

Consultation Questions: Is the Church's Teaching Based on the Bible?

Last month in this column, I offered several questions to help a church consultant analyze a church. Perhaps a quick refresher will bring these questions to mind again:

1. *Is the church's teaching based on the Bible?*
2. *Is the church a praying church?*
3. *Is the church driven by a Great Commission focus?*
4. *Is the church reaching non-believers?*
5. *Is the church keeping the new believers who join?*
6. *Is the church both locally and globally minded?*
7. *Does the church have a strategic plan for future growth?*
8. *Are the leaders committed to the ministry of the church?*

The goal of this article is to dig deeper into the importance of question #1. Church consulting should be foremost about *the church* and only secondarily about consulting. The church is the body of Christ, the people of God living out their faith in a local context. We are God's chosen vessel to proclaim and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ to an unbelieving world. Only through reading and applying God's Word can we truly understand who we are to be and how we are to live; thus, the church must be built on a solidly biblical foundation. An inherent danger in church consulting is that the consultant will give suggestions that will, in fact, lead to "church growth"—but the message taught falls short of the gospel and the organization grown is less than a New Testament church.

Consider, for example, what often happens to evangelism if a church's teachings are not based on the Bible. The exclusivity of Christ (John 14:6, Rom. 10:9) is denied in the face of political correctness; after all, how can there be only one way to God? The doctrine of hell is viewed as an outdated teaching that cannot possibly reflect a loving God. More specifically, the lostness of humanity (Rom. 3:23) is itself questioned if the Bible's teachings are jettisoned. The church may still grow in numbers, but the growth will not be conversion growth that makes an eternal difference. Evangelism no longer matters.

Determining a church's teachings, though, is not as easy as other consulting tasks. Growth and giving patterns can be determined by analyzing numbers, but evaluating doctrinal teachings is not so simple. Here are some possible ways to get at least a sense of what a church believes.

1. *Read the church's constitution and statement of faith* (if the church has one of either). In some cases, the statement of faith will be a denominational statement adopted by a larger body than the local church. There is no guarantee that the church actually teaches or believes what its statement of faith says, but knowing the statement is a beginning point for the consultant.
2. *Review the church's small group curriculum.* If the church uses a set curriculum for its small groups, ask to see the materials. If no curriculum is used, be sure to ask church leaders how they determine what to teach in the small groups. Ask if there is an intentional strategy to teach the church its basic doctrine.

3. *Survey members of the congregation.* We have found that a simple survey asking members to state their level of agreement with doctrinal statements is an effective way to learn what a church believes. Generally, we survey about 15 percent of the active adult attenders in a church.

The survey questions might look something like these:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|-------|----------------|
| strongly disagree | disagree | uncertain | agree | strongly agree |

- _____ Jesus Christ is the only way to God.
- _____ Hell is a literal place.
- _____ All good people will go to heaven.
- _____ There are many ways to God.
- _____ The Bible is entirely the Word of God.

4. *Include some basic doctrinal questions when interviewing church members as part of the consultant process.* For starters, you might ask, “Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?” “What do you believe will happen to people who die without having a personal relationship with Jesus?” Realize that church members do not always believe as the church teaches, but asking the questions can nevertheless be helpful in this task.
5. *Listen to the preaching and teaching.* Here, the importance of a consultant’s spending time at the church is obvious. Visit the church, and attend a small group and a worship service. If attendance is not possible, listen to sermons via CD’s or the Internet.
6. *Ask the staff what the church teaches.* Sometimes, what the staff members teach is not what the members believe. A disconnect becomes obvious, and the consultant can help leaders recognize the gap.

I openly admit that I am a biased evangelical who affirms the truthfulness of God’s Word, the lostness of human beings, and the need for all persons to follow Christ through repentance and faith—but that’s the point. I believe that biblical truth truly matters. The healthy church will believe such and will base its teachings on the Bible.