

Christianity Is All About Relationships

Jesus called us into friendship, not just with Him but also with His followers.

I don't like goodbyes, especially on the mission field, because sometimes I get emotional. Last week it was really bad.

I had spent six days with a church in Tarapoto, Peru, and I invested a lot of time and energy encouraging the people—especially some young adults who are emerging leaders. When it was almost time for me to go through the security checkpoint at the airport, about 18 of these men and women burst through the lobby doors and gathered around me and my translator, Diego.

I lost it. I tried to walk around the circle to say goodbye to each person: Giancarlos, Jhor, Dalia, Juanita, Roberto, David, Cristian, Clavela, Rays. Each time somebody hugged me I sobbed. I was a slobbering mess by the time I hugged the last brother, Enrique.

People in the airport were staring at us, but that wasn't the painful part. My heart was being ripped out of my chest.

When I got to my seat on the airplane and gained composure, I realized this is a normal part of Christianity. Our gospel flows from the heart. Our faith is based on the astounding truth that a loving God came to earth to repair our broken relationship with Him. And since then God has sent people across oceans and mountain ranges to tell others about His love. They have often had to endure painful goodbyes.

Christianity, at its core, is about relationships. While the Bible certainly contains theology, it is not a book of dry

doctrines. It is a dramatic account of men and women who learned to love each other as they followed God. Unlike Eastern religions—in which individuals seek a solitary, Zen-like state to find truth—Christianity calls us to follow God as a loving community.

Jesus modeled this message by investing time in His disciples. He didn't float around on a pillow like Yoda while dispensing otherworldly wisdom. He hiked through Israel with His friends. They got their feet dirty together. He fished with them, ate with them and just hung out with them.

Mark 3:14 says Jesus appointed the twelve *“so that they would be with Him* and that He could send them out to preach.” Notice that His relationship with them was not just about the task of ministry. He wanted their fellowship!

We sometimes get this backwards. We tend to value religious performance, yet we are often bankrupt when it comes to friendships. We sit together in countless meetings but never open our hearts to each other. Even ministers have admitted to me that they have no friends. We've created a robotic, programized Christianity that counts heads but lacks the heart of New Testament love.

I've had enough of this sterile religion. I've learned that ministry is not about getting big crowds, filling seats, tabulating response cards or eliciting raucous applause. It's not about running on the church-growth treadmill. Religion that focuses on externals is performance-based.

How would you assess your friendship with God? Intimate? Professional? Distant? Cold? And what about your relationships with others? Do you have close friends? Or do you live out your faith in solitary confinement?

I tell Christians all over the world that they need three kinds of relationships in their lives:

1. “Pauls” are spiritual fathers and mothers you trust. All of us need older, wiser Christians who can guide us, pray for us and offer counsel. My mentors have encouraged me when I wanted to quit and propelled me forward when I had lost sight of God’s promise. In the journey of faith, you do not have to feel your way in the dark. God gave Ruth a Naomi and Joshua a Moses. Ask the Lord for a mentor.

2. “Barnabasses” are spiritual peers who are bosom friends. They know everything about you, yet they love you anyway. They are also willing to kick your tail if necessary! They provide accountability in areas of personal temptation. And they will stay up all night praying for you when you face a crisis.

3. “Timothys” are the younger Christians you are helping to grow. Jesus never told us to assemble crowds, but He did command us to make disciples. Relational discipleship takes a lot of time and energy, but investing your life in others is one of the most fulfilling experiences in life. Once you have poured your life into another brother or sister, and watched them mature in Christ, you will never settle for superficial religion again.

Jesus said it best when He told His followers: “No longer do I call you slaves ... but I have called you *friends*, for all things I have heard from My Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). The Christian life is a vibrant, love relationship with God—but it doesn’t end there. I pray you will open your heart and invest in the people around you.

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