



**NO  
PERFECT  
PEOPLE  
ALLOWED**

**CREATING a  
COME AS YOU ARE  
CULTURE at TABERNACLE**

Tabernacle Baptist Church, Penarth.  
8 studies for small groups



# ***NO PERFECT PEOPLE ALLOWED***

## **CREATING a COME AS YOU ARE CULTURE**

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# **Introduction:**

## **No Perfect People Allowed**

Back in the autumn of last year I was at a conference when I was asked a challenging question: Is your church website designed to attract Christians from other churches or it is genuinely designed to attract people from outside the church who do not know Christ? The speaker went on to expand on his question. He said that if our website contained lots of information about our doctrinal position, our style of worship, the type of Bible we use and our type of theology then it was almost certain that we would be attracting people who were already Christians. People who don't come to church aren't interested in those sorts of things. Those particular topics are only of interest to people who already have faith. I was struck by the fact that much of what we do is designed to attract people who are already Christians. Put this startling revelation alongside the fact that over 95% of people in Wales don't go to church and you realise how astounding this state of affairs is. We are fishing for 5% or less of people who are already Christians and broadly ignoring those who are not.

In his book "No Perfect People Allowed", John Burke asks a question. What does a Buddhist, a biker couple, a gay rights activist, a homeless man, a high tech engineer, a Muslim, a 20-something single mum, a Jew, a couple living together and an atheist all have in common? He writes, "They are the future of the church". John Burke goes on to say that these people all started coming to the church he pastors in Texas, USA, in recent years. Over a period of time of being around the church and other believers they were challenged by the Gospel and ultimately their lives were changed. Most of them are in their 20's or 30's and became followers of Christ in the past five years. Many of these people are now leading others in our church. "This is the generation the church much reach if it is to survive. It's an eclectic generation on a winding, wayward spiritual quest and the church has an incredible opportunity to guide them in their spiritual journey."

However, these people are the very people that most churches put off and discourage. They are made to feel so unwelcome, so unholy, so irreligious that they are pretty certain that the one place they don't want to search for spiritual truth is in the church!

Most of that 95+% of people who do not come to church will not look like Christians. They will not act like Christians. They will not speak like Christians.

They will not think like Christians. Yet so often in our churches we expect people coming from outside to do those things. This series of studies called 'No Perfect People Allowed' is based around Burke's book. The sub-title to his book is called "Creating a come as you are culture in the church" and strives to ask what sort of church do we need to be if we are to be truly missionary and reach the vast majority of folk who do not come to church yet?

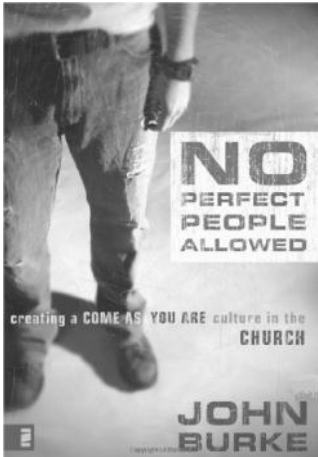
According to the church statistician Peter Brieley the church in the UK will be virtually wiped out in 30 years if we do not change the current trend of decline. Of course, there will still be Christians and churches, but not in strong enough numbers to sustain current denominational structures. As 2012 starts, for example, the Baptist Union find itself in a perilous financial position brought about by declining attendances and growing bills—especially in the pension fund. It is estimated that the Methodist Church could implode within 15 years.

Whereas 25 years ago most of the people we were trying to reach at least had a notion of what Christianity entailed, now that knowledge is almost completely gone. We are in the exciting position of primary missionary and evangelism. No longer are we trying to convince nominal Christians that they need to make a personal commitment to Jesus. Now we are reaching completely unchurched people who have never heard the gospel. We are essentially in the same situation as the first century church and the opportunity is stunning!

This series of studies will run alongside the Sunday morning services and look at what it means to be a church that has a "come as you are culture". Some of it will be challenging. Some of it will be uncomfortable. I have deliberately been provocative with some of the phrasing of the introductory comments and questions. One thing is certain; the church in the future cannot and will not look like the church of the past or even the church of the present. What is it that God is doing in our day? At Tabs we have already begun this journey and have been on it together for many years. We are in the incredibly privileged position of being able to discover and model what church will look like in the future. My prayer is that these studies will help us to reflect together and think about the kind of community we are going to be in the future. Please pray with me that these studies will not merely be an intellectual, theological exercise but rather a deep searching for what God is calling us to be.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Roger Carter". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, prominent 'R' and 'C'.

NB: If you have purchased a copy of "No Perfect People Allowed", please read chapter 1, The First Corinthian Church of America, in preparation for the first sermon in the series and the first study.



## **NO PERFECT PEOPLE ALLOWED: CREATING a COME-AS-YOU-ARE CULTURE IN THE CHURCH**

(Review from Amazon.co.uk) "How do we live out the message of Jesus in today's ever-changing culture? The church is facing its greatest challenge, and its greatest opportunity, in our postmodern, post-Christian world. God is drawing thousands of spiritually curious, imperfect people to become his church, but how are we doing at welcoming them? No Perfect People Allowed shows you how to deconstruct the five main barriers standing between emerging generations and your church by creating the right culture. From inspiring stories of real people once far from God, to practical ideas that can be applied by any local church, this book offers a refreshing vision of the potential and power of the Body of Christ to transform lives today. We now are living in a post-Christian culture and that means we must be rethinking ministry through a missionary mindset. What makes this book both unique and extremely helpful is that it is filled with real-life stories of post-Christian people becoming followers of Jesus, not just statistics or data about them.

