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Is Debating Atheists in Chat Rooms a Worthy Endeavor?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether spending time defending Christianity in chat rooms where atheists and Christians debate is a worthy endeavor and whether it's better to choose a church you agree with theologically or one that provides community.

* Is spending time defending Christianity in chat rooms where atheists and Christians debate a worthy endeavor?

* What are your thoughts on finding a church you agree with theologically versus finding one that provides community?

Transcript

[Music] I'm Amy Hall, I'm here with Greg Koukl and you're listening to Stand to Reason's #STRask podcast. Hi Amy. Hello Greg, are you ready for your first question? Yes ma'am.

Alright, here we go. This one comes from Phil. Is spending time defending the cause of Christ in chat rooms where atheists and Christians debate a worthy endeavor? Nearly all Christian defenses are met with ridicule and scorn.

Can you recommend a worthy discussion for them? What's identified here is the liability of online conversations, okay? And I think it's great that we have Christians that are willing to engage in that medium. I don't do it. I don't have the time for it.

My time has spent elsewhere plus I'm a slow typist so it's just not the best way for me to do it. I have other platforms but for many this is the platform they have and I think they should take use of it, make use of it, okay? The fact that the Christians responses are met with scorn in a certain sense is irrelevant because the only people that you're aware who are being scornful of your points are the people who are responding but there are a whole bunch of other people that aren't responding, they're listening. And so I'll do an event and it'll be at a university and then after my talk there'll be a Q&A and the Q&A and has a bunch of atheists and they go hammer away, alright? And sometimes their responses are characterized like this person characterized the responses on the chat

room but not always in fact, characteristically I get treated respectfully.

There are hundreds to thousands of people that are sitting there listening and paying attention and they're listening and paying attention to two things. They're listening to the content and they are also aware of the style, okay? People who are nasty and unpleasant, only appeal to other people who are nasty and unpleasant. You know, it's a gladiator event and all the people that are like them are cheering them on, stick them again, hit them again, hard or hard or kind of thing.

But there are a lot of other people out there that are going like, I don't agree with that Christian but that guy's not nice and that wasn't a fair thing to say. Now this is important for Christians to keep in mind because not only is there a moral quality to being nice, there is also a tactical benefit to being nice. Your points sound more persuasive if you're gracious and kind, okay? I listen to Dennis Prager on occasion.

I mean, most of the time I'm working doing something else but like when I'm driving to the studio, I'll listen to him because that's during his broadcast time. One of the most powerful things about Dennis is his, not just his content which is superb but his, his manner. He's gracious to people and many times he'll say, okay, we disagree.

I'll give you the last word. What that communicates is that he has such confidence in his view, especially in the light of the reasons he's just given which are characteristically very well thought through. He has such confidence that he's willing to let the other guy have the last word and he's not afraid, he's going to up in his case.

That kind of confidence has an impact on the listener. And so when we're engaging people who are nasty, there are two things we think about. We think about our content and we think about our manner.

We think about our content and we think about our manner. Those are two elements by the way of a good ambassador knowledge, content, and accurately informed mind, a hundred percent character, an attractive manner. And because as I pointed out, an attractive banner is obligatory for Christians before God, but it also adds to persuasiveness.

So if you're engaged in online forums and this is an opportunity you have, understand you're going to get some strong pushback and some nasty stuff from people. And then you can respond, well, ridicule is not an argument. Do you have anything more substantive to offer against the point that I just made? Okay, you can type that out.

Ridicule is not an argument. That was funny. I even laughed, but it didn't address the issue.

So help me understand blah, blah, blah, whatever. And so the oftentimes when I do a radio show with a challenger, when I'm doing a Q&A with challengers in a larger

audience, when I'm doing a debate, which I've done in the past, I don't do them anymore, but when I've done a debate, I am not trying to win the challenger generally, the one I'm debating with. I'm trying to have an impact, put a stone in the shoe of those who are listening, and there are lots and lots and lots of people, listening or reading in a chat room.

Those are the people you think about. So even in chat rooms, if you get nothing from but abuse, take a tip from Jesus, Matthew chapter 5, you know, the spirit of, well, that's the Peter, the spirit of grace of glory rests on you. First Peter went for whatever, you know, if you suffer for the sake of Christ, but Jesus said, "Hey, you know, rejoice and be glad because your reward and heaven is great.

This is the way they treated the prophets." So don't get too strung out about the fact that people are hammering at you, all right? It's online. Is there not drawing blood? It may not be nice, but there are a whole bunch of other people that are paying attention that are watching the way you respond, not just the content, but the manner. And this is another reason I don't follow these things online, not only because of the nastiness of the non-Christian, but because of the nastiness of the Christians.

It's so deplorable. Oh, Greg, now that you say that, you've reminded me. What is something you wrote in the past, I might? Well, kind of... It's joking, Andy.

Wonderful. I used to love...we had comments on our website, and I loved interacting with people on there. I loved interacting with the atheists.

