

"Dancing in No Man's Land will equip and enable you to leave your bunker and engage with others in peaceful dialogue. There is a land between the bunkers that only a few find. Brian Jennings will show you the way."

KYLE IDLEMAN, pastor and author, *Not a Fan* and *Grace Is Greater*

DANCING IN NO MAN'S LAND

MOVING WITH PEACE AND TRUTH
IN A HOSTILE WORLD



BRIAN JENNINGS

I've given my life to building bridges in the name of Jesus. *Dancing in No Man's Land* will become a valuable tool for those laboring with me. If you care about reconciliation, truth, and peace, this book is for you. Brian Jennings digs underneath the layers of hostility in our world and shows us how to emerge in the light. Our families, communities, and country will be radically changed when we begin living the principles from this book. I pray the change will begin with you.

DR. JOHN M. PERKINS, cofounder of Christian Community Development Association (CCDA); founder and president emeritus of the John & Vera Mae Perkins Foundation; cofounder of Christian Community Health Fellowship (CCHF); author of *Let Justice Roll Down*

I have a friend with great courage. Rather than choosing to battle and scheme from the protection of a fortified bunker, Brian Jennings has elected to venture out and offer peace. Do you long to offer hope to those outside your hunkered-down beliefs? Well, *Dancing in No Man's Land* will equip and enable you to leave your bunker and engage with others in peaceful dialogue. There is a land between the bunkers that only a few find. Brian Jennings will show you the way.

KYLE IDLEMAN, pastor; author of *Not a Fan* and *Grace Is Greater*

In these times, when it seems like we're surrounded by conversations waiting to go wrong, I'm grateful for Brian's call back to the way of Jesus. Let's step forward into our relationships with thoughtfulness and wisdom, understanding that truth and grace work best when offered together.

AUBREY SAMPSON, speaker; church planter; author of *Overcomer: Breaking Down the Walls of Shame and Rebuilding Your Soul*

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls us to be "peacemakers," not "peacekeepers." There's an important and profound difference between those two. Peacekeepers hunker down in the bunker, prepared to deal with any conflict that may stumble upon them, but peacemakers get out of the bunker, venture into no man's land, and do the hard work of "making" peace. In this well-written, engaging, and practical book,

Brian Jennings doesn't just provide the motivation to get out of our bunkers and point toward a safe path through no man's land—he also reveals the steps necessary to ultimately dance in the midst of our journey toward a more peaceful world.

ARRON CHAMBERS, pastor; author of *Eats with Sinners: Loving like Jesus* and *Devoted*

Brian writes with clarity, passion, and simplicity about issues that are critical to anyone who longs to find a faithful way to engage in a divisive culture. His engagement with Scripture as well as culturally significant moments makes this a helpful and challenging read. His pastoral passion is clear and compelling throughout the work—a strong, constructive read!

CASEY TYGRETT, author of *Becoming Curious: A Spiritual Practice of Asking Questions*

For anyone wanting discipleship toward truth and peace, Jennings offers a desperately needed guide to recognize the idols of “bunker living” and learn to leave them behind. Of course, entering no man's land won't be easy or painless. But, beloved church, please listen to this trustworthy guide. Let's navigate the complications of this age with Jesus' own prayer in sight: unity.

CATHERINE MCNIEL, author of *Long Days of Small Things: Motherhood as a Spiritual Discipline*

Bunkers feel safe and comfortable. In a complex world, living in a bunker seems reasonable. Brian Jennings, however, reveals to us how our bunkers, silos, and self-segregation away from those who think and live differently from us are actually a form of war rather than peacemaking. When we think we're being protective, we are actually being aggressive in ways that distract from the gospel of Jesus. But more than that, Brian shows us paths to peace and freedom.

SEAN PALMER, author of *Unarmed Empire: In Search of Beloved Community*; teaching pastor at Ecclesia Houston; cohost of *Not So Black and White* (podcast)

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BRIAN JENNINGS

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INTRODUCTION

Whoever loves a quarrel loves sin; whoever builds a high gate invites destruction.

