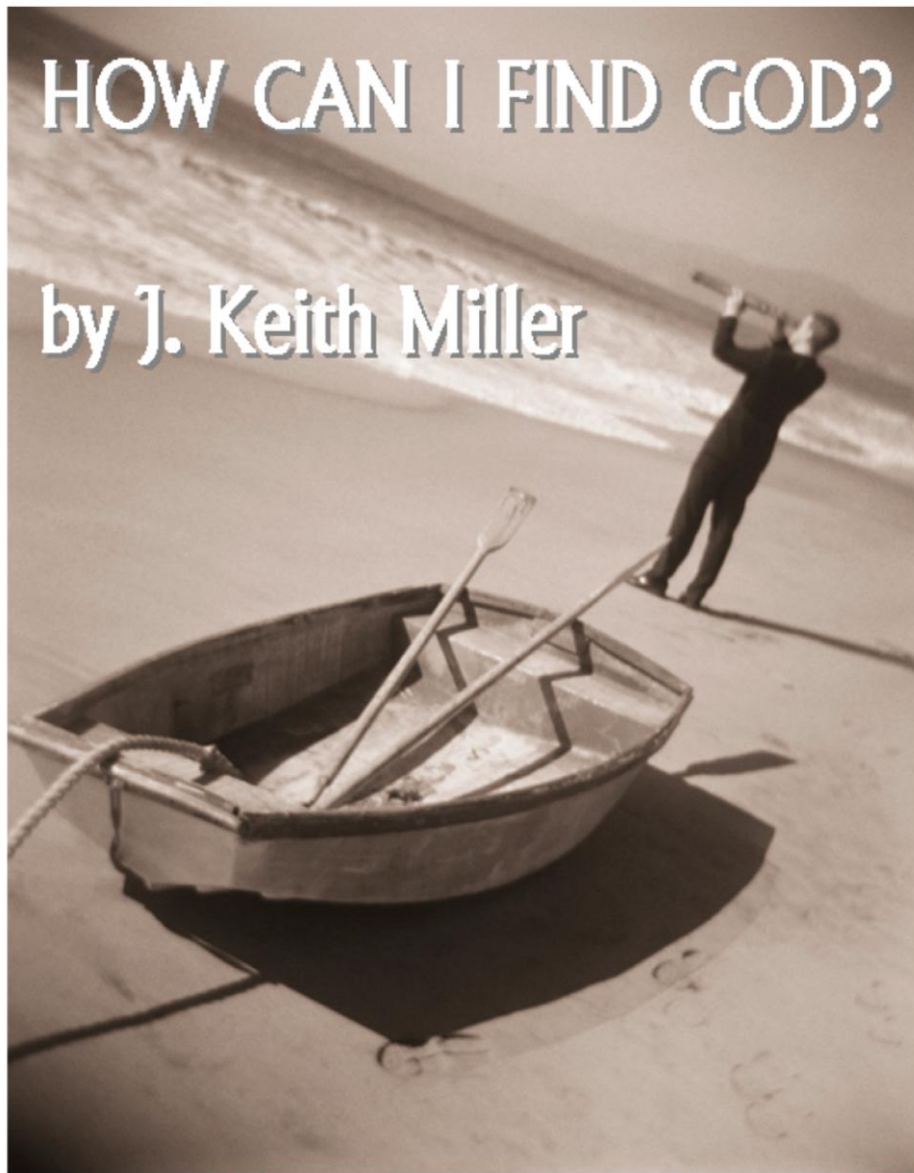


HOW CAN I FIND GOD?

by J. Keith Miller



HOW CAN I FIND GOD?

What Makes Us Ask the Question?

"I'll never see my husband again. He's dead." The woman speaking was an attractive forty-one-year-old housewife with two sons and a daughter. Her face was drawn from lack of sleep as she continued: "Yesterday, sitting by the graveside as the minister's voice droned on, quoting something about 'dust to dust,' my mind was almost numb. I found myself staring at an old oak tree on the other side of the grave. Its twisted roots seemed to clutch the grass with a kind of desperation. My eyes wandered up its trunk and then to the sky beyond. I wanted to cry out, 'God help me, *help* me!' But as I looked into that light blue sky, for the first time in my life I felt only an empty void. I realized that there might not be a God out there at all. And if there was I couldn't find him now."

