

Why Community is an Act of War
Ephesians 4:1-16

Many Christians have a less than biblical understanding of what being a Christian is all about. More than a few liken it to a casual stroll down the proverbial yellow-brick road on our way to some heavenly OZ. Others think that being a child of God entitles a person to a pain-free existence, or at least an existence in which all pain is easily, if not automatically, eliminated. Of course, there are plenty of Christians who err at the other end of the spectrum. They have a defeatist mentality and fail to walk in the fullness of their privileges and power as the people of God.

I say all this as a way of explaining the title to today's message. In case you didn't look, I've entitled it: **"Why Community is an Act of War."**

Immediately some will wonder why in the world I would use such a volatile and aggressive term as "war" to describe something that they believe is so easy, peaceful, and routine. There are a lot of things you might associate with the concept of war, but Christian "community" probably isn't one of them. So what in the world do I mean by this? I'm glad you asked!

To make sense of this idea we need to remind ourselves of the daily battles we face in life today. And when I say "battles," I mean spiritual challenges, war, conflicts. No one wants conflict for its own sake. I much prefer peace at all times. But ask any veteran of the United States military and they will probably tell you that the reason they went to war was to protect and to preserve the peace.

So what are some of the "enemies" you and I face that call for spiritual resistance? Who or what are the opposition that calls for us to bind ourselves to one another in community? Again, in what sense is community an act of spiritual war? But first, what is "community"?

Community

Perhaps the best way to answer that question is by looking at how the Bible describes God's new covenant people: the church.

My settled conviction is that one of the primary reasons people avoid community is that they have not understood **God's perspective on the local church**. And from one angle I can understand that. You walk into a corporate gathering such as this and you are instantly confronted with an odd assortment of people, many of whom you may not know. The differences that exist among us are often huge barriers to community.

There are people of **different ages**, and so we confront a chronological hurdle to jump over. Most people are more comfortable associating with people their own age. It's not easy to bridge the age gap that exists in a local church.

There are people of **different socio-economic status**. Some here at BW are extremely successful monetarily and their standard of living is noticeably different from those who struggle financially.

There are people of vastly **differing educational background**. We have people who dropped out of high school and people who have multiple graduate degrees. It's all too easy for some to resent the highly educated and for the highly educated to look down their noses at those who haven't progressed very far in school.

There are people of **different races**. Although we aren't nearly as ethnically diverse at BW as I hope we will become, some people are still a bit hesitant about how closely connected they can be with someone of a different ethnicity.

And then you add to the mix the differences that exist among us when it comes to our **family background**, where we grew up, whether or not we've been Christians for many years or were only recently converted to faith in Christ, and you can begin to see why some people are afraid of burrowing deeply into community and of committing themselves and entrusting themselves to others.

But God speaks to us in his Word about the nature of what a local church is designed to be and it is obvious that these unavoidable differences are actually strengths rather than weaknesses. This is clear from the most common metaphor that the NT authors use to describe us. Repeatedly we see in Scripture that ***we, the individual men and women of a local church, are like the parts of a human body, connected and related one to another in a common life with a common goal.***

For example, when the Apostle Paul tells the believers in Ephesus to stop lying to one another but rather to speak the truth, the reason he gives is, and I quote: ***because "we are members one of another"*** (Eph. 4:25).

Again in Romans 12:5 Paul says that ***"we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."***

In 1 Corinthians 12:27 Paul says, ***"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."***

And of course right here in Ephesians 4 Paul repeatedly describes us as a body in which every member and every part makes its contribution to growth and maturity in Christ.

All of us know what it means to be a *companion* with another or a *teammate* or the *friend* of another. I know what it means to be *affiliated with* someone in an endeavor or even in an organization. But what does it mean for you and me as Christians to be ***"members one of another"***?

Clearly Paul has in mind something that goes beyond mere casual acquaintance. ***Christians in a local church are not just neighbors.*** Paul has in view a *solidarity* and *mutual inter-dependence* one with another that flows from a *spiritual unity* created by God and willingly embraced by each believer. We are no longer alienated or independent beings but people who belong together in covenant commitment as one body in Christ.