PROVERBS 17:19

IT WAS THE FALL OF 1914.

This war was different from those that had come before. The invention of the machine gun, as well as other high-powered weapons, meant that armies could no longer charge their foes without suffering mass casualties. And so, as Allied forces beat back the German army, the Germans dug in, literally. The earth protected them, allowing them to hold their ground.

The Allied forces realized they couldn't advance, so they dug in too.

What began with small foxholes, bunkers, and ditches developed into thirty-five thousand miles of trenches that crisscrossed war-torn Europe. Offering protection from enemy fire, these trenches stalemated many battles, sometimes for years. The longer the armies stayed, the deeper, longer, and more secure their entrenchments grew.

Knowing the enemy bunker lay as close as fifty yards away, soldiers learned to lie low in the trench. Leaving their bunker or peeking over the top could well be their last move. Barbed wire stretched across the tops of bunkers and through the land between—no man's land. Snipers found vantage points from which they could shoot at soldiers daring to move out of their hole. Advancement was almost impossible.

Bunkers grew in sophistication, but most of their conditions were detestable. Some soldiers drowned in the mud. Some died of disease. Some lost feet due to trench foot. Many died from bullets, shells, or

poison gas. All suffered from trying to figure out what to do with sewage, dead bodies, flies, and rats.

Still, if you were in World War I, hunkering down in a bunker, trench, or foxhole might give you the best chance of survival. You could lob grenades and stick your gun over the top while keeping your head low. The problem is that if someone with a better view wasn't giving you an idea of what was going on, you couldn't leave your bunker until the other side either surrendered or died. Even then, you may have felt safer staying right where you were.

With each side holed up, refusing to talk and engaging only through violence, the bunkers of war were void of peacemaking. The bunkers of life are no different.

Has a disagreement with a friend escalated to the point where you now treat them as a foe? Have you been in a conversation where no one is listening? Have you watched family members choose sides in a feud? Are you in a war of differing opinions, with wounds on all sides and no hope in sight?

Or perhaps a political ideology has lured you into lining up dissenters in your crosshairs. When a news story breaks, you immediately declare an alliance and an enemy. Do you only listen to those who agree with you and arm you for battle? Are you tired of shooting and being shot during every election?

In our culture, we hunker down in our opinions and beliefs, poking our heads up only to lob angry words at the opposing side. If someone disagrees with us on an issue, we are quick to label them "enemy," lash out, and attack. We launch our assault from a bunker filled with like-minded thinkers. Advancement is almost impossible. And we can't know what is actually going on because our heads are below the dirt.

We see people fighting from their bunkers, hiding in their bunkers. Sometimes we even see people leaving their bunkers only to join another, turning their weapons on their former allies.

Oh, and if you dare to leave your bunker to talk to the other side, you'll get shot from both sides.

This mind-set is killing us. It's killing friendships and families.

Killing civility and discourse. Killing businesses and organizations. Killing churches and charities. Killing respect and influence.

There has to be another way. A better way. A land beyond the bunkers.

One of the great challenges of our day is to learn how to pursue truth and peace—at the same time. Somehow, Jesus did it, as have a few others. But it's not our normal. We feel an incessant pressure to choose either truth or peace, as if the two can't be trusted to sit next to each other without drawing blood.

Neither truth nor peace can create wholeness without the other. A husband's complaints against his wife may be true. A wife's complaints against her husband may be true. If they only care about these truths without also seeking peace, their relationship is doomed. Truth won't even matter anymore. It becomes distorted, manipulated, and angry from a bunker.

But simply pursuing peace, setting truth aside, is its own kind of bunker. Devaluing truth never leads to actual peace. It only causes chaos. Those who demand complete tolerance (accepting every opinion from every person) seem to only be tolerant of those with whom they agree. They label their enemies as "intolerant." But to be intolerant of intolerant people is itself . . . intolerant.

