

Jim and Casper Go to Church

Discussion Guide

Introduction

1. Jim describes a common measurement used by pastors to gauge their success and calls it the Three *B*s: *buildings, budgets, and butts in seats*. Do you think your church uses these markers as a way of determining its success? If it does, do you think it should?
2. Jim describes his coming through the discipleship process ending up “thinking more like a Pharisee.” Can you identify with any pharisaic tendencies in yourself? Is this something you think happens regularly in Christian settings? Why do you think it does or does not occur in churches?
3. What do you think about Jim’s practice of paying people to go to church? Is there anything wrong with using money this way? Why are we comfortable spending large amounts of money building buildings and where did Jesus instruct us to do that?
4. Did you ever have a time in your Christian life when you felt uncomfortable “arguing your friends into becoming Christians,” as Jim puts it? Did you feel like you had to do this in order to be a good Christian?
5. Discuss the concept of defending the (relational) space” as opposed to “defending the faith.” Which practice sounds more doable for you?

Rick Warren’s Church: Saddleback

1. Jim comments that he wonders if Christians have a “God-given duty to appear unusually happy—especially at church.” Do you ever feel like there is an expectation from others within the church to appear this way?
2. Casper comments that the music, which seems impressive to Jim, is “too slick, too professional.” Do you ever find yourself wondering about this same thing?
3. Casper comments that the church attenders seem to take church as one of many items on their schedule. He implies that since church is about “God, heaven, the afterlife,” etc., they appear to be unengaged in the service. Do you think that many churchgoers have a *laissez-faire* attitude toward worship? Discuss.
4. Jim talks to Casper about “beliefism—the worship of the right beliefs.” Do you think Jim places too strong of an emphasis on what he sees as a central problem? Why or why not? Discuss.
5. Casper talks about being impacted by personal stories of believers. Do you think your church underemphasizes the importance of the power of telling our stories? Why or why not?

Church, L.A. Style: Dream Center

1. Casper likes the idea of the church being in the center of a poor neighborhood—where he thinks Jesus would have been helping people. What do you think about Casper’s assumption? Do you think Jesus cares more about the economically

- poor? How are wealthy and poor alike in their spiritual need? How are they different?
2. Jim tells Casper that, “Jesus never intended for the Jesus movement to (what we now call Christianity) to form into a religion.” What do you think about that statement? Do you think it’s true? Why or why not?
 3. How is the fact that most churches meet the congregation’s cultural needs an advantage? Are there some disadvantages? Discuss.
 4. Casper is surprised by the (lack of) reaction within the church after a young man claims to have healed someone – he wondered why the guy wasn’t out on the street if he had that kind of power. Is there anything wrong with Christians telling others that God heals? If so, when might it have a negative effect on unbelievers? Is it important if it does have a negative influence?

The Mayan and McManus: Mosaic

1. Casper notes on arriving at Mosaic that even though they are greeted with some apparent genuineness, it still seems like “some kind of HR-staff, Wal-Mart-greeter friendliness.” Do you think it’s difficult for the normal church congregation to greet people without seeming forced and phony?
2. Casper talks about feeling “different” once he lets people know why he is visiting the church. Then he unexpectedly meets the pastor, Erwin McManus. Does that meeting reinforce Casper’s sense of “otherness”? If so, how do you think the conversation might have been improved to lessen some of that sense?
3. What do you think about Casper’s observation that the conversation with the pastor seemed almost like one he might have had with a salesman? How might this be an example of “defending the faith”? Could this be avoided in the context in which the conversation took place?
4. Casper tells Jim that he wants to hear a call to action more than a plan of salvation. He wonders why he doesn’t hear more about what Christians are doing instead of what they believe. How well do you think the average church communicates the mission of the Church? Discuss.

Mega in the Midwest: Willow Creek

1. Willow Creek is one of the larger churches Jim and Casper visit, with more than twenty thousand people attending every weekend. Are there negative aspects of attending a megachurch? Are there positives, particularly for the seeker?
2. Casper comments on the music and gives it a Church Rater rating of “one.” He comments on the fact that the band, in its ethnic makeup appeared contrived since the congregation was largely Caucasian. Do you think that Casper’s comments are fair?
3. Casper is surprised when he hears that the congregation prayed for the pastor to be able to meet a celebrity. He says that in light of real issues such as violence and hunger, prayers like these are “ludicrous.” Should Christians pray prayers that non-Christians might consider trivial? Why or why not? Should churches carefully consider what kinds of prayers are announced in a worship service in light of the impression given to visitors? Does it matter?

4. How valid do you think Casper's criticisms of pastoral displays of emotion are? Did you ever consider that some might take them as manipulative?
5. Jim and Casper have a deep dialogue about the way many Christians talk to nonbelievers in an effort to bring them to a point of decision about Christ. Have you ever considered the way Jim explains faith in the context of inevitable death and the possibility of eternal life? Do you think this is a good way to explain faith to unbelievers?

