

Notes from “Jim and Casper Go to Church”

by Jim Henderson and Matt Casper

JW: Jim is a long-time Christian and former pastor. Casper is a self-described “open-minded atheist”. These two men visit twelve different churches and share their observations on what they see and here. While only one of the congregations visited can be considered a traditional, mainline Protestant church, I found their observations, particularly Casper’s observations on “church” to be extremely informative. The excerpts below struck a cord with me as I read.

In the introduction, Jim previews a theme that will appear in many of Casper’s comments on Christianity. He wrote, “Jesus didn’t just teach principles; he taught practices. He gave people something to do. He didn’t just teach them about forgiveness; he told them to forgive their debtors. He didn’t just talk about love as a concept (eros, phileo and agape); he told people to love their enemies. He didn’t just tell people to think about changing their behaviors; he told them to repent (change their actions). . . . it has become painfully obvious that what we need is not more information, but more formation. We need to learn once again to minor in principles and major in practice.” (xxxiii-xxxiv)

JW: To borrow from scripture, Faith without works is dead.

At Saddleback Church (Pastor Rick Warren) Jim asked Casper to rate the band and the music. Casper said “‘For presentation and professionalism, they get a four or a five, but the music is *too* contrived, too slick, too professional, really.’ . . . Casper continued, ‘And the lyrics? ‘Hope Changes Everything’? What does that mean? Hope changes nothing except your own feelings. Action changes everything.’ . . . Wow, [Jim] thought, *We’ve only been in the building ten minutes, and the worship band and the music – what we Christians usually think of as one of the best ways to attract others to church – have been labeled contrived and soulless by Casper the Friendly Atheist.*” (Pg. 4)

JW: Music is an important element of worship. If you believe Casper, overproduced musical productions can do as much harm as good.

Later at Saddleback, Jim and Casper were discussing the service and the decision theology presented that morning. Jim asked, “What is missing for you?” Casper responded, “Well, where is the call to action? The challenge to make this world a better place? . . . The message was that you don’t have to do anything. Just say a prayer, magic words, and you are in.”(pg. 6) Casper continued “‘If I did believe in God, and that I was going to be granted eternal life in heaven, I would want to do something significant here on Earth, to live as much of my life as I could following the example set by Jesus when he was here on Earth . . .” (pg. 7)

JW: Casper’s observations highlight the difficulty people have in our society with the concept of grace. Especially in America, we are taught that we must earn everything. Helping people understand a free gift from God isn’t always easy. Casper also reminds us of the importance of “because/therefore” theology. Because God loves us and acts to save us, therefore we follow the example and teachings Jesus laid out for us.

At a church in LA call the Dream Center, Casper comments on the light show and theatrics used in worship. “I think the light show and all that, for me anyway, does less to attract and connect me than to disconnect me.” (pg. 19)

JW: The church they were visiting was full of young people and very diverse. Obviously the show connected with a number of people, but Casper reminds us to all lights, smoke machines and power point are not going to connect with all people and aren’t the only way to reach the unchurched.

At a different church in LA called Mosaic, Casper notes, “If God expresses his love for us by sacrificing his Son, how can that love possibly be returned? Is that sacrifice merely to be appreciated and recognized once, maybe twice a week, or must we do more? I would think more. And I think that’s what I’m waiting for, Jim. After the service, and the music, and the bucket, I want to hear one answer to one simple question: What do you want me to do? I mean, we’re talking about eternal salvation here, and if heaven is real, it can’t really be easy getting in.”(pg. 33)

JW: Again, Casper points us toward an understanding of the radical nature of grace and toward the fact that grace may not be simply seen as good news to be accepted. Grace, God’s unconditional love, mercy and forgiveness, may be freely offered, but obviously it is not always freely or easily accepted.

At Willow Creek Church in Illinois, Casper hears the pastor mention that the congregations prayers had been answered because he had secured a meeting with Bono. Casper is struck by the way in which prayer is used. “It seems to me like a gaudy use of the power of prayer. An interview with Bono? Is that the king of thing that people at Willow pray for? . . . I mean, come on. People are being killed needlessly in every corner of the world, kids are starving, and people are praying for their pastor to meet a rock star? That’s ludicrous.” (pg. 44)

JW: No explanation is given for why they were praying for a meeting with Bono. Since Willow Creek does global ministry, it could have been an attempt to coordinate a worldwide ministry between the church and organizations represented by Bono. The helpful point here for me is not the criticism of what they were praying for, but a call for us to remember that prayer is important communication with God. When speaking with those outside the community, we need to remember that prayer, particularly styles of prayer and topics of prayer, may need explanation to be more fully understood.

When faced with the classic ‘What’s going to happen to your soul if you die today?’ decision theology, Jim and Casper have the following exchange. Casper says, “I don’t know what happens following my death, your death, or anyone’s death. I mean, are you holding out on me? In your conversations with God, have you been given proof of what happens after we die?’

‘No, Casper, all I have is faith – that’s it – no proof. The fact is I can’t prove one thing about what I believe to you. All I have is a hope, and the reality is neither of us will know who is right until we actually die.’

Casper’s mouth was agape, and he was silent for a bit. When he spoke again, it was much more quietly.

