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What Questions Should I Ask Pastors When Looking for a New Church?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about what to ask pastors and other church leaders when looking for a new church.

* What questions would you ask pastors and other church leaders when looking for a new church?

Transcript

This is Amy Hall. I'm here with Greg Cocal and you're listening to Stanterasons #STRAskPodcast. Well Greg, today we have a few questions about the church.

Okay. And this first one comes from Tom Gerg. What questions would you ask the pastor and other church leaders when interviewing, when, hmm, oh I see, when interviewing as new church, I guess.

Yes, I guess so. What questions would you, sorry, I thought this made sense for when I read it before. What questions would you ask the pastor and other church leaders if you're looking for a new church? I see, I see.

Okay. Well, I would want to see their statement of faith. That's the first thing.

And the statement of faith describes what their convictions are, all right, regarding theology. And some are more general and short, others are longer. In my view, the longer the better, because it's like a tighter meshed seine or net or whatever less things slip through, all right.

So the kinds of things that I would be concerned about now are actually the same things that I'm concerned about in any alleged Christian school and what they hold to. And the first is the nature of the gospel, the nature of the gospel. And here I'm looking for what has been characterized as exclusivism, that is, Jesus is the only way of salvation because he is the only one who solved the problem.

And in order to benefit from that, you must believe that he did and trust him for it. So I made a comment many years ago when the whole emergent church in the post-water moon started that if you don't believe in objective truth, you can't be a Christian. And I'm not trying to exclude you.

I'm saying the definition of being a Christian entails that you believe something is true, in particular, and it has to do with Jesus. But if you don't think there is any objective truth, then you can't have the objective conviction that Jesus did certain things that are necessary for you to affirm in order to enter in to salvation, all right. And so that Jesus is the only way is an objective truth and that you must put your trust in him since the New Testament times is required.

Okay, that's called exclusivism. I know it sounds a wordy-toity and snobby, but it's not. Medicine is the same way.

I said in the story of reality, singular problems often require singular solutions. Okay, so the second thing is a high view of Scripture. A high view of Scripture.

And here I'm talking about something like inerrancy. Not this view that, well, Scripture is inspired with regards to its theological insights, but it can make mistakes about history and things like that. The interesting thing about that view is that it basically says where you can actually test the Scripture, it's false.

Where you can't test it, the theological claims, oh, then those things are true. All right, the second problem though is the bigger problem, and that is that theological claims in the Bible are tied to historical verities, things that happened as a matter of fact in history. And if they didn't happen, then that undermines the claims of the text, classically the resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15, Paul said if it didn't happen, then we're fools and people should pity us.

Okay, so high view of Scripture. And I'm talking about something like inerrancy, properly understood. A third thing is nowadays, not gay affirming, not gay affirming.

Now, 10 years ago, I don't want to think I would have made that a requirement because it wasn't happening. Now it's all over the place, maybe 15 years ago now, but now it's everywhere. And that's that's different from being friendly to gays.

Theologically, if they are affirming homosexuality is a morally acceptable, legitimate, means or a wave of life before God. Well, then what they're doing is they are promoting lawlessness. And Jesus in the Sermon of the Mount described those people who look like us, but promote lawlessness are wolves in sheep's clothing.

Okay, you read the whole passage and you see in Jesus says, I never knew you. So that's another thing. That I have a couple other things that are not strictly theological, but they have theological ramifications.

One of them has to do with the preaching. Okay. And I'm wary of topical preaching.

And even I'm even wary of verse by verse teaching that turns into just topics being suggested by the passages. What you want to do is you want to have a pastor who teaches the Bible. So you learn the Bible, you understand how these books fit together, you get an understanding of the books, the kind of understanding that the people who read the books originally got, you know, they weren't taking a couple of reading a couple verses at a time and thinking, how can this help my marriage? How can I get have a better family? How can I balance my finances better? This is the wrong approach.

You want in it, I'm not against topicals. In fact, most of the talks I give are topical. So there is a place for them for specialists who specialize in topics like we do in apologetics.