This mutual inter-relationship and inter-dependence that we experience as God's children is the foundation for community. ***By community, then, I simply mean the way we live our lives together as the people of God.*** Community in the church is very similar to what it is or ought to be in the family: very different people loving each other, speaking truth to each other, encouraging each other, partnering with each other in mission and ministry, holding each other accountable to the life Christ has called us to live, forgiving each other, teaching and instructing each other, worshiping together with each other, and the list could go on endlessly.

I realize that not all Christians want to hear this. They honestly don't like it. But there's simply no way of getting around the fact that ***when you come to faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior you not only have a new personal identity, you also have a new personal community, a new family.*** And the simple, undeniable, inescapable fact is that we will never grow up into the fullness of what we are in terms of our personal identity in Christ until we embrace and enter into our corporate identity as one people of God.

That's right. You heard it right here. I'm totally persuaded from Scripture that ***you and I will never grow up in Christ, will never fully experience all he has died to obtain for us, if we persist in living as isolated individuals cut off from the grace and power that comes to us only in the context of spiritual community.*** I'm not saying you aren't saved. I'm not saying you won't go to heaven. I **am** saying that your maturity, growth, and even your enjoyment of God will be stunted and fall short of what you otherwise might experience.

Let me give you just one example. It's found on the same page as the passage we read this morning, in **Ephesians 3:17-19**. Here we have Paul's prayer for the Ephesians, that they might experience and enjoy the depths of God's love for them in Christ. But notice carefully how he anticipates this happening. We read in vv. 17-19, how Paul prays

“that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, **being rooted and grounded in love**, may have strength to comprehend **with all the saints** what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:17-19).

This indwelling influence of Christ in our hearts is in some way related to, perhaps even dependent upon, being **“rooted and grounded in love”**. The “love” here is what you and I have one for another. In other words, apart from a communal and mutual love that we display toward each other we will struggle to know and experience Christ's love for us.

But there's more. It is **“with all the saints”** that we are enabled to understand the unfathomable love of God for us, his children. For all its glory and the great heights from which it came, such love can only be experienced together “with all the saints” (cf. 1:1,15; 3:8; 6:18)! Our experience of Christ's love is personal, but never private. It is meant to be felt and proclaimed and enjoyed in the context of the body of Christ. It is a personal, yet shared, experience. ***When we think about, pray about, talk about, and give thanks for God's love for us together with other Christian men and women, we feel and experience and deepen in our awareness and assurance of that love far beyond what could ever happen if we did it alone.***

I hope this explains and adequately accounts for why we talk every Sunday morning about our small groups and why we encourage everyone to get involved in one and to develop close relationships in a D-group. It's certainly not because we enjoy saying the same thing week after week, and it isn't because we get a commission out of the offering each time someone signs up!

We are driven to this because of our jointly and deeply held conviction that the Christian life must, and I mean absolutely must, be pursued and lived in close, intimate, honest relationship with other Christians. This also accounts for why “community” is one of our four ministry values here at Bridgeway.

Why a War?

What I mean by this is that the life of a Christian devoted to community is a life in combat with numerous enemies. ***There are forces and temptations and trends and even some people who if not resisted and overcome can undermine your relationship with Christ and seriously erode your growth as a Christian. Thus when you choose to pursue community with the people of God you are fighting the insidious and destructive influence of these enemies.*** So let me mention a few.

(1) Community is an act of war against sinful self-sufficiency.

We may not like to admit it, but there is in each of us a tendency to think we don't need other people. We find ourselves saying, “I've got all the resources within my own soul to govern and regulate my life. And if I step out of line with God, I don't need anyone else to stick their nose into my spiritual life. I can get myself out of any mess I create and I'm fully capable of living a godly life without the input of others.”

Where did that mindset come from? It certainly didn't come from the Bible. Simply put, it's the mindset of the world in which we live. ***The philosophy of the world is that our problems are outside of us and the solution to them is inside of us. The philosophy of the Bible is that our problems are inside of us and the solution is outside of us.***

The answer to your deepest and most intensely painful struggles and failures in life is not found in who you are by nature. It is found in what God has done for you by grace. It is found in the power that resides in the community of God's family.