"Reading this book filled me with optimism regarding the next generation of pastors and faith communities ..." (Bill Hybels, Senior Pastor, Willow Creek Community Church.)

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# FORMAT OF THESE STUDIES

- ✘ Each study in this series is related to a Sunday morning sermon of the same name. The studies are designed to **follow** the sermon, and the sermon will hopefully stimulate discussion and debate in your small group. However, weeks 3 and 5 do not follow on from a sermon due to other things happening on that Sunday morning. If your group is scheduling a social action week or a social event, these may be good weeks to have them.
- ✘ If you have access to the internet, you can listen to any sermons you might miss at [www.tabspenarth.org.uk/downloads/sermons](http://www.tabspenarth.org.uk/downloads/sermons)
- ✘ Do not feel that you have to answer every question in the study. If discussion really takes off then you might find yourself spending all evening on a single question! That is OK. The very nature of these studies means that there may be significant differences of opinion about the nature of church, what we should be doing and how we might need to adapt what we do in the future. Some of the questions are deliberately provocative. Remember; healthy debate and differences of opinion are good. We can disagree without being disagreeable!
- ✘ At the end of each study is a section entitled “Going Deeper.” This is for those of you who want to take the study further by yourself. These sections are not designed to be studied in your normal group meeting, although they may prompt thoughts or questions that you want to share the next time you meet with your small group.
- ✘ The questions section of each study has 2 parts. The first is called “Culture Check.” This is to help us do a ‘reality check’ of what our church is *really* like. Sometimes our worldview and perception prevent us from seeing the church as the rest of the world do, and these questions are designed to help us get past that problem. The second part of the questions are ‘Small Group Questions’ which are the normal questions designed to help us engage with the Bible and apply it better in our personal lives and our lives together. The leadership would value feedback, particularly about the culture check, at the end of the series.

# 1. THE STRUGGLE FOR EMERGING GENERATIONS

What world are you from? Seriously! You might not have considered it before, but we live in a multi-cultural society where people from many different cultures and worldviews live side by side. I don't just mean people from different countries, religions or ethnic background. I also mean people from different cross-generational cultures too. Trust me - if you were born before the start of the Second World War you have a completely different view of how the world works than if you were born in the period between the 50's and the 70's. Those who were born in the 80's and onwards also have a completely different view of the world and how it works. These different views of reality are called 'paradigms' or 'worldviews' by sociologists and lack of understanding about them lies at the root of church decline in the west in the 20th century. It's not just that different people like different things or have different experiences—they actually **see** and **understand** the world differently!

Our views of technology, relationships, sexuality, work, education, church and of what is important or valuable are different depending upon our age and what culture we grew up in. In every region and location of the world there is a unique culture created by the sociological, political, religious and historical paradigms in which people grew up. This is also true of generational paradigms. When a young person looks at a mobile telephone, they see and understand something different to a middle aged person or an older person. We have young adults in our congregation who have *always* had the internet in their home during their lifetime - this naturally means they view it differently to someone for whom the internet is a new innovation. To conduct relationships with people online through social media is the norm for younger generations, and just weird to those who are older!

The same is true for those inside the church and outside. We actually see and understand the world we live in differently. Take sex before marriage as an example. Whilst most people inside the church would feel that this was not what God intended for us, nearly everyone outside is completely confused

by our attitude. They simply do not understand because they see the world differently to us. The Office for National Statistics says that 78% of couples will now live together before marriage and over 95% will have had sex with their partner before marriage. For a whole generation it is the norm and they don't understand why it is a big issue for the church. So, when a couple who are living together come to church searching for something spiritual, they suddenly find themselves surrounded by people who have a different worldview to them. How do many couples in this situation react? Many don't come again because they feel they are being judged and that Christians think they are better than they are.

But... the very people who need to hear the Gospel most are outside the church. More than that, if the church is to survive and grow it is going to need to meaningfully engage people outside the church who don't share the same view of reality as us. How are we going to do that when at the moment many of them are not even willing to listen to us because they believe us to be narrow, judgemental, bigoted, homophobic people with a laughable view on science and creation, morality, women, child abuse and music? That might sound a shocking way of putting it—but it is how many people feel about us!

## **CULTURE CHECK**

- ✘ What are the things that our society most values? what is it willing to expend time, money and energy on the most?
- ✘ What are the things our church most values? What is we willing to expend time, money and energy on the most? What are we absolutely not willing to give up in order to be more effective evangelistically?
- ✘ From your understanding of the scriptures, what are the things that God most values? What would he have us spend out time, money and energy on? What do we actually spend our time and money on?

## **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS – READ JOHN 4:1-26**

- ✘ What is the first thing Jesus asks the Samaritan woman? Why do you think the first thing Jesus does is ask the woman to serve him rather than tell her what he can do for her?

- ✘ As a church, how good are we at asking or allowing people who are not believers or members to serve Jesus or us? If a brilliant singer who was not a Christian started coming and asked if they could sing with the group, how might we react? What about as a Sunday School helper or doing readings or leading prayers? God allowed this woman who was living a sinful life, from a different religion and of the wrong gender to minister to him. Would we?
- ✘ The woman wants to talk about wells and buckets and drinking. Jesus wants to talk about the Gospel, but he does it by talking to her about... wells and buckets and drinking! How good are we at listening to what other people want to talk about when it comes to spiritual matters, and how much do we just tell them what we want them to hear?
- ✘ Jesus does not bring up the matter of her living arrangements and her ex-husbands until she has asked him to give her the water of eternal life. In other words, Jesus leaves the matter of her sin until she is already engaged in the process of salvation. However he does bring it up! Sin needs to be taken seriously, but how early in the conversation with a non-believer should we bring it up?
- ✘ When Jesus talks to her about her previous husbands the woman quickly changes the subject to a conversation about worship and racial identity. Why do you think Jesus didn't keep her on the subject ?