But as a steady diet, you want to learn what is the gospel of Mark all about? Why was it written? Who was it written to? What is the basic claim as me? Same thing with Ephesians or Thessalonians or Hebrews or whatever. These had a purpose. So you want to be educated about the purpose of God's word in that way.

And so this is another thing that I would look for. The worship to me is a big deal. And this is where individual tastes are going to differ.

But I think that when it comes to worship, I think worship leaders ought to lead worship. Okay, now there's a couple of things entailed in there. I won't get on my try not to get on my soapbox on this.

But what there are a couple of things entailed, a leading worship. First, you've got to lead. Secondly, it's got to be worship.

All right, leading means you are guiding the people. You are not entertaining them. You are not, whoa, whoa, whoa, doing all your little entertainment trails because people can't do that when they're worshipping.

You want to guide and lead the people in a clear melody and get out of the way so that they are focusing able to sing the song and get into the worship without being distracted by the worshipper. That's part of what leading is. And the second thing is it's got to be worship.

And so many of the songs nowadays are not worship so much. They are not geocentric or Christocentric, centered on God or Christ and the work of God or Christ, but they're centered on the self. They are celebrations of their feelings and they're almost always in the first person, "I this, I that, I the other thing." You know, when Jesus told the disciples how to pray, the first word is plural.

Our Father. In other words, this is a community thing. Now, it doesn't mean you can't play it by yourself, obviously.

Jesus prayed by himself. But the point is that there is a community here, but when we are all worshipping as individuals, "I this, I that, I the other thing," and that's the main flavor, the fairer, I think that's problematic. When I was having time with the Lord yesterday, I pulled out an old song book from the Jesus Movement Days and I realized that almost all the songs in there were verses.

Put the music. They were great. Those are the ones I remember from that era by the way.

Yeah, then you remember the verses too, you know, the passages. And so, so, so, I think that in worship, you want to be focusing and and the music needs to be beautiful. If it's, if it's, if it's dreary and oh my goodness, there are so many dreary songs that pass for worship in worship services.

It doesn't have to be 50 years old or 100 years old or 150, although those songs weren't dreary, but so many of the songs now are just plain old dreary. I see only what I can think of it. Anyway, to me, that's, if it's not beautiful, it's not worship.

It can be sober, but not dreary anyway. So, these are the things that I'm, I think, are really important in a church, what I would be looking for. And you're going to end up making some compromises, but I think in the first four things, I wouldn't compromise.

The worship part, you're going to have a hard time finding a church that actually consistently worships has worship leaders who lead worship in the way I just described it. There's going to be a lot of entertainment. And on the one hand, there's going to be a lot of self-centered, emotionally ejaculations kind of thing, exclamations of, wow, everything is wonderful.

When the people are singing, they aren't feeling that, but they're just singing this stuff because they're told to sing it. And this is what the worship leader is doing. And it's not going to be beautiful.

But so you have that you might have to make a compromise there, but that would be ideal. Those what four or five things, Amy. Okay, I have a few more questions that maybe people aren't thinking about, but you will think about later if things go wrong in your church.

Because, of course, as you say, Greg, things are never going to be perfect, but there are a lot of things to consider here. So one thing I would ask for sure is what is the structure of their leadership and what are the methods of accountability? If something goes wrong in your church, are there, is there a denomination that can step in? And if not, are there other ways, if you get a pastor in there who is out of control in some way, whatever way that is, do the elders actually have authority to hold someone accountable? Not only do they have the authority, but are they actually doing it? Is the authority just on paper?

And some of these questions, you might have to ask the people around you rather than the leadership, because you may need to find out from people who are experiencing what's going on in that church. But I would definitely ask about accountability either from outside or from inside in terms of the leadership.

And then I would ask them, what do you consider to be or who do you consider to be your audience as you have your service? In other words, is your audience Christians? Are you building up Christians? Are you mean the audience of the past or the present? How does the past understand his audience to be? Who are they directing the service to on a Sunday? This is really good. Are you directing it? Are you directing it towards believers? Are you building up the believers? Are you maturing the believers? Are you worshiping with believers? Or is your goal an evangelism event? Right, right. Yeah, that's a great distinctive fact.

