

Reality Check: The Case for Relational Christianity

Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul modeled accessibility and had close bonds with their disciples. That's the way we should do ministry.

A friend in Alabama recently told me about a preacher who came to his city in unusual style. The man arrived at a church in a limousine and was whisked into a private waiting room behind the stage area. The evangelist gave specific instructions to leave his limousine's engine running (I guess he wasn't concerned about rising gas prices) so that the temperature inside his car would remain constant.

This evangelist then preached to a waiting crowd, took up his own offering and retired to the waiting room for some refreshments. Then he left the church with his entourage without even speaking to the host pastor.

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This guy's "faith"—he is touted as a faith preacher—may have been inspiring, but his love was as cold as the air inside his oversized vehicle. His behavior that night represents why so many ministries today are in crisis. We've created a monster—a version of Christianity that is slick, marketable and event-driven but lacking in any authentic impact. It is as one-

dimensional as a flat-screen TV—and a total turnoff to people who are starving for genuine relationships.

This preacher's detached style is the exact opposite of the Apostle Paul's. His deep relational bond with his disciples is reflected in all his epistles. He almost slobbers as he describes his affection for his ministry team in the 16th chapter of Romans. When he says goodbye to his colleagues in Ephesus they weep and kiss each other. He tells the Philippians: "I have you in my heart" (1:7, NASB).

And he conveys uninhibited affection when he greets the Thessalonians: "Even though we had some standing as Christ's apostles, we never threw our weight around or tried to come across as important, with you or anyone else. We weren't aloof with you. We took you just as you were. We were never patronizing, never condescending, but we cared for you the way a mother cares for her children. We loved you dearly. Not content to just pass on the Message, we wanted to give you our hearts. And we did" (2:6, The Message).

Paul's ministry style is best visible in his relationship with his spiritual son Timothy, who often traveled with him. More than one-fourth of the 27 books in the New Testament are either written by Paul to Timothy or by Paul and Timothy to various churches (2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon). This clearly signals that genuine Christianity is not about pulpits, meetings, suits and ties, microphones, entourages or air-conditioned limousines. It has everything to do with close teamwork.

How can we reclaim relational Christianity? We would be wise to take these steps:

1. Become accessible. Jesus modeled accessibility against a backdrop of an austere religious culture. The rabbis in Jesus' day were obsessed with their robes, titles and public pontifications while they stayed away from the common people.

Meanwhile Jesus held children in his arms, ate with tax collectors and showed affection to his disciples.

Over the past 30 years many of our churches have developed a sterile religious culture that keeps leaders elevated and separated from their congregations. And the younger generation is rejecting this because they can see the emperor has no clothes. Churches that want to grow in this current season—and that want to reach the younger generation—will have to ditch these old paradigms, along with the teachings that created them.

2. Open up your life. I regularly meet ministry leaders who tell me they have no friends. Some feel threatened by superiors who dominate or control them. Others fear that if they admit struggles or weaknesses they will lose their jobs. Others have never had a spiritual father or significant mentor. They are relationally empty. They have nothing to impart but 3-point sermons and motivational principles. They may shout praises on Sunday morning but they struggle with loneliness on Sunday night.

This dam must break. Hearts must open, honest confession must flow and godly friendships must be forged if we hope to offer healing to our fractured, love-starved generation. Church should be the ultimate place where people can find connection—not just with God but also with each other.

3. Develop effective discipleship models. In all the countries I have visited I've never seen a healthy, growing church that didn't have an organic small-group system. Real disciples are not made on an assembly line; they are fashioned with loving care in intimate, relational settings.

One of the main reasons I am serving God today is that a youth leader named Barry St. Clair took me under his wing when I was 15 and nurtured me in a small group Bible study for more than three years. Barry, at age 30, was already a successful author

and speaker and a busy husband and father, but he took the time to invest in a Southern Baptist teenager by including me on ministry trips and praying with me about personal problems.

Barry became my most trusted counselor after I went into ministry. He stood with me at my wedding. He prayed over me at my ordination. He still writes me encouraging notes—35 years after he taught me to have a quiet time with God using Peter Lord's *The 29:59 Plan*.

Today we need to get back to the basics. After the inaccessible preachers have driven off in their limousines, we are still called to make disciples. And we can't fulfill that mandate until we stop this silly ego show and embrace a humble ministry style that puts relationships first.

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