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Transforming Anger

mike Lueken

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This dissertation entitled

TRANSFORMING ANGER

Written by

MIKE LUEKEN

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Gary Black

Kurt Fredrickson

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TRANSFORMING ANGER

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BY

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ABSTRACT

Transforming Anger
Mike Lueken
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
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This study explores the spiritual transformation of anger as a starting point for personal and ecclesiastical renewal and reconciliation. Dr. Dallas Willard writes, “To cut the root of anger is to wither the tree of human evil.” This is an extraordinary claim which suggests anger is a primary human sin, and a catalyst for many other sins and social problems. The implications of anger reach deep into one’s personal life and relationships and threaten the unity and witness of the Church. The transcendent problem of anger, according to Willard, is why Jesus addresses it before lust, divorce, retaliation, and loving enemies in the Sermon on the Mount. The transformation of anger has profound implications for individuals, relationships, the Church, and the culture.

The first section of this thesis examines the epidemic of anger in the culture and in the Church. Getting one’s way, and what one wants, is considered an inalienable right in today’s culture. Defensiveness, unforgiveness, road rage, political antagonism, and old-fashioned fist fights are manifestations of the growing problem of anger. Faith in God, devotion to Jesus, and participation in a local church, often make little difference in how anger is used to advance personal agendas. The Church has a prime opportunity to pursue its missional calling through the ministry of reconciliation with a commitment to gentleness and civility. The Church, however, is too often defined by the opponents it angrily fights.

The second section of this thesis explores various perspectives on anger including those of philosophers, psychologists, and theologians. In addition, a practical theology of anger is developed based on various biblical narratives and teachings. Jesus’ unique role in God’s revelation provides the ultimate means for evaluating anger. Given the volatility of the current culture, the defense of “righteous anger” is challenged throughout this dissertation.

The last section of this thesis explores various individual and communal disciplines and practices for transforming anger. Authentic change requires intentional effort in cooperation with the work of God’s Spirit. The hope in this final section is to provide realistic means to personally and ecclesiastically transform anger into gentleness and grace.

Content Reader: Gary Black Jr., PhD.

Words: 349
To my wife, Julie, who lovingly encourages my curiosity to learn, graciously endures my frustrations along the way, and joyfully reminds me of what ultimately matters in life.
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PART ONE

AN EPIDEMIC OF ANGER
INTRODUCTION

Dallas Willard writes, “In his Discourse on the Hillside Jesus treats hostility at greater length than any of the other matters he takes up. This is certainly because it is most fundamental. If you pull contempt and unrestrained anger out of human life, you have thereby rid it of by far the greater part of wrong acts that actually get carried out.”¹ This is an extraordinary claim with profound implications for human life and for the ministry of the Church, particularly in light of the pervasive tension and volatility of the current times. Countless New Testament scholars have dissected Jesus’ masterful sermon to determine its original order, arrangement, and meaning. In the process, the profundity of his teaching has been meticulously deconstructed. Often, missing among the possible interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount, is the intriguing possibility Willard proposes. Jesus delivered a brilliant and life-changing teaching to a group of desperate and hungry people.² He set forth a vision of a new and better way to live under God’s present reign and rule. Being an effective communicator, he began with foundational topics. Jesus knew anger is the antecedent of various personal, relational, and social problems. If anger is transformed, human life will be more abundant and full (Jn 10:10), and the Christian community will more effectively salt the earth and illumine the world (Mt 5:13-14).³


² Ibid., 132-133.

³ Throughout the remainder of this paper, “the Christian community” will be used as a reference for both individual Christians and the institution of the Church. For further explanation of the phrase “the Church,” see page four of this thesis.
Individuals, relationships, churches, societies, and indeed humanity as a whole, will radically improve. As Willard states, “To cut the root of anger is to wither the tree of human evil.”\(^4\) This compelling vision, and various ideas and practices to transform anger, are the focus of this thesis.

**Ministry Context**

Oak Hills Church (OHC) is located in Folsom, California. I have served the church for twenty-three years: the first four years as an associate pastor, and then fifteen years as a co-pastor. In 2015 I became the sole senior pastor of OHC. Folsom is a middle-to-upper class Northern California suburb of approximately 70,000 people. OHC cautiously identifies as an evangelical church. This paper relies on George Barna’s definition of evangelical:

Evangelicals have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and believe that, when they die, they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. Their faith is very important in their life today; believing they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians; believing that Satan exists; believing that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; asserting that the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches; believing that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works; and describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today. Being classified as an evangelical is not dependent upon church attendance or the denominational affiliation of the church attended.\(^5\)

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OHC is affiliated with the North American Baptist conference of churches (NABC).\(^6\)

Generally, the theology and practice of OHC is more progressive than mainstream American Evangelicalism and the NABC. Simply stated, the culture of OHC blends traditional and conservative evangelical theology with an openness to new expressions of God’s love and grace in a post-Christian cultural context.

The setting of OHC in a wealthier suburban setting, along with the evangelical roots of OHC, provide an important context for understanding the scope of this thesis. In this thesis, references to “the Church” are not intended to include the entire range and scope of the Christian Church across the spectrums of ethnicity, denomination, socio-economics, tradition, or geographic location. This thesis centers on an understanding of “the Church” that is limited to those congregations, Christians, and Christian organizations of which OHC is representative. At a minimum, this means “the Church” is a reference to American, Protestant, predominately White, evangelical, suburban congregations and organizations doing ministry in an increasingly post-Christian setting.

Throughout its thirty-four-year history, OHC has demonstrated a willingness to explore new frontiers. For example, in 1995, the church leadership prayed and studied about the role of women in church leadership. Ever since, qualified women are able to serve on the elder board, preach, teach, and fulfill pastoral roles. In the summer of 2000, OHC began transitioning away from a seeker-targeted model of ministry and prioritized

\(^6\) See https://nabconference.org/us/ for more information.
individual and communal spiritual formation in Christlikeness. This transition took about nine years and completely reshaped the culture, programs, and values of the church. More than 1,000 people left the church during these tumultuous years. Today, spiritual formation in Christlikeness continues to be the organizing priority.

The current conversation and debate around sexual orientation and gender identity is another example of OHC’s openness to explore new territory. There have been many hours of conversations, prayer, and dialogue about the ways OHC can cultivate a welcoming environment to those struggling with their sexual or gender identity, while still upholding Biblical convictions on these issues. The congregation is regularly challenged to stretch beyond “us versus them” paradigms to extend risky grace and love. Similar efforts are made to dissolve the implied alliances between political affiliation and the Christian faith. One of the crucial emerging values at OHC is to purposively foster a congregation of different perspectives, races, ages, opinions, and political orientations.

