

A Different Kind Of Family (July 11, 2021)



Ask any migrant – and they will tell you Nino Culotta got it right with the title of his book – *They're A Weird Mob* – Australians really are a weird mob.

Everyone expects a bit of weirdness from Australians.

But here is what I want to suggest this morning – Christians are an even weirder mob.

We are diverse, we are flawed, we hold our opinions tenaciously.

Yet despite the Bible being crystal clear about who Christians are – many of us are constantly surprised at who makes up the church – and how weird and wonderful we are.

I keep meeting Christians who have been disappointed by churches. In fact, this very week two friends one in this city – one in another city – spoke to me about how disappointed they are in the church.

They read their Bible – have an idea of how a church should be – and are convinced that a church somewhat close to the ideal biblical pattern is out there – somewhere.

They have tried 3, 4, 10 local churches but all of them had issues.

They had imperfect leaders and imperfect people.

They held to some doctrine or practice these people feel they shouldn't.

So, when their current church shows it is flawed – then their search goes on and they leave to find that better church.

However, after a few attempts – many simply give up.

Over the years, I have met a significant number of individuals and families who have told me – we don't actually attend a local church anymore because there is not one church worth attending anywhere in this city.

I believe that in many ways the issue is a misunderstanding of the nature of the church.

This morning and next week – I want to talk about the church.

This morning, I want to suggest this:

God uses this imperfect family to achieve His perfect plan.

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Don't think the church as it exists is a failure on God's behalf. God knew who we would be – flawed – and He sovereignly works through our flaws.

So, if you joined a church expecting a unified, godly, committed, loving group – you will have been terribly disappointed.

Here is the point – God could have made us more united and committed and holy.

That would not be a problem for Him.

But, the Bible tells us that God chose to use us – this imperfect, flawed group – to bring His plan for the ages to fruition.

Before the foundation of the world – God planned out the building of the church.

His plan was to gather a group of men and women who all have God as their Father, Christ as their King and the Holy Spirit in their heart.

We now have the vantage point of 2000 years of history to look back at the church – and you might ask ... so what happened?

How did we end up with 2000 years of division, sin, failures, apathy?

Surely you have to admit that if God had so ordained – He could have called us and washed us – and made us into a perfect family. No divisions, complete faithfulness, dedicated service.

I don't know all the reasons why God chose to use us in our imperfections.

Clearly one major reason – in my understanding **the** major reason is – so that when His plan is finally complete – He and He alone gets the glory.

1 Corinthians 1:26–29:

Brothers and sisters, consider your calling: Not many were wise from a human perspective, not many powerful, not many of noble birth. Instead, God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God has chosen what is insignificant and despised in the world—what is viewed as nothing—to bring to nothing what is viewed as something, **so that no one may boast in his presence.**

History is the story of how God redeems fallen humanity through Christ.

He *could* have used holy angels.

He *could* have written the gospel in the skies.

He *could* have only chosen the best 1% of Christians – the Spurgeons and Hudson Taylors and Elizabeth Elliots – and sent them to proclaim the truth.

Instead, He chose to use us.

But, despite our flaws – God’s Kingdom will come.

The gospel will fill the earth.

His glory will transform this world.

And when we stand in glory – not one angel, nor one saint – will ever say – wow – the church’s unified effort accomplished this – bravo church.

No, every created being will say – the fact the gospel went out and the church grew is a greater miracle than creation – to God and Him alone be the glory.

My point this morning is not that we should simply accept our flaws and sin and division. No we should fight them. We should strive for this church – any church to be better.

But, we must not have an expectation of who we are that is unrealistic. We are sinners – redeemed sinners – but sinners.

The New Testament does speak of the universal church – the whole group of Christians in all the ages. But the usual use of church in the Bible is in reference to the local church.

The local church is designed to be a foretaste – an **imperfect** foretaste – of the coming perfect church.

In order to convey what this body of believers is – the New Testament uses a series of metaphors – each of which add something to the picture of who we are.

Some of the more significant ones are:

The church is a **Body**

One organism with many varied, interconnected, interdependent parts.

The church is a **Bride**

Our love, devotion and heart is to be given to one person – the Lord.

The church is a **Flock**

We are sheep bought and cared for by the Good Shepherd.

The church is a **Temple**

We are the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

But perhaps the most dominant and significant metaphor of who we are is this:

The church is a **Family**

The most basic use of family is for your flesh and blood relatives – the social group you are born into.

