

'Everyone gets to Play' Creating a Culture of **engagement**
'Come as you are' Creating a Culture of **Radical Welcome**
'Follow me' Creating a Culture of **discipleship**
'Give it away' Creating a Culture of **generosity**
'Play nicely' Creating a Culture of **honour**
'Before an audience of 1' Creating a Culture of **worship**
'Leadership = influence' Creating a Culture of **blessing**



Cultivate #2: 'Come as you are' Creating a Culture of Radical Welcome

What's So Amazing About Grace opens with this story from a charity worker in Chicago:

A prostitute came to me in wretched straits, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter....I had no idea what to say to this woman.

At last I asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naive shock that crossed her face. "Church!" she cried. "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

What struck me about my friend's story is that women much like this prostitute fled toward Jesus, not away from him. The worse a person felt about herself, the more likely she saw Jesus as a refuge. Has the church lost that gift? Evidently the down-and-out, who flocked to Jesus when he lived on earth, no longer feel welcome among his followers. What has happened?

Jesus is here amongst us, and as we go out into the world introducing him to the people we meet, we can assume that people will be attracted to him. [interestingly enough as a side point – if you are chatting to friends and want to share the gospel you will have more success and definitely more fun if your focus is – rather than trying to tell people about Jesus (or worse still tell them about church or religion) leading them **to Jesus**]

People are attracted to Jesus. Jesus brings freedom, love, grace, healing and honour to those he encounters. We don't need to worry about that, or manufacture it, or force it. Relax – we can trust him.

Billy Graham once said, "It is the Holy Spirit's job to convict, God's job to judge, and my job to love"

This frees us up from the difficult things and lets us just concentrate on loving, welcoming and leading to Jesus. Create an environment where Jesus is in the house by his Spirit, and encourage each other as more and more we put ourselves in the trustworthy hands of our Heavenly Father.

Our second element of culture we want to nurture and protect is that of creating a radical welcome for people coming in. It is summed up by the phrase 'Come as you are' which communicates the truth that everybody really is welcome here.

Religion speaks a conditional message of: behave, believe, belong. To come in here you need to behave yourself – tidy up your act. Then believe, and once you behave in the right way and believe the right stuff then you belong.

We say to belong, believe, behave... first we welcome you in. And the welcome is not conditional on you behaving the right way or believing the right stuff. Love doesn't set rules and conditions – God's love is freely given to all. If it were a question of earning it or deserving it then we're all stuffed.

Once you belong then comes belief. And it is out of belief that behaviour begins to change. From the inside out.

When it goes wrong – when we get religious and put ourselves in the place of God – when we take on the job of judging, convicting, making people holy – it goes horribly wrong and people suffer. This was the situation when in Jesus' time and he confronted it head on. First in a highly charged encounter set up by the religious leaders to try and catch him out, and then in his direct teachings to the religious leaders of the day...

John 8:3-11

3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4 and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5 In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6 They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

This reveals how far the religious leaders had fallen away from love and into law. To go to such lengths to try and trick Jesus, and using a human being as a tool with no thought to her.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

The genius of Jesus. He didn't engage them at their level, he just allowed their own hearts to bring conviction. What do you think he was writing? Some say the names of the people holding the stones, maybe with a list of their sins, but that would be stooping to their level – something that Jesus never did. I personally think he wasn't writing anything.

9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

11 "No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Matthew 23:23-28

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

25 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

27 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

This morning we will look at how we grow and change into Christ's image – how we behave, or become holy and sanctified. Clue – it isn't something achieved by laying down the law and controlling people. I also want to look at some of the barriers that we erect that keep people out of the beautiful welcome and love of Jesus that brings life and freedom to all. And I want to explain to you a way of thinking about church and our community that will help us create a loving, welcoming church where people really can come as they are without a sense of judgement or exclusion.

- 1. Our heart attitude towards others**
- 2. How people grow**
- 3. Creating a centred set**
- 4. Removing the barriers**

But first of all what is the main driver in all of this? Our heart attitude towards others.

1. Our heart attitude towards others

When anyone comes into church, but especially someone unfamiliar with church and Jesus, their radar is scanning and it is asking 1 question: am I accepted here? Am I OK?

Can I come as I am?

Can I come with my questions?

Can I come with my fears?

Can I come with my disagreements?

Can I come with my doubts?

Can I come with my political view of the world?

What is the heart cry of most people? **To be understood**...we want someone to know the real me and to be able to handle the real me. The phrase 'come as you are' has been a key motto for many Vineyard Churches over the years. The desire to create an environment where anybody can access Church without fear of Judgement or the need to pretend to be 'something they are not' in order to be accepted...