‘Wow, Jim. I have never heard it put that way before. I’ve never heard anyone admit that it’s all based on faith. So often people precede an attempt to get me to join up with Jesus with a threat and an unprovable claim: Chose Christ, because you’re going to die. I always think, *That’s it? That’s the pitch?* I mean, what else is in the package?’ (pg. 45-46)

JW: If there was any doubt that the “decide now for you might die tonight” conversion method was no longer effective or desirable. Casper’s critique makes it clear that honest conversation about life and faith is a much more effective way to connect to those outside the church.

At a traditional Presbyterian Church in Chicago, Jim and Casper were joined by a friend named Helen. When Casper noted that he appreciated the way people lingered and talked following worship and saw that as a sign of community, Helen began the following exchange.

“Casper, it’s nice that they’re talking to each other, but how come no one has come over to greet you and Jim? Aren’t they at least curious about why two guys were here typing on laptops? Surely they noticed!’

I (Jim) told Helen that in all our church visits, hardly anyone had voluntarily spoken to us.

This was the norm, not the exception.” (pg. 57-58) Later Jim told Casper, “that I’d love to start a new seminar, one that will help churches realize that one very simple action on their part could make a very big difference in how people perceive them. . . . I’ll call it the ‘Just Say Hi Church Growth Seminary.’ Here’s my idea. We tell pastors to retire all their ushers. . . . We tell pastors to find five to ten people who are willing to do one simple thing every time they come to church. . . . Just say hi, Casper. That’s it. They would agree to say hi to three people who are new to them, and then they would be done for the day.”(pg. 58)

JW: Simple, but true. If people would be willing to just say hi with interest and integrity, the community would be strengthened and newcomers would feel more welcome.

The Presbyterian Church used Bibles and large passages of scripture reading. “One thing I (Casper) really like was their use of the Bible. In many of the churches we’ve ‘worked,’ they pull one sentence or even just one clause from one verse, and we get no context. I often feel like the pastor makes up his mind on what he wants to say and then does a keyword search in the Bible to find whatever verse he can to support it. But here, we read a whole passage (Acts 26:1-29), and we got the whole story in context. . . . The Bible is chock-full of interesting stories, and sometimes it may be more effective just to let them speak for themselves.” (pg. 60)

JW: At its best, the type of proof-texting Casper describes assumes an overwhelming knowledge of Scripture and the ability to recall the context from which a passage is pulled. At its worst, proof-texting is exactly as Casper described – a way to prove what you want to say instead of proclaim what God has to say. Use of scripture in its wider context may make it more accessible to skeptical newcomers.

At one church outside of Chicago and one in the Pacific Northwest, Casper was impressed with the mission work in the community and with the idea that people were encouraged not just to give money, but to invest their time in working with and helping others. “Image Dei is not trying to get you to join *them*, so much as they’re trying to join *you*.” This style of ministry was described as “*Inbreaking* is joining an existing community action, while *outreaching* is inviting them to join yours.”(pg. 95)

JW: St. Michael does a lot of outreach, but what might it look like to seek out opportunities for inbreaking. It could be going down to one of the trailer parks and fixing up a playground or looking for an established community ministry to support as a congregation.

Jim and Casper go to see Joel Osteen’s church in Houston. The ‘show’ is amazing. The presentation is professional. The preaching is engaging. The theology however draws criticism. “The message goes like this: Stay consistently happy and in a good mood, and God will bless you. But since no one can accomplish this, they don’t get blessed. And when they don’t get blessed, they have only who to blame? Themselves.” (pg. 127)

JW: Right on target.

Christians argue often about the proper way to interpret Scripture. Here is Casper’s suggestion:

“It’s simple: If the Bible is really the Word of God, it’s very, very important to not take it out of context. I mean, that’s a rule that applies to most every phrase ever said, so you’d think it’s apply tenfold to the Bible! You can’t look at Leviticus and say God hates gay people, then ignore Jesus’ endless commands to love each other. You can’t take a snippet of the Bible out of context and misuse it, or spin it, to support your particular pitch. That’s twisted.

In my opinion the Bible is kind of like the Constitution: It’s a document of the rules we used to live by and the rules we live by now, with each addition fixing and overruling what came before. Just like the Thirteenth Amendment overruled Americans’ ‘right’ to own other people, the teachings of Jesus overruled some of the more, um, mean-spirited elements of the Old Testament. In my

opinion, the Bible isn't a tool you use selectively; it's a lesson plan you follow, or at least it should be for anyone who believes that it's more than just a book of myths and legends." (pg. 141-142)

JW: It seems to me that as an atheist, Casper has a better (not perfect, but better) understanding of how to interpret scripture than many 'Christians'. Again, if we take Casper seriously, it implies that we would need to bear witness to the whole message of scripture, not just focus on little sections if we want to reach newcomers.

Finally, Jim asks Casper:

“So if you wanted Christians to hear one thing, what would you tell us?” . . . ‘I guess I'd like some straight shooting: ‘Hi. Life is challenging. But we've found that being followers of Jesus has helped us. Maybe it could help you, too.’ That'd be refreshing. And I'd be interested in hearing more and asking questions. In short, I'd be interested in having a conversation.” (pg. 145)

JW: Sounds like a faithful, effective way to begin a conversation with a newcomer.

JW, 5/14/08