Family is supposed to love you in spite of your flaws and be there through good and bad.

Every person is born into a family of some form – even if it is just the mother who gave birth to them. This family may or may not last.

Some of you sitting here have families that are awesome. Some of you have pretty average families – perhaps almost non-existent.

But, when you became a Christian – when you were born again – you became a part of a new family – the family of the saints.

In a sense – the believer in Congo who I may never meet in this life – is my brother in this new family.

But, there is a particular call for Christians to join themselves to a new family – through baptism and church membership – the family of a *local* church.

I'm not sure what expectations you had for what this spiritual family would be like.

I can still remember the anticipation I had before going to my first church service as a new believer.

I was excited to meet this group of saved, washed, redeemed saints – heaven on earth.

I can still remember my disappointment. They were so ... normal.

Kids fighting, wives impatient with husbands, talk about worldly things around the coffee.

Honestly, I expected more. I expected to meet a group of heavenly minded, selfless, holy saints.

But the problem was not the church – but my expectation.

In a sense, the church is like marriage. The reality of marriage includes finding out your spouse is a sinner – you are a sinner – and marriage takes hard work.

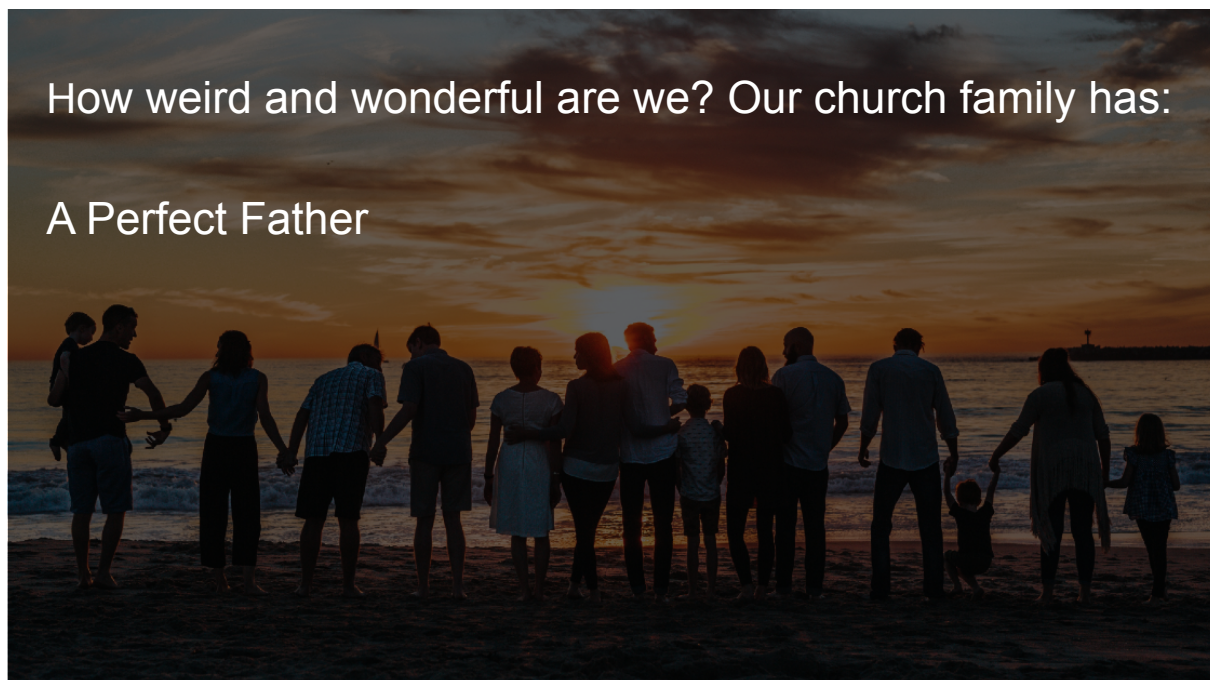
Very few Christians do not have several periods of their life where they are not disappointed – often profoundly disappointed in their church family. The leaders let them down and the sheep turn on them.

But, here is what I want you to remember. We **are** weird – and wonderful – *by design*.

God chose to use us – in our imperfections – so the glory is His.

Let me remind you of this through three truths.

First – Our church family has:



A perfect Father

John 1:12:

To all who did receive [Christ], he gave them the right to be children of God.

1 John 3:1:

See what great love the Father has given us that we should be called God's children—and we are!