Scot McKnight captures the heart of OHC when he writes:

The Church is God’s world-changing social experiment of bringing unlikes and differenters to the table to share life with one another as a new kind of family. When this happens, we show the world what love, justice, peace, reconciliation, and life together are designed by God to be. The church is God’s show-and-tell for the world to see how God wants us to live as a family.

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7 The seeker-targeted model of ministry was popularized by Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. See Willow Creek founders Bill and Lynne Hybels’ book, Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995). In 1991, seven leaders from OHC attended Willow Creek’s leadership conference and in time, OHC oriented its ministry around reaching the unchurched. Weekend services were carefully designed with an emphasis on performance. The intent was to surprise seekers with a non-traditional approach to doing church in the hopes of piquing their curiosity. Various programs, groups, and events were regularly offered to meet the needs of the growing congregation and enable people to connect with others. A mid-week worship service was also held for more extensive worship and teaching experiences.

8 Scot McKnight, A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God’s Design for Life Together (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 16.
There are currently elders and staff at OHC with different political allegiances and different perspectives on various social issues. The hope is to cultivate a congregation that primarily identifies as the beloved of God. Racial, political, and social identities, while important, are secondary to this most important and influential identity.

While admitting to a lack of objectivity, OHC is a unique congregation. It is both pliable and malleable. The congregation thinks beyond pat answers and status quo positions on various social issues and perspectives. The specific challenges many pastors routinely face in their ministries are not issues of conflict at Oak Hills. At the same time, OHC is facing the challenge of being a church in a decreasingly religious culture.9 In addition, like many churches, OHC is burdened with some of the negative baggage of the Evangelical label at a time when the culture is increasingly skeptical of the term.

Well-meaning followers of Jesus sometimes conflate the terms Evangelical, Christian, and Republican.10 At times, loyalty to a politically conservative, Republican ideal seems to be a higher priority for Christians than devotion to Jesus. In the name of standing up for morality and truth, Christians can instead defend the agenda of the political right. Anger and contempt often accompany these attacks against those on the other side. The goal is to win the fight, using whatever means necessary. In these instances, anger is considered a necessary, and even righteous response to the cultural

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coup d'état attempted by irreligious liberals. Hence, the more the culture marginalizes the Christian community, the more the Christian community fights back.

Anger, however, is not a weapon exclusive to Christian Conservatives. Liberal and socially progressive Christians equally employ anger to advance their agenda. The political left justifies its anger by citing Bible verses about standing with those who are oppressed and caring about social justice. In the context of OHC, there are Christians on both sides of the political aisle for whom anger is considered a legitimate and righteous response toward recent cultural and political developments.

In addition, beyond the political arena, there are Christians at OHC who have nurtured anger in their heart for a long time without considering the spiritual, emotional, or relational implications. Anger is a default reaction when life does not cooperate, or when one’s agenda is blocked. The degree of anger is determined by the situation. The justification for anger is the fact that it exists. People automatically get angry when they are slighted or mistreated. The rise of anger, in other words, is considered an appropriate response to whatever is happening. Anger is not instinctively seen as a sign of an unformed heart. Anger is lumped into the category of character flaws labeled “just who I am.” Unexamined anger damages the soul and weakens the Christian community’s witness in a post-Christian culture.

There is plenty of literature that suggests anger is a normal human emotion that needs to be managed, controlled, and tamed. Christian psychologist Gary Chapman writes, “I believe human anger is designed by God to motivate us to take constructive
action in the face of wrongdoing or when facing injustice.”¹¹ Theologian Sarah Sumner begins her book on anger by asserting, “Anger has a place in the Christian life.”¹² A few sentences later she writes, “Yet most people have overlooked the example of perfect anger Jesus gives us. What if Jesus’ anger is for our good? Have you ever heard a sermon about imitating Jesus’ good anger? Can you think of any praise song about Jesus’ perfect anger? Have you ever asked God to help you be angry like Jesus?”¹³ Sumner and Chapman give voice to the common notion that anger is a normal emotion, and therefore, a natural aspect of being human. It can be constructive or destructive depending on how it is managed.

This dissertation challenges the ideas that anger is inevitable, necessary, and at times beneficial. In reality, anger deforms the human soul and weakens the witness of the Christian community. The purpose of this thesis is to move beyond strategies for anger management and offer realistic ways for the Christian community to cooperate with the Spirit of God in his work of transforming anger. This investigation seeks to discover the priority of spiritual formation in the process of transforming anger. A central conviction throughout this thesis is that human anger can be transformed. It is possible to live well, build strong relationships, care deeply about important things, and fight injustice, all without anger. The tender wounds lurking in the angry person’s inner world can be healed. The Christian community does not need anger to fulfill its calling in this world.


¹³ Ibid.
Jesus’ audacious vision of a life lived without anger is nearly unimaginable in the midst of the current religious, social, and political hostilities. An anger-free life, however, is the necessary alternative.

Jesus’ gripping vision of life without anger challenges the impotence of the typical evangelical gospel. In the words of Pastor Bill Hull,

Present day evangelicalism gives little place to discipleship in its view of salvation. Our doctrines of grace tend to keep us from clearly defining what it means to be a disciple. We tend to treat the experience of conversion as something entirely separate from the process of becoming a disciple. This separation has led to a common problem we face today. People profess to be Christians yet believe they do not need to follow Jesus . . . For many who call themselves Christians today, being saved or being a Christian has no serious connection with an ongoing commitment to being formed into the image of Christ.14

Hull’s concept of the separation between conversion and discipleship turns spiritual transformation (what Hull calls “being formed into the image of Christ”) into an inaccessible worthy ideal. Transformation is not, however, expected of those who are Christian. Character formation, in other words, is no longer an essential part of what it means to be a Christian. The conversion/discipleship separation enables the Christian community to worship God at church services and have contempt for those who are different. The separation enables the Christian community to attend church most weeks but rage against political opponents, retaliate against those who insult them, and nurture unforgiveness for decades, without facing the hypocrisy.

14 Bill Hull, Conversion and Discipleship: You Can’t have One Without the Other (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 21.
If Willard is correct, however, Jesus emphasizes the primacy of transforming anger because it is an urgent concern in the human soul. Anger is not to be tamed or managed, but transformed. The Spirit of God wants to eliminate anger from the will, mind, body, and relationships. Managing anger is similar to treating cancer symptoms when surgery is available to cut out the cancer. The ripple effect of transforming anger extends into reshaping relationships, the church, and even the culture. When the Christian community takes seriously the possibility of transforming anger, it will shine like a “town on a hill” (Mt 5:14) in a divided and angry culture. The viral spread of Shalom, instigated by the transformation of anger, is worth whatever it costs.