And then there are times, when a controversial topic makes headlines, that many of us kick both truth and peace to the curb. Neither of those, after all, serves our agenda when we're angry. But rejecting them altogether is the worst thing we can do.

To find the better way, we must seek truth, and we must also seek peace. We must seek them both at the same time.

If we cannot learn to live in truth away from the bunkers, if we cannot learn to set aside our need to be right and learn to love others even when we disagree—how will our families, schools, businesses, neighborhoods, and churches heal? What will become of our world? Who will make peace? Who will bring clarity? Who will take the risk? Who will change the world?

If you long for things to be different, I pray God will graciously use

the words on these pages to encourage you: You are not alone. People all over this planet share your longings for a different way, a different world. The hostility they see all around sickens them. They long for healing and wholeness. But our longings won't bloom into reality without radically altered hearts, minds, and souls.

I'm asking you to reject the notion that the path of truth forks away from the path of peace. Refuse to be enticed away from either. There's a land between the bunkers. Only a few find it. They've been misunderstood and accused of everything under the sun. People in the bunkers hated them when they left. The wanderers of the less-traveled land die every day, yet if you catch a glimpse of them beyond the barbed wire and smoke, you'll see the most peculiar thing—they are dancing. In that place where truth and peace dwell, there is joy. You can dance too in that frightful, wonderful land between, that place called no man's land.

In this book, we're going to take a journey together into dangerous healing, out of our bunkers and into no man's land. Has hostility seeped into your own life? Have you chosen sides? Identifying your true coordinates will prepare you to map out a new route. World change starts with self-examination.

Part 2 aims to inspire and equip you to choose a new way. You'll stuff your gear bag with timeless principles and stories of hope. You'll learn from those who changed their world, avoiding bunkers at every turn. Clear minds and gentle words really do prevail.

In part 3, we'll lock arms, climb, crawl, and change. I'll share how I'm trying to live in no man's land and offer you hope for navigating some of life's most volatile issues.

While the principles in this book can be applied by anyone, our hope rests in the Lord. History reveals that mere human efforts fall apart in the end. I pray God's hand will act in you and through you more magnificently than is humanly possible.

Be warned, the struggle for peacemaking and clear thinking is hard, grueling work. Mud may swallow your ankles with every step. Some will misunderstand you. Others will line you up in their crosshairs.