I learned so much. I loved having my ideas challenged because it forced me to be very clear and to know how they were going to react to what I was going to say. That's one of the biggest things I learned from interacting with atheists online.

Which, by the way, I benefit from because I write something and you tell me, I know what something's to say about what you just wrote. Let's fix it. So I learned a lot of skills from that.

But what happened is that over time, we started the blog. I guess it was...I think it started here in 2006. I didn't come here until 2007, but that's a long time ago.

And over time, what happened was that the atheists stopped making arguments and that all they would do is just come and leave an insult. And I think part of that was because more and more people were getting involved. And when we started off, it was people who were interested in the topics and who liked to think.

And then it was just everybody's online and everybody's talking. So even that I was okay with. But then what happened is the Christians started responding in the same way.

And at that point, I said, "Our comments are no longer helping people. Now they're

teaching people to respond in this way." And that's when we remove the comments. And I still miss them.

I still miss this interaction. But I think it's a lot harder to find now. I'm sure there are places you can find.

Maybe look for a blog where the person who's writing is...he might be a little more congenial or reasonable. And he's not just about making insults at Christians. If you can find that, you're probably more likely to find people you want to converse with than maybe a chat room.

I really don't know how chat rooms are going these days. But I can imagine it's not good. A lot of them don't take comments anymore for the same reasons probably.

Or you have to be some kind of registered behind the registration member in order to be able to put a comment down. And I don't know. There might be...I want to say...I almost think that Jay Warner Wallace has something like this on his website now.

That they are very careful to let people in who've kind of proven themselves. I think it's forever...I don't think it's just for Christians. So maybe go to his website and take a look and see... Cold case.

Yeah, cold case Christianity. The other thing I wanted to add, Greg, is that you mentioned the tactical and moral advantages that you've been able to see. And there are advantages that you get from responding in a way that reflects Christ.

But there's also an apologetic advantage. And we've talked about this before. You reminded me of this when you brought up 1 Peter.

When we respond as Jesus responded, we are reflecting him to people. We are showing people who he is and his character. And I know I've told this story here before, but it's so amazing to me.

When Richard Wormbrand, who was a pastor in Romania under the Communists, when he was put in prison for being a Christian... For being a Christian. For Christ. Yes.

And he was tortured by the guards. He and his fellow Christian prisoners would then turn around and they would go back to their cells and they would pray for their persecutors. And some of the guards saw this and they saw Jesus in that and they actually became Christians.

So it's not only that you're doing what's right. We are supposed to do what's right even when we're suffering. And by the way, read through 1 Peter over and over because it talks a lot about this.

But we're also reviewing... We're also actually engaging in an apologetic just by the way

we're responding. So that is an advantage of being in these spaces. If you can take it, if you can manage to respond as Jesus would respond.

And noble flesh. And by the way, he was very clever. He was very thoughtful in his responses.

But he wasn't a gladiator event to him who can draw the first blood. And he always treated people with dignity even when he was condemning them for something. He still treated them with dignity.

And then he didn't treat them as... Gosh, he wasn't condescending or... I'm trying to think of a word. So if you're in these chat rooms, you can build your character. It's good for you to have to strengthen that just as you would strengthen your body with weight training.

To train yourself to not respond in kind. But you have to be careful because you will be influenced by this. So you also need to take care of yourself and be balanced and not spend all of your time in there.

Not only because it will affect who you are, but emotionally it's very hard to take that for a long period of time. And you don't want to learn from them. You don't want to be disciplined by them in terms of the way they respond.

So you have to be careful that you are spending time with God. You're spending time in fellowship if you're going to step into this situation. But one more thing about this is that some people do become Christians.

I've read stories about people who were in chat rooms like this or on people's websites and interacting in the comments who were actually watching these exchanges and did become Christians. So it can happen. I think you just have to be wise about how much you can take.

And it's okay to work on building up your strength in this area. But it's probably going to be more about your character than it is about making rational arguments. I mean depending on where you can find.

And I'm sorry I don't know of a better forum to recommend, but those are my ideas for that. Finding something. So hopefully you can find something, Phil.

We hope that works out for you. All right. Here's a question from Drew.

Can you discuss finding a church that you agree with theologically versus finding one that provides community? Perhaps this is this is a false choice. I'm getting burnt out by mega churches that don't match my theology, which is reformed. But the mega churches are where the singles community seems to be.

Well, now there's another element here, the singles community. And presumably Drew is a single person. Of course, where you don't have mega churches with big singles community, you still have singles in other churches.

And so this is going to be somewhat a judgment call here. Certainly the theology is really important. Now I've gone to churches and benefited from them.

And some for years that were not reformed. Okay. So this can be a personal conviction.

It does not mean that there isn't growth and benefit to be had in places that disagree with you on something pretty essential. It kind of depends to me on the issue and the kind of disagreement you're experiencing. So like if I will cut into details, but I'm just simply saying I'm very committed, reformed in my soteriology.