This intelligent, haggard-looking woman sitting across from me in my office was saying that suddenly she had realized she didn't know God personally. She was looking down at her hands which were clenched into fists, one holding a tear-soaked handkerchief. Finally, after what seemed like several minutes, she looked up and asked quietly, "Keith, how can I find God?"

As I sat there thinking about her question, I could remember the faces of dozens of people who had sat in that chair over the years and in different ways asked that same question. I could see again the bewildered look on the lovely white-haired lady's face as she told me through her tears that she had committed adultery—after having been faithful to her husband for thirty years.

I felt once more the numb despair of a fifty-seven-year-old man. Without any explanation, he'd just been fired from a fine position he'd held for twenty years. He could find no other job. The world has no use for the old—and "old" is getting younger every year.

Then there was that long line of ancient-looking teenagers. They seemed to be feeling blindly along the wall of life looking for a doorway, wondering if there is any entrance to a world with meaning for them. Was there anyone anywhere who would love them specifically? Many of these emotional nomads with the haunted cynical eyes said they did not believe in God. Yet their presence in my office made their agnostic pronouncements sound a little hollow.

Finally, I saw the stunned faces of women whose confidence had been shattered when their husbands had deserted them for no apparent reason, and who were trying to put the pieces of their personal worlds back together. They silently cried out for some new support since all the props which had held life in place for them had been swept away.

And many times through the specific disappointments and despair of all these people I had heard the deeper question they had not had time for when things were going well: "How can I find God?"

The Problem with Success

But I can also recall another sort of person who, far from having failed, had succeeded marvelously in life. These were the fortunate ones who had reached the material or professional goals on which they had counted to bring them happiness and fulfillment. But to their surprise and confusion, the success many of them had sought so compulsively left them empty and alone. The great purpose which had made their journey toward the top so exciting disappeared when the goal was reached. Long-repressed anxieties and insecurities arose to fill their days and nights. These men and women too asked, "What does it all mean? Is there anyone out there beyond ourselves? And if there is a God, how can someone like me find him?"

You may think I am painting a black picture of modern life—that I am exaggerating the problems, the loneliness and restless incompleteness around us. But I do not think so. The probings into the vastness of outer space have made our earth seem terrifyingly small and insignificant. And Freud’s discoveries of the complexities and hidden depths of our unconscious inner space have made us uncertain about our motives and unsure of the validity of our moral and religious heritages. We seem to be caught up by forces both beyond and within us over which we have little control. And when one adds to this the social upheavals caused by emerging nations and the struggles for racial and sexual freedom, the question about finding God seems much more pressing and realistic than it did in less rapidly changing times. And to people searching urgently for personal meaning and hope the *fact* of God’s “existence” means very little if they cannot *find* him and *know* him personally.

A Case History

How does a person describe a new beginning with God as the motivating center of life without basing that experience on some vague mystical feeling? How does an individual who wants to have intellectual integrity describe the experience of encountering God as the personal, the immediate, and limitless *Thou* in life? History has shown again and again that in trying to transmit the essence of the life Christ demonstrated, and which he continues to offer each of us, we cannot speak adequately in propositional terms. We are forced to turn to the language of living experience. In the last analysis we are all reduced to, the witness of “that which we have seen and heard” in our own lives.

I do not know any general rules for living life as a businessman, a father and husband, consciously committed to the living Christ. I know of no scholars in this field. All I can do is witness to insights received on one adventure of faith which continues to change my own life and that of my family. The fact that these

insights have been verified in the scriptures, in the lives of Christians in the church's history, and in the experience of dozens of contemporary men and women know has made me believe that they represent more than a subjective pilgrimage. This is the way it began.

By the time I was eighteen years old I was a great success—at least at the time it seemed that I was. In a large high school I had won honors in basketball, dramatic reading, and class plays. I had been elected president of the senior class, and finally king of the school. Life's opportunities appeared to be limitless in spite of the fact that it was 1945 and we were in the midst of the Second World War.

Three months after graduation, I saw the Western world sitting on the brink of an explosion of joy and relief, anticipating momentarily the official word that war was over. But fifteen days before the war ended we received word that my only brother, whom I idolized, had been killed in a plane crash while serving in the Air Force. That night I remember sitting alone on the back steps in tears.

