added).

Here and now we are not going to get all the intimacy we seek. We won’t see God face-to-face. It’s important to understand that.

Nevertheless, Christianity is not merely a matter of waiting for Jesus to come back to earth. It is life in everyday reality. Within that everyday reality, can we know Jesus personally?

When I first began to ask this question, I could not answer it. I could see very little that was “personal” in my ordinary Christian life of prayer and Bible study and church involvement. And my evangelical friends

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weren't much help. True, they talked about a personal relationship. "God led me to . . ." was a common phrase. Some claimed to hear God's voice. But I never heard anyone clarify these claims. If someone said, "God led me to stop and see my friend Mary," no one asked whether God did, indeed, prompt that and how. I never heard any pastor say, "We're going to sing 'He Touched Me,' and then we'll talk about the questions it raises." Some people certainly must have had questions, but they never voiced them.

So I backed up a step. Instead of asking what a personal relationship with God might be, I asked what a personal relationship might be—*any* personal relationship. When I asked the question that way, I made a fundamental discovery: personal relationships are peculiar. They operate by a mysterious set of rules, depending on facial expressions that we can't define and knowledge that we can't explain. Engineers can make blueprints of any machine in the world, and a good machine shop can duplicate them. But you can't use a blueprint to duplicate a friendship. The most compelling reality in any of our lives—our relationships—is very hard to describe or define. We know people in a way entirely different from the impersonal way we know objects and forces and ideas.

What the phrase "personal relationship with God" claims, most basically, is that God is a person. Since I

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am a person, I must therefore know him through these peculiar means by which people know each other.

I admit that this does not seem, at first glance, like a very dramatic discovery. But it led me to a train of thought that has transformed my search for deeper intimacy with God.

I sometimes pose this question: Suppose a young woman is dating a man ten years older than she. Although she senses strong mutual attraction, she is not sure she really knows him. Because of their age difference he seems unlike any of her friends. How should she get to know him?

When I pose this question, people come up with a long list of ways to know others: by talking together, sharing activities, meeting each other's friends and family, exchanging life histories, reading the same books, discussing the same movies or television shows, working on a project together, and so on. Some may emphasize one way over another, but no one has ever suggested that just one of these means is all that is needed. Everyone agrees that we get to know people by experiencing them from many different angles.

Contrary to this, many spiritual programs emphasize only one avenue to God: a type of Bible study, a method of prayer, a style of social activism, a form of worship. "Do this," they seem to say, "and you will know God." They inadvertently create a mechanical

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image of God. If only we could get one broken piece of the machine going (speaking in tongues or yielding to God's power or reading the Bible daily or serving the poor), our spiritual life would start up and take off like a lawn mower.

Personal relationships do not work that way. They are not mechanical. They are built out of a mosaic of different experiences, most quite ordinary. Small pieces go together to make something surprising.

If you want to grow closer to someone, you usually don't look for some new, exotic approach. You look to make better use of the opportunities already at hand. "Why don't we start meeting for lunch on a regular basis?" you might say; or, "I think we need to talk about deeper things." You seek to add small pieces that are truly meaningful and deeply personal. You watch to see a bigger picture emerge.

Knowing God Is Not So Difficult

In this book, I want to explore how knowing God personally is similar to the ways we know others and know ourselves. It will take some patience as we put pieces of a mosaic together.

In doing this, there is one mistake we must not make. We must not portray knowing God as overwhelmingly difficult or complicated. It is not. The Bible

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tells us, again and again, that God is very near. And he is near because he wants to be near.

If God wanted to hide from us, we would play hide and seek for the rest of our lives. But God chooses to open up to each of us. God has told us to find him in prayer, in church, in Scripture, in the Lord's Supper, in following his example of sacrifice and service. These are the classic pathways, sometimes called the "means of grace." They are not a program. They are God's free and gracious offering of a relationship. He wants to know us, and to be known.

I don't have a new spiritual technique to offer. I hope to wake you up, to make you lift your head and open your eyes. Every day God holds himself out to us, asking to be known. His personality spills over into the details of daily life—in the morning's sunshine that he handcrafts every day, in the kindness of a friend's smile—and even in and through the humdrum ordinariness of most church services. If you can begin to see that God is available not as some "power" or "holiness" but as *himself*, I think you will pursue a relationship with clearer eyes and greater hope. Your longing can begin to be filled. The one who made the universe is inviting you to enter a personal relationship.