All right. In my understanding of salvation, sovereign grace, but I could go to Calvary chapels, which are not that way. And I benefit tremendously from them and have the great community that are characteristic of Calvary chapels.

So you have to assess your own theological palette, so to speak. Some things are really important to me, but I can go to benefit from churches and be part of churches where that wasn't part of the teaching style or theological content. And now other things that are really important to me that, man, I couldn't, you know, I just have to move on.

So I think this is one of those things. How important is it that you have a big singles group to go to? It's possible to get fed substantially in other places. But if you're single, you know, and you're looking to make build relationships with the opposite sex, hopefully get married, not be single anymore, then you have to weigh those opportunities.

So I think it's, I think that in this particular case, it's going to be a personal decision. What do you think, Amy? Well, this is really tough because I think back to when I first moved to LA and I had wonderful community and so many good close friends and I grew spiritually from that. And over time, I ended up moving away from the churches I was in before, partly because of their theology, but partly because of the depth of the theology.

I think there's a difference between having different theology and having shallow theology. So sometimes there are churches that have a different theology in certain areas, but their depth of theology in many other areas. Yeah, I can still, it's still okay for me.

Whereas there are some churches where the theology is so shallow that I just, or even worse, it's not even focused on Jesus. It's just focused on teaching you how to live and it's not even focused where it needs to be. And sometimes that is related to theological issues, but sometimes it's just a shallowness of the church.

Now, if that's the case, you might do okay for a while with the fellowship, but you are going to burn out eventually if you're not being fed. So this is tough. I think where you are in life also makes a difference.

I think when you're younger and you want to take advantage of the fact that a lot of people your age are doing various things and you want to be part of it. You might tend towards that side rather than the theology side. But I would say for the long haul, you probably will have to end up in a church that matches your theology or at least has deep theology and thinks deeply about things and they're open to you having a different view.

You know, there's another alternative and some people may not like this and I'm not sure how you're going to respond. And that is you can go to a church that has the kind of rich theology and the rich theological environment that will feed you and then go to some other church's singles group on Sunday night or on Wednesday night or be part of their enterprises. Of course, coming at your splitting yourself between two communities, but you're meeting different needs.

And I don't think that all of your spiritual needs or personal needs have to be met in one group of people. Some churches have great worship and lousy teaching. Some people, some churches have, and many in my experience have much better teaching and really by my standards, bad worship.

And every once in a while, you know, it's good to go somewhere where there's fabulous worship and you benefit from that. Fabulous worship, according to a certain set of standards. I've talked about this in the past.

So, you know, you sometimes get you most people aren't going to get their apologetics from their local church. They're going to get it from standard reason or reasons to believe or reasonable faith or other books or other teachers or whatever. So, I don't think there's anything, excuse me necessarily wrong with splitting your affection, so to speak, because you're getting one thing from one local body and you're getting something else that's important to you from another local body.

It did occur to me, though, if you go to these larger churches because they have a great singles group and a lot of people, a lot of activities, but the theology is shallow. What kind of member of the opposite sex are you going to meet in those shallow churches? Okay. What people are one with are what they offer in one too.

And so it might be you're going to have a lot more opportunities to meet someone else of the opposite sex in a church like that, but is that the kind of person that you're going to be one to connect it to if it turns out that they have kind of a shallow approach to Christianity? It was just another thought. Yeah, I don't see anything wrong with, especially if you're coming out of those churches, you likely do have relationships with people that are still happening. So just keep in touch with them.

Try and find a church that is deeper and matches your theology, but keep up, be intentional about keeping up your relationships with the people that you connected with before. You can get involved with that, you know, people have parties, they have mission trips, they have all sorts of things. So if you end up at a church that's smaller and maybe doesn't have these things, you still have those connections with other people.

So you can cultivate, you can continue to cultivate those. I would say you need to find a place that is spiritually feeding you first and foremost. Right.

Maybe that has slightly different theology. If you're okay with whatever that difference is, that's okay, but you do not stay at a church. Like you said right here, Drew, that you were getting burnt out.

So that already tells me you weren't getting what you should have been getting from the church. So hopefully, I mean, unfortunately, there's no perfect solution here. You'll always have a trade off of one kind or another.

And I'm sorry that's the case. I wish that wasn't the case. But unfortunately, in a fallen world, that's how it is.

So I hope you're able to find a good church that is, you know, bringing you closer to God, deepening your relationship and giving you an opportunity to serve others. Just remember that church is there to be your family and you are playing a part in that church. You are meeting a need for other people.

So part of it is, of course, about the fellowship, but part of it is about meeting the needs of others. And so maybe there are fewer young people that gives you more opportunities of things you can do in a smaller church to help the other people there. So that's another thing to keep in mind here.

Good luck to you and keep praying. I know it's frustrating and I hope you find something soon. All right.

Thank you, Phil and Drew. If you have a question, send it on Twitter with the hashtag #STRS or go to our website. Just find our hashtag #STRSPodcast page and you'll find a link there to send us your question.

We look forward to hearing from you. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.

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