If your god is not God, fire him.

by Dale Ryan

There is a difference—sometimes an enormous difference—between the God of our doctrinal statements and the god we live with every day. Our theological convictions may be thoroughly orthodox, but we may actually serve a god who is quick to anger and slow to forgive. Or a god who shames his followers. Or a god who is punitive and rejecting.

That was my experience. I was close to graduation from seminary when I first really faced the fact that "getting it right" in my head (or on a theology exam or in a doctrinal statement) didn't matter very much if the god I lived with every day was not really God. The god I served was the god-who-is-impossible-to-please. I had served this god for most of my life. It is not a god that I would recommend to anyone. My theology was orthodox. My statement of faith would not have said that God was impossible to please. But the god I woke up to every day—the god whose character and demands shaped my life—that god could not be pleased. It was a god who was not God. Not even close.

Let me be clear about this. The god who is quick to anger and slow to forgive is not a "distorted image of God." It is the opposite of God. It's the wrong god. It's not God at all. It's not that I was looking in the right direction but just couldn't see clearly. I was looking in the wrong direction entirely. It was the wrong god. There is, of course, a whole pantheon of not-Gods. Take your pick:

The angry, abusive god
The abandoning god
The inattentive god
The impotent god
The shaming god

There are many others. I no longer believe that such gods are merely distorted images of the living and true God. They may be distorted images of abusive parents or distorted images of people who have hurt us, but they are not distorted images of God at all.

This conclusion makes a huge difference. If these gods are merely distortions of the true God, then what we should do is to try to undistort them. Maybe we can rework them somehow. Negotiate with them. Restructure them. Reframe them. This is not, however, the approach suggested in Scripture. What ought we to do when we find that we serve a god who is not God? There is only one answer in the Bible. Throw the bum out. Get rid of him. It is an idolatrous attachment, and it can't be reformed, restructured, rehabilitated or restored. This is not a point where it is appropriate to be moderate. We need to clean house. The god who gives us nothing but fear or shame is not God. Fire him. Or her.

But what about the baby in the bathwater? There is no baby. If we live in relationship with a god who gives us nothing but fear and shame, there is no baby in that bathwater. We need to throw
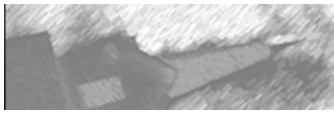
the bum out.

But what about all my good theology? Do I have to throw that out? Well, not necessarily. But we may need to give it a rest. We need to take time to clean house. We need to find out why we have tolerated an abusive god for so long. We probably need to get back to spiritual kindergarten. We may have missed—or have forgotten—the basics. I needed to go back to the most basic of spiritual truths: There is a God and it is not me. All of my abusive gods were internalizations of my experiences with mortals. If as children we experience abuse, we may learn that all powerful people are abusive, even God. So what is most familiar to us is a god who abuses. And we may find ourselves attracted to what we are most familiar with. But like all not-Gods, these abusive gods are a part of me. They are my internalization of my abusive experiences. They are gods of my own creation, crafted out of my experiences with other people. Recovery can begin only when I fire these non-Gods and find a God who is not my own workmanship.

It takes a good deal of humility to return to spiritual kindergarten. But my experience has been that anything more complicated is best saved for later, when we've had some practical experience in a relationship with a God who is grace-full and loving. It may not have been our theology that got us into a relationship with an abusive god. But our theology did not protect us from that abusive god either. So we need to give it a rest. We need to get back to basics. If the god we have today is not God, we need to fire him. We can figure out all the theological details later, when we have some safety in a relationship with a non-shaming God.

But what will God think about all this? If we have served abusive gods, we will of course expect to be punished. We will perhaps be firing the only god we have ever known. The result will be, in all probability, a season of spiritual brokenness. A season perhaps of doubts, second thoughts, spiritual confusion and spiritual loneliness. After all, those not-Gods did provide us with some benefits. They were familiar. They were what we knew. And sometimes the familiar—even if it is abusive—is less terrifying than the fears that come when we fire the only god we have ever known. What will happen now? Will the spiritual loneliness and brokenness ever come to an end?

How will God respond? What is God's attitude toward this painful spiritual poverty? The gods we craft from fear, shame and rejection will shame, blame and intimidate. We need to keep looking until we find a God who says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." There is a God we might want to get to know better.

I won't pretend that cleaning house of idolatrous attachments is easy. It isn't. It takes time, and we will not be able to do it alone. We will need help. The not-Gods may return to disrupt our lives. We may need to "throw the bum out" more than once. We may need to return many times to the most basic of spiritual truths. But the living and true God will see our spiritual brokenness and will not shame us. In our spiritual poverty the true God will see sure signs of the coming of his kingdom. May God be praised.

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