It is in the air, in the way people speak, act, behave towards others. It can't be hidden and it is one of the lovelies things about this church. I know that I can bring a friend and however they behave, whatever they think or say, there isn't going to be that awkward grimace, followed by a Christian smile that is a mask for judgement and criticism of the heart.

In fact the worse the behaviour the bigger the question and the bigger the need for that individual to hear 'You are loved here. It is OK to be you. You are accepted.'

These words are the words of Jesus, and when we speak them (usually by our actions more than in words) we are speaking the words of Jesus to the world – and to each other.

Because the acceptance doesn't end once you sign a connect card or join a life group. It continues.

2. How people grow

Because we want to become like Jesus and the dynamic of inside out never changes.

What was the issue with the Pharisees? They cleaned up the outside and the inside festered.

Cleaning up takes a lot of energy. Particularly if you start from the outside.

If our acceptance of you is conditional on behaviour, then you will adjust behaviour in order to be accepted. That will be hard to do – and you won't have any energy for the important inner work, which will slide. So the very illness that causes the symptoms of bad behaviour in the first place gets worse because it goes untreated. And a gap appears between how you look on the outside and what you are really like on the inside. Not a comfortable place to be at all. Integrity is wholeness, where the inside matches the outside. Unwittingly the good Christian person finds themselves in a place of dis-integrity – disintegration.

Lets look at how people grow into health. Belong, believe, behave.

Belong – acceptance. Unconditional love. Affirming you as a person because of who you are not what you do or how you behave.

Believe – primarily believe that God is love, he loves you, then you find out who you are in Christ – identity – and you soak it up without any pressure to be anything other than who you are. Love by God, accepted, redeemed at enormous cost – God gave his very son as a ransom to spring you out of the jail of sin, out from under judgement into freedom and grace. Wow.

What happens now? What is the natural unforced response of the heart? You start to look more like Jesus (we all begin to look like what we worship. Worship Jesus and you will start to look like him). And you begin to transform from the inside out into the person you were created to be – you but without the bad stuff, healed, restored and projected in 3D technicolour with dolby surround sound on the world. You are marvellous!

Those with a limited vocabulary and world view might call that **behaving**.

That's why when we say come as you are we don't feel the need to tag on the end 'but don't stay as you are'

"It is the Holy Spirit's job to convict, God's job to judge, and my job to love"

3. Social set theory

So if it isn't our job to police behaviour and beliefs and morals – how do we know who is in and who is out? Who's a Christian and who isn't? where are the rules?

If these are questions you are asking then you may have a bounded set mentality. Those who have done pt 2 of rooted will be familiar with bounded sets.

Here is one – there is an in/out, centralized leadership – mostly a singular charismatic dominant leader, membership is being "in" by conformity and performance – and obedience to the leader, people are seen as a collective, not as unique individuals with a name and plan, relationships are top – down, parent – child, promotion and program driven... all about visibility and success, reinforces strong boundaries by indoctrination and conformity, resulting in a "we – they", "right – wrong", and "in – out" mindset, creates a performance environment: attendance and hard work to achieve the pastor's vision.

Here we are modelling the dynamics on what is called a centred set. The centre of (local) church is Jesus and the values of his Kingdom, that draw people to the centre at varying levels of integration, relationship and commitment. Thus following Jesus is a journey of integration...

- Drawing people to the centre with core values such as love, acceptance and forgiveness...
- Creating a warm relational environment based on maturing adult to adult relationships
- Where people are treated as unique individuals with dignity and respect, with personal histories
- Ministry and leadership is about nurture and equipping, teamwork and modelling
- It's all about being led by God's presence, drawn by his values - NOT being driven

4. Removing the barriers

So what are the barriers to someone coming along and being accepted for who they are? What elements of church might make people feel excluded?

In any group that gets to know each other well short cuts are created and people get cliquey without realising it.

Take signs and accessibility for instance. If a place is hard to find and there aren't signs or people guiding the newcomer and visitor in it is very excluding and some people will give up and go home to watch the grand prix. But once you've done it a couple of times, you know where it is and you don't need signs, so their absence might soon be forgotten. And what's wrong with a venue being hard to find? I know where it is.

Here are some barriers that might grow up and exclude people without us realising.

- Christianese and in jokes
- No safe spaces
- Parking problems
- Unexplained weirdness
- No-one speaking to you
- Everyone speaking to you