

Who is the Church for?

Richmond July 8th 2018. Parish Consultation as Susan prepares to leave.

Acts chapter 15

Mark 2:18-22 new wine into new wineskins.

As a youth pastor Bill Hybels was forced to quit his position because the elders of the church felt he was attracting ‘the wrong kind of kids’. Frustrated, Hybels started Willow Creek Community Church, which he intentionally designed to attract non-believers. It has become one of the largest churches in America today.

Our passage today raises the same question that Bill Hybels asked as a young pastor: Who is the church for? Who indeed?

In the first century, Jews thought it was exclusively for Jewish people (15:1), or at least for those who adopted Jewish customs: (I quote) “*Unless you keep the ancient Jewish custom of circumcision taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.*”

In verse 5 Paul and Barnabas met with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. (I quote): ‘some of the men who had been Pharisees before their conversion stood up and declared that all Gentile converts must be circumcised and be required to follow the Law of Moses.’

I wonder why we are told they **had been** Pharisees? – perhaps it was to explain why they were still insisting on the requirements of the Law (as they would for a proselyte). Yes they were Christians but their thinking was nevertheless still locked (in part at least) into the old. A good example of putting new wine (Gentile converts) into old wine skins (the law) – the new wine will burst the old skin as new life bursts forth, or is this a case of trying to force old wine into new wineskins? Which would be a nonsense.

I wonder what things we are locked into that doesn’t fully reflect the gospel?

In Jerusalem the apostles and elders were in a log jam of sorts about the situation – the requirements of the law – but the log jam was freed after hearing the testimony that God had given the Gentiles the Holy Spirit through Peter, Paul and Barnabas’s ministry without imposing the restrictions of the Law. Given that God had done this, why should the church now turn around and impose the law?

James closed the discussion by saying: “***And so my judgement is that we should stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God, except they should abstain from***

eating meat sacrificed to idols, from sexual immorality, and from consuming blood or eating the meat of strangled animals.

The overarching concern was to **stop troubling the Gentiles**, stop troubling these new Christians, and to rejoice with them in their new identify as children of God – made so through adoption by faith, and not brought into the covenant through the old requirement of circumcision.

It has been suggested chapter 15 encapsulates this question: Are we called to be guardians or gardeners of the faith? When pushed, what is our default position: to guard the faith, or do everything in your power to grow the faith with all the associated risks? Are the two mutually exclusive?

What screams out at us through Acts 15 is the triumph of grace over law. The challenge then as now is to bring people to Christ by taking the gospel out there to non-believers - and once they are converted to Christ, encourage them to grow into the fullness of their call in Christ without being forced into an inappropriate mould which will constrain them and limit their ability to grow.

There is no shortage of opportunities to engage with our community - with the last the lost and the least (Bishop Justin), or the flotsam and driftwood of society. One person with a burden can begin a new ministry / outreach.

TV Thursday night on poverty in the USA. A pastor who was a rapper / artist working with youth who had dropped out of school. A woman whose sister was shot dead in the street – who visits schools and gets students to sign a non-violence pledge. Many don't bother about education because in their neighbourhood many are dead by the time they are 18.

How to engage with such powerful cultural forces – how to take the life of Christ into these dark places. That is a challenge in all communities.

Romans 12:2 “Don't copy the *behaviour and customs of this world*, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.” The ‘renewal of our minds’.

J B Phillips translation: “Don't let the world (church) squeeze you into its mould.” This is undoubtedly an interesting passage for us to reflect on given that the church is now finding itself squeezed by the culture of the world.

Bishop Justin developed a modern monastic order called Ngati Awa at Waikanae – for the ‘least the last and the lost’ ie. **‘the wrong kind of people’**. (Bill Hybels)

Some of the clergy at the Wellington Electoral Synod told him: we elected you for ‘who you are’, we don’t want you to change because the church desperately wants to reach the lost generations. What a huge struggle it will be to shift an organization as large as the church from guardian to gardener. But we know the church consciously and unconsciously will do it’s best to squeeze Justin into its mould because the church’s default position is the status quo.