We tend to think that we know ourselves better than anyone else. Thus we either overestimate our strengths or underestimate our weakness. But the fact is that others in the body of Christ are often much better and more discerning when it comes to tendencies in our life than we are.

In saying this, I'm not trying to sow the seeds of self-doubt in your soul. I'm not wanting you to become filled with unwarranted fear and anxiety about yourself and life. I'm just trying to reinforce the biblical truth that *God never intended you and me to thrive and grow and increase in our enjoyment of God apart from the help and strength and support of other Christians.*

(2) Community is also an act of war against self-protection.

Here I have in mind the fear of being seen and known for who we truly are. The result is that we hide behind a façade that doesn't accurately reflect our true self. We are basically terrified of what others will think of us and what they might do if they really knew what we are like when we are alone. Living in community forces us to lay our lives before others and to authorize and empower them to speak the truth in love when we need it most.

Let me give you one example of what I have in mind. After years of interacting with married couples who are on the verge of divorce, I've discovered that the principal culprit is the passive, withdrawn, uninvolved man, the father who won't speak into the lives of his children and who shuts out his wife with the excuse that he's too tired after a long day of work. *But his primary motivation is self-protection.* He's terrified of being exposed as incompetent. He can't bear the thought of how painful it would be if others discovered that he simply doesn't know what to do to fix the mess his family is in. It's much easier to pretend the problem will go away with time or to let his wife handle it.

How does community wage war against his approach to life? By connecting that passive, fearful, pain-resistant man with other men who understand what he's feeling and who will challenge him, encourage him, pray for him, love him, and hold him accountable to do what has to be done.

(3) Community runs directly counter to the more general and natural tendency to be selfish.

We need community because we need to look outside ourselves and our own desires and serve others and give to others and sacrifice for others. Didn't Jesus himself say, "It is more blessed to give than to receive"? If so, then to experience that blessing we have to become givers, but you can't be a giver if you are not in relationship with someone who can receive!

When I've talked with both men and women about the importance of giving to others and pouring themselves out for and into others, they often ask: "What's in it for me?" And I always respond, "What's in it for you is the incomparable joy and satisfaction that comes from being *more* concerned about what's in it for them!"

(4) Yet another lethal enemy of our souls that community confronts and defeats is self-importance.

I have in mind the person who in effect says:

"I can't afford to waste my precious time with other people. I'm simply too valuable to the people at my job and in other responsibilities in life to spend so much time and energy pouring into people weaker than myself who most likely will never appreciate what sacrifices I would make for them."

"What I'm doing is simply too important and too valuable to postpone or set aside just so I can hang out with a lot of people who don't measure up to my accomplishments or my status in society."

“What I alone can accomplish is certainly of more value than anything these people can do. I just don’t think they have anything to offer of real value.”

Humbling yourself to live and serve in community with others is the antidote to that horribly lethal absorption with oneself.

(5) Community is the lethal enemy of individualism.

There are places on earth where this is not nearly the problem it is here in the west. What I’m talking about is that good old American “*it’s-just-Jesus-and-me*” mentality.

J. I. Packer describes “individualism” as “a proud unwillingness to accept a place in a team of peers and to be bound by group consensus. The gospel condemns individualism as disruptive of the life of the divine family, the new community of believers together that God is building in each place where individual Christians have emerged. Harmonious consensus, undergirded by brotherly love, is to be the goal for every church, and individualism is to be overcome by mutual deference” (“Evangelical Foundations for Spirituality,” *Serving the People of God: The Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer*, 2:266).

When you live outside community you are at the center of your world. When you live within community God is at the center.

In no way am I denying the reality of *individuality*. Yes, we are each unique individuals, shaped in God’s image with our own unique personality and gifts and opportunities. I must individually believe in Jesus. You can’t believe for me. There is no such thing as salvation by proxy. But at the same time my own individuality will never be nurtured and sustained and corrected when it goes astray if I give myself to rank individualism.