The issue of anger is profoundly personal to this author. The insights and conundrums described herein emanate from the front-line trenches of nearly three decades of pastoral work. Furthermore, my personal history is marked by the damage done by my own anger. Anger has been the deadliest sin of my soul. Early in life I learned to respond to disappointment with anger. In athletics, anger provided the extra motivation to outwork and defeat opponents. In relationships, however, anger was harmful. The passion for this thesis comes from experience with anger’s destructive power, and Jesus’ power to transform.

Part one of this paper examines the epidemic of anger currently infecting the culture and the Christian community. There is a growing concern about the widespread anger in the culture. News reports daily confirm the transcendent problem of anger in today’s world. The Christian community is also angry. Throughout the history of

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15 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New International Version.
Protestant Evangelicalism, latent anger has been a motivation. The Church compounds the problem by teaching a gospel where Christlike character transformation is merely optional, but not expected or required.

Part two explores various perspectives on anger to better understand it. The work of Aristotle and Seneca are briefly examined. The more recent work of Carol Saussy, Margaret Nussbaum, Gary Chapman, and Sarah Sumner are also considered. The Bible has much to say about anger. The story of Cain and Abel, the wrath of God, Jesus’ radical teaching on anger in the Sermon on the Mount, and Paul’s teaching in the New Testament, are examined. Willard’s perspective on anger is unique and is referenced throughout this section.

Part three describes considerations and spiritual practices on the journey of transforming anger. An individual’s journey involves engaging in various disciplines, experiences, and relationships to cooperate with the Spirit of God in the transformation of anger. A congregation’s journey involves prioritizing certain values and engaging in certain communal practices to root out anger and grow as a reconciling community marked by love and Shalom.
CHAPTER 1
ANGER IN THE CULTURE

On a chilly Fall day in November of 2017, retired anesthesiologist Dr. Rene Boucher watched his neighbor, Dr. and Senator Rand Paul, mow the lawn and dump the clippings on a growing pile of brush near Boucher’s adjacent property. The neighbors had not spoken to each other for a decade because of unresolved disagreements over property upkeep and maintenance. That afternoon, in a fit of uncontrollable rage, Dr. Boucher attacked Senator Paul pushing him off his lawnmower, breaking several of Paul’s ribs.¹ These highly educated and wealthy men who live in an exclusive neighborhood in Bowling Green, Kentucky, tussled on the front lawn over where to put grass clippings.

AmyJane Johnson’s seventy-one-year-old father-in-law was recently followed by a furious driver who became unhinged by the senior citizen’s awkward driving maneuvers. When the elderly man pulled into his driveway and stepped out of his car, his

attacker repeatedly punched him, resulting in multiple facial fractures. For over a minute, the assaulter taunted, “Had enough?”2

These incidents highlight the growing epidemic of anger in the culture. The disturbing stories mentioned above graphically illustrate how the culture is “not the way it’s supposed to be.”3 Similar examples of the destructive power of anger fill the headlines each day. In a recent survey on civility in America, researchers found that 75 percent of Americans believe incivility has risen to crisis levels in our country.4 An online article by Julia Turner captures the sentiment of today’s cultural observer:

Over the past decade or so, outrage has become the default mode for politicians, pundits, critics and, with the rise of social media, the rest of us. When something outrageous happens—when a posh London block installs anti-homeless spikes, or when Khloé Kardashian wears a Native American headdress, or, for that matter, when we read the horrifying details in the Senate’s torture report—it’s easy to anticipate the cycle that follows: anger, sarcasm, recrimination, piling on; defenses and counterattacks; anger at the anger, disdain for the outraged; sometimes, an apology … and on to the next. Twitter and Facebook make it easier than ever to participate from home. And the same cycle occurs regardless of the gravity of the offense, which can make each outrage feel forgettable, replaceable. The bottomlessness of our rage has a numbing effect. This desensitization makes it tough to clock exactly how modern outrage functions. Is it as awful as it sometimes feels? More useful than it might seem? Should we be rending our


garments about our constant rending of garments? Or should we embrace the new responsiveness of the social and hypersensitive Web?\(^5\)

It is common to read news reports about parents screaming at little league umpires, professional athletes physically assaulting their girlfriends, fathers abusing their children, protesters attacking the opposition, and politicians fomenting their followers with vitriolic tweets. Jeffrey Kluger writes, “Rage uncorked becomes rage indulged, and rage indulged becomes rage applauded—and pretty soon anyone with a gripe decides it’s OK to crank the dudgeon machine up to eleven.”\(^6\) Philosopher Martha Nussbaum calls this “the social disease of anger.”\(^7\) In American culture, anger is considered a legitimate response to slights, insults, or simply not getting what one wants. The words of Lucius Seneca, writing in the first century, are a poignant indictment on today’s culture:

As madmen exhibit specific symptoms—a bold and threatening expression, a knitted brow, a fierce set of features, a quickened step, restless hands, a changed complexion, frequent, very forceful sighing—so do angry people show the same symptoms: their eyes blaze and flicker, their faces flush deeply as the blood surges up from the depths of the heart, their lips quiver and their teeth grind, their hair bristles and stands on end, their breathing is forced and ragged, their joints crack as they’re wrenched, they groan and bellow, their speech is inarticulate and halting, they repeatedly clap their hands together and stamp the ground, their entire bodies are aroused as they “act out anger’s massive menace,” they have repellent and terrifying features of people who are deformed and bloated—it would be hard to say whether the vice is more abhorrent or disfiguring.\(^8\)


Sometimes anger does not show up in the explosive form Seneca describes. It can also simmer beneath the surface and produce a more passive expression that slowly erodes lives and relationships. Whatever form it takes, there is a growing sense from a variety of sources that anger is on the rise in the culture. Perhaps this should be expected, or at least not surprising, in a culture where morality and ethics are increasingly relative.\(^9\)

**Anger and Relationships**

On May 16, 2018 Justin Painter barged into the house of his ex-wife Amanda Simpson and shot and killed her three children, her boyfriend, and then himself. Ms. Simpson survived the attack. She had recently told Justin Painter that her boyfriend was moving into her house. Painter’s anger resulted in another tragic domestic violence incident where a mother watched her children die.\(^{10}\) Psychologist Gary Chapman describes the familiar story of many marriages, “Marriage becomes a battlefield, each spouse accusing the other of firing the first shot. If the couple do not learn to properly handle their anger, they will never have a satisfying marriage. I say ‘never’ because love and uncontrolled anger cannot coexist. Love seeks the well-being of the spouse, while uncontrolled anger seeks to hurt and destroy.”\(^{11}\) When anger is directed at a wall or door,

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\(^9\) Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way it’s Supposed to Be*, 16-18.


it causes personal injury or property damage. When anger is directed at another human being, however, the damage is often more severe.