God – holy, omnipotent, perfect – is our Father. There is no truth about you or me that is more important than that.

Listen to these words written by J.I. Packer:

You sum up the whole of New Testament teaching in a single phrase, if you speak of it as a revelation of the Fatherhood of the holy Creator. In the same way, you sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one's holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. **If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.** For everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God, "Father" is the Christian name for God.¹

'Father' is the Christian name for God. It sums up who we are children of the King.

When Jesus sat on a mountain in Galilee and said when you pray – pray like this – **Our Father in heaven.**

There would have been audible gasps.

To them, you do **not** address God as 'Father'! It would be like meeting the Queen and saying – it is so lovely to meet you 'Lizzie'!

That is Tower of London stuff.

The Jews had a concept of God as Creator, as King, as Lord – but the idea of God as Father was never part of their thinking.

Father seems to bring us to God's level – and that can't be true.

But it is. Through Christ – we become God's children.

Packer is right. This is who we are.

¹ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973) p. 226.

What Jesus taught is revolutionary – the reason Christ came was to call a people to become the children of God. God – the Creator, King and Lord – would be our Father.

What does it mean to have God as our Father? Galatians 4:6:

And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “*Abba*, Father!”

We can call out to *Abba* Father.

It is hard to find an English equivalent. Daddy is too irreverent. Perhaps the best translation is something like – Beloved Father.

Because He is our Beloved Father He cares for us. Matthew 7:11:

How much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.

We have a good God as our Beloved Father.

That is the good family news.

But, here is the problematic family news:



How weird and wonderful are we? Our church family has:
A Perfect Father – But Imperfect Siblings

We have: A Perfect Father – But Imperfect Siblings.

When God is your Father – you get the church as your brothers and sisters.

Matthew 12:48–50:

Jesus replied . . . , “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” Stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

But, many of us have disappointment at this new family.

I understand why we might expect better.

If you want a champion racehorse – you need to find a champion stallion – a champion broodmare – and find a foal that has the lines and breeding of its parents.

In the same way – if God is our Father – you might expect His kids to be awesome.

One day we will be – but not just yet.

Theologically we know the church in this life is imperfect.

We know we are sinners. 1 John 1:8:

If we say, “We have no sin,” we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

But our expectation is a bit higher than joining ourselves to a bunch of sinners.

Unfortunately, you are sitting among a group of men and women who want to be holy, who hate their sin – but they fail – *every single day*.

And get us on a bad day – it can be pretty ugly.

And the imperfect siblings include the undershepherds – who are also imperfect.

So, here is the end result.

We know depravity means the church is flawed.

But we are constantly amazed at how flawed.

So, on the one hand we should expect better – but on the other hand we are exactly what we should expect.

Setting the bar too high – leads to ongoing disappointment.

I was thinking this week of conversations with a number who left this church over the years.

The conversations are often remarkably similar.

Oh – we love the church and the people. We like the teaching and the worship.

But, we have this issue we can't get past.

Sometimes it is theological.

The leaders don't have their teaching on the end times right.

You don't push the right view of schooling.

You compromise too much with the government.

Often it is personal.

I can't deal with Jim. Just can't.

I can't believe you put Lenny up as an Elder – he rubs me wrong.

And I am like – really – these things surprise you and this is enough to leave over?

I know we are far from a perfect church. We do strive to be better – but we will disappoint.

Here is my issue. There are many good churches – there are no perfect churches.

It took me years to grasp that.

In 1989 – I moved to America and became a member of *Grace Community Church* in Sun Valley.

I had listened to John MacArthur night and day for years – especially his sermons on the church.

Frankly, my expectations were completely unrealistic. What I found was a good church – one of the very best there is. But, I found some imperfect leaders and imperfect sheep.

John taught the ideal but Grace Community simply didn't meet the ideal – and I struggled.

I shared this with one of my seminary professors who walked me through the New Testament. He showed me there were good churches and bad churches – but no perfect ones.

What was I thinking?

You read the New Testament – and the picture you get is the furthest thing from one big happy family.

In Philippians Paul is telling two women to reconcile and work together.

In Galatians he says – there is a false gospel circulating and he rebukes Peter for withdrawing from the Gentile brothers.