In one sense, when it comes to justification and the forgiveness of sins, you can legitimately say to God: “You’re all I need.” In another sense, when it comes to sanctification and growing up in Christ, you must say to others: “Help me. I need you. God doesn’t want me to do this alone.”

(6) Community is an act of war against the threat of doctrinal drift.

This is precisely what Paul is talking about in Ephesians 4:14-16, something we’ll look at it in more detail next week. Contrary to what you may think, you are not capable of maintaining a straight course toward the truth all by yourself. You need the corrective input of others. You need the insights of those whose spiritual gifts are different from and in some cases more greatly developed than your own. You need the eyes and awareness of others who see the doctrinal dangers and heresies and lies of the world, the flesh, and the Devil that want to deceive you.

In the absence of community you are doomed to drift theologically, or as Paul puts it, to be “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (v. 14).

(7) Community is an act of war against clericalism.

What is “clericalism”? It is the idea so prevalent in the church today that everything of importance when it comes to ministry and the exercise of spiritual gifts is done by the ordained pastor, the preacher, or in some churches, the priest. It’s the horribly unbiblical notion that the guy wearing the robe or the turned around collar or the fellow that attended seminary is somehow more anointed than you and is someone to whom you must always defer.

But in community, *everyone gets to play!* Spiritual gifts are for all believers. This is Paul’s point in Ephesians 4:11-12, again, something we’ll explore further next week.

(8) Community is absolutely essential to win the war against the deceitfulness of sin.

Here is what the author of Hebrews said: “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ [in order] that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13). You simply cannot see sin for what it is without the spiritual eyes of others in the body of Christ.

Sin is blinding, and few people are aware of how dangerous this can be. As Paul Tripp has said, “spiritual blindness is not like physical blindness. When you are physically blind, you know that you are blind, and you do things to compensate for this significant physical deficit. But spiritually blind people are not only blind; they are blind to their own blindness. They are blind, but they think that they see well” (*Dangerous Calling*, 72-73).

None of us is safe living separately from others and unknown by them. Contrary to what you may think, you don’t know yourself nearly as well as you think you do.

(9) Community is an act of war against secrecy regarding our sin and resultant poor health.

My guess is that this one sounds a little strange, so let me explain. Whenever we talk about praying for the sick, our attention typically turns to James 5:13ff. There we read that if anyone is sick, “let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” (v. 14).

But many people stop there. They mistakenly think that healing prayer is solely a matter of the Elders and the one person who is sick. But if you continue reading into v. 16 you come to this statement:

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

James isn’t talking about the sick person confessing their sins to the Elders but of *average, individual Christians confessing their sins to other average, individual Christians*. He doesn’t mean standing up in front of an entire congregation on a Sunday morning and confessing your sins and failures to complete strangers. He’s talking about the close fellowship and accountability that exists among those who’ve embraced the community of intimate knowledge one with another. That doesn’t mean you can’t confess your sins to a stranger. But I believe James has in mind the sort of confession that comes more readily when the people involved trust one another and love one another and have committed themselves one to another.

And the point is, you can’t do this if you have forsaken the intimacy of community. Clearly, James believed that one reason we don’t experience healing is unconfessed sin: whether it be of unforgiveness toward others, bitterness, lust, greed, envy, or whatever. ***If you want to be healed, find a community of trusted Christian friends and be open and vulnerable with them about your sins.***

(10) Finally, community is an act of war against Satan and all his schemes.

You do realize, I trust, who is behind the first nine of these threats to your spiritual welfare: Satan! One of the primary reasons why it is so difficult to find community and commit yourself to it is because there is a spiritual adversary working beneath and behind the scenes to create mistrust and doubt and fear and to supply you with all sorts of seemingly legitimate excuses why you can’t pull it off.

Satan’s strategy is simple: divide and conquer. Keep Christians separate from one another. Isolate them. Convince them they don’t need anyone else. Convince them of their own self-sufficiency and self-importance. Convince them that others can’t be trusted. Convince them that community is too costly, too time-consuming, too controlling, too manipulative. Do everything necessary to splinter the body of Christ into little more than singular units of human life that rarely intersect with each other, much less unite in covenant love and commitment to one another.

This is why community is an act of war!

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