

FELLOWSHIPS OF THE HEART

By John Eldredge

MATTER OF HEART

The family is... like a little kingdom, and, like most other little kingdoms, is generally in a state of something resembling anarchy. (G. K. Chesteron) Going to church with hundreds of other people to sit and hear a sermon doesn't ask much of you. It certainly will never expose you. That's why most folks prefer it. Because community will. It will reveal where you have yet to become holy, right at the very moment you are so keenly aware of how they have yet to become holy. It will bring you close and you will be seen and you will be known, and therein lies the power and therein lies the danger. Aren't there moments when all those little companies, in all those stories, hang by a thread? Galadriel says to Frodo, "Your quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little and it will fail, to the ruin of all. Yet hope remains while the Company is true."

Seriously now — how often have you seen this sort of intimate community work? It is rare. Because it is hard, and it is fiercely opposed. The Enemy hates this sort of thing; he knows how powerful it can be, for God and His Kingdom. For our hearts. It is devastating to him. Remember divide and conquer? Most churches survive because everyone keeps a polite distance from the others. We keep our meetings short, our conversations superficial. "So, Ted, how's everything going on the Stewardship Committee?" "Oh, just great, Nancy. We've got a big goal to reach

this year, but I think we'll be able to get that gym after all." No one is really being set free, but no one is really at odds with each other either. We have settled for safety in numbers — a comfortable, anonymous distance. An army that keeps meeting for briefings, but never breaks into platoons and goes to war. Living in the community is like camping together. For a month. In the desert. Without tents. All your stuff is scattered out there for everyone to see. C'mon — anybody can look captured for Christ an hour a week, from a distance, in his Sunday best. But your life is open to those you live in community with.

However, there are two things you now have that you didn't have before, and they enable this sort of fellowship to work. First, you know the heart is good. That is the missing key in most fellowships. Your heart is good, and the others' hearts are good. This makes it so much easier to trust and to forgive. Whatever may be happening in the moment, whatever the misunderstanding might be, I know that our hearts toward one another are good, and that we are for one another. Craig says something that stings. If I thought, You know, he meant that; he's trying to hurt me, it would pretty quickly trash the relationship. But I know that is not his heart toward me; that is not who he truly is. If I thought it was, why I'd turn tail and run.

Second, we know we are at war. The thought that says, Oh, brother, here goes Frank again. Why can't he just drop it about his mother? What is it with these people? They're not really my friends. I'm outta here. That's the Enemy. You must remember that the Enemy is always trying to pull everyone else to do to you what he is doing to you. As I said earlier, he creates a kind of force field, a gravitational

pull around you that draws others into the plot without their even knowing it. Gary walks into the room and, suddenly, I'm irritated at him. It's not me, and it's not him. I have to know that. His lifelong assault has been, "If you can't get it right, we don't want to be with you." It's a lie. It's the Enemy. I don't feel that way toward him really. But unless I live with this awareness, keep a watchful eye out for it, and resist, I'll get sucked into the pull, start making agreements with it, and there goes the friendship.

FIGHT FOR IT

Be kind, for everyone you know is facing a great battle. (Philo of Alexandria)

A true community is something you'll have to fight for. You'll have to fight to get one, and you'll have to fight to keep it afloat. But you fight for it as you bail out a life raft during a storm at sea. You want this thing to work. You need this thing to work. You can't ditch it and jump back on the cruise ship. This is the church; this is all you have. Without it, you'll go down. Or back to captivity. This is the reason those small house fellowships thrive in other countries: they need each other. There are no other options.

Suddenly, all those one another's in Scripture make sense. Love one another. Bear one another's burdens. Forgive one another. Acts of kindness become deeply meaningful because we know we are at war. Knowing full well that we all are facing battles of our own, we give one another the benefit of the doubt. Leigh isn't intentionally being distant from me — she's probably under an assault. That's why you must know each other's stories, know how to "read" each

other. A word of encouragement can heal a wound; a choice to forgive can destroy a stronghold. You never knew your simple acts were so weighty. It's what we've come to call "lifestyle warfare."

God is calling together little communities of the heart, to fight for one another and for the hearts of those who have not yet been set free. That camaraderie, that intimacy, that incredible impact by a few stouthearted souls — that is available. It is the Christian life as Jesus gave it to us. It is completely normal.

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