**Turn to Luke 7 and read verses 36—50. Then read Luke 5:27-32 and Luke 19:1-10**

- ✘ Discuss some of the issues raised in the questions about the woman at the well but thinking about the sinful woman, Levi and Zacchaeus.
- ✘ These people were major sinners during Jesus day. What if we substituted drunks, gay people, those living together before marriage or drug addicts as the 'sinners' in the stories? How do we cope with these sorts of people in our church today? What would Jesus do?
- ✘ How can we do better at engaging those who most need a saviour with the good news of Jesus today?



The Greek word that is used in the scriptures for 'sinner' is ἁμαρτωλός (hamartōlos). It comes from a word that means "to miss the mark" or "to fall short."

This word in turn comes from a conjunction of 2 other Greek words. The first is ἄ (alpha) which in

Greek is put before a word to make it a negative or the opposite. Amoral, for example, is the opposite of moral and arrhythmia is when a regular rhythm becomes irregular—you will be able to think of other words in English which uses this convention. The second part of the conjunction is μέρος (meros) which means to get your fair share or allotment.

These 'sinners', therefore are people who have fallen short of the mark with regard to God's Law and who as a consequence will not get their share of something that is theirs by right - specifically the promises of God.

If you have ever studied drama or Greek plays you may well recognise the word ἁμαρτωλός (hamartōlos). In Greek tragedies the main tragic character is doomed to failure because of a 'fatal flaw' in his or her character. Disaster will follow as a result. Often the tragic deeds are committed unknowingly, as when Oedipus unknowingly kills his own father and then marries his own mother without realising who she is. What are humanities fatal flaws?

Is this a different way of thinking of 'sinners' or unsaved people? Instead of thinking of Christians as a special and elect people who have 'got in' to God's promises, is a better way of looking at it that those outside the church as God's loved creations who are missing out on something because they have missed the mark in some way? Sinners are loved by God's too, but something in their life means they are missing out on what God has for them. If this is true, should it affect the way we think of non-Christians and how we go about sharing the Gospel with them?

## 2. THE PROBLEM WITH CHURCH.

Jesus is the most wonderful, winsome, interesting person the world has ever know. The Gospel is the most fantastic good news that anyone could possibly imagine. The church should be the embodiment of a perfect society called to love one another and live sacrificially for each other. And yet more than nine out of ten people in our society have rejected the church as having nothing relevant or interesting to say in their lives. What on earth is going on? Why have so many people dismissed the church and the good news it is called to share?

- ✘ As a group, on a piece of paper or a flip-chart, write down all the things you can think of that people outside the church might say about Christians and the church. Overall, is the balance of these word positive or negative?

In “No Perfect people Allowed” Burke writes the following:

“To understand how serious the issue of tolerance is for (those outside church in the ‘emerging generations’) you have to consider their underlying concerns. During the first two years of my churches’ existence I was asked two questions by spiritual seekers more than any other question: “What do you think of other religions?” and “How do you feel about gay people?” I’ve discovered the real question they are asking is: “Are you one of those narrow minded, bigoted, hate filled, intolerant types of Christians I have heard about?” (pp.38-39)

He goes on to say that we should remember that the people who are asking these questions have been trained at school or university and through the media and government legislation to value tolerance above almost any other value. The United Nations now promotes November 16th as the ‘International day of Tolerance.’ In our post-modern, relativistic world people don’t really mind what we believe or how we behave, as long as we are tolerant towards others who believe or behave differently. However, in Christians they often see people who they believe are amongst the most intolerant people on the planet! Intolerant of science; intolerant of women; intolerant of other faiths; intolerant of non-believers; intolerant of drink, drugs, sex, contraception, abortion, homosexuals... the list goes on and on!

## CULTURE CHECK

- ✘ When was the last time you had a dialogue with a non-Christian person to honestly try to understand what they believe rather than just try to tell them what you believe?
- ✘ If a spiritual seeker came into our church, would the average person they interact with be as willing to listen as much as speak?
- ✘ Do you feel comfortable creating a culture where people could hang out, question, and doubt for months or years as they wrestle to find faith? What fears or concerns does it raise for you?
- ✘ What changes could be made at our church to better create a culture of dialogue and acceptance?

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS – READ MARK 8:5-13

- ✘ In one episode of the Simpsons, Homer sees his neighbour Maude over the garden fence. “Hey, I haven’t seen you in a couple of weeks,” he says. “Where have you been?” “I’ve been at Bible Camp learning to be more intolerant!” she replies. Being as honest as you can be, how would you describe your gut-feeling towards Muslims or Hindus, gay or lesbian people, alcoholics or drug addicts, people living together, single parents or other people who have a different opinion to you about matters of faith and morality?
- ✘ Just imagine if you were exploring a foreign religion. What fears or concerns would you have? What environment would most help you be open to new ideas? Discuss how you create this same environment for a spiritual seeker coming into your group.
- ✘ **Read Luke 7:18-23.** John the Baptist had seen and heard of Jesus’ miracles, yet when he gets thrown in prison, he falls into doubt and sends his disciples to Jesus just to check he is on the right track. In your opinion, what room is there for doubts as people seek an authentic faith?
- ✘ What struggles do Christians face that are pretty much the same struggles that non-Christians face? Discuss what deep-seated needs, wants and desires are common for all people. How might these commonalities provide an opportunity for dialogue about the Christian faith?