We had always been a close family, and my mother's reaction was one of deep grief, as was my father's. As I sat there terribly alone, I felt that someday I had to find the meaning of life. I felt that I had to pour myself into it twice as much since Earle would not get a chance to live it at all. During those next few months my mother got continually worse and finally had a nervous breakdown a little over a year later. The strain on my father had been too much also, and at about the same time he had a heart attack. I had left for the Navy two weeks after my brother's death. After eleven months in the service I was released to go to college. My parents were sick. I began to get to know them as one adult knows another, and they poured out their souls separately before me. I realized that although I had been living with them nineteen years, I did not really know them—nor did they know each other. They did not realize the anguish caused by the little things in their own lives which hurt and frustrated each other; and I felt

that neither of them actually understood about the hopes and dreams in the other's soul—and yet we had been a close family and had known much love and happiness. I began to realize that there was a great deal of life on which I had not counted.

I went to college on a basketball scholarship and the G.I. Bill. During Christmas vacation of my sophomore year I was traveling across the state with some friends. We were driving very fast when the right front wheel slipped off the road onto the highway shoulder that had been washed away. The driver tried to swing the car back onto the highway but it went completely out of control. There was a long screech, and I closed my eyes.

Suddenly, I felt like a rock in a tin can as we bounced and rolled 270 yards down a long hillside, over and over, five and a half times. When the car stopped it was on its side and I was on my face against the groundward side. There was dust everywhere. I lay still for a moment and then opened my eyes. There beside me was a pair of legs, and I thought my friend who had been riding with me in the back seat had been cut in two. But then the legs began to move and I realized he had been thrown face-first out the rear window and was struggling to pull his legs free.

When he got out and turned around he smiled. His face seemed to sort of fall apart from the impact. Blood was covering his face. I tried to get up on my hands and knees but my head fell, and I realized that I had broken my neck. I kept trying to think, "What happens to you when you break your neck?" All I could remember was that you died. Somehow I wanted to get out of that car to die!

It was just about sunset and the cold grayness of December was closing in and around us. I told my friend what had happened and then asked him if he could help me get out. He was unhurt except for facial cuts. So I held my head with

both hands, realizing that I had to keep my spine straight, and he dragged me out of the car. As he was trying to help me I remember looking around and seeing spectators standing around the car, afraid to help for fear of becoming involved. One man was even taking a photograph and I thought to myself, What a cold bunch of — — — these are!

My friend Bob put his overcoat on the ground and helped me lie down beside the road then covered me with my own. I lay there an hour and a half waiting for the ambulance. I remember lying beside the highway and praying very simply. I was very much awake. As I prayed I had a strange feeling of peace that permeated my consciousness. I thought to myself, "What a shame to find so late in life that this kind of peace is a reality." For the first time I was not afraid to die. I realized at that moment that even in this tragedy which might be the end of my life there was Something very personal, very real, which was more important than anything else I had ever known.

But I got over the broken neck—and the feeling of peace! The next couple of years were filled with turmoil inside, and yet it was a turmoil mingled with a great deal of joy. For although I was bearing the burdens of the family in trying to keep my parents afloat emotionally and spiritually as their lives were drawing to an end, I also fell in love with a girl at school. Her love changed my life. Although I had recovered from the broken neck, I had also pushed God back into a corner of my life as I re-entered the stream of competition for grades and attention. Except that by now, a lot of that frantic life had lost its savor. Some of the fresh naiveté had been replaced by methodical knowledge of how to get things done in the world of people. In my sophomore year I was elected president of my fraternity. The same month, I found out that I was on the verge of having ulcers.

Not many months later I remember sitting in a hospital room beside the bed of my father who was dying. I was praying again and wringing my hands in

helpless frustration. His stomach ulcers had perforated, but because of his heart condition they could not operate. I was sitting beside his bed watching him bleed to death internally. I loved him very much. As I sat there helplessly shaking my head, a small Roman Catholic nun, one of the sisters at the hospital, came into the room. She walked over to the other side of my father's bed, picked up his hand, and patted it. She said to him gently, "Can you hear me?"

He said, "Yes," very weakly.

She said to him, "Have you ever accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?"

He shook his head, "No."

Then she asked him quietly and matter of factly, "Would you like to do this?"

There was a pause and then he said, "Oh, yes."

She said to him, "Then repeat after me: 'I accept you, Jesus Christ, as my Lord and Savior.' "

He did, and then he twisted in the bed and died.