Sometimes when I preach on a Sunday, and I'll just say this, I said, you may not be a Christian here. Great. I'm glad you're here.

I'm not here to convert you. I'm here to put a stone in your shoe. I hope I know you in a good way.

But I'm not speaking to you today. I'm speaking to Christians because it's my job in this situation to train them or something to that effect. And that's, you know, read through Ephesians.

It talks, I think it's Ephesians where Paul talks about how the Holy Spirit is giving gifts to each person in order to in order so that they will mature each other into the full stature of Christ or so the camera goes. Oh, blah, blah, blah. That kind of stuff.

That's the goal. That's the goal of church. And when... Present every man, the complete in Christ.

Many years ago, I was part of a church that was focused on bringing people in. And what would happen is all the mature believers would leave. And it was just constantly very immature believers because as soon as anyone started to get even a little bit of maturity, they would leave the church because nothing was... They weren't being filled up.

They weren't being fed out of quick. Yeah. And that's... You know, I hear so many people say, "Oh, you should go to church to be fed." No, no, actually that is what the church is for.

That is what the church is for. You're going there to be filled with God, to worship Him, to see Him, to enjoy Him and to learn about Him. That's why we're going.

Well, the Greek word for church is ecclesia. And that means the called out ones. So in a

general sense, they're called out of the world to follow Christ.

But also when you meet in your normal, your gatherings, you're coming out of the community and into your own private community. Evangelism is done in the Ugora. It's done in the marketplace.

So we go out for that. It doesn't mean it can't be done in the church. But what you're focusing on is focus.

And if the focus is evangelism, then it's not functioning as a church, but as an evangelist to go organization. Lots of them do that. And then the next thing I would ask is, what is the goal of your sermons? And this is something you can ask them, but also I think you need to watch a lot of the sermons to get an idea of what they're actually doing.

Because they might be saying all the right things, but when you actually listen to the sermons, it's something completely different. But what's the goal? Is the goal to teach you instructions for life? Or is the goal to reveal God to you so you can worship Him and know Him fully? I mean, as an ultimate goal, of course, there are places in the Bible where there are instructions for life. But this is all within the context of the worship service, which is showing us who God is revealing Him to us so that we can actually worship Him.

And then the next thing I would do is I would read everything on their website and I would believe them when they say what they're about. And this is something I have discovered. I will read something on the website and I'll say, wow, this doesn't, this, this kind of the focus they have on their website, this happened recently, the focus sounded very much about, I guess, building up their community.

That was an entire focus. There wasn't a single word in their mission or values about worshiping. Like worship did not show up there.

And I mentioned this to someone and they said, oh, well, you know, who knows who made the website, just go and see how it is. So I went and of course I go in there and this entire sermon is all instructions, life instructions. And this comes to where I have what I call the Mormon test and I say to myself, could this sermon have been preached in a Mormon church? Interesting.

Because if there is no gospel and no understanding of who God is in the sermon, then a Mormon could go along with it because a Mormon is in church to become a better person mainly. I mean, that's what they're doing. That's their gospel.

Their gospel is following these laws in order to make it to the highest level of heaven. But that's not our goal as Christian churches. When the gospel is part, it is the goal of why you are there, then that should show up in the mission and values and whatever they really care about, they will put on their website.

Now make sure you read everything because you might find later like, what is this horrible thing on this website? It's so helpful now that we have this resource. So I do recommend that. A lot of times churches will have a list of resources on there and go and look and see who they're recommending.

If they have a blog, look at their blog, just look at everything there. Listen to the sermons, ask the Mormon question. Greg, I love it.

Ask the Mormon question to yourself regarding the sermons. Yes, to yourself. Yes.

Greg, you mentioned about topical sermons because a lot of pastors do think that they are teaching the Bible what they're actually doing is reading a verse and using that as a jumping off point for whatever topic they want to talk about. It's not actually what the Bible, it's not actually the point of the passage, it's not the point of the book, it's not the point of the gospel. That's right.

