

The Church Unleashed as Family

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 September 2020

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] What do you think of when you hear the word family? My guess is for a lot of people that's quite a difficult word.

A word that evokes a sense of sadness, grief or pain because of its association with some difficult experiences. And for that reason, I think it's totally understandable why many people would prefer not to use the term family as an image to represent the church at all.

And yet it's something that we can't really get away from. The New Testament Greek word is oikos, which means family or household. It's the living reality that we're adopted into when we become Christians.

We're to regard ourselves as children of God, that is, as brothers and sisters in Christ. So if family is a genuinely biblical piece of shorthand for church, and I think it is, let's take a few moments to unpack what that means for us in practical terms.

Now, I guess most fundamentally regarding church as family reminds us that church is not something that we just go to, that we attend. But it's a living, breathing body of which we're a part.

[1 : 16] Now, in the same way that you don't attend family, you don't attend church. Rather, family and church refer to something that you belong to, that you're a part of.

But what are the practical implications of that? What does it mean in real terms to regard the church as our family? It's here that we do well to remember what family, in the truest and most accurate sense of the word, really means.

If we think it just denotes a cosy and exclusive nuclear unit where everything is just right and perfect, then we need to think again. That's not what family is, and it's not what church is.

If, on the other hand, we take family to mean the messy and, at times, chaotic reality of different people living together and working out and working through the challenges that life throws at them, then we're closer to the image of the church, and indeed family, that the Bible presents us with.

You know, I've been in pastoral ministry for my entire working life. I would be very wealthy, indeed, if I'd been given one penny for every time that someone said to me that they just wished their family could be normal.

[2 : 33] Whenever anyone says that to me, I make no hesitation in telling them that there is no such thing as normal. Or, to be more precise, to be normal is to have problems and tensions and conflicts.

In fact, I would argue that the term dysfunctional family is actually quite misleading, because it implies that most families don't argue, fall out or experience some kind of tension.

The reality, of course, is quite the opposite. To be a family doesn't mean you just coast through life in a state of permanent bliss, where everyone simply basks in one another's mutual affection.

Real families aren't like that, because real human beings aren't like that. To be family means to engage in those real challenges and tensions of life, but to know that for all the mess and the chaos, there's a deeper bond that holds you together.

That's what we mean when we refer to church as family. And the following story illustrates this. Apparently, the words Amen and Alleluia are virtually the same in every language throughout the world.

[3 : 46] Someone called Daniel Christensen brings this to life in the story about his relative called Anna George, who was a Romanian soldier in the Second World War. It was 1941 and troops had overrun the Romanian region of Bessarabia and entered Moldavia.

Anna and his comrades were badly frightened. Bullets whizzed around them and mortar shells shook the earth. By day, Anna sought relief from reading his Bible, but at night he could only crouch close to the earth and recall verses memorised in childhood.

One day, during a spray of enemy fire, Anna was separated from his company. In a panic, he bolted deeper and deeper into the woods, until, huddling at the base of a large tree, he fell asleep from exhaustion.

The next day, trying to find his comrades, he moved cautiously towards the front, staying in the shadows of the trees, nibbling a crust of bread and drinking from the streams. Hearing the battle closing in, he unslung his rifle, pulled the bolt and watched for the enemy, his nerves near the breaking point.

Twenty yards away, a Russian soldier suddenly appeared. He wrote this. All my mental rehearsals of bravery served me nothing.

[5 : 09] I dropped my gun and fell to my knees and then buried my face in my sweating palms and I began to pray. And while praying, I waited for the cold touch of the Russian's rifle barrel against my head.

I felt a slight pressure of my shoulder close to my neck. I opened my eyes slowly. There was my enemy kneeling in front of me, his gun lying next to mine among the wildflowers.

His eyes were closed in prayer. We didn't understand a single word of the other's language, but we could pray. We ended our prayer with two words that need no translation.

Alleluia. Amen. Then after a tearful embrace, we walked quickly to opposite sides of the clearing and disappeared beneath the trees.

Now, to be a Christian means being part of a worldwide family, the church. It's a very diverse family and it transcends all nations, denominations and traditions.

[6 : 12] And like any family, it has its tensions and it has its problems. But for all that, there's a bond that goes deeper than anything else that divides us. In our passage from Acts chapter 2 today, we have a snapshot of the life of the early church.

Their life was one of radical discipleship, utterly focused on Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit.

They met together, ate together and pulled their resources together sacrificially in order to meet the needs of others.

Totally outward looking, they were united with an intense sense of family and community. They had their problems, of course, and we don't need to read far into the New Testament letters to see that.

But their love for one another with utter commitment to Christ was what essentially defined them as church. Now, there's a challenge for every generation of Christians.