Have you ever been to a mosque, a synagogue, or a temple? Were you there during a service? How did you feel? What concerns did you have? Were you worried that you might come under spiritual attack or be opening yourself to spiritual danger? That is probably how a

person from another religion would feel if you invited them to church.

Have you ever been in a bookmakers or a casino? What about a bar that had strippers? If so, how did you feel? The discomfort, disorientation and lack of certainty about what was going on is probably exactly what someone who frequents those establishments would feel if they came into church.

Would you be willing to go into a mosque, a bar, a strip-club or casino if it meant there was an opportunity to share the Gospel with someone and perhaps even see them become a Christian? As Pastor, I'm not sure I could say 'yes' - If I am being honest I think I might just be too uncomfortable and worried about my own spiritual well being.

When Jesus said in Mark 16:15 "He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation." Did he really mean ALL the world including the uncomfortable, 'sinful' places?

However, it is not just notorious 'sinners' who would feel out of place in most churches. 'Ordinary' people who don't normally go to church might feel equally uncomfortable and out of their depth in most church services. They may not know the songs, don't know anyone there, don't know when to stand up or sit down, don't know what to do about the collection or whether to take communion or not.

How do we make people, whatever their background, feel comfortable amongst Christians and in our church?

### **3. THE PROBLEM WITH MEMBERSHIP.**

(N.B. This study does not follow the Sunday sermon series due to the Week of Christian Unity. This study picks up the themes explored in the New Year's Message delivered at both services on January 8th)

"In some farming communities the farmers might build fences around their properties to keep their livestock in and the livestock of neighbouring farms out. This is a bounded set. But in rural communities where farms or ranches cover an enormous geographic area, fencing the property is out of the question. In our home of Australia, ranches (called stations) are so vast that fences are superfluous. Under these conditions a farmer has to sink a bore and create a well, a precious water supply in the Outback. It is assumed that livestock, though they will stray, will never roam too far from the well least they die. This is a centred set. As long as there is a supply of clean water, the livestock will remain close by."

Deep Church, Jim Belcher, (p.86)

The Jews of Jesus' day were bounded set people. It was very easy to define who belonged and who didn't. If you were born into the right race, followed the right set of rules and kept the right traditions, then you were 'in'. Part of the problem for the Pharisees was that Jesus blurred the boundaries and told people who didn't belong that they were not far from the kingdom of God or had more faith than the religious people.

Churches are also bounded sets. The 'fences' fall into three areas: Belief, Behaviour and Belonging. If you believe the right things, behave in the right way or fulfil the membership requirements (baptism, confirmation, membership interviews, taking communion in the right way for Catholics, speaking in tongues for Pentecostals, etc.) then you are allowed to be a member. Increasingly people do not come with any of these requirements fulfilled. Because we live in a post-Christian society people don't know the basic doctrines of the Christian churches, may not be living 'holy' lifestyles and may not have done the things necessary to feel that they belong. How are we to make people feel welcome and feel that they are allowed to belong to our community. Is there a place for belonging before believing or behaving?

## **CULTURE CHECK**

- ✘ Does Tabernacle have 'fences' which defines who is 'in' or 'out' of our community? What are they? How welcome or otherwise do these fences make people feel?
- ✘ Do you describe yourself as a Baptist? Do you define yourself as belonging to another denomination but worshipping at a Baptist Church? Do you describe yourself primarily as a Christian who worships at a Baptist Church? Why? Does it matter?
- ✘ When you are visiting another town or city, do you look for a Baptist Church to worship at, or one that has the right style of worship and preaching? What do you think this says about your attitude to bounded or centred sets?

## **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS – READ MATTHEW 8:5-13**

- ✘ What things strike you most about this story? What do you think the Pharisees would have made of it?
- ✘ By talking about “the feast of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” Jesus is emphasising the Jewish character of the Kingdom of Heaven. Yet at the same time he is saying that non-Jews from the east and the west will be able to take their place at the feast. Other people who Jesus entered into dialogue and relationship with who didn't naturally belong in the kingdom included 'sinners', Samaritans, foreigners, lepers and people who worked for the Roman occupying powers. What, for Jesus, were the defining features of being allowed 'in.'
- ✘ **Read Acts 10:24 - 11:3** Thinking of the book of Acts in general, and this story in particular, what do we know about the membership requirements of the early Church?
- ✘ What do you think people's attitude to membership is in modern society?
- ✘ Why do some people worship at Tabs and maybe even call it their church, yet do not come into membership? Is membership important? If

so, for what reasons?

- ✘ Some churches simply do not have membership anymore to define who belongs and who doesn't. For some churches regular attendance at worship is the only requirement for being involved in ministry, in decision making and in leadership. What do you think of that? Would it work at Tabernacle?



The picture of the farm without fences used in the introduction to this study calls to mind Jesus' words in John 7 when he says, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink." As a church, if we dig spiritual wells deep enough and make the clean water of Jesus available, then people will be

attracted and stay close to the life-giving water. But what are the characteristics of that deep well? What does a community look like that is drinking living water? What are the features that define it?

What is the difference between building a 'church' or a 'congregation' or a 'community'? What are the characteristics of each, and which elements of them are likely to be attractive to people outside the church?

One of the things people are really looking for today is authenticity. They have become disillusioned by our political system, our religious institutions and the financial and economic system. Whether it is banks giving big bonuses to leaders who have made horrible financial mistakes, politicians fiddling their expenses or child abuse and financial scandals in the church they feel let down. What might be the effect in our society of a community of people who say they believe in love, forgiveness and acceptance where anyone is welcome who are actually living out their beliefs authentically?