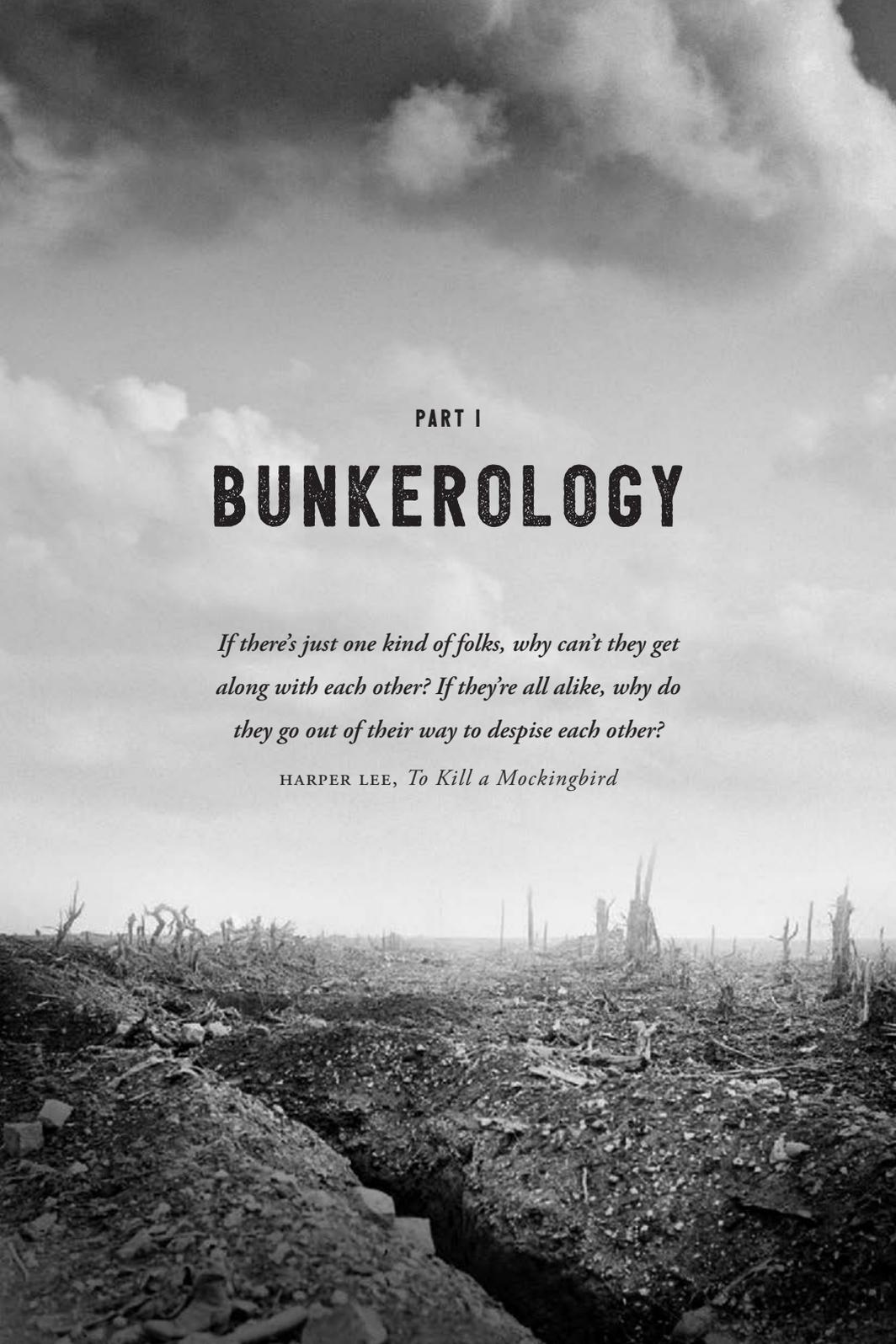
Thankfully, you have the examples of brave men and women to

INTRODUCTION

follow, and you have the opportunity to learn from the source of all wisdom. Lean into this. Equip yourself to be a gentle and clear voice of healing in your world.

We need you to do this.

For the love of God, get out of your bunker.



PART I

BUNKEROLOGY

If there's just one kind of folks, why can't they get along with each other? If they're all alike, why do they go out of their way to despise each other?

HARPER LEE, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

CHAPTER 1

ROOTS



Why We Step into Bunkers

Bunker mentality: An attitude of extreme defensiveness and self-justification based on an often exaggerated sense of being under persistent attack from others.¹

FEW THINGS MAKE ME HAPPIER than a cup of coffee and free parking on a cold day in downtown Chicago. That's why I am so familiar with Division Street, where you can find a shopping center that has both. (I'd tell you where, but I can't have you taking my secret spot.)

For the past eleven years I've led a Chicago trip for high-school students, where they learn from and work alongside two of my favorite ministries in the world: First Christian Church and By The Hand Club for Kids.² I've also traveled to Chicago to play, see friends, and attend meetings. There's a lot to love about the city—a lot of beauty. But there is a lot that should concern us too.

