

Questions at the door

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [January 6, 2016](#) issue



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I've never understood pastors who begin the worship service with announcements. It seems odd liturgically to start by referring to things that are happening at another time and often in another place. It's certainly a strange form of hospitality to get stuck into the housekeeping arrangements before offering what the newcomers think they've come for. And you often end up urging worshipers to join in an activity or event when a third of them haven't turned up yet.

I prefer to make the announcements part of the service ending—a bit like the ads that come between the climax of the sit-com and its final scene. It's an unswerving law of church that although people don't much listen to announcements, they may take profound offense at them. Pastors who pore over every semicolon of a sermon text assume that they can "wing it" with the announcements—which is how they end up revealing more than they intended and taking way too long to do it.

One Sunday, having waded through a call for volunteers, I said, "You know, I should probably say this every Sunday, but if you've come here this morning feeling brokenhearted or anxious about something, don't leave without talking to one of the pastors about it. That's why we have coffee hour—to get to know each other well enough so that when things fall apart we can share what we're going through. Talking to you is what we're here for."

So I had no one to blame but myself when the first person out the door skipped the pleasantries and came straight out with it. "I get the God part," he said; "I just can't get the Jesus part." That was it. No worries about a husband showing signs of dementia, a brother's divorce, or a whistle-blowing scenario at work. He was saying that the biggest issue in his life—something he was desperate to talk to someone about—was . . . God. So I said the first thing that came into my head. "I think Jesus is God saying, 'I'm not far away and long ago and theoretical; I'm here and now and in your face.' Do you want a God who's a nice idea, or a God who's about everything now and forever?" He said, "The everything God." I said, "Well then I think you do get the Jesus part." Then he left. Maybe I'll never know if he wanted my answer or would have preferred a listening ear.

More worshipers came through the line. Then the last person out the door, who'd clearly made sure he was the last person, said (and I'm not making this up), "I get the Jesus part. I just can't get the God part." I was even more dumbfounded than the first time. To meet one person in the heart searchings of faith might be a wonder; to get two made me think that they had a bet and were pulling my leg. But this man was genuine. He had hung back for a real sit-down conversation.

I started thinking, "Is this the same conversation as earlier—or is it the opposite?" It was hard to tell. Slightly regretting my knee-jerk response last time, this time I just listened. What emerged was a tale of touching humility from a person whose early formation had been narrow and dogmatic, and who was quick to write off his experience as inadequate and his faith as insufficient. In the end I said, "At the

beginning you said you didn't get God. You got Jesus, the sacrificial love, the openhearted inclusion, and the never letting us go, but you didn't get God.

"Yet you've told me a story of memory and gratitude, of awe and hope. Honestly, if you had to describe Christianity in four words, you could do a lot worse than these words. I think the only place I'd gently challenge you is to wonder why we don't see you here more often, because those are hard words to live on your own. If you were part of a community that struggles with these words, you'd discover that most churchgoers are further back on the life of memory, gratitude, awe, and hope than you are.

"And by the way, that God you mentioned earlier—the one you said was somewhere beyond sacrificial love, openhearted inclusion, and never letting us go. I don't get that God either. I think if you get Jesus you get pretty much all the God there is."

We sat in silence together, the way you only do with someone you're really close to. I may never know what my companion was thinking. I was thinking, "If only we dared ask what was in the hearts of those who walk in the doors of the church. If only we dared hope that faith was the most important thing in people's lives. Those two people who risked saying what they really thought have just taught me what it means to be a pastor."

Maybe the announcements are the most important part of the worship service after all.