## 4. THE STRUGGLE WITH TRUST

Consider the Pharisees of Jesus' day for a moment. They were absolutely certain that they knew God, had access to all spiritual truth through the scriptures and that anyone who didn't believe and practice the same things as them were 'sinners.' 'Sinners', basically, were anyone who didn't keep their faith the same way that they did. The problem was that to remain spiritually pure, to be able to afford the required sacrifices in the temple, to be allowed to attend worship and be taught the requirements of the Law you essentially had to be male, Jewish, wealthy, living in the right place and physically healthy (sick people were often thought of as spiritually unclean and excluded from the temple.) If you couldn't enter into worship then you were unable to fulfil the requirements of the Law and so were a sinner. Jerusalem's religious elite quite literally thought of themselves as above the rest of the Jewish population. They had a raised walkway through Jerusalem to take them from their palatial quarter of the old city to the temple so that they wouldn't have to mix with sinners, gentiles, poor and sick people in the street below!

Into this society steps Jesus. He primarily chose to mix with fishermen, publicans, tax collectors, prostitutes and sick people—the 'sinners' of his day. We need to ask ourselves a brutal question: is the church more like the Pharisees or Jesus? Do we willingly and lovingly mix with the least the last and the lost or do we consider ourselves spiritually 'better' and 'more together' than the 'sinners' around us? Just as importantly, when those outside the church look at us what do they think we think about them? Are we seen as loving, generous and accepting, or are we seen as 'holier than thou'? Do they feel they are able to trust us, or do they feel judged by us?

### CULTURE CHECK

- ✘ Who are the 'sinners' as far as modern Christians are concerned? What practices or acts are considered 'beyond the pale'?
- ✘ Who are the 'sinners' as far as modern non-believers are concerned? What practices or acts are considered 'beyond the pale' by the World?
- ✘ What do you think most non-Christians think that we think or believe about them? Does this make dialogue more or less easy? Why?

## **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS – READ MATTHEW 9:1-17**

- ✘ In the story of the paralytic man Jesus links the man's sickness with sin and his healing with faith and forgiveness. (Compare this to the parallel story in Luke 5:18-25) However, it is the faith of the friends that get the sick man healed and his sins forgiven, not his own faith. Also, there does not appear to be any hint of repentance on behalf of the paralyzed man. What theological problems does this cause for us? On what basis does Jesus forgive and heal the man?
- ✘ Why do you think Matthew left everything and got up and followed Jesus? What was it he saw in Jesus or had heard about which made him abandon everything to follow him?

According to Luke, Matthew's actual name was Levi. As he was a tax collector for the Romans he would have been despised and shunned by the Jews. However, in his own Gospel Matthew uses the name 'Matthew' which means 'gift from God.' When Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 and says, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice' we are reminded of how Jesus saw Matthew and other 'sinners.' The way Jesus viewed Matthew was merciful. He was a Jewish man who was not living as he should. He was considered a huge sinner by the people and was hated, yet he is a "gift from God". Jesus saw him as a man in need of love and mercy, not primarily as a tax collector.

- ✘ Do you think that Jesus ate with the 'sinners' just in order to see them converted and saved? What was his motive?
- ✘ When you see a drunk, an addict, someone living with someone they are not married to, a homosexual, an unmarried mother or someone recently released from prison, do you first see the person in need of love and mercy or the 'sinner'? Be honest!
- ✘ When questioned by the Pharisees about eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus said that he did not come to call the righteous but the sinners to repentance. He ate with them and associated himself with them. However, He was not changed by them and did not become like them - rather some of them became like Him. What are we like when we hang around "sinners"? Do we start acting like them or do we show them Jesus?

- ✘ **Read 1 Corinthians 4:7.** What is the difference between a Christian and a 'sinner'? What right do Christians have to feel superior? Do you think we do feel superior sometimes, and even if we don't then do we appear that way to people outside the church?
- ✘ What do you think non-Christians feel about themselves when they start considering God? Do they think they are OK, or do they feel they are not good enough?



The word that the King James Version of the Bible renders 'publican' is τελώνης (tallonacé) which literally means a farmer of taxes. He 'farmed' public revenue on behalf of the State, and hence was a 'publican'. The 'tell' part of the original word survives in English in the word 'teller' as in "a

bank teller." However, in more modern English we describe the keeper of a public house, not a tax collector, as a publican. There is no sense whatsoever in the Biblical use of the word 'publican' that it had anything to do with pubs or drinking. Even so, when most of us hear that Jesus was found eating with 'publicans and sinners' (i.e. Matthew 9:11 KJV) we assume it has something to do with drinking or getting drunk. How does our cultural worldview of what a publican is affect our interpretation of the scriptures on this point? At one time the Church Constitution for Tabernacle said that publicans could not be members. Think about that for a moment - Jesus hung around with publicans and sinners but some churches have constitutions that say they cannot be members - even when it is based on a misinterpretation of scripture! How do you think this would make publicans feel disposed towards the church or it's message?

With this in mind, here's another thought. (Hang onto your hats now!) In exactly the same way, the word 'homosexual' does not appear in the way we understand it in the New Testament, and only obliquely in the Old . What do many gay people feel about church based on what we *think* the Bible says about their sexuality or what they think we think of them?

# **5. THE STRUGGLE WITH BEING WITNESSES.**

(N.B. This study does not follow the Sunday sermon series due to the family Service. If you are planning a social event during the term, you might wish to skip this study and hold it this week)

The primary purpose of the church is mission. Think of Christ's return and the end of time that is spoken about in the Bible. If God just wanted our worship, then he would wind everything up now and bring us home to heaven where we could worship him perfectly for all eternity. If it was social action or healing he wanted, then again he could bring about the end times when 'every crying eye' would be wiped and all suffering taken away. The reason the church has been left on earth is to reach others with the Good News of Jesus. The reason Jesus left the Great Commission to the very end of his earthly ministry was because he wanted it to be the thing the disciples remembered the most - Go into the world and make disciples. The reason God delays the end times is so that more people can come to know the Lord! The primary purpose of the church is to bring irreligious people to know Christ. But is this the thing we are most involved in as individuals, is it the thing we spend out money on and is it the thing we devote most time to? The answer is an emphatic 'no'!

