

'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 #5: 'Play Nicely' Creating a Culture of Honour**

A man and a woman had been married for more than 60 years. They had shared everything. They had kept no secrets from each other except that the little old woman had a shoe box in the top of her closet that she had cautioned her husband never to open or ask her about.

For all of these years, he had never thought about the box, but one day the little old woman got very sick and the doctor said she would not recover. In trying to sort out their affairs, the little old man took down the shoe box and took it to his wife's bedside.

She agreed that it was time that he should know what was in the box. When he opened it, he found two crocheted dolls and a stack of money totalling \$95,000. He asked her about the contents.

"When we were to be married," she said, "my grandmother told me the secret of a happy marriage was to never argue. She told me that if I ever got angry with you, I should just keep quiet and crochet a doll."

The little old man was so moved; he had to fight back tears. Only two precious dolls were in the box. She had only been angry with him two times in all those years of living and loving. He almost burst with happiness.

"Honey," he said "that explains the doll, but what about all of this money? Where did it come from?"

"Oh, that?" she said. "That's the money I made from selling the dolls."

My parents live near an American airbase at Mildenhall, in Suffolk. If you were to walk into Mildenhall American Airbase you would find it just like walking into a town in America – full of Americans, American shops, newspapers, traditions – just like America but plopped down in a field in Suffolk.

The church is in some ways a representation of heaven here on earth. Gathering together a bunch of people who have been redeemed, forgiven and are entering into a process of transformation – dealing with their stuff and becoming more like Christ – with Christ at the centre of everything that goes on: to be worshipped, followed, studied and known amongst us. What we are doing is establishing an outpost of heaven here on earth.

So this is church – just like heaven but plopped down in a city in Devon. And just as in Mildenhall if you wanted to seek asylum and become American you could turn up and request sanctuary in the airbase. If people want to claim asylum in heaven they just need to walk in here and ask. We can sort them out with passports, a new identity, the works. Heaven on earth!

What's the problem? We are. We fight and argue and don't always treat each other right.

**The fact is that conflict exists.**

Is the solution to take away conflict? No that isn't healthy. It is in the difficulties and conflict that Christ is truly honoured and we learn to become more like him. Conflict is fundamental to relationships. **The key lies in how we do our conflict, and how we do our relationships.**

The fifth element of culture we want to nurture and protect is that of **honour**. In this we hold the key to creating a truly counter-cultural outpost of heaven. One that is very attractive to others, and really does reflect heaven. Because in heaven there is a culture of honour which on earth has been destroyed by sin. On earth people fight each other for supremacy and everyone loses, in heaven people die for each other in humility and servanthood, and everyone wins.

Once again we have a leader and a rabbi who has walked this path, on this earth, and not just spoken about it but demonstrated it, modelled it, exemplified it, so that we might follow. Just before he made his ultimate sacrifice of love on the cross he said this to his disciples:

John 13: 34,35

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

How exciting that we can create in our community a culture of honour amongst us – where we bestow on each other such love, respect, care and esteem that it is a wake up call to those who come in from outside – where it's dog eat dog and the battles that are fought drag everyone down to the lowest common denominator – come in and experience this culture where we are all treated with the same high level of respect regardless of gender, class, job, age, background and colour. A respect based on the fact that we are all children of the most high God, created in his image, and worth him sending his son to die for us.

Galatians 3:26-28 says that all are free in Christ:

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

I'm guessing that these were the big dividers of the time – race, gender and social status. If there was to be true love and honour practised in the church of Paul's time then these would be the three points of the sermon.

Our society is even more divided now, but I would say that the dividing lines remain race, gender and status.

### Race

Neither Jew nor Gentile – religious or irreligious, colour, creed, nationality, political persuasion, racial background. All are one in Christ.

We have been given a gift in this church: the gift of diversity. We have men and women, rich and poor and people from many different backgrounds, nationalities and ethnicities.

We have many nations represented.

This isn't a fluke. When we planted the church Plymouth was 99% white, British and (it felt like) Daily Mail reading. And our church reflected that. And I prayed for diversity. For the gift of different people types from different places. And boy has he answered our prayers!

How enriched are we with the different stories and experiences in this room that teach us that our world – God's world – is so much more than our narrow understanding of life! It teaches us to be expansive and inclusive, and it humbles us and challenges us.