When Chicago announced mass school closings in 2013, Manierre Elementary families worried. The plan called for Manierre students to attend Jenner Elementary. It's only a short walk, but the change required them to cross Division Street. Manierre kids aren't supposed to cross Division. That's the rule on the street, and gangs enforce it.³

One of our partner ministries buses or walks children home, taking the appropriate routes to ensure their safety. The gang members seldom care if a kid is involved in a rival gang or not. They just know someone's walking across the street from a neighborhood that plays host to rival gangs. Animosity runs deep, spanning generations. Sadly, this is reality for many children.

What lies at the root of the bunkers we dig into? While we may not face the stark division between gangs, we all face division in our everyday lives. At work, when we're asked to side with a coworker or a boss. In politics, when our choice of candidate supposedly defines so much about who we are. In relationships, when longstanding wounds flare up and people decide who they most believe.

Bunkers emerge in many ways, but there are three common roots: fear, pride, and the cycle of anger.

Fear pushes us deeper into our bunkers and keeps us there, telling us that no good will come of not holding our ground. On Division Street, fear isolates neighbors who only live a block apart. Isolation feeds their paranoia. Any outsider is an imminent threat.

Fear's close cousin is pride—the belief that we know more and better and therefore have the right to our bunker. Pride keeps us in our bunker because we can't imagine a good reason to leave. Division Street won't see peace until people are willing to swallow their pride. Humility can feel as if we're betraying the people in our bunker and the people we once were (or currently are).

As pride and fear work together, we become more entrenched, and our feuds escalate into an unending cycle. Some people are your enemies just because that's how it's always been. You could find some rivals on Division Street who'd say the same thing you'd hear from a family member: "I don't even know what we were arguing about." It's important that we understand the roots of the bunker mentality before we do anything else, because only by yanking out the roots will we be able to move forward in healthy and productive ways.

On Division Street, gang members have drawn lines. They've tied their loyalty to those in their gang. They aren't interested in open-minded

dialogue but are instead obsessed with power and protection. They personify bunker dwellers.

But if we let fear, pride, and anger control us, so do we.

FEAR

Fear can paralyze.

I discovered this years ago, when I went with a group of friends to play paintball. The owner of the place was a skinny, scraggly-haired guy who looked like Shaggy from the old Scooby-Doo cartoons. “Shaggy” explained the game to us, delighting in telling us all the ways we could be injured. Then he let us shoot some practice rounds.

The speed of the small paint-filled balls both excited and terrified us. We realized this game was going to hurt a lot worse than a simple game of tag. One of my friends, who wore a mesh tank top that day, decided to stop teasing me for wearing so many layers.

The owner divided us into teams, sent us to opposite sides, and told us our objective: to shoot everyone on the other team. When he yelled “Go!” all cocky banter subsided. Each team wanted to win, but we also wanted to avoid pain.

When I found myself pinned down by enemy fire, paintballs whizzing by my head, I was afraid to move from my little ditch behind a tree. But surrendering seemed too unmanly. I finally worked up the nerve to leap out for a brave assault.

Agony quickly replaced my bravado. I was left with multiple welts as reminders of my foolishness.

Even in a silly game like paintball, we can be overpowered by fear. And in life, we find ourselves facing many things a lot more painful—and a lot more fear-inducing—than paintballs.

Fear can paralyze, keeping us from moving forward. A friend of mine told me she could never give her heart away. She wanted a happy marriage, but past pain crippled her willingness to be vulnerable. She spent her childhood trying to fix her bleeding heart. Memories of abandonment, neglect, and abuse haunted her. Eventually, instead of trying to fix her heart, she attempted to protect it by never giving it away.

When we're overcome with fear, bunkers feel safe. We're afraid engaging will make things worse. We can't handle feeling so vulnerable. Fear pushes us to dig in deeper, to hide away, to avoid the scary space outside our bunker.

To be fair, our fear is not without merit. Have you ever felt defeated after trying to bring peace to a warring marriage? Have you ever noticed what a rarity it is for someone to change their political views? Opinions abound, but why does the shouting leave minds unchanged? Fear exhausts us, drains our motivation, and pins us down. Only once we recognize how fear is controlling us can we have any hope of moving out of our bunker.