## **CULTURE CHECK**

- ✘ Someone once said that you can tell what you value by what you spend your time and money on. What do we truly value at Tabs?
- ✘ When was the last time you personally shared your faith with a non-believer or invited them to something at Church?
- ✘ Lots of people say, "I'm not an evangelist. I don't have that gift. I will leave that stuff to someone else. Is this a Biblical or acceptable thing for any Christian to say?"

## **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS. READ ACTS 1:1-11**

- ✘ Do you think the disciples felt ready to evangelise to the very ends of the earth? What was Jesus solution to their inability or nervousness?
- ✘ Do you feel ready to evangelise and witness even to just the end of your

street? What is Jesus' solution to your lack of gifts or confidence?

- ✘ The disciples wanted to move Jesus onto a debate about end times and the Kingdom, but Jesus focused them back on what really mattered. Essentially he said, 'mind your own business about matters that don't concern you and focus on the things I am telling you to do.' What things distract, displace or divert us away from being witnesses and missionaries as individuals and as the church?
- ✘ What does being a witness mean? Is it the same as being a missionary or an evangelist? What are the differences and the similarities? What are you personally called to do with regard to sharing the Good News?

**Read Romans 10:11-17.** The Christian faith is not really taught in many of our schools today. Christianity may be taught as a comparative religion, but it is put as an option alongside other faiths - remember the discussions we have had in this series about tolerance and relative truth? This is one of the ways it is being worked out in our society.

- ✘ If the Bible story is not being taught in our schools, and is not being passed on in families, then how will people come to know Jesus? How will can they believe in one of whom they have not heard? What is your personal responsibility with regard to Romans 10:11-17
- ✘ Preaching may not necessarily mean standing in a pulpit or on street corners! How could you personally preach the Gospel in your circle of family and friends?



Going Deeper this week is simply a prayer request. Over the last 2 months we have had several parents from a local school approach us here at Tabs to tell us that there is a concerted campaign in the school to remove Christian assemblies and stop the school visiting Tabs for services and

concerts. A school governor from another faith is working alongside militant atheist parents to petition the headmaster and governing body to prevent 'proselytisation' of the children. Please pray for the headmaster, for Christian teachers in our schools and for Christians to come forward for election to school governing bodies.

## 6. THE STRUGGLE WITH TOLERANCE

It seems that Christians have never been very good at accepting people who act, believe or behave differently to them. The history of the Baptist Church in Britain is a story of intolerance, exile and persecution by other Christians. The first Baptists in England had to flee to Europe to escape imprisonment for their faith, and even after they were able to return to the UK and worship freely after the Act of Tolerance was passed in 1689, they still suffered persecution for being 'non-conformists' and 'dissenters.' However, in their turn Protestants, Catholics and 'Methodical Believers' have all suffered persecution or social ostracism for their faith. Go to the centre of Oxford and you will see the Martyrs Memorial where Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley were burnt alive for holding to the Protestant faith when the Catholic Queen Mary came to the throne in 1553. This kind of intolerance has caused many to reject the church and it's teaching. Some people will even go as far as to say that religion is at the root of all wars.

Phillip Yancey wrote 'Grace says that God accepts you and loves you unconditionally.' However, almost every bit of research done shows that if you interview people on the street then few people associate Christianity or the Church with grace. Rather they feel we are all about rules, law, zero-tolerance, judgement and condemnation. Even those people who are interested in matters of faith, God or the Bible assume that they will not be welcomed or accepted by the church or by God until they become better people. This is why the message of grace and the message of 'Come As You Are' is so important. People need to know that they can come to church just as they are today and still be loved, accepted and welcomed both by Christians and by God. To do that we need to build a culture of acceptance and love.

### CULTURE CHECK

- ✘ Are you aware of any people you know who are not yet Christians who have had a 'bad experience' of church and been hurt by it? Are you aware of people who think Jesus is OK, but they don't want anything to do with organised religion?

- ✘ What most prevents you from personally experiencing grace? Do you ever condemn yourself for your own failings and sin, even though the Bible says there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus? If you, who already know Christ, feel like that, then how do you believe someone outside the church might feel?
- ✘ Who are the people today who feel persecuted and excluded by the church, and how could we show them grace and love? Why are they excluded? Should we be reaching out to them 'as they are'?

## **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS. READ ROMANS 15:1-7**

- ✘ Many British people look at church history and just see a history of intolerance. For Muslims they look at Church history and see the crusades, whilst many Jews would want to point to anti-Semitism as the historical hallmark of relationships between Christians and Jews. How good are we at confronting our own history as Christians?
- ✘ **Read Romans 3:23-24.** How should this verse help us to include all people? Does it?
- ✘ **Read Romans 7:15.** Have you ever felt this cycle Paul describes? How did that feel? What do you think caused it?
- ✘ **Read Romans 8:1-6.** How does God's promise (v.1) to not condemn help us grow? Verses 5 and 6 indicate that God's non-condemning acceptance frees us to set our minds on what the Spirit desires. Why do you think this is so important for growth?
- ✘ **Read Romans 15:7.** If we could truly feel accepted by each other, how might it help us grow? How might it help us accept the outsider?
- ✘ What fears or concerns do you have about creating a culture of total acceptance? What can we do to help create this environment?