So thank you for everyone who has come along and put up with being excluded because we are all merrily doing things as we always do not realising that what is obvious and normal to us might need a bit of an explanation to people who don't know what's going on.

We can honour each other by being attentive to each others needs, slowing down and including others rather than racing ahead with what we are familiar with.

And we can honour each other by listening to each other's stories and learning about cultures that are different to our own.

Now let's look at the issue of gender – something I think we have got into a bit of a pickle about in churches generally.

The reason is 2 fold – one is cultural.

Our culture is one in which there is still widespread misogyny and oppression of women – institutionalised and entrenched in society. It is often so entrenched it isn't noticed by most people – including women. But

- Only a quarter of board chairs, presidents and chief executives in the UK are women
- Gender pay gap figures reveal eight in 10 UK firms pay men more, with an overall gender pay gap of 14%.
- The British Crime Survey of 2005 showed that 45% of women in the UK have experienced some form of domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking.

It was the level of sexual abuse women felt they had to put up with, and the shame and powerlessness that surrounded any perceived attempt to speak out, that prompted the #metoo movement, when at noon on October 15, 2017 the phrase "Me too" was tweeted by Alyssa Milano.

It was used in response to reports from The New York Times and The New Yorker in October 2017, that dozens of women accused the American film producer Harvey Weinstein of rape, sexual assault and sexual abuse over a period of at least 30 years.

The #metoo hashtag had been used more than 200,000 times by the end of the day, and tweeted more than 500,000 times by October 16. On Facebook, the hashtag was used by more than 4.7 million people in 12 million posts during the first 24 hours.

Analyses of the movement often point to the prevalence of sexual violence, which has been estimated by the World Health Organization to affect one-third of all women worldwide. A 2017 poll by ABC News and The Washington Post also found that 54% of American women report receiving "unwanted and inappropriate" sexual advances with 95% saying that such behaviour usually goes unpunished. (Wikipedia)

The deep-rooted gender inequality and misogyny (hatred of women) - that has been entrenched into societies and laws and cultures ever since the dawn of time – isn't biblical.

But it has been fed into assigning roles in the church, and theology built around it.

Which leads to my other reason for churches to have got into a pickle around gender and equality. The first was cultural and the second is theological – we have, throughout history, got it the wrong way round. A few texts in the NT have been taken as starting point and things interpreted (or ignored) to fit them. And those verses have stood out and been used not because they fit with the rest of God's word (they don't as we shall see in a minute) but because they fit the pervading spirit of the time – the culture out there that has been bought in here. Not recently, but beginning about 400AD about the same time that (if

you were following at the beginning of the series) we found that lots of things in the church suddenly changed and began to look more like they did outside the church.

As so often happens we have brought in our worldly culture based on man's design and found a theology to fit it. It is precisely why if you were sitting in church just 200 years ago there would have been plenty of theology knocking around supporting slavery and denouncing the radical Christians seeking to abolish it.

Interestingly these radical Christians seeking to rock the boat and cause chaos by trying to abolish slavery took as their biblical starting point this verse in Genesis

[Genesis 1:26-28](#)

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."

Here we see both man and woman created in God's image, and called to rule — there is no distinction between them in the part they play.

And also in Genesis 2. Although the man is created first, it quickly becomes clear that he is incomplete because he is alone — he is made for relationship with someone like him.

This is not a narrative about parts played, but about being the same but different. Notice that the man does not name the woman until after the Fall (Genesis 3.20).

Everything changes after the fall, after sin enters the world and affects our relationships with each other and with God.

God created man and woman to reflect the love of the Trinity – mutual love and service rather than any one ruling over the other.