Helen, the Almost-an-Atheist, Takes Us to Church: First Presbyterian

1. Jim and Helen, "almost an atheist," talk about Helen's turn from Christianity because of the *religion* stopped making sense to her.. Helen says that she is beginning to understand that she doesn't have to be a Christian to be a follower of Jesus. Does that make you uncomfortable? Have you ever considered this concept? Has the definition of Christianity changed over the years? Should it be different? Is a new definition needed? Why or why not?
2. During the public acknowledgment of the newly elected church leaders, Helen makes a comment on the new leaders' pledges to keep promises to God, the church, and the congregation, wondering how they will be able to keep all of them. Have you made promises to your church and secretly wondered if you could keep them all? If so, did you share your concerns with anyone? Why or why not? Is it wrong for one to make such commitments? Or how is it possible for one to do so? Discuss.
3. Jim and Helen are surprised by Casper's enjoyment of and positive response to the traditional service at First Presbyterian. For Casper the reason seems to be related to good childhood memories, including his being confirmed into the church and taking Communion. Do you think there is a blur in boundaries of being a Christian and being an American? Discuss.
4. After observing that none of the congregation approached or spoke to Jim, Casper or Helen, Jim and Casper discuss a seminar idea Jim calls the "Just Say Hi Church Growth Seminar." Do you think your church could benefit from Jim's suggestion of people informally saying hi to visitors? Do you think it seems more difficult to be friendly in church than in the outside world? Why or why not?
5. Casper likes the fact that the pastor at First Presbyterian used the Bible in his preaching. He observes that in many of the churches they've visited it seemed as if the pastor took Scripture out of context to support his sermon outline. Do you think it's wrong for pastors to use the method Casper describes? Do you think that oftentimes Scripture is used by a preacher just to make his or her point? Discuss.

Big Church or Church Big: Lawndale

1. Jim reflects that he's wondered how churches can "use the same words, claim the same beliefs, and declare themselves to be totally committed to Christ and yet be so different in the values they present and the practices they undertake." Do you agree with Jim? Do you think there should be a code for Christian behavior in the world? Is there one that is being ignored? Discuss.

2. The church discussed in this chapter is Lawndale *Community Church*. And from Casper's observation, it is serving the community in which it is located. Do you think that some churches use the word *community* in their names, but do not always serve their communities? Does, or should a church always serve its local community in the name of Christ? Could a church's involvement in its community depend on the culture and the community itself?
3. Are you familiar with the concept Jim addresses: Big Church vs. church Big? Based on Jim's definition, are they mutually exclusive? Consider the comments by Wayne Gordon quoted in this chapter. Discuss.
4. Jim says that he thinks it would be a good practice for Christians to visit other churches regularly—"once a month." How often have you visited other churches? If you have not, would you consider doing so? Do you think it is or would be beneficial? Why or why not?
5. Lawndale is the economically poorest of the churches Jim and Casper visit, yet Casper is more impacted by it than any of the others so far in their journey. Lawndale would be considered "weak" in resources, yet it has a strong community of believers. Have you wondered if weakness might actually be a strength in living an authentic Christian life?

The Drummer's Church: Jason's House

1. Jason, the house church leader, is initially reluctant to let Jim and Casper use his real name in the book because he worries that Christians will think that he advocates trying to convert unbelievers by using a "friendship angle." Do you think Jason's concerns have validity based on your experience interacting with Christians?.
2. Jim and Casper discuss the importance of respect in relationships and specifically the relationship that Casper shares with Jason. Do you think that Christians have difficulty having respectful relationships with nonbelievers? If so, what factors impede a "real" relationship between believers and nonbelievers? Have you ever noticed that "being right" ever gets in the way?
3. Discuss Jim's explanation to Casper about people being moved by the Spirit physically. Do you agree with Jim? Have you considered what nonbelievers might surmise when observing believers being moved in the Spirit?
4. Jim and Casper discuss the differences between small churches such as Jason's missional community, and megachurches such as Saddleback. Do you think it's possible in a megachurch to have the intimacy in worship that Casper experienced at Jason's church? What do you think are the advantages of being in a small church? in a megachurch? Is there a place for all? Is one better than another?
5. Discuss the concept of *serving our fellow humans by bringing them to Christ* as opposed to *bringing Christ to our fellow humans by serving them*.

Emerging Church Weekend: Imago and Mars

1. Jim and Casper discuss how the evangelical church has become intertwined with conservative politics by many in- and outside of the church. Do *you* think this confusion has been a deterrent to people wanting to visit a church? to those considering Jesus? If so, to what degree?