After I graduated from college I went to work for a major oil company. I had married Mary Allen in my senior year. We were sent to that company's exploration office in Southwest Texas, near the Rio Grande. In those next months as I drove through that vast desert land near the Mexican border, I came to love the silence, the stillness, and the vastness very much. I became fascinated by the changes in the desert. The white, hot noonday blast with the heat waves rising continually and visibly off the highway ahead and off the desert to the side would change into an amazing coolness. The magnificent sunsets hinted at something wonderful and very real beyond the horizon. Then suddenly the total blackness of night and coldness would envelop it all. As I drove through that vast desert country alone, day after day, I began to sense

something of the majesty and the silent power of God in the world. There awoke in me a realization that I must somehow learn more about God and find out about Jesus Christ — who was supposed to *be* God.

This restlessness grew until one night at home in the middle of the night I woke Mary Allen and said, "Honey, I've got to go back to school to find out about God."

She was sleepy and surprised, but after a moment said, "I'll go with you, but how will we do it?"

We had a new baby and some debts to pay. I said I didn't know but thought maybe we ought to pray about it; and we did. I didn't have any desire to become an ordained minister but my kind of interest seemed to point to that direction. Seemingly this was what to do when one's commitment and interest reached a certain point.

And so I enrolled in a graduate theological school, believing that God's will for people like me must lie in this direction. The church seemed to say that it did and the world thought that it might.

When the men at the oil company office found out that I was going to study theology many of them did not know quite how to react. I was the first person from that office to go to divinity school. They didn't know how to send me off. They had a way which was standard for sending people off to other offices. They didn't know if this would be appropriate. But since there was no precedent for a change, the final social functions engineered by our friends were empowered by the usual spirits, which did not seem at all incongruous at the time.

I remember one of my closest friends at the office putting his arm around my neck and leaning rather heavily on me at about two o'clock one morning and saying to me through deeply sincere and slightly watery eyes, "Buddy, you'll

never make it!” And with this send-off we went to live in the East.

But regardless of any preparation we had had, when we got to the school I soon sensed that for me there was something terribly wrong at divinity school. Some of these young men seemed more full of themselves than had the men at the fraternity to which I belonged. There seemed to be an intellectual competitiveness that was very keen, and somehow unloving. But this I understood and I began to try to compete with the best of them. As the weeks rolled by I felt in my soul that this couldn't be the answer to life since it was only a religious version of the same kind of competition which I already *knew* did not end in Reality. Some of the boys began to talk about being ordained. In some cases their interests were focused on things I considered to be quite trivial — how long must one's surplice be, whose wife could make the most beautiful stoles for the various seasons of the year. None of these things seemed very important to me.

When I arrived at school I didn't know the answers to the theological questions we were trying to discuss, but I did know the questions people ask when they're dying and when they are afraid. And if God through the church didn't have the answers to these questions, then how could he be God? I wanted to know how people could get to *know* God *personally* in such a way that they could have something of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

I felt that ministers should know God so well that Christ's love in their lives could create a real hunger for God in the souls of the other people and lead them to Christ too. I sensed intuitively that there must be a way to introduce God into other people's lives, that this must somehow be what it's all about. But everywhere I found that people wanted to intellectualize the good news, wanted to make it conceptual, or to make it propositional — in any case to stay away from personal confrontation. And somehow in those intellectualized arguments the aliveness of God would evaporate and fade away only to come back into my

soul when I was alone in prayer.

I studied hard and was as interested as any other student in the academic work. But I was repelled by the lack of gut-level engagement with the problems I knew so many people face. I felt we were dealing with the awesome God of Moses and the intellectual power of the Greeks; but nowhere did I see the personal redeeming God of Jesus Christ.

After four terms of this, I realized that whatever the problem was—I did not know—I could not in good conscience be ordained. Our second child was born that fall after my third term. Mary Allen almost died following the birth of this baby. She was desperate and lonely, 1300 miles from home; and I was very little help. I was in a state of turmoil inside. No one knew about it, and I began to fear for my sanity. I was trying to take care of our two babies and go to classes. Mary Allen was in the hospital, very sick and frightened. Inside, my soul was like a tableau of warriors by Michelangelo, the figures twisting and turning for release. Finally, I realized I had to get out of there. I completed the term and we left.

The oil company had said we could come back if ever I wanted to work for them again; so I called. They were very kind, but, suddenly I realized something for the first time: when a young man in our generation goes off to study for the ministry, although most of his contemporaries don't understand, they think it's fine for him. But when he comes back, having left seminary, they really don't understand.