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, an average of twenty people every minute, equating to over ten million people a year, experience some form of domestic violence.\textsuperscript{12} It may be tempting to dismiss this statistic since most relationships do not experience domestic violence. Anger, however, is “one of the most common negative patterns in relationships.”\textsuperscript{13} It may be hidden from the general public, but when people are with their families behind closed doors, anger will emerge. Marcus Tullius Cicero’s advice from long ago is helpful wisdom in the current climate of divorce, domestic violence, child abuse, and the everyday relational anger. Cicero writes,

\begin{quote}
Thus we are right when we say that angry persons have gone “out of control”—that is, out of their intent, their reason, their conscious thought . . . When angry persons try to attack people, we must get the victims away from them until they collect themselves. (And what does it mean to “collect oneself,” if not bring the scattered parts of the mind back to their proper place?) Or, if they are in a position to exact revenge, we must beg and plead with them to put it off until their anger ceases to boil.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

Cicero expresses how the emotion of anger overrides rational thought and drags a person into another episode of anger. Families are particularly impacted by the way passive or aggressive anger shapes the culture of a home. As Carol Saussy succinctly states,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Cicero, \textit{Cicero on the Emotions}, trans. Margaret Graver (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 68.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
“Relationships are destroyed in anger.”

Family members become trained to walk on eggshells to prevent another outburst. Various episodes of anger over the years slowly weaken family intimacy and keeping the peace becomes a primary goal. The souls of young children are damaged by the anger of parents. Husbands and wives settle for a tenuous arrangement held together by the distance they know to keep from one another.

Willard describes anger’s role in marital disharmony,

> Anger and contempt between mates makes sexual delight between them impossible, and when such an important need is unmet, people are, almost invariably, drawn into the realm of fantasy. Dissatisfied mates project fantasy images that the real people in their lives are forced, in one way or another, to fit into—or fall short of. This leads to increased frustrations, producing more anger and contempt.

Willard connects anger in relationships with sexual difficulties in a marriage. For Willard, this is why Jesus’ teaching on anger in the Sermon on the Mount is immediately followed by his wisdom on lust, infidelity, and divorce. Unchecked marital anger starts a chain reaction that if unaddressed, can eventually lead to divorce.

**Anger and Sexual Brokenness**

Anger not only distorts marital intimacy, it produces a wider range of sexual brokenness. Willard writes, “Anger and contempt are the twin scourges of the earth. Mingled with greed and sexual lust, these bitter emotions form the poisonous brew in

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17 Ibid., 182.
which human existence stands suspended.”\textsuperscript{18} The mingling of anger and lust is evident in the popularity of pornography. Anger and contempt are essentially prerequisites to lust and pornography because they enable one person to objectify another for their own sexual pleasure.\textsuperscript{19} Rape is another obvious mingling of anger and sexual brokenness. Recent news reports detailing the abuse of women by powerful people like Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, and a host of other actors, politicians, and leaders has pushed the problem of sexual abuse into the cultural spotlight. Powerful men abused their roles and status to take advantage of vulnerable women. As Willard aptly puts it, “Sex and violence are the two things that are repeatedly cited as the areas of our greatest problems, in life as in the media.”\textsuperscript{20} Once more, imagining a world where there is no anger opens up the possibility of healing the sexual brokenness so common in today’s culture.

\textbf{Anger and Politics}

James Davison Hunter writes,

What adds pathos to our situation is the presence of what Nietzsche called “ressentiment.” His definition of this French word included what we in the English-speaking world mean by resentment, but it also involves a combination of anger, envy, hate, rage, and revenge as the motive of political action. Ressentiment is, then, a form of political psychology. Though ressentiment has historical precedence, it has become the distinguishing characteristic of politics in modern cultures.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 168.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 183-184.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 177.
The 2016 Presidential campaign involving Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton was characterized by what Nietzsche called ressentiment. Like most political candidates, Trump and Clinton disagreed on policies and strategies for solving the problems facing the nation. While their disagreements were typical of politicians, how they disagreed was unprecedented. In October of 2016, the two candidates debated for the second time on national television. The New York Times commented, “Both candidates were visibly uneasy throughout the debate, even refusing to shake hands at the beginning, as the town hall event unfolded on a small stage in a highly charged atmosphere. It was a deeply ugly moment in American politics, featuring the sort of personal invective rarely displayed by those who aspire to lead the nation.”

It is as though the 2016 Presidential election was a coming-out party for contempt and anger. Clinton and Trump turned the campaign for the most powerful office in the world into a schoolyard battle of bullies. They called each other names, poked fun at the other’s appearance, criticized each other’s families, and seized every chance to belittle one another. Anger and contempt were used on a national stage to win at any cost.

Throughout his presidency, thus far Donald Trump has sustained this divisive tone with early morning tweets and racially insensitive remarks at various rallies. In a July 5, 2018 speech in Montana, for example, President Trump called Senator Elizabeth Warren “Pocahontas,” mocked the #MeToo movement, demeaned cultural sensitivity,

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insulted Senator Maxine Waters as a “low IQ individual,” and claimed “seventy-five percent of the media are dishonest.”23 The New York times recently stated, “For the first time the country is led by someone who inflames that [political] conversation on a nearly daily basis, taunting his adversaries on Twitter and quickly triggering tens of thousands responses.”24 Today’s society is a long way from the wisdom of Seneca: “In the same way it’s appropriate that a person who administers the laws and guides a civil community should seek to heal people’s characteristics with words for as long as he can, and rather gentle words at that, to urge the proper course of action and instill in their minds a desire for what is honorable and fair, so that they will hate vice and value virtue.”25 President Trump is a prime example of a leader who seems to assume anger is a virtue, civility is a weakness, and agitated crowds are a sign of support. As Jeremy Peters of the New York Times recently wrote, “To a degree that is unique to this period and this president, disputes over politics have divided American’s homes, strained marriages, ruined friendships and invaded the workplace.”26

Anger and Racism

In spite of much progress over the past two and a half centuries, racism continues

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26 Peters, “In a Divided Era, One Thing Seems to Unite: Political Anger.”
to infect American culture. An important study shows how the racism of the past was based on Whites’ bigotry of Blacks because of perceived inferiority. Currently, however, some suggest that Whites are angry at the government for giving Blacks undeserved handouts, and at Blacks because they receive an unfair advantage.\textsuperscript{27} Such entrenched attitudes feed racism. Arguing racism continues in the twenty-first century even though it looks different than in the past, Joseph Barndt writes, “Racism continues its destructive actions as before, but in ways that are more hidden, more disguised, more sophisticated.”\textsuperscript{28} The current tension around building a wall between Mexico and the United States, for example, illustrates Barndt’s point. There may be valid reasons for the United States to build the wall. It is also true, however, that hints of racism lurk behind the passion for the wall.