In 1 and 2 Timothy, Paul warns Timothy about false teachers, those who will oppose him, deceitful spirits, teachings of demons, people with seared consciences, people who will despise him, the struggle for holiness, members who deserted Paul and deserted the faith, those who engage in irreverent and empty speech, those who ruin the faith of others, those who hold to a form of godliness, those who deceive gullible women – and on and on.

Read the letters to the seven churches in Revelation – it was tough going.

That is the church in this fallen world.

Over the years I watched a fair number of precious sheep get disillusioned and leave here – try other churches – find an issue there – become disillusioned with the church and at times even with God.

I often hear people say – Craig – we need to get back to the church of the first century.

By that they usually mean – we should be like the church in Acts 2. And even then, they really mean – be like verses 44-47:

Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with joyful and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

It is almost as if Pentecost came – the church was birthed perfect and our job was to keep it perfect.

Let me tell you about Acts 2:44-47. It is like viewing someone's Instagram feed. You see this beautiful family – mum dad and three kids smiling and happy.

And you have family envy.

However, the picture is not reality. Look a little deeper. Behind the picture, their marriage is struggling, the kids are a mess and they are far from happy.

Don't over-romanticise this one little period of time in Acts. I want to ask these people some questions:

First, selling homes to help the poor – devoting yourself daily – sharing the gospel to see people saved – great – you say you want the church to do it – well you are part of the church – so just wondering when does the sale of your house settle and when we will receive the funds?

I know that is a little facetious – but my point is that the church is often held to a higher standard than the person holds themselves.

Second, does your Bible end at Acts 2?

There were great things happening in that church – but let's be honest – it was far from perfect. Just read Acts.

For example, you get to Acts 5 – and you meet Ananias and Sapphira who were a part of that very church. They were not perfect. They were not holding all things in common selling everything to meet the needs of others. They lied about their generosity and were disciplined out of the church ... through death.

Two books after Acts we find 1 Corinthians. A first century church – but I don't hear anyone saying – we need to be more Corinthian – unless they mean – spiritual gifts.

Corinth – divided, immoral, failing to hold to basic biblical truths – even applauding those who say – Jesus is cursed.

I sure don't want to be *that* kind of first century church.

The church was not birthed perfect. It was born and it has had some really good periods and some stinkers.

When I was preaching through 1 Corinthians – I often asked myself – if I were a member of that church – what would I do?

Honestly, a big part of me would want to gather the godly saints – move up the road – and start – *The Agora Evangelical Church of Corinth*.

But it is interesting to me – that this is **not** Paul's advice to the church.

He says this – 1 Corinthians 1:10:

Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction.

He doesn't mean you have to all agree on every peripheral teaching. He means we are to strive to find our unity in Christ.

Now – I will point out that there were no other churches in Corinth to move to – and I suspect that if the church stayed rotten to the core – if men like Timothy and Apollos could not turn it around – *Agora Evangelical* – might be the option.

But **first** – you fight – you fight to put aside the petty differences and find your unity in Christ.

One of the metaphors describing the church is marriage. The Bible says – when you have issues in marriage – your first impulse should not be to say – clearly I made a

mistake – there is a better spouse out there – I divorce thee – I divorce thee – I divorce thee – it is time to move on.

You talk, cry, forgive, love – and fight to find a way forward.

It is the same in the church.

The siblings – the brothers and sisters that make up the church – including the leaders – are as imperfect as you are – so we have to fight for unity.

Second truth. Our church family has:



How weird and wonderful are we? Our church family has:

A Perfect Father – But Imperfect Siblings

A Perfect Union

A Perfect Union

1 Corinthians 12:12–13:

For just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body—so also is Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and we were all given one Spirit to drink.

One body – but made of many different parts.

Don't misunderstand this. It is not that God decided to create a supermodel body.

He saves each person and shapes them into the perfect piece.

He needs a hand – so he makes a perfect hand.

The result is a perfect body – fitted together and working in unison.

No. He saves us and we retain our distinctives.

This does not mean that God has trouble assembling the body.

Somebody comes to Christ – and God the body already has feet – and this person is a foot and a misshapen foot.

No, in His sovereignty, God calls us and miraculously fits us together with our differences and diversity.

Humanly we should not fit – but divinely – we fit into one amazing God designed body.

Each person who is in the church was chosen by God before the world existed and in the fullness of time is fitted perfectly together.

Ephesians 1:4:

For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world.

Revelation 13:8:

[Our names are] written from the foundation of the world in the book of life.

God put His church together – every last piece of it – according to His sovereign perfect plan.