In the case of my hurting friend, fear drove out love. Our hearts only have room for one or the other. If it's true that "there is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18), we can also assume that fear can cast out love. Are your roots growing in fear or love?

PRIDE

In many ways, pride addresses what fear causes. Fear makes us feel out of control and powerless. Pride tricks us into believing we have control and all the power. Pride keeps us in our bunker just as much as fear does, keeping us right where we are out of the belief that no one else is as right as we are.

When the great King Solomon died, his son Rehoboam was handed the crown. The people begged him to lighten the oppressive, crushing workload forced upon them by his father.⁴

King Rehoboam told them he would consider their request and give them an answer in three days. A group of wise, experienced advisers said, "If you will be kind to these people and please them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants" (2 Chronicles 10:7). But his group of foolish buddies advised, "Now tell them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's waist. My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions'" (2 Chronicles 10:10-11).

Rehoboam's pride clouded his judgment. He listened to his foolish friends, choosing to rule as a tyrant bully. He was the king, thinking he deserved to do whatever he wanted.

The Israelites felt completely abandoned. The country was no longer their country. As for Rehoboam, his life was soon in peril. He escaped the self-inflicted rebellion, but his Chief of Forced Labor was not so lucky. (You know you're a bad leader when you have a Chief of Forced Labor.) The people stoned that man to death. He was simply the ugly face of the king's pride—pride that led to his demise and, in some ways, the demise of the nation.

Romans 12:16 says, "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight" (ESV). Hebrews 7:26 uses a variation of the word translated "haughty" to describe Jesus' exaltation above the heavens. The word aptly describes him but ought never to describe us. A haughty person acts as if they deserve the exaltation. They assume they are high above the rest.

Haughty people love their bunkers so much that they can't possibly imagine ever being wrong. The progression may go like this:

1. I think I am right.
2. I know I am right.
3. Because I am right, they are wrong.
4. Because I must stand for what's right, I must attack those who are wrong.
5. Because I am right, I'm better than them.

You may get to step 1 (thinking you are right) quickly, and there's nothing wrong with that. You can even have a civil and productive discussion at step 3 (believing you are right and the other is wrong). But step 4 (attacking the person with whom you disagree) drops you straight into a bunker. It's why you need great discernment about ever moving past step 1.

Sometimes you'll need to drop all opinions and just learn. Other times, you should hold a loose opinion or strong conviction. It depends on the subject. You can do all of those things well in the first three steps.

But once you move to step 4 or 5, you harm the relationship. It's rare for a person to work their way out of their bunker and back up the progression. Once you are right and better than me, and once I'm wounded from your attacks, our relationship plummets into deep trouble. Pride will hamper any honest attempts toward truth or peace.

DEFENSE TO OFFENSE

Fear and pride work in a destructive cycle, making us defensive of our position, closed to considering any ideas from opposing bunkers. And in our defensiveness, we end up navigating serious life issues as if we were rooting for college football teams.

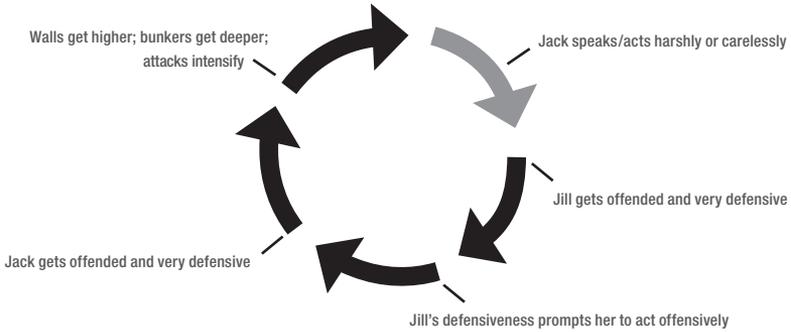
When I moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1998, I quickly learned that Tulsa is made up of three types of people: Oklahoma Sooner fans, Oklahoma State Cowboy fans, and people who are sick of hearing about both of them. (Few fall into this third category.)