It is worthwhile to think about what would happen in America if the Spirit of God transformed the racial anger and contempt of Christians. The initial thoughts, feelings, and biases toward those of another race would be infused with love and grace, instead of fear and judgment. Christians would be intolerant of racist policies and attitudes, seeing both as incompatible with the way of Jesus. The horrific history of racism in America would inspire compassion for people of color, instead of White defensiveness. The fear of perpetuating the sin of racism would cultivate gentleness and sensitivity toward immigrants. The Church would initiate efforts to stand with victims of racism and do


\textsuperscript{28} Joseph Barndt, \textit{Understanding and Dismantling Racism: The Twenty-First Century Challenge to White America} (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2007), 40.
whatever possible to eliminate systemic racism. The rhetoric surrounding the desire to build a wall between the United States and Mexico would be an occasion for Christians and the Church to pause, and prayerfully discern the wisdom or lack of wisdom of such a decision. It is challenging to envision a racist-free America, given the heated volatility of current culture.

**Anger and the Cultural Divide**

On September 14, 2001, just a few days after the terrorist bombings in New York, Lance Morrow wrote an article for Time Magazine entitled “The Case for Rage and Retribution.” The title alone is chilling. Morrow writes,

> A day cannot live in infamy without the nourishment of rage. Let's have rage . . . Let America explore the rich possibilities of the fatwa. A policy of focused brutality does not come easily to a self-conscious, self-indulgent, contradictory, diverse, humane nation with a short attention span. America needs to relearn a lost discipline, self-confident relentlessness—and to relearn why human nature has equipped us all with a weapon (abhorred in decent peacetime societies) called hatred.  

American culture has followed Morrow’s advice and nourished its anger into an inferno of rage. There is widespread consensus that the culture is living on the edge. It pulsates with the lingering effects of aggressive anger and the perpetual fragility caused by suppressed and passive anger. The tension is palpable in the media, in the political arena, in neighborhood disputes, and during water cooler conversations with co-workers who have differing opinions and viewpoints. Social media is especially divisive. There are lightning rod subjects that are too risky to talk about for fear the latent division will

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become explosive anger. The whole issue becomes more complicated as anger is normalized. Those who rant and rave about whatever cause are often applauded for caring. Anger has become a sign of caring and a symbol of righteousness. Yet, as Willard writes, “When we trace wrongdoing back to its roots in the human heart, we find that in the overwhelming number of cases it involves some form of anger.”

Given the growing division in the country, and the general consensus that all is not well, it is hard to argue with Willard’s diagnosis about “the primacy of anger in the order of evil.”

**Anger and Suburbia**

In light of the ministry context of OHC, a brief consideration of the way anger embeds in upper-to-middle-class suburbia is warranted. Willard defines anger as a “spontaneous response or feeling” that alerts a person to “an obstruction of their will.” If this was the extent of anger, or if its initial promptings could be redirected, it would not wreak such havoc or cause destruction. Generally, however, the feeling of anger quickly converts into the will to retaliate or pay back the one who has blocked or interfered. In suburbia, this conversion commonly occurs when the line is too long at the grocery store or a restaurant’s service is too slow; breeding impatience with anyone and anything that does not cooperate in a timely fashion. Conflicts erupt between neighbors because empty

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30 Willard, The Divine Conspiracy, 164.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 165.

33 Nussbaum, Anger & Forgiveness, 5-6.
garbage cans remain in the street too long. Kluger’s description is particularly relevant in suburbia: “Anger is the lazy person’s emotion. It’s quick, it’s binary, it’s delicious. And more and more, we’re gorging on it”\textsuperscript{34} Suburbanites make passionate arguments against low-income housing options under the guise of preserving property values, but often the deeper issue is anger and contempt for the poor. Shallow and insignificant concerns are frequently the reasons behind suburban anger. The achievement of a comfortable suburban life includes the right to get angry at anyone or anything that is uncooperative. This right to anger has often been the privilege of the cultural elite. In the Middle Ages, for example, “While lords might express anger righteously, peasants—nonwarriors and therefore by definition without honor—could not be rightly or even truly angry.”\textsuperscript{35} Perhaps the privilege, comforts, and abundance of resources of suburban life raise expectations and nurture the environment for anger when those expectations are not met.

It is not surprising, given the epidemic of anger, that gentle Mr. Rogers is making a comeback through a powerful documentary “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”\textsuperscript{36} and an upcoming feature film called “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood.”\textsuperscript{37} The epidemic of anger awakens a longing for a better and more beautiful world. Perhaps those who follow Jesus and the movement he established, exemplify this better and more beautiful way.

\textsuperscript{34} Kluger, “America’s Anger is Out of Control.”


\textsuperscript{36} “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” online, directed by Morgan Neville (Los Angeles: Tremolo Productions, 2018).

\textsuperscript{37} “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood,” directed by Marielle Heller (New York: Big Beach Films, 2019).
CHAPTER 2
ANGER IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Christians are disciples of Jesus committed to a Christ-centered moral vision, as outlined in Scripture, and therefore intended to shape the ethics of the individual and of the community of faith.¹ In a recent national survey, however, 69 percent of evangelicals acknowledged their anger over the current state of American culture.² David Kinnamen confirms this observation when he writes,

The growing hostility toward Christians is very much a reflection of what outsiders feel they receive from believers. They say their aggression simply matches the oversized opinions and egos of Christians. One outsider put it this way: “Most Christians I meet assume that Christian means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, anti-gay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who does not believe what they believe.”³

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This does not necessarily mean Christians are responding inappropriately, but it indicates anger is increasingly seen as an acceptable attitude and posture toward the culture.

Anecdotally, conversations I have had in the lobby after church suggest Christian animosity toward the culture is rising. Similarly, conversations about the apparent increase in Christian anger are regularly met with understanding and agreement. The Christian community does not seem to deny its rising anger and even seems proud of their indignation, carrying it as a sign of righteousness. Hence, the challenge is not to convince Christians they are angry, but to help them understand the damage anger does to their own soul and to the broader witness of the Church. This challenge is exceedingly difficult because respected Christian thinkers and theologians have gone to great lengths to legitimize “righteous anger” and expose the sin of non-anger. For example, Sumner writes, “It’s true that most anger is deadly, but Godly anger is vibrant and enlivening. According to the Scriptures, godliness requires us to be angry at certain times. It is a biblical imperative: ‘Be angry, and yet do not sin’ (Eph 4:26, NASB).” The “righteous anger” argument is used by Christians to legitimize indignation over things like cultural moral decay and various social injustices. It is considered “righteous” anger because it is aimed at confronting, and ultimately correcting, a significant moral wrong or injustice.