Because of my tremendous self-centeredness and pride, I have always tried desperately to be understood. The oil company took me back and sent us to an office we had been in before. I would rather have gone to almost any other place, because this going back represented my first great human failure. There was no way I could explain to the people around me what had gone on and what

was going on inside my soul behind the confident mask I showed to the world. I began to work, because I had a wife whom I loved very much and two babies I loved deeply. But there seemed to be no hope, no ultimate purpose, anymore. If there was a God, the people at the seminary had subtly hinted that I must have turned away from him (or perhaps this was my imagination). At any rate, I felt things closing in on me in the inner chamber of my life.

I used to walk down the streets, I remember, and suddenly would break out in a cold sweat. I thought I might be losing my mind. One day it was so bad that I got in my company car and took off on a field trip alone. As I was driving through the pine-wooded country of East Texas I suddenly pulled off beside the road and stopped. I remember sitting there in complete despair. I had always been an optimistic person and had always had the feeling that there was one more bounce in the ball. After a good night's sleep, or perhaps a couple of martinis and a good night's sleep, one could always start again tomorrow. But now there was no tomorrow in my situation. I was like a man on a great gray treadmill going no place, in a world that was made of black, black clouds all around me.

As I sat there I began to weep like a little boy—which I suddenly realized I was inside. I looked up toward the sky. There was nothing I wanted to do with my life. And I said, "God, if there's anything you want in this stinking soul, take it."

That was years ago. But something came into my life that day which has never left. There wasn't any ringing of bells or flashing of lights or visions; but it was a deep intuitive realization of what it was God wanted from me, which I had known before. And the peace which came with that understanding was not an experience in itself, but rather a cessation of conflict.

I realized then that God does not want our money, nor does he primarily want our time, even the whole lifetime a young seminarian is ready to give him. I

believe he wants our permission to come into our lives and show us how to live creatively and freely in loving relationships with him and people. And if we give him our permission, he will begin to show us life as we have never seen it before. It is like being born again! I saw that I had not seen Christ at seminary because I had never known God personally.

As I sat there I continued to cry, only now the tears were a release from a lifetime of being bound by myself, by the terrific drive to prove that I am something—*what*, I had never quite understood. Although I could not understand nor articulate for many months what had happened to me, I knew at the core of my soul that I had somehow made personal contact with the very meaning of life. I was at last in touch with God.

I started the car and turned toward home.

The Presence of God—A Person in the Void

I wish I might say that life suddenly became a joyous religious dream, but it did not. Something had happened to me inside which both frightened and excited me. It was as if my swollen soul had been lanced and the poison drawn out and I was clean. I had a new chance at life in a way I did not understand, but felt deeply to be true.

Somehow my sins and extreme self-centeredness seemed to be forgiven. I had a dawning hope that I was going to make it, that things were going to be all right ultimately. Since I didn't feel so pressed to prove myself, the specter of having to do something big and important in life wasn't such a driving taskmaster. And although it has taken years for some of these problems even to begin to resolve themselves in my life, the *hope* that they would was born when I began to try to let God into the personal arena of my experience that day by the roadside.

Somehow what was happening to me felt as if I had received a new set of eyes and ears. I was beginning to see and hear people I had never really noticed or heard before. Each one had a history and was struggling to find the way in life—just as I was. These were my people. And I realized that wherever there are people struggling to learn and live I can find a place and will never be alone. I am discovering that the adventure of trying to learn to live for God is sometimes discouraging but it is very exciting. It's more than emotion, though.

Martin Buber tried to describe what happens when one encounters God personally. He said, "Man receives and he receives not a 'specific content' but a Presence, a Presence as power." One is bound up in a new relationship. Now this is no lightheaded release from the responsibility of intelligent thought. On the contrary, life becomes heavier — heavy with meaning. "There is the inexpressible confirmation of meaning. Meaning is assured. Nothing can any longer be meaningless." One does not know how to explain this fact of meaning, and yet it is real. One can be sure of its certainty. This was true of me as I set out to try to live my life for Jesus Christ.

Some of the specific changes in perspective which began to take place may appear to be insignificant, but they are still transforming my whole understanding and experience of life.

At first I was terribly shy about telling anyone what had happened to me. I didn't know if the experience of beginning to live for God was real or would last. I could not identify with people who went around acting religious, but I found that I was very eager to get to know God and to find out how I might live the creative, loving, and fulfilling life Jesus promised his followers.