People here are crazy about college sports, especially college football. And while there's some good-natured ribbing, there's some genuine hatred, too. Both colleges have had their fair share of scandals, dishonest coaches, and law-breaking players. Every time a distasteful story hits the news, some fans of the other school act as though Santa has landed on the roof. They laugh and mock. They grow giddy with excitement. But the truth is, they don't need scandals and other failures to propel the hostility forward. The simple division of sports loyalties can create an unhealthy anger and foster dehumanization of the other side.

Unfortunately, we can increasingly see this scenario playing out in a host of other contexts. I once officiated a wedding in which I was warned about how much the two families disliked each other. The ushers were told to be careful to seat people on their designated sides of the chapel. I asked the groom why the two families had such animosity. He couldn't remember. It wasn't anything big. A small disagreement had spiraled out of control.

Proverbs 18:19 says, "A brother wronged is more unyielding than a fortified city; disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel." From

boardrooms to living rooms, this verse is played out right in front of us every day. As we recoil from fear and cling to our pride, our words become reactionary and careless. One harsh word can spiral us into a never-ending feud:



When feuds escalate, the roots of our bunker mentality grow into a poisonous tree, and everyone loses. Wounded people tend to wound people. Hurt people hurt people. The offended become the offenders. And when a war breaks out, people choose sides.

We're all too familiar with this in our culture. It's been happening for a while, but I found myself first really bowled over by it in 2012.

President Obama's signature piece of legislation during his first term in office was the Affordable Care Act (often called Obamacare). Debates about the government's role in health-care issues quickly escalated across the country. Heated arguments erupted everywhere: the halls of Congress, TV and radio talk shows, Internet blogs, and many personal conversations.

People clambered to their bunkers.

The health-care issue became dominated by two extreme camps. Some clambered to a bunker that accused, "If you support this bill, you hate our country." Others shot back from an opposing bunker, "If you do not support this bill, you hate the poor." People said these things in many different ways, but the message was clear: "You are either with me or against me."

Do you see how this language forced people into separate camps? There was no tolerance for those unwilling to declare an enemy, to pick sides. Pride and fear mingled, putting people into bunkers—pride in

one's own position being absolutely right and fear of the implications of the other position—and the cycle of anger around health care continues even as I write this book years later. *Sigh*.

I'm not advocating we think unclearly or uncritically about important issues. Just the opposite. Health care and our government's role in such things deserve robust discussion and debate. I'm just suggesting we learn to do so without lobbing a grenade that will blast destruction in every direction. Extreme statements don't help anyone think clearly about an issue. They only divide people and cloud clarity.

If you find yourself in a bunker, mad and ready to attack, you need to ask God to examine your roots. You probably won't spot the problems on your own—few of us can. Each of us should turn our ears to wise people and the quiet whispers of God. Fear, pride, and violent cycles poison roots. The leaves on the plant may look green for a while, but not for long. The toxins in the roots will soon spread, and the whole plant will wither.

Tim Keller taught me to look for the “sin beneath the sin.”⁵ It's easy to notice when someone is arrested for abusing his wife, but we'll have to look closer to find what's really wrong. Beneath the eye-catching sin is a “sin beneath the sin” (like unresolved anger). It's this “sin beneath the sin” that poisons roots, and it's not something we can fix. Only God heals hearts. Only God heals roots. Only he has the power to dig deep enough to repair our spiritual brokenness. It's his specialty.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Is fear driving out love in your life? From where does this fear come?
2. How are you tempted to be prideful? What helps you overcome that pride?
3. What cycles of hate or violence do you see in your world?
4. Is there a “sin beneath the sin” in your life that needs to be addressed?
5. Whom can you ask to help you grow healthier roots?