

ANGER AND THE CHRISTIAN

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One cannot read the front page of a newspaper today without coming face to face with the destructive power of anger. Domestic violence, road rage, and murders of passion are really but the ugly tip of an immense iceberg of bitterness, strife, violence, and general misery in our world. In the summer heat of Texas, incidents of domestic violence and the divorce rate rise significantly, but the temperature is only an accelerant, not a cause of the burning fire in the souls of men. A very thin layer of civility covers this anger like the earth covers the coal vein in Centralia, Pennsylvania which has been burning beneath the ground for over 40 years, and may continue to burn well beyond our lifetimes. It does not take much in our present spiritual atmosphere to incite rage, and it is happening with increasing frequency and unpredictability. An honest mistake on the freeway can result in frightening and dangerous hostile action by another driver. A controversial call by an umpire or referee can result in a violent episode, even by parents in a little kids' game. A growing number of children are cringing in fear of angry peers and adults, even in "sanctuary" of their homes . . . and they are becoming angry themselves as a result. Teachers are experiencing not only more frequent unpredictable and dangerous rage in their students, but it happens at increasingly younger ages.

We measure the damage caused by natural disasters through death counts, injuries, and financial loss, but who can possibly measure the damage caused by anger? The costs of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are only a very tiny portion of the consequences of anger. How many wars, gangs, deaths, broken marriages, psychologically wounded children, and a host of other social maladies have resulted from unchecked anger? We are trying to control the raging flood of anger in our country by "anger management seminars," but is this merely a stop-gap measure? I suppose time will tell whether we will be able to build social barriers high enough to contain the rising flood in the world.

We Christians need to recognize that we are not immune from the temptation of anger, and the danger and destruction it causes in our lives and our relationships. Christians struggle with the same flesh that dominates the world, and that flesh is characterized by St. Paul in Galatians 5:19 ff. Paul's list of the works of the flesh include "enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, and envy." These vices are closely related, and anger permeates all of them. The problem is that Christians often camouflage their anger through pious justifications, such as the concept of "righteous indignation." It is much too easy for us to categorize the anger of others as sinful, but our own as "righteous." Furthermore, we imagine that if we have been treated badly or unjustly we have a right to be angry. (Do we really think unbelievers or our enemies are angry for no reason? Who DOESN'T claim a just cause for his anger?) Beware! The sinful heart is deceitful above all things. Who can know it? (Jer 17:9).

Let's consider what destruction anger causes to the soul of the angry person and to others:

1. Anger takes control of the will and yields the reins to Satan.

Anger, like greed and lust, never remains in a subservient position for long. If it is not confronted and resisted it will quickly take control of the life and yield the reins to the angriest being in the universe, Satan. God earnestly warned Cain about this when he became angry with his brother Abel. "The Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it'" (Gen 4:6-7). Instead of shutting the door of his heart against his anger, Cain allowed it to rule over him and murdered his brother, Abel. St. John reflects upon this sin and says that Cain was "of the evil one." Those who allow anger to rule over their hearts and do not daily contend with it and repent of it, are allowing the evil spirit to control their behavior.

2. Anger blinds us to reality by distorting our perceptions.

Like drunkenness, anger distorts our view of reality and leads to foolishness. The wise Solomon saw this danger, writing "He who is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly" (Prov 14:29). It is important to teach new drivers that emotional distress can be as dangerous as drunk driving because it distorts judgment. I clearly instructed my own children that they were never to get behind the wheel when emotionally distressed, and that I would drive to pick them up if necessary. When one of my daughter's best friends was killed in one car accident after leaving his home in raging anger, I think she understood the lesson. Anger, especially when nursed, can severely distort our perceptions about other people. It is very difficult to remain even remotely objective about a person with whom you are angry. You begin to see only the faults and shortcomings and become blind to any and all virtues manifested. If anger is indulged for long, the faults become exaggerated, often into monstrous proportions. Eventually, every motive of the target is assumed to be evil and he becomes absolutely demonized. To the angry person this caricature is reality, and those who don't share the judgment are considered naïve. Anger also distorts our perceptions about self. The longer we nurse anger the easier it is to justify to self. Instead of repenting of it, we take pride in it or wallow in self pity.

