

To Keep the Saved Saved, the Church Must Escape Religion and Recover Discipleship

By Bob Young

The church has one message -- the gospel of Jesus Christ! The church has two tasks, both of which are God-given. The church must actively pursue God's eternal purpose through preaching that saves people -- evangelism. The church must actively pursue God's eternal purpose through teaching that keeps the saved saved -- discipleship.

Keeping our eyes on these two tasks will guard against the tendency to let our discipleship disintegrate into mere religion. Many people do not know the difference between religion and Christianity. Many Christians do not recognize the difference between religion and following Jesus as a disciple. The word religion literally means "connect again" or "reconnect" (re = again, lig = to bind, as in our word ligament). In a simple definition, religion is the effort that a person makes to approach God. In practice, religion has become burdened by a number of practices that have little to do with approaching God, being saved, or staying saved. In western culture, religion is very closely tied to "going to church." Biblical Christianity is unique because the focus is on discipleship -- becoming a Christ follower. "Go and make disciples...." Christianity does not depend on our efforts to approach God; Christianity is based on God coming to us through the person of his Son Jesus.

John 4 tells the story of a woman whom Jesus encountered at a well in Samaria. She was a religious woman; she was also a sinner. When she talked about how and where to approach God, Jesus raised the conversation to a higher level. We are spiritual beings, even as our heavenly Father is spirit. God is spirit and he desires spiritual worship. Jesus says the Father is looking for worshipers who adore him in spirit and truth. The Father wants to connect with us, even as we seek to connect with him. Religion is often measured in externals; following God and connecting with God is internal. Many who visit our church assemblies or small groups are not much different than the woman in John 4. We must learn about the circumstances of those who show interest in spiritual things and do all we can to understand their needs and their desire to draw near to God. We must help them move from a religious perspective to a discipleship perspective. One place the church needs to do this more effectively is in our gatherings.

One way we connect with God and with one another is in our worship. The Christian assembly empowers the church through four dynamics. Our meetings should always include a reminder of our common faith -- what it is that binds us together as followers of Jesus. Sharing faith will serve both to **evangelize** those who are in various stages of faith development and to **disciple** those who are committed to becoming Christ-followers (disciples). Third, the Christian assembly is a time of sharing our lives. With the modern tendency to institutionalize the church and in larger churches, this aspect of our assemblies is often difficult. Where is the **intentional sharing and social interaction** in the typical church assembly? The need for Christians to share their lives intimately is one reason small groups are essential in the contemporary church, especially in the US culture. The fourth element of Christian gatherings is **gratitude and praise**. Each of these four dynamics is important. Each of these four should be the goal of every person who leads worship. Each of these four -- evangelism, discipleship, sharing, and praise -- can be a part of each worship activity. Said another way: the assembly is not only for worship, it is also a place for evangelizing, discipling, and sharing. The small group must not focus exclusively on discipling, it must include all four dynamics. The evangelistic Bible study will be more effective when it includes all four dynamics.

These four elements overlap and should be present in all of the activities we customarily associate with worship assemblies. Those who lead assemblies must keep all four of these goals in mind: sharing the faith, building disciples, encouraging shared lives, connecting with God.

- In singing, we share faith as we disciple one another. We also praise God with gratitude.
- In the Supper, we again share life, demonstrating and building faith as we mutually remember in the spirit of gratitude.
- The sermon should remind us of our shared faith, binding us together and bringing us to the very throne room of God with hearts of praise.
- Corporate prayers offered in the assembly should reflect our shared lives, gratitude, and recommitments to discipleship.