4 I have had numerous conversations with people in my congregation who are disgusted with the current state of the world. Ironically, they are oblivious to the ways their anger contributes to the ethical and moral condition of the culture.

5 For example, on September 28, 2018, following a Sunday service, I had a conversation with a retired pastor about the focus of this research. He acknowledged the growing anger he observed in his most recent congregation. In my experience, his response is common. When the issue of Christian anger is identified and named, people willingly acknowledge the growing problem.

Racism is an example of a severe evil that degrades the human soul and deforms the culture and must be confronted and corrected. Anger over racism is considered righteous, and non-anger is unrighteous. One of the premises of the “righteous anger” argument is that anger is required to bring forth the desired change. Although this is addressed more in depth throughout this thesis, “righteous anger” is a complicated issue requiring careful thought and a firm commitment to spiritual formation and maturity. “Godly anger,” to use Sumner’s phrase, is only possible by those who are fiercely and primarily devoted to actually being Godly. The casual use of “righteous anger” is exactly the kind of wrong-headed endorsement Christians rely on to justify their anger.

Even if a concession is made for the occasional expression of “righteous anger,” it seems reasonable to expect less anger in those who follow Jesus, or at least that Christians would be “slower to anger” (Js 1:19) than those with no faith allegiance. The Bible says Christians are to “put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature” and “rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips” (Col 3:5, 8). This chapter suggests anger is embedded in the Christian community like it is in the current culture. Christians and churches utilize anger to fulfill their agendas just like those who have no faith allegiance.

Westboro Baptist of Topeka, Kansas is an ultra-extreme example of anger taking root in the Christian community. Its website address is www.godhatesfags.com. The site boasts: “‘God hates fags’—though elliptical—is a profound theological statement, which

7 Ibid.
the world needs to hear more than it needs oxygen, water, and bread.”

It is sobering and saddening to see those who claim to know Jesus Christ blatantly advertise their hate. The church has made national headlines through their traveling protests against homosexuality. Westboro’s example demonstrates the extraordinary lengths to which some Christians will go to sanctify their anger.

Most Christians do not subscribe to the extremism of Westboro. The anger in the Christian community is most subtle, perhaps even hidden. It stealthily influences underlying attitudes and reactions to cultural developments. Kinnamen and Lyons explore the various reasons why outsiders react hesitantly and negatively to the Christian community. They write, “One crucial insight kept popping up in our exploration. In studying thousands of outsiders’ impressions, it is clear that Christians are primarily perceived for what they stand against. We have become famous for what we oppose, rather than what we are for.”

This important observation points to the way anger pollutes the stream of the Christian community. Hunter calls this a “defensive against” paradigm “that has long been embraced by Protestant Fundamentalists and mainstream Evangelicals.” He writes, “Conservatives of all confessions have been angry about their

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loss of prominence, as well as anxious, on guard, and self-protective in ways that have created walls between themselves and the outside world.”\textsuperscript{12} Miroslav Volf explains Christian oppression and violence as the result of a “thinned-out faith” that is “not allowed full sway in shaping the way Christians live, but is either employed to achieve goals set by values unrelated to faith, or allowed to define goals by the means of achieving them . . . We mold our faith to fit our own desires and our capacity to live in a given situation. [This] thin but zealous practice of the Christian faith is likely to foster violence.”\textsuperscript{13}

Thinkers like Volf and Hunter present compelling arguments about the ways the Christian community uses anger to accomplish its desired objectives. On September 28, 2018, Jerry Falwell Jr. tweeted: “Conservatives & Christians need to stop electing ‘nice guys.’ They might make great Christian leaders but the US needs street fighters like @realDonaldTrump at every level of government b/c the liberal fascists Dems are playing for keeps & many Repub leaders are a bunch of wimps!”\textsuperscript{14} Falwell is an influential leader in the evangelical community. He is the president of Liberty University, “The second largest private nonprofit university in the nation.”\textsuperscript{15} He is an ardent supporter of Republican policies and is regularly quoted in the news as a spokesperson for

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13} Miroslav Volf, \textit{A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good} (Grand Rapids, MI: 2011), 19-21, 40.


\textsuperscript{15} Liberty University, Biography of Jerry Falwell: President of Liberty University, accessed January 20, 2019, http://www.liberty.edu/aboutliberty/index.cfm?PID=14588.
Conservative Evangelicalism. His tweet blatantly promotes the righteousness and goodness of anger to his sixty-one-thousand followers on Twitter. His combative rhetoric models a worldview, anthropology, and theology to countless Christians who look to him as a representative of the Evangelical perspective.

Low-grade anger and contempt frequently produce seemingly benign church policies. Recently, an OHC staff member attended a meeting of facility managers and administrators from other churches within the NABC. Part of the conversation was a brainstorming session on how to respond when the homeless show up looking for help. Approximately 70 percent of those attending articulated their church’s policy of refusing to assist the homeless to discourage them from returning to the campus. The policy was discussed openly without considering whether it reflected the heart of Jesus toward those in need. There was no mention of the potential anger or contempt lurking beneath the policy. The issue was presented only as practical and logistical, not theological.

Anger in the Christian community is undoubtedly the result of many current and historical developments and factors. A detailed analysis of all the possibilities is beyond the scope of this research. The roots of Evangelical anger, however, help chart a way forward toward its transformation. The remainder of this chapter, therefore, identifies some of the possible factors and developments that have gradually ingrained anger into the genetic code of the Christian community.

A Reactionary Ethic

When Martin Luther wrote his ninety-five theses, his intention was to reform
Roman Catholicism—not launch a new branch of Christianity. In spite of his intentions, Luther’s fiery response to papal abuses established a now 500 year-old Protestant precedent. The historical context of Protestantism is one founded in resistance. Therefore, it is understandable that when something is amiss or awry, contemporary Protestants feel justified to react by protesting. When something appears theologically off-track, Protestants rise up and speak out. The rebellion might be against another branch or expression of Christianity, like it was in Luther’s instance, or it could be against the culture. Protestant blood reacts, stands against, and opposes. Luther’s confrontation of medieval Catholicism inspired other uprisings and reactions. Heinz Schilling comments,

The “Wittenberg unrest” held the town in thrall for several months. Viewed retrospectively, these events can be located as one of the numerous urban movements that flared up in late medieval cities in an attempt to align secular and ecclesiastical affairs with the interests of their citizens. The anticlerical riots that caused such fear amongst the Catholic clergy were part of that tradition: students and journeyman chased priests from their altars, ripped the missals from their hands, and mocked and derided all men of the church, above all Franciscans and Antonite monks. Such goings-on were hardly unheard of, but Luther’s theologically innovative and deeply felt attacks on the failings of the church had brought a new dynamic and plausibility to the traditional protests of the citizenry and a well-established urban anticlericalism.