But:



While we have a Perfect Union – we have Imperfect Parts.

The church is a family of believers – with exactly the same Bible – indwelt by the same Spirit – possessing the same mind – the mind of Christ – **so what went wrong?**

Well, are **imperfect siblings** – which means we are **imperfect parts**.

The body God forms is not some perfectly formed model.

God didn't form perfect hands, perfect eyes, perfect everything and form a perfect body.

Here is the reality – within the body we have feet who want to be hands.

Tongues who are convinced – this body doesn't need stomachs and livers – just more tongues like me.

The truth is in one sense we are much closer to Frankenstein's monster.

Mishappen bits all grafted together to form one body.

We are different – we don't fit together easily.

In the world we build our friendships around similarities. Similar stage of life, similar worldview, similar personalities.

We find someone who is like me – of course we should get on.

But the church is not like that.

We are diverse – ethnically, personality, stage of life, socially, opinions – but put together as one.

Here is the crucial point while we might look like it – we are **not** Frankenstein's monster. God makes this diversity work.

How?

He takes our diversity and differences and unites us by giving us something bigger than ourselves.

He gives us one head – Christ – and one great cause – the Great Commission.

Christ and His commission are to unite us around a person and a cause that is bigger than our differences.

That is how it should work – but we are imperfect parts.

Some parts think they know better.

Unite around me.

Unite around my boy – Elder Jim.

Unite around our theology of baptism.

This always leads to division.

There are people who marry a spouse thinking they can change them. I know his issues – her problems and a good spouse can sort them out.

There are people who join a church thinking they can change it. This is a good church – but I can make it a great church. We need to unite around me – or my teaching – or my expertise.

No! All that will do is cause the body to tear itself apart.

All the while a fair chunk of the congregation are scratching their heads – people are dying and going to hell and we are tearing each other to shreds and totally consumed over who is the boss and whose voice is right?

Some finally say – I think God would be more honoured if I just sat at home reading Spurgeon on Sundays with my family.

No – I don't believe so.

What unites imperfect parts is submitting to Christ and His cause.

No church does this perfectly – but I will venture to say some do it better than others.

While I am not an advocate of church hopping – I am an advocate of moving if a church is decidedly unhealthy.

There are books and ministries pointing out what makes a church healthy.

Here are a few indications of a healthy church:

Biblical Gospel

This is how you get united to Christ.

High View of Scripture

This is how you submit to the Lordship of Christ.

Faithfully Teaches the Word

This is how you know the mind of Christ.

Godly Membership

This is how you know the flock of Christ.

Church Discipline

This is how you keep the flock of Christ holy.

Seeks the Lost

This is how you join the cause of Christ.

And from my biased, limited perspective – perhaps the most significant key to a healthy church is:



Plurality of Qualified Elders

The Elders' main job is to keep Christ and His cause front and centre.

Their task and role is to keep Christ's voice, Christ's commands as the ones uniting the body.

Don't get me wrong. It is not that each of us goes through the door of salvation – and we come out cookie cutter Christians.

No, we retain our differences. But – good leaders keep saying that what unites us is greater than anything that separates us.

Our identity is in Christ.

Our mission is from Christ.

If Christ and the Great Commission are not at the forefront – the peripheral differences will divide us.

These are seven marks of a healthy church – Mark Dever adds two more to have nine marks – plenty of others have a couple on top of that – but this is a good start.

Does any church keep these perfectly? – no! But quite a few in this city strive to have them at their core.

Those churches are much more likely to find their unity together in Christ and His command.

This is how the imperfect parts are designed to function as one.

There is a **third truth. Our church family has:**



How weird and wonderful are we? Our church family has:

A Perfect Father – But Imperfect Siblings

A Perfect Union – But Imperfect Parts

A Perfect Mission

A Perfect Mission

When we get to glory – our unity will be perfect, our love for each other will be perfect – we will be perfect.

So, why doesn't Jesus just take us to glory when we are saved?

Why isn't it the case that when we are baptised we go down into the water – and are raptured immediately and no one comes up from the water?

Because – we are saved for a purpose.

Matthew 28:19:

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 1:8:

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

And incredibly – this mission **will** be completed perfectly.

Revelation 5 pictures the time when every saint from every age of history and every nation and every tongue are gathered in worship of the Lamb triumphant.

And perhaps the most stunning part of this is that in John 6:39 Jesus says that not one of those the Father gave Him are lost. Every single saint given to Him by the Father will hear the gospel, repent and be found in glory.

