

Word games

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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I had one of those semi-awkward, overly familiar God-talk conversations yesterday... You know the ones, right? Conversations punctuated by words about “what God is doing” and breathless declarations that “it was such a God thing” and “God just showed up” and “it’s so amazing how God is just moving.” Now that I am a pastor, these kinds of conversations are even *more* awkward than they once were because, rightly or wrongly, I get the overwhelming sense that I am supposed to be eagerly expressing my approval of such language. Kinda like a professional requirement or something—like if I don’t understand and affirm the words and the experiences, then I get a failing grade as a pastor. I usually mostly smile and nod while inside I am rehearsing a thousand objections and criticisms and mostly wishing my interlocutor would just take their enthusiastic fervor somewhere else.

It’s not that this kind of language is unfamiliar to me. I heard it a lot when I was younger. I even made the occasional half-hearted attempt to use such words myself—invariably in situations and contexts that were already saturated with this kind of a super-spiritual ethos. They just felt like the words to use. It felt like if you didn’t use them, you were unspiritual or insensitive to the divine movements that were evidently so obvious to everyone else. Who doesn’t want to be in on “what God is doing,” after all? Who doesn’t want to be there when God “shows up” and “moves with power?” It nearly always felt forced and artificial when I tried to borrow these words, to be sure—I could never seem to summon the requisite certainty in the movements of the Spirit!—but there were times when it sure beat the alternative. It’s not always fun to be Eeyore on the side—especially when God is doing such incredible things!

Of course, the pendulum swung fairly hard the other way, as pendulums seem so prone to doing. I became comfortable in academic and theological discourse, and grew to love arguments and ideas *about* God very much. I developed an appreciation for more cerebral forms of worship, trading praise bands and with their passionate, emotive lyrics and four well-utilized chords for somber hymns and

carefully crafted prayers and liturgies. Less helpfully, perhaps, I gave pretty much free reign to my cynicism. I took great delight in skewering naïve understandings of faith and pointing out each and every inconsistency with this or that conception of God and his work in the world. I grew even more suspicious of confident declarations of “what God is doing” and “God told me” and “it was such a God thing...” *How do you know? Always, how do you **know**?*

Today, though, I noticed something a bit unusual amidst the God-talk. There were the familiar feelings of weary cynicism and impatience (If God “showed up” where was he before? What does a *non*-God thing look like? How do we know the difference? Isn’t God *always* moving?), but there was *also* something like a genuine longing. What would it be like to be *that* confident in the ways of God, I wondered. What would it be like to be *that* enthusiastic, *that* expectant, *that* impervious to the encroachments of lifeless reason? What would it be like to be *that* sure that you were in tune with God and his ways, *that* convinced God is standing at the ready to miraculously intervene? What would it be like to speak about Jesus like your best friend?

No sooner do I write these words than I am talking myself out of them... *There are different ways of relating to God, right? Why should the overly familiar approach take precedence over more reflective and measured ways of thinking and speaking about God and faith? And what about the inconsistencies, the gaps, the impossible expectations, the irresponsible language? What about the yawning chasm between rhetoric and reality? What about.... ?*

Yeah, I know. But still. I wonder what it would be like...

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