An ethic of rebellious reaction has characterized evangelical DNA from its beginning. On its own, the instinct to react does not automatically equate to anger. Rebellious reaction, however, is frequently a step toward anger that at a minimum increases its likelihood.

Throughout the twentieth century, evangelicals continued to react and stand against various religious and cultural developments. Historian George Marsden writes,

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17 Ibid., 231.
“Fundamentalists were evangelical Christians, close to the traditions of the dominant American revivals establishment of the nineteenth century, who in the twentieth century militantly opposed both modernism in theology and the cultural changes that modernism endorsed.”

The militancy in evangelical history has at times been a positive, prophetic and reforming presence in both American culture and in Protestantism. Evangelical identity, however, has also been unduly formed by this militancy, and by an oppositional posture against the culture. Marsden writes,

As in the early nineteenth century, when it opposed Enlightenment secularism, it thrives on opposition to modernizing trends . . . Evangelicalism is especially vigorous when it is closely connected with the cultural mainstream yet maintains a sense of being culturally embattled against it. It is a symbiotic relationship that invigorates just because one is so unhappy about it.

Marsden captures the spirit of evangelicalism in saying it “thrives on opposition” and battles the cultural mainstream. Hunter calls this a “defensive against paradigm that has long been embraced by Protestant Fundamentalists and mainstream Evangelicals.” In the current post-Christian cultural setting, the rebellious and reactive spirit of Evangelicalism continues to fight against the culture’s efforts to marginalize and minimize the Christian community. It is hard to imagine the Christian community knowing what to do without having something to oppose.

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19 Ibid., 255.

A Small Gospel

Willard summarizes the thesis of this paper when he writes, “There is nothing that can be done with anger that cannot be done much better without it.”

In spite of various attempts to legitimize anger as a normal, and at times necessary emotion and response, the deceitfulness of the human heart combined with toxic levels of animosity in the culture, makes the transformation of anger an urgent need. For this to occur, the gospel must proclaim and describe a vision of an anger-free life under God’s leadership and provide a realistic way of realizing this vision. The process of transforming anger happens in the details of the inner life and requires ongoing humility and openness to the Holy Spirit’s work. The gospel commonly proclaimed in evangelical churches, however, is often too small and generalized to reach into these inner life issues.

It is the responsibility of the Church to cultivate biblical virtue and character and help people understand the toxicity of anger. As Hunter puts it, “Beyond the worship of God and the proclamation of his word, the central ministry of the church is one of formation; of making disciples.”

There is no other organization charged with this crucial work. The United States government does not intentionally seek to develop good character in its citizens. There is no federal or state agency appointed to help human

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23 Hunter, To Change the World, 236.
beings become good and pursue the good. Growth in godly character and in the fruit of the Spirit is the exclusive calling and work of the Christian community.

Willard identifies a core problem when he writes, “It is now generally acknowledged . . . that one can be a professing Christian and a church member in good standing without being a disciple. There is, apparently, no real connection between being a Christian and being a disciple of Jesus.”24 The gospel is restricted to dealing with sin and securing heaven after death, but authentic character transformation of things like anger is optional. As Willard puts it, “Christians are routinely taught by example and word that it is more important to be right than it is to be Christlike. In fact, being right licenses you to be mean, and indeed, requires you to be mean—righteously mean, of course.”25 The smallness of the typical gospel proclaimed in many evangelical churches enables the Christian community to retain its anger and even be proud of it.

**Denominationalism**

Church historian Winthrop Hudson notes the original intent of denominationalism was to allow for diversity in a particular group of churches while preserving the overall unity of the Protestant Church. This unity was mainly demonstrated through ecumenical societies devoted to advancing social, moral, and spiritual good.26 The history of Protestantism, however, beginning with Luther’s reformation, is filled with examples of

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splinter groups breaking from the original to correct an errant doctrine or practice.

Sometimes these divisions were energized by what was believed to be necessary, and even righteous indignation against the original group. The split was needed to preserve the purity of God’s name and his Church. The stinging indictment of theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, however, is that,

Denominationalism in the Christian Church is such an unacknowledged hypocrisy. It is a compromise, made far too lightly, between Christianity and the world. Yet it often regards itself as a Christian achievement and glorifies its martyrs as bearers of the Cross. It represents the accommodation of Christianity to the caste-system of human society. It carries over into the organization of the Christian principle of brotherhood the prides and prejudices, the privileges and prestige, as well as the humiliations and abasements, the injustices and inequalities of that specious order of high and low wherein men find the satisfaction of their craving for vainglory. The division of the churches closely follows the division of men into the castes of national, racial, economic groups. It draws the color line in the church of God; it fosters the misunderstandings, the self-exaltations, the hatreds of jingoistic nationalism by continuing in the body of Christ the spurious differences of provincial loyalties; it seats the rich and poor apart at the table of the Lord, where the fortunate may enjoy the bounty they have provided while the others feed upon the crusts their poverty affords.27

According to Niebuhr, denominationalism was born from pride and nurtures division in the Church. Willard adds, “It is worth noting that nearly everything that defines any given denomination is negative—that is, something ‘we’ do not do that ‘they’ do. By far, most of our groups were born in negation.”28 This negation is not always a gateway to anger, but sometimes it is a first step. Negation creates tension which gradually produces division and opposition. The eventual result is an upgraded church or denomination void of the original group’s deficiencies. The entire story of denominationalism is not as


28 Willard, Renovation of the Heart, 236.
simple as angry people splitting off to satisfy their ego and do their own thing.

Additionally, God undoubtedly works through the various denominations to advance his purposes. A multitude of denominations supports the notion, however, that Christians in the same congregation regularly fight and frequently divorce.