And so all these things are ways also finding out what their view of the gospel is. You could come straight out and ask them, but most people know if you come straight out and ask about the gospel, what does that mean? I mean, you probably should, but most of the time they know the right words to say, but the question is, how are they actually organizing their church services? And what are they actually saying in the sermons that indicates whether or not they are actually centered on the gospel? Now, let's see, I have a couple other notes here. Is, are the sermons the pet topics of the pastor or is he actually going through the ideas that are in the book, which is what you said, Greg? Are they just giving instructions or are they glorifying God? And Greg, you mentioned the worship things, and I totally agree that congregational singing is something different from having people up there performing.

Are people actually singing? When you're sitting there, can you hear the other people singing? Because that's a good indication if they're singing songs that are simple enough, that are meant to be sung with a melody you can follow, which is very rare nowadays with contemporary music, at least the way it's being sung in a lot of places I go. Yeah, there are a lot of good things out there that will explain how to do good congregational singing. And then one last thing I want to mention, because you talked about how you don't want it to be a celebration of our emotions.

And sometimes people will email me and say, well, but what about the Psalms that actually talk about emotions? And the answer is, yes, they do talk about emotions, but all those emotions, it's not a celebration of their emotions. It's not a celebration of them. It's them expressing their feelings, and it always moves towards glorifying God.

It always moves towards how the truth about God affects those emotions or answers his concerns or whatever. It's always directed in that way. It's not an actual celebrating of just, this is how I feel.

Yeah, right. At my concern, here's the big concern. I think that a lot of these songs are manipulative.

And I mean it this way. They are not meant to capture. Let me put it this way.

They are designed to get people to start feeling the thing that the song is expressing. It is not a genuine expression of a person's heart. This is why it always strikes me as unusual that the first song that they sing is a big giant rousing almost always, no matter what church, big rousing, all right, get to your feet.

Let's whoa, whoa, whoa. A lot of people aren't warning people, and maybe they don't want to jump up and down and yell, but then this is what the, because this is the way to get you pumped up. But pumped up singing isn't always worship.

So that's, I am fine with expressing emotions before God. Absolutely. And you do see that in the Psalms.

I am concerned about what I think turns out to be a kind of a manipulation using music. So you get people singing things. They're not really feeling, but that by singing it, you can get them to start feeling it.

Instead of focusing in on God, and when you focus in on God in the right ways, then our emotions will follow if they do in a way that's associated with God and Christ, and the things that we are properly celebrating about them. And you might ask yourself, when you leave a service, what is on your mind? Do you leave thinking about how wonderful God is? Do you leave thinking about how you've failed this week and you've done something wrong? I mean, maybe there could be conviction, but if you don't have, if you're not leaving with the gospel and a love of God, then something has gone wrong with the focus in the church. Now, I will say no church is going to get this perfect.

No church. And so many churches out there are, I think, missing a lot of these elements. And I, I encourage churches to move in these directions.

And I think maybe we will as time goes on as we're forced to depend on God more as culture gets more difficult. And I think maybe this will actually help churches focus on the right things, I hope. But my heart goes out to you if you're looking for a new church, it's a hard thing to find.

It really is. But listen to those sermons, read those, those websites. Hopefully they have information on there.

And I don't know about you, Greg, but I like the most boring church possible. I, I, I just love the peaceful, quiet churches that are focusing on God and the ideas and worshipping and without all the bells and whistles. Yeah.

That's just my personal thing. But everybody has to, you know, you, you pick from what you have available, because the answer is not to not go to church. Right.

Right. All right, Greg, anything else to add before I think that covers it. There's a lot more that could be said, but, but I think that covers it for now.

It's good. Well, thank you, Tom Gurg for that question. We appreciate it.

And I think maybe in our next episode, I'll go on to the other because we do have a couple more questions about churches that I think would be interesting. So stay tuned for our next episode. And we'll see you there.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Cockel for Stand to Reason.

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