I want to suggest that this is perhaps the greatest miracle in history.

Why because:



While the church has **A Perfect Mission – It Has Imperfect Disciples.**

If you think you have to find the perfect church to make a difference in this world – you will never find it.

It has often been pointed out that the existence of the church and the growth of the church are among the greatest miracles.

Here is the church imperfect and flawed. Divided, consumed by internal concerns.

Study after study shows most Christians rarely share their faith.

Missionary numbers are dropping.

If I were God and I had a plan to reach this world – I can tell you choosing us – entrusting us with the gospel – sending us to take it to the world would not be my plan.

I would send angels. I would carve the gospel on the moon and Everest. I would write it in the sky.

But God has one plan and no plan B.

Give the gospel to us and tell us to tell others who will tell others.

That is about as simple a plan as you can get – and our execution has been pretty ordinary to say the least.

But here is the thing – the important part of this plan is not us and our execution – it is God and His plan.

God delights to use us – weak, flawed, fallible – so He gets the glory.

God doesn't use perfect churches – He works amid the mess of imperfect churches – and He gets the glory.

The fact that His plan will succeed is a miracle on par with our Enduring Grace group winning the soccer world cup.

So, what does this mean for you?

Don't expect this church or any church to be perfect. Don't be surprised when our imperfections show.

Instead, rejoice that God uses cracked pots and an imperfect family to work His perfect plan.

Enjoy this weird mob, encourage this weird mob – and be a part of what God is doing with this weird mob.

But, that doesn't mean we throw up our hands and say – we are what we are – we can't do better.

We should admonish and counsel and point each other to holiness and Christ.

We should call our leaders to press on and not be complacent.

Look – there is a saying – you can choose your friends – but not your family.

That is true spiritually as well – Jesus chose us – the Spirit united us as one and joined us to each other.

The church is diverse – in every way imaginable. Different ages, social backgrounds, races.

We are different. We are flawed.

Being part of a church is hard work.

Paul is clear – unity is something you have to strive for.

You unite two sinners in marriage and it is hard.

You unite 300 sinners in membership and it is really hard.

When Paul instructs the church in Ephesians his command is this – Ephesians 4:3:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Unity is not something that just happens – it is something we have to work hard for.

We have to forgive one another. Encourage one another. Speak words of wisdom and love to one another.

Galatians 6 says – when you see someone in the church struggling with sin – you don't just condemn them and say – it is you or me – one of us is leaving. You restore with a gentle spirit – you carry their burden.

Maybe there are burdens here you need to help carry.

Accept that every family has parts that are different.

And then when differences turn to disagreements – strive to resolve them.

In the Sermon on the Mount – Jesus said – if a brother or sister has offended you or sinned against you – don't ignore it – don't just leave – go and seek to be reconciled with them.

In 1 Corinthians 11 – Paul says – don't take the symbol of unity – communion – while harbouring division against a brother or sister – go and be reconciled.

Maybe there are people in this church you need to go to.

We are a weird mob – but a weird mob by design.

We are called to choose to put our differences aside and unite around Christ and His cause.

When we do, we find that life in this family is actually one of the sweetest relationships in this life.

The more we submit to Christ the more He uses us in His cause – the more our joy in this life.

So, see us for what we are – flawed – yes – but a God designed, God built, God directed thing of beauty that is a foretaste of the perfect family we will have in glory.

And then we can focus on the family business – proclaiming the gospel of Christ – to the glory of God our King.

A Different Kind Of Family (July 11, 2021)

Main Point: God uses this imperfect family to achieve His perfect plan.

General Questions:

1. What is the church?
2. What is the difference between the universal and local church?
3. What are the metaphors the Bible uses of the church and what do they convey?
4. What does it mean that the church is designed to be a family?
5. Why do you think so many Christians have become disillusioned with the church?
6. Why are we so surprised that the church is flawed?
7. Why does God use flawed, imperfect us to work His purposes?
8. How are such diverse parts meant to be united?
9. What are realistic expectations for how a church should conduct itself and shepherd the flock?

Application Questions:

1. What should you do when you realise your church is flawed?
2. When do you accept the flaws and when do you say something?
3. Is it OK to not be a part of a local church? Why or why not?
4. What indicates a church is a healthy church?
5. What might be reasons for leaving a church?
6. How can you make this church a better place to be?
7. How can you help some who are disillusioned with the church?