I felt like a misfit having no one with whom I could identify deeply. I didn't like to pretend to be religious, and yet I had always played my life to an audience to gain affirmation and approval — first my parents and teachers and later my

peers and business superiors. But as a new Christian I had no sense of knowing with whom I might relate and check my behavior. One morning in prayer I told God my lonely dilemma: "God, I don't seem to fit anywhere. No one really knows or appreciates the struggles I have."

Then, out of the silence, it was as if God said to me, "I understand what you are going through. Why don't you play your life to me as your audience? I'll give you the personal consciousness of the acceptance and love you need for your life."

What a simple thought this appears to be as I write it. Yet when I really tried it, this idea of being aware of God as my continuous loving companion through the hours of my days and nights gave me an emotional place and a present personal support to help me to begin living as I now wanted. All my life I have been influenced too much by the moods and opinions of my associates. Now, in my new experiment, although I was still living in the same social and business circles, I was occasionally finding a calmness and an ability to live with more honesty and integrity than before. I was starting to play my life to a different audience—to the Living Christ whom I was told loved me enough to die for me.

I wasn't thinking in terms of him judging my actions, but rather of his living awareness of my struggles to be his person. I began to get up in the morning being conscious of God's awareness of me and my waking movements. I began to be able to tell him that he was the one for whom I wanted to perform the day's actions. And just the conscious act of deciding *that* was a new commitment which, by itself, changed all kinds of things.

I had always noticed that when I was with a Christian whom I respected tremendously, my conduct would improve *without* any conscious effort. While such a person was with me in our home, for instance, I would be a little less unreasonable toward our children when they misbehaved. And I would probably be more attentive to the people who waited on me at the post office or bank. In

this same way as I consciously attempted to live my days and nights before a present, attentive Lord, I began to change with regard to my specific consideration of other people. I began to listen to them with greater attention and to hear their problems and concerns and to care about them. And since I felt God was with me I began to talk to him about the people and problems I now saw in the world around me. This for me was a new approach to prayer.

Communicating with God

The next few months I began to learn to talk to God as if Jesus Christ were sitting with me in the same room. I learned to be honest about my feelings, good and bad; I learned to tell God I loved him and to confess my sins specifically every day. I experienced great release in thanking him for forgiveness and for the specific gifts of life and hope, for the good things which happened to make me happy, and for the negative things—the pain of which taught me about life and loving. I learned to pray for other people and finally to ask for guidance. I learned to share with him my own secret aspirations and dreams.

I soon learned that I could not live a Christian life alone. I needed to share the struggles and the questions as well as the thanksgiving with other Christians who were also in the process of becoming—becoming what God had given them the potential to be. It was a strange new adventure to share my true concerns, to study the scriptures, and to pray with people who seemed actually to care about me.

Finally, I am having to face the question of how to live my vocational life for God as a professional writer and a responsible citizen of my city and country. And I am still in the midst of these searchings.

What might happen to you if you should try to live your personal and vocational life as a Christian? I do not know, but I think Dietrich Bonhoeffer came close to describing what I'm discovering when he said, "And if we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What decisions and partings will it demand? To answer this question we shall have to go to Him, for only He knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow Him, knows the journey's end. But we do know that it will be a road of boundless mercy. Discipleship means joy." ¹

Finding God Where You Are

But what if *you* would like to find God personally now? How would you begin? What kinds of questions would you ask yourself? And how would you turn to God and tell him you would like to begin the adventure of faith?

The following is one way you may be able to find out something about where you are now in your relationship to Christ. Look inside your own life, honestly. Be specific with yourself and God. Let's say that you and I are sitting together in a quiet place. We have known each other for some months and have come to the place in our relationship where you are telling me that you would like to know how you might find God in this more personal way.

You are really interested in knowing how you might make a new beginning in your own life. I will talk to you here as I would if we were together in the same room. If you are interested, you may want to do the things I am suggesting.

First, look into your own inner life and ask yourself the question, "What is the most important thing in the world to me?" The temptation for some is to say "God," but let me tell you some ways you can tell what really may be most important to you.

