

Stop the Ego Show

Over the past 30 years many of our churches have developed a sterile religious atmosphere. How can we reclaim relational Christianity?

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 told people in his entourage to leave the engine running so 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 refreshments. Then he left the church without speaking to the host pastor.

Slam! Bam! Gone! It was like a spiritual drive-by shooting.

This guy's faith may have been inspiring, but his love was as cold as the air inside his oversized vehicle. His behavior shows us 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 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 style is the opposite of the apostle Paul's. He wrote: "Even though we had some standing as Christ's apostles, we never threw our weight around or tried to come across as important. ... We weren't aloof with you. ... We were never patronizing, never condescending, but we cared for you the way a mother cares for her children" (1 Thess. 2:6-7, *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 were

written either by Paul to Timothy or by Paul and Timothy to various churches. This proves that real Christianity is not about pulpits, meetings, suits and ties, microphones, entourages or air-conditioned limousines. It has everything to do with relationships.

How can we reclaim relational Christianity? Here's a start:

1. Become accessible. Jesus modeled accessibility against the backdrop of an austere religious culture. The rabbis in Jesus' day were obsessed with robes and public pontifications while they avoided the common people. Meanwhile Jesus held children, ate with tax collectors and showed affection to His disciples.

Over the past 30 years many of our churches have developed a sterile religious atmosphere that includes clerical titles, "armor bearers" and long-winded sermons that always end on cue with a financial appeal. The younger generation is rejecting this because they can see the emperor has no clothes. Churches that want to grow will have to ditch the old paradigms.

2. Open your life. I regularly meet ministry leaders who say they have no friends. Some fear that if they admit struggles or weaknesses they will lose their jobs. Others have never had spiritual mentors. They are relationally empty.

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.

3. Develop effective discipleship models. 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 a 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.

Let's 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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