2. Have you ever considered the effect of the words of hymns sung in church, such as references to the blood of Jesus, and how they might sound to outsiders? Discuss this and other traditional Christian terms and how they might strike those outside the church or visiting for the first time.
3. Discuss Jim's concepts of "otherliness" and "beliefism." Do you agree that even nonbelievers can be acting otherly even if their focus is not on acting so for Christ? Could they in reality be acting like Christ because the image of God has been placed within at birth from God or is that too hopeful? Discuss.
4. Discuss the concept of "Sacred Spaces." Do you think implementing this concept is lacking in churches? If so, to what degree?
5. Casper comments that he likes the stories Eric tells at Imago Deo. Earlier, in Chapter 5, he comments on the fact that he especially likes it when teaching from the Bible is in context. Is it possible to do both well in one church? Discuss.
6. At Mars Hill, Casper comments on, in his opinion, the pastor's "persistent focus on avoiding sin." Is there anything wrong with a pastor stressing sin? Is this something churches should avoid or speak of more? Should pastors care how it might affect unchurched visitors? Why or why not?
7. What do you think of Casper's question about how two churches, Imago Deo and Mars Hills, can "follow the same guy [yet] have such radical, fundamental differences"?

Come as You Really Are: The Bridge

1. Jim and Casper discuss the music at the Bridge and how it takes Casper to a higher level that he calls "the flow." Jim calls it God. Do you think that Casper's explanation of "the flow" being "the humans' need for expression taking over" would surprise many Christians? Do you think that the thoughtful atheist's explanation for meaning in life, as Casper has, is respectfully considered by Christians? Do you think that sometimes Christians are threatened by such explanations? Why or why not? Discuss your answers.
2. The Bridge seems to be unconcerned with following a schedule as is done in most American churches. Do you think this would be a hindrance for most churches? for most churchgoers? for nonbelievers? If you think it would be a deterrent, do you think it necessarily should be? Is a loose format better or worse than a scheduled format? Why?
3. How important is it for churches to measure their words and consider their use of Christian terminology in light of the impression they have on visitors? Do you think, as Jim muses, Christians might need "a new kind of language" to connect with the unchurched effectively?
4. The Bridge uses an interactive means (small group discussion) as a way of teaching the Bible in the worship service. Many larger churches encourage being involved in a small group. Are there certain demographics that would be attracted to one kind of format over the other?

Osteen Live!: Lakewood

1. Casper comments that Lakewood's appearance with the fog machine and light show says to him that "money is no object." Have *you* ever wondered why churches resort to rock concert like effects?
2. Casper is "livid" at the unabashed (in his opinion) pastor's appeals to the worst in people: greed, selfishness, envy, and pride." When does a church "cross the line" in its monetary appeals? Does the mission of the church—what it will use the offering for—permit or deny a level of appeal? Why or why not? Discuss.
3. Jim says that he's observed that many Pentecostal and Evangelical churches subscribe to this message: "Stay consistently happy and in a good mood, and God will bless you." Do you agree with Jim's observation? If so, how do you think this became such a common message in some churches?
4. Discuss the concept of moving from "debate to dialogue."

Keeping It Real: The Potter's House

1. On the way to the Potter's House, Jim and Casper discuss the fact that in all the churches they've visited the format is basically the same. Do you think people would be bothered if church deviated from the basic form, as Casper calls it: "the call to worship, the reading, the collection, the sermon"? Are these all necessary components? Why or why not?
2. Casper is confused by the pastor's use of the term *the body of Christ*. Do you think there's a problem with churches using terms that perhaps are not familiar to the unchurched? If so, to what degree?
3. Discuss Casper's comment that "if you follow Paul's metaphor, the church [the body of Christ] should be the most integrated place in America."
4. Can the church be the "body of Christ," a term that infers equality of its members, when, as Casper notes, it is also enthralled with "celebrity pastors"?
5. Jim points out some of the cultural differences between black churches and white churches. How could each of these groups learn from the other? Do you think that using the same practices in different cultural/racial church settings would work? Why or why not?
6. What do you think about Casper's comment, "I think if more people were willing to treat beliefs as beliefs instead of facts, that would make talking with each other easier"?
7. Discuss the concept of going "from manipulation to intentionality." For a deeper discussion, try Jim's suggestion and rent *The Big Kahuna*. Dialogue with each other on the film's message as it relates to manipulation.

Is This What Jesus Told You Guys to Do?

1. Jim says he thinks that "every Christian should be required to bring one cynic/atheist/unbeliever to church at least once a year." Do you think your church would benefit from the observations of these people? Do you think your church members know one cynic/atheist/unbeliever?
2. Do you think churches should ask Casper's question "Jim, is this what Jesus told you guys to do?" on a regular basis? Do you think asking this question would cause the church to pay attention to its current practices and consider changing some things?

3. Discuss Jim's question to pastors and Christians: "Are we in the preaching business or the people-changing business?"

Casper's Closing Words

1. Discuss Casper's rules to Christians (and others):
 - Be open-minded. Learning is the best thing that can happen to anyone.
 - Do unto others as you would have them do to you.
2. Based on Casper's rules for Christians and everyone else, how is your church doing? Would a visitor, maybe an atheist, sense that these rules are being adhered to?