Sex is everywhere today in a way that even 25 years ago would have been considered indecent: on television, the internet, magazines, billboards and shop window displays. Amongst the only people not really taking openly about sex and sexuality today is the church!

This has 2 negative effects. The first is that the world thinks we are irrelevant when it comes to an issue that is high on the agenda for them and so we are not allowed to contribute to the debate. Secondly, when young people in the church have questions or curiosity about their sexuality they go to the internet, to television or to their secular friends to find out more rather than those inside the church. Sex is not dirty or wrong and the Bible has a lot to say about it. It is, however, personal and private and intended by God to be enjoyed between a man and a woman who are married to each other. We ought to be saying loud and clear that sex is good and created by God, but it is such a powerful thing that God has prescribed healthy limits for it in his Word.

One of the big issues in the secular world is the rights and freedoms of gay people. As we have already seen, many non-Christians use our views on sexuality as a guide to the type of people we are. Are we narrow, judgmental and bigoted or are we tolerant, loving and accepting? For over 20 years the Church of England has been engaged in this debate, often in ways which have been disruptive and damaging to the unity of the church. It is the intention of the Baptist Union to engage Baptists more fully in this debate in the near future. We need to do some thinking about it now!

How could we as a church, engage in open and adult conversation about sex, and in particular sexual orientation? Would someone be able to espouse a more 'liberal' point of view without feeling condemned by other people as not being a 'proper Christian'?

I am aware of a number of gay people who are members or worshippers in Tabs - what would happen if they were to 'come out' into the open? Would they **feel** loved & welcome? Would they **actually** be loved & welcomed?

## 7. THE STRUGGLE WITH TRUTH

One of the things people believe increasingly in our postmodern culture is that there is no such thing as absolute truth. All truth is relative to the situation you are in. A table is only a table as long as you want it to be a table - if you sit on it, then it becomes a chair. If you store things on it, then it becomes a shelf. If you sleep on it, then it becomes a bed. The table is whatever you perceive or want it to be. Now for people who grew up in the pre-postmodern world, this is nonsense! The table was designed and built to be a table, whatever purpose you may use it for, it is still a table. For the postmodern mind-set that is just arrogance. How dare you insist that your truth is better than my truth? This is an example of what we looked at in the introduction and Session 1 when we talked about differing worldviews .

In our increasingly secular society most people are taught that history, especially religious history such as that written in the Bible, was written by a dominant, powerful elite who wrote it for their own purposes. Therefore history must be 'deconstructed' and removed from it's biased context to get at the truth beneath the words. Truth therefore becomes our own interpretation of the world derived from our own experience and subjective point of view. You can believe what you want as long as you don't impose it onto other people. Your truth is only as equal or valid as my truth, and no better. What really matters is that we respect each other and our differences.

Into this increasingly postmodern worldview comes the church saying that Jesus is the only way, the whole truth and the life and no-one can come to God except through him. Ouch! The challenge is, how do we share the absolute truth that Jesus is the only way to God to a generation that switches off the minute you tell them that?

### CULTURE CHECK

- ✘ Are we/you communicating truth with humility or arrogance? Are we winning the argument but losing the person? How would we know?
- ✘ What ways could we make our church culture better represent the truth of Jesus with a humble approach?

- ✘ How can we express the things we know to be absolutely true without alienating people who have been brought up believing that all religions, beliefs and faiths are equally valid?

## **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS. READ PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11**

- ✘ What struggles have you experienced (personally or with others) regarding truth and Christian faith? Are there things which most Christians strongly believe that you struggle with? **Read John 14:6-9.** Are Jesus' statements meant to be exclusive or inclusive? Why?
- ✘ Which approach(es) had the greatest impact on you finding faith? Was it one that just told you what to believe or one that helped you explore faith through dialogue and come to your own conclusions? Share why that approach helped you?
- ✘ Look at **Philippians 2:5-11** again. Why is a humble approach to truth important? Jesus conveyed uncompromising truth in an attitude of humility. How can we (personally or as a group) be more like Jesus to those around us?
- ✘ One of the key questions people ask when thinking about truth today is, 'does it work?' It's a very practical, pragmatic question that is more concerned with outcome than intellectual truth or knowledge. **Read John 8:31-32.** Why is it so important to convey practical truth to the world around us? What practical issues relate to Christians and non-Christians alike, and how does faith in Christ practically help?
- ✘ **Read 1 Peter 3:15.** How prepared do you feel to give an answer for your faith if someone asks about it?
- ✘ How would you set about doing it with gentleness and respect? How might you react if the person became hostile about the Christ, Christians or the Church?
- ✘ What steps can you take to become better prepared?



Although the idea of truth being relative is quite hard for people with a modern mind-set to grasp, the idea of absolute truth is actually relatively new. With the rise of a scientific approach during the enlightenment, a feeling grew that everything could be measured and defined in an absolute way. Scientific laws could be

discovered and these laws would be true for everyone. The word 'discovered' is significant, because it suggests that the truth of these laws has always been there, just waiting to be uncovered.

In the ancient world truth could be more fluid. The gods, for example, were local. The Greek gods might have sway in Greece, but over in Persia the Persian gods were in charge. This is what is behind the Psalmist's lament, 'By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept... how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' The Psalmist knows that the God of the Israelites is back in Israel, but now they are in Babylon and far from home. He is saying, "My religious truth was fine when I was at home, but it doesn't work now we are far away!" When Pilate asked Jesus "what is truth?" he is hinting that the truth of the Jews may not fit everyone.