One way I have found to locate the true focus of my life is to ask, "What do I

think about again and again when I am alone or when my mind is not occupied with work or conversation?" Let me give you some suggestions of the kinds of things I mean: Do you think about your wife or husband (or children)? Do you think about being successful in your vocation, about being considered a brilliant person, or being socially sophisticated? Or are your recurring thoughts about sex or your own beauty? Or are your thoughts when you are alone centered on your own inner problems — jealousy, resentment, guilt? When I ask myself this, some of the things I have come up with at various times in my life (if I am honest) are: thinking about myself as a successful athlete, businessman, scholar, or writer; or thinking about possible sexual conquests; or imagining or hoping people will think I am an extremely intelligent person. At one time my thoughts were occupied with how I could become a great Christian minister.

Each of these thoughts is like a rubber ball on a string tied to the center of my mind. I throw it out and get busy with the work of the day. But when I am alone, back it comes, again and again, to occupy the middle of the stage of my attention. I am asking you to consider these recurring thoughts because wherever you focus this hottest intensity of your mind could be very close to *what you worship instead of Jesus Christ*. For what is worship if it is not the object of your life's most intense focus?

I am not implying that Christ says that it is wrong to love our children or wife or vocation. But it is wrong to love them more than God. It is wrong to make idols of them. It ruins them and us. I believe that Christ intimates that we can never fully realize the gift of life which he came to bring until we first know that we have loved ourselves and our way more than him and his way (Matt. 9:10-13; Luke 15; 18:18-30).

I have become convinced that the things which keep us from finding a live relationship to God are often not the bad things in our lives, but the good things which capture our imaginations and which keep us from focusing on Jesus

Christ. I think this accounts for much of the frustration of moral people. One looks around and says: “No stealing, no murder, no adultery! Why, God am I so miserable and frustrated in my life?” But we have not seen the fact that we have never really offered God the one thing he asks—our primary love.

What do we do when we find out that we love something more than God? For me it was rather terrifying, because that which was keeping me from the freedom of Christ was *my desire to be a great Christian leader!* It seems evident that our decisions will ultimately be made to conform with whatever has truly captured our imagination. My own decisions and sacrifice were not being made purely to love and feed Christ’s sheep out of obedience and love of him. Rather, my decisions were made to help the church’s work (my work) to its greatest fulfillment. This led to chaos and frustration.

When we see and can honestly face the fact that our world is really centered in something besides God, in ourselves, I think we face the most profound crossroads in our lives. Because this is to recognize that we have separated ourselves from God by taking God’s place in the center of our own little world.

What do we do? For me the answer is paradoxically the simplest and yet the most difficult thing I have ever done. In our age of complexity we want a complex answer, but Christ seems to give us instead a terribly difficult one. I think there are basically two things involved in coming to God at the center of life: (1) to tell God that we do not love him most and confess specifically what it is that we cannot give up to him; and (2) to ask God in the personality of Jesus Christ to come into our conscious lives through his spirit and show us how to live our lives for him and his purposes, one day at a time.

But what if you recognize that you *honestly do not* want God more than whatever is first in your life? I think this is where a good many perceptive people find themselves. In that case I would recommend that you (1) confess (as

above) and then (2) tell Christ that honestly you cannot even *want* him most. Tell him that you *want to want* him most (if you do), ask him to come into your life at a deeper level than you have ever let him before, and give him permission to win you totally to himself. This may be your first honest encounter with Christ, and he will take you wherever you are. As a matter of fact I believe this is really all any of us can do — give God *permission* to make us his. We certainly cannot be his by our own strength of will.

If you made this new conscious beginning in a conversation with me, this is what I would tell you: From now on you are not responsible to exert the pressure or to carry the burden of muscling yourself up to be righteous. You are not *promising* to change, or to *have strength*, or to be a *great* Christian. You have only confessed your need and turned your life over to Christ. What a relief! It is his responsibility to furnish the forgiveness and motivating energy for you to live in a new and creative way.

It was at this point in my life that I stepped across the edge of the adventure of faith and joined a group of fellow strugglers. We were all trying to discover and participate in God's will in the world. And in this company with his people I am finding the joy which comes through God's forgiveness, his support, and the sense of his creative presence in my loneliness.

Within this mixture of persons becoming new and whole I am starting to be able to face the disappointments and failures, the successes and changes in my life and to get in touch with my true feelings—and even the needs of some other people. Finally, there is dawning in my experience that hope of eternal life which can join us to him and to each other, even beyond the grave.

And in this process with this unlikely family, Christ's church, people like me—and perhaps you—are beginning to know God himself.

ⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The McMillan Co., 1958), p.32.