***To think that women shouldn't teach or lead men contradicts God's design for humanity found in Genesis, and it also contradicts other OT scripture.***

In other words, if God who inspired Holy Scripture is offended by women leading and teaching men then we should find no example in the Old Testament of God giving leadership to a woman. After all, God doesn't contradict himself. But in Micah we see a reference to Miriam leading (Micah 6:4)

And in Judges we read about Deborah. She was one of the judges who God raised up to lead all of Israel. (Judges 4:4-5)

(source: Rich Nathan's 'Women in Leadership')

Rich Nathan then goes on to list all the NT women leaders, including the apostle Junia, and says:

*The short of it is, if Paul meant to teach that women could not lead or preach to men in the church in every situation for all time he contradicted it by his own apostolic practice.*

*My own reading of church history suggests that whenever the Spirit of God is poured out in the church, women are liberated to be and do everything that God has called them to do. Whenever the activity of the Holy Spirit recedes and the church becomes more institutionalized, women are pushed into the background. The bottom line is this, nothing in the spiritual gifts passages that we read about in the New Testament – in 1 Corinthians 12, in Romans 12, in Ephesians 4, in 1 Peter 4 – ever restrict any spiritual gift, including gifts of*

*teaching or leadership or apostleship or evangelism or prophet or pastor or teacher simply to men. The gifts of God and the call of God are not gender-based any more than they are race-based or age-based.*

We see within the New Testament other examples of women in positions of leadership; other signs that the Fall has been overturned, and that the new creation has broken in; that God's original design for male-female relations is being restored.

None more so than in observing how Jesus related to women, and how involved they were in the gospel narrative. And we sometimes miss just how radically different Jesus's attitude to women was from that of his context. He had female disciples (Matthew 12.46-50). He allowed women to sit at his feet and learn (Luke 10.38ff). Women followed him with the other disciples, and provided for his needs (Luke 8.1-3). Perhaps crucially, women were the first witnesses of the resurrection (Matthew 28.9 and John 20.17). This is particularly important because he commanded Mary Magdalene to go and tell the disciples what she had seen, and she became the first witness, and thus, in a sense, the first apostle of the resurrection. (Revd Clare Hendry, co-author of *The Gender Agenda*, IVP, 2010).

Wouldn't it be great if the church were leading the radical charge to overcome gender inequality, and modelling how to honour each other – for churches to be places where men can be celebrated as men, women celebrated as women, individuals celebrated for who they are not their assigned roles or even gender. Where the traditional power structures of the world are dismantled and we are competing not for superiority but to outdo each other in love, honour and respect.

And a safe place for whoever you are to be you, accepted as you are.

And this leads us to honouring each other regardless of status. Status is a biggie nowadays, when authority and success come from popularity and bling. On what grounds do we raise people up, honour them and listen to what they have to say? It is popularity and wealth.

So perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that the church is any different, but at the same time we should pray that it is.

Jesus knew of the dangers that lie in status, and told people to beware giving the best seats...

So how can we ensure that we honour people equally, regardless of wealth, success, social class, accent or status?

On what grounds do we honour people?

Have you heard the story about the 8 cow wife? It is a fictional story of a young south pacific islander woman who is belittled by her family and fellow villagers. She was told by everyone, "Senita you're ugly!". In the depths of her self loathing she is courted by the most successful businessman in all the islands, Johnny Lingo. As was custom, Johnny was to purchase his bride with a gift of cows for her father. Most women in the village bragged of being 4 cow wives or even 5 cow wives. Mahana's father was hoping to get even one sickly cow for his undesirable daughter.

On the day of negotiation Johnny Lingo made his offer for Mahana- 8 cows. It was unprecedented. No one in all the islands had paid 8 cows for a wife. The movie ends with a merchant coming to make a delivery to Johnny many months later. As he enters their hut he sees a beautiful confident woman and asks- "Mahana?" The same woman who was an unkempt outcast only months earlier was now the most desirable woman in the island chain.

Johnny Lingo was asked why he paid 8 cows for his wife and he said it was because he wanted an 8 cow wife.

Who much have you been bought for? Realise that and you become aware of your worth. You have been bought with the blood of Jesus. God so loved you that he sent his only son that you might not perish, but have eternal life.

And this is our starting point and our conclusion.

We are back to what life is like in Heaven – in a world before sin.

We go back to God's initial design for us and the way we relate both to each other and to him.

And we ditch the worldly mindset of authority, power and domination.

By so doing – ditching the ways of the world and creating a corner of heaven in our community – and in our friendships – and in our families and marriages

- We can learn to truly love and honour each other
- Prefer each other
- Raise each other up into our identities as children of the most high, created in His Image, wonderfully made, beautiful and to be loved and respected

(Stand to pray)

### **Philippians 2: 1-11**

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

7 rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!

9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,

10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.