Another interesting feature of this idea of relative and absolute truth is just how much modern science struggles when universal, empirical truth is challenged by completely new ideas. Recently results from the LCH at Cern suggested that particles had been recorded travelling faster than the speed of light. Cue mild panic from the scientific community and backtracking from the team which made the discovery! Science often makes new discoveries which completely rewrite the textbooks, whilst at the same time contending that science has a monopoly on truth which theology has no right to comment on.

How do you cope when something you are absolutely sure is true is challenged by new evidence? Do you enter a state of flat denial or do you just dump your understanding of truth to take on the new reality? Are you somewhere between these two extremes? How do you think an atheist might cope with the discovery that God might be real, or a non-Christian who hears the challenge of the Gospel for the first time? How could we help them?

## **8. THE STRENGTH OF THE CHURCH IS...**

“Many books have been written about postmodernity,” writes John Burke. “Usually with an emphasis on the relativistic way of thinking about truth and morality. But the broader postmodern experiment has been most shaped by emerging generations. What I define as the Postmodern Experiment began with a generation deciding to test what life would be like living out the philosophy, “If it feels good, do it...” “All the diagnostic experts keep pointing backward to the era of the ‘60’s and ‘70’s as the fatal hour when everything started going to hell.” Since the sixties, several cultural seismic waves rolled through our society, leaving behind an unexpected aftershock for the Christian Church.” (“No Perfect people Allowed”, page 32)

The convergence of many culture shifts - some good, some bad and some neutral - has meant that many of the landmarks for our society have either shifted or been washed away completely,. We have been left with emerging generations feeling cast adrift on an uncertain sea of change: communications explosion, the internet, reliable contraception, women’s emancipation, globalisation, consumerism, vast disposable incomes for children and teenagers, the welfare state, world travel, almost universal car ownership, easily accessible divorces, the removal of stigma attached to divorce or unmarried parenthood, AIDS, relatively safe and accessible abortion... and so many other social innovations have hit our culture since the end of the Second World War that our society has been left reeling.

The consequences are perhaps unsurprising: growing mental health problems, especially depression and anxiety (the BMA now estimate 1 in 5 people under the age of 30 are receiving treatment or medication for anxiety or depression at any one time!), anger issues, relationship breakdown, transient sexual relationships, sexual addiction, eating disorders, drug abuse, attempted suicide and self-harming, sexual and physical abuse, self image problems, rising STI’s... again the list goes on. Writing about American society Burke conclude, “Americans went out for a three decade binge on self and now our society is vomiting up the consequences uncontrollably!” He points out that the trends in Western Europe are the same as those for America.

Amidst this turmoil and social confusion sociologists tell us that the heart-cry of the emerging generations is for love and communal stability. With everything else

shifting around them, people are looking for a sense of somewhere to belong. Jobs, homes, relationship, even parents seem transient and changing and nothing appears reliable. Our own young people at Tabs, when asked what they wanted in terms of a youth worker said, “someone who’s not going to move away or quit after a year or two.”

Here’s the good news for the church! What can the church provide that so many people in society are looking for? Stability, a sense of historical continuity, and most importantly of all a real sense of community. The very things that this hyper-changing society cannot offer turns out to be the church’s speciality!

## **CULTURE CHECK**

- ✘ Do you recognise the description of society as fractured and broken as described above? If not, what do you think is going on in our society?
- ✘ When people come to our church are they exposed to a genuine community of believers rather than just a gathering of religious people?
- ✘ How could we help visitors and seekers experience genuine community better at Tabernacle? How could we create better community?

## **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS. READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-31**

- ✘ If you were describing yourself as a body part, what would you be? Why? Would you rather be something else?
- ✘ At Tabernacle, do we have an over preponderance of any one part? Maybe we are a body with six eyes and 4 hands! Why do you say that?
- ✘ Are we missing any parts of the body? What parts? How can we remedy any imbalance there is in the body?
- ✘ Some theologians have described the traditional church body as being made up of lots of ears and one big head! The Pastor is the big head who does all the pastoring, teaching, preaching, worship leading, visiting, and vision casting whilst the bulk of the body spends most of its time in the pew listening to what he has to say! Many people would like to return to this model of leadership and ministry. Is it healthy? Is it even Biblical? If Christ is the head, then what is the Pastor?
- ✘ What would a fully functioning body look like at Tabernacle? How can

we grow and mature to be more like that?

- ✘ **Read Ephesians 4:11-16** In these 6 verses, count how many times the phrases 'grow up', 'mature', and 'build up' appear. What does a mature church look like? What does an immature church look like?
- ✘ In verse 12 the job description for ministers is given. What is it? Who is meant to do the 'good works' of ministry? If possible in your group, read that verse in several different versions of the Bible.
- ✘ **Read John 17:20-26.** What is Jesus' model for unity? Whose example are we to copy?
- ✘ For Jesus, what is the purpose of that unity and love?
- ✘ How best can we share that unity and love with those outside the church and how best can we make people feel loved and wanted inside our community?



As we conclude this series, I want us to think deeply about a simple question: can the church continue to do things in the future the same was that it has in the past? Albert Einstein said that the definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over again and expecting

different results. Church attendance numbers in the UK are in free-fall and yet pretty much we carry on doing the same things as we have always done. Music might have been updated slightly (if you think what we do is modern, then turn on a commercial radio station and you'll find it really isn't!) and the building layout changed, but pretty much we are doing now what we did 100 years ago in the same place at the same time on the same day. If the church is going to change, what are the irreducible elements of church and worship services that must not change? Once we have decided what we absolutely **must** keep the same, then we need to think about what we are willing to alter or even give up for the sake of reaching the unchurched masses.

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