3. Anger spills over to other relationships.

It is very difficult, even impossible to contain anger to predefined boundaries. Angry people are usually very difficult to be around even if their anger is focused on someone else. We all know that anger is not always expressed against the person who has caused it. Abused spouses and children are almost always the victims of transferred anger. I once had a relative who was engaged to young man with a violent temper. She was confident that this angry young man would never harm her because his anger was focused elsewhere. You know what I counseled, but she had to discover the truth the hard way. Anger is a fire that does always stay in the pit.

4. Anger destroys.

The inspired writer, James, put it this way, “The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” Angry people are often deceived into thinking that their anger is motivating and empowering them to serve God. That’s what the angry Pharisees thought, but their “righteous anger” led them to commit the worst crime of history in the name of religion. Anger is a negative force. It does not build, it demolishes. It does not heal, it wounds. It does not comfort, it antagonizes. It does not strengthen bonds, it sows strife. It destroys other people. It destroys relationships. Again, Solomon warns “Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming” (Prov 27:4). Ultimately, angry destroys even the self. It shrivels the soul and destroys the body. Anger is not a healthy thing physically or spiritually.

5. Anger feeds on itself and grows, even without further provocation.

Because anger distorts reality it becomes self generating. We probably have all experienced this in our own thought lives. The original “sin” which prompted anger is often forgotten in the demonization process. The monster we have created in our minds quickly replaces the flawed creature against whom our anger was first stirred. As the monster grows, so does our anger, all out of proportion to reality.

6. Anger is contagious.

Solomon writes, “A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention” (Prov 15:18). Angry people like Hitler do not only capitalize on the anger of others, but are capable of creating it. Angry people beget angry people just as one burning coal starts another and another. “As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.” “A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression” (Prov 29:22). It is amazing how many people can be caught up in anger who don’t even know for sure why they themselves are angry. The anger of another has simply infected them. This is often called “mob mentality.” For that reason the Bible warns us to avoid chronically angry people: “Make no friendship with a man given to anger” (Prov 22:24-25). Removal of the angry person usually solves the problem. Solomon writes, “Cast out the scorner and contention will cease.” Why? Because his anger is contagious and continues to generate strife

It should be no surprise then that God specifically identifies anger as a sin to be resisted and cast out of the body of Christ. St. Paul writes:

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Eph 4:30-32).

Again, Paul writes in Galatians:

Now the works of the flesh are evident Enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envyand things like these . I warn you as I warned you before that those who do these things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control ... (Gal 5:19-23)

Does this mean that anger will never surface in the Christian church? Of course not! EVERY sin surfaces in the church because of the flesh which continually rises in our members. But when it rises in our own hearts, or in our community, we are to call it what it is – SIN, and deal with it as such. Sin is not to be tolerated, coddled or ignored, but squarely faced, named, rebuked and corrected.

No sin, of course, can be overcome outside of Jesus Christ. He says “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). He Himself has faced and conquered the temptation to sinful anger. In fact He resisted far more temptation than have we. “He was tempted in all points like we are, YET WITHOUT SIN” (Heb 4:15). No one has ever suffered more injustice than the holy Jesus. St. Peter writes, “He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:22-23). This is very good news because His perfect obedience in this regard has been credited to us. St. Paul writes, “by the obedience of One the many are justified” (Rom 5:19). The same Jesus who condemns our anger by the law (Mt 5:22) refrained from anger that we might have a righteousness in which to stand before the throne of God.

Does that mean we can get as angry as we want for as long as we want? Obviously not. “How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Rom 6:2) Buried with Christ we need to rise up with Him into newness of life. That means we will no longer indulge in anger, but “put it away” from us, and “crucify it” with Christ. In Christ I do not have a *right* to be angry, but the freedom to return good for evil, to pray for those who insult me, to turn the other cheek, and to forgive those who sin against me.”(Mt 5:38-42; Eph 4:32). Dear Christians, do not let anger reign in your members, for you are not under the law but under Christ.

The service of forgiveness is rendered by one to the others daily. It occurs, without words, in the intercessions for one another. And every member of the fellowship, who does not grow weary in this ministry, can depend upon it that this service is also being rendered him by the brethren. He who is bearing others knows that he himself is being borne, and only in this strength can he go on bearing. --Dietrich Bonhoeffer