How do we create space for seekers to grow in Christ without being squeezed into unhelpful moulds? I do know you have worked hard to be welcoming and inclusive – two qualities you will want to hold on to as you go through your discernment for a new vicar.

These days we don’t quote Moses and the need for circumcision to new Christians – but we will have our own pet rules and bottom lines – whether it be about dress, or language, or music, or age. (Westport example).

The early Christians needed to understand (as do we) that the key to God’s plan of salvation wasn’t race, or age, or law, it was grace (5:11). The Church is a place for Christians to grow in their faith and if it ever stops attracting ‘the wrong kind of people’, it will have lost touch with God’s vision.

(In my former church after I left drugs became problematic in the youth group. The leadership shut it down rather than try to sort it out). The senior youth group once had an average attendance of 70, 120 on the roll. Every year some of those would make a commitment to Christ and I would baptise them in the sea. Closing it down was the safe option – it stopped the ‘wrong kinds of youth from coming – but it stopped all youth from coming - and ended any chance of speaking into their lives.

At synod a few years ago Marge Tefft shared a meeting she had with me in Greymouth. She shared about the guilt and disappointment when she saw clergy in other parishes doing different things – and asked the question of how to keep faith with the Diocesan Strategic Vision.

As we prayed together the image of a surfer came to me along with the importance of watching for the right wave to ride. After all we cannot ride them all – it is impossible - and exhausting to even think of trying. So we must watch, and pick the right wave to ride.

What is the right wave that God wants this church on the hill to watch for and catch? It requires active watching – it takes an experienced eye – a discerning eye.

And the task is to get positioned in time, and to use all one's skill to ride the wave into the shore staying on your feet!

For Marge that image was liberating. Later, someone gave a further word of encouragement and identified the particular wave as bringing a healing ministry to the region of Greymouth. Exciting.

Bishop Richard then said something very interesting – he shared a word that was spoken at Spreydon Baptist Church in Christchurch when Murray Robertson was in the early days of his ministry there – the word was about revival coming like a wave – and that the first wave would bring the driftwood - and how they dealt with the driftwood would determine how well the revival would go and grow. The secret and the challenge was in the **driftwood**: 'the wrong sort of people', and how the church responded to them and their needs.

Think of driftwood – picture it piled up on our beaches – Is it beautiful to you or is it just of nuisance value? Do you clear it away as soon as possible? Cut it up for firewood? Or use it for sculptures? Or wait for the sea to take it again?

In Ruby Bay recently we had a cyclone combined with a King Tide – 50 houses were evacuated as they were flooded with sea water – and drift wood – there was an amazing carpet of drift wood and huge logs right through the sections to the main highway opposite our gate – where did it all come from?

The driftwood represents the hurting, needy people – these are the people Christ brings to the doorstep of the church 'the wrong sorts of people'. How we engage with them bringing the gospel of Christ will determine if the church will ever truly get into mission mode.

Spreydon Baptist as many of you will know, has developed a huge and effective ministry across their community over the years with all sorts of social outreach – practical helping ministries as part of their vision to serve and to proclaim the Lordship of Christ. They recognised the driftwood as a gift and an opportunity.

In chapter 15 if it wasn't for the Holy Spirit alive and active in people changing lives and breaking new ground and pushing boundaries - all that would be left would be law, rules, regulations, restrictions and death. The Holy Spirit is and always must be the 'life changing' component – the vital ingredient.

Let us open ourselves to the Holy Spirit – truly open ourselves up – and let the Holy Spirit mould our hearts into the mould of Christ and not the world’s mould – and then direct our lives to fulfil His will - that all will be to His glory.

Let’s be prepared, regardless of our age, to be the new wine that gets put into the new Church on the Hill wineskins.

1. Celebrate
2. What needs addressing
3. Hopes for the next 5 years
4. Qualities of a minister.

Inclusiveness – welcoming- driftwood.