For example, records from the late eighteenth century reveal the frustration, anger, and contempt that existed between groups of Christians who held different perspectives on various issues. These differences sometimes resulted in costly and painful church splits. Jaroslav Pelikan identifies secular influences on twentieth century Church divisions:

The blurring of confessional distinctions during the twentieth century was accompanied by the growing historical recognition that those distinctions had not been purely (perhaps in some cases, not primarily) theological in origin at all, and that the churches “often allow themselves to be separated from each other by secular forces and influences.” . . . A pioneering American study was devoted to the decisive role played by such questions as slavery and class structure in the history of how the churches of the United States (and, by extrapolation, all churches throughout Christian history) had divided from one another, regardless of the doctrinal justifications that may have been provided, after the fact, for their divisions.

The myriad of denominations is a historical witness to the unwillingness and perhaps inability of professing Christians to lay aside the need to be right for the sake of unity.

Unity is challenging work, which explains why Jesus fervently prayed for it in his Church (Jn 17:20-23). When unity is hard to preserve, the Church’s historical habit is to

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divide and restart. Dissenting groups undoubtedly think the purity of the gospel is at stake, but Niebuhr’s observation is overlooked:

A skeptic world notes with amusement where it is irreverent and with despair where it longs for a saving word, that the organization which is loudest in its praise of brotherhood and most critical of race and class discriminations in other spheres is the most disunited group of all, nurturing in its own structure that same spirit of division which it condemns in other relations.31

The Christian witness is damaged by the Church’s lack of unity and inability to work through differences.

The Loss of Power

Many scholars and thinkers believe American culture is now post-Christian.32 In this era of post-Christendom, the Christian community is increasingly marginalized and minimized. It is losing power and place and no longer has a meaningful voice in the value-shaping cultural discussions and debates. Christians fear this changing world in which they live. The culture’s immorality evokes concerns about the trajectory of the nation. Pastoral conversations often include counseling in how to handle the rising fear.

The loss of power ignites anger in the Christian community toward the factors and forces deemed responsible for its displacement. The anger emanates from the belief the Christian community is now a victim of a secular culture. Hunter suggests the loss of cultural power leads the Christian community to “accuse, blame, vilify, and then seek

31 Niebuhr, Social Sources of Denominationalism, 9.

revenge on those whom they see as responsible.”33 The culture is the “they” that is responsible. When wrongs are perceived to have been done, anger is considered a reasonable way to right the wrong. As theologian Richard Mouw writes, “Crusaders are people who think the cause they are fighting for is so important that they must use all means at their disposal to win.”34 “There is a difference between speaking the truth, and doing so with anger. When the Christian community angrily responds to its loss of power, it confirms the culture’s original reasons for marginalizing and minimizing the Christian community.

The Homogenous Principle

The seeker-targeted and seeker-sensitive movements of the late twentieth century helped churches profile the kinds of people they were hoping to attract. Willow Creek Community Church in Northwest Chicago pursued “unchurched Harry and Mary.”35 Saddleback Church in Southern California targeted “Saddleback Sam and Samantha.”36 These hypothetical characters were described in terms of their job, income, hobbies, and desires. On a smaller scale, OHC’s seeker strategy targeted married men working white-collar jobs with underwhelming impressions about church. OHC programmed its

33 Hunter, To Change the World, 108.
36 Rick Warren, The Purpose Driven Church: Every Church is Big in God’s Eyes (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 169.
weekend services to attract and retain these men. The belief was, if they came, their spouses and families would follow. The homogenous principle is based on the belief that people prefer being with those who are similar. Sociologist Christena Cleveland writes,

Culturally homogenous churches are adept at targeting and attracting a certain type of person and creating a strong group identity. However, attendees at such churches are at a higher risk for creating the overly simplistic and divisive Right Christian and Wrong Christian labels that dangerously lead to inaccurate perceptions of other Christians as well as hostility and conflict.37

People want to attend church and do life with those facing similar life challenges they are. This forges a strong community bond within a local church but also fosters groupthink and the oppositional paradigms of “in versus out” and “us versus them.” Biblical scholar Scot McKnight asserts, “We’ve made the church into the American dream for our own ethnic group with the same set of convictions about next to everything. No one else feels welcome. What Jesus and the apostles taught was that you were welcomed because the church welcomed all to the table.”38

A church filled with similar people does not necessarily breed anger. It does, however, train a congregation in how to be with those who are similar. A congregation may not be as equipped to interact with those who vote differently, earn less income, have non-traditional families, or live in less affluent neighborhoods. For example, in the Evangelical Church, liberal democrats are often “them.” The poor and less able feel unwelcome in the efficient and tightly programmed culture of a suburban church. Many


38 Scot McKnight, A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God’s Design for Life Together (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 17. Italics original.
African Americans, Asians, and Hispanics tend to feel like outsiders in a predominantly White suburban church. Perhaps most of all, homosexuals feel the shameful scorn of the Christian community. The Church is only home for heterosexual prodigals. David Kinnamen summarizes,

> What are Christians known for? Outsiders think our moralizing, our condemnations, and our attempts to draw boundaries around everything. Even if these standards are accurate and biblical, they seem to be all we have to offer. And our lives are a poor advertisement for the standards. We have set the gameboard to register lifestyle points; then we are surprised to be trapped by our mistakes. The truth is we have invited the hypocrite image.\(^{39}\)

The homogenous principle encircles “us” and leaves “them” standing on the outside.

**Summary**

The culture is on edge. Stories of anger fill the news headlines on a regular basis. The vice of anger is now an inalienable right and value in today’s society. The Christian community operates on similar terms. Missiologist Ed Stetzer defines “Convictional Christianity” as “People who identify as Christians and are decidedly more religious. They more likely go to church regularly, live values that align with Christianity, and choose their spouses based on their faith.”\(^{40}\) Rather than being an alternative to the contempt and rage of the culture, Convictional Christians tend to justify and rationalize anger. Stetzer writes,

> Convictional Christianity has incrementally split from the mainstream of Western culture. This has provoked anger among some Christians. Since their values and practices shaped culture for so long, they had the impression that they owned the

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\(^{40}\) Ed Stetzer, *Christians in the Age of Outrage: How to Bring Our Best When the World is at its Worst* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2018), 8, Kindle.
culture in some sense. These Christians want their country back, and by that they mean they want their cultural power back. This anger can lead to hostility against those they believe have taken it, fear that this trend will continue and lead to their marginalization, and confusion as to what to do about it.41

In the next section, various perspectives on anger will be considered to begin to establish a theological and practical basis for constructing a set of practices, experiences, relationships and habits to cooperate with God’s Spirit in the transformation of anger.

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41 Ibid., 10.
PART TWO

PERSPECTIVES ON ANGER
CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW

Referring to anger, the Stoic philosopher Lucius Seneca wrote, “With regard now to its damaging effects: no pestilence has been more costly for the human race.”¹ Nearly two thousand years later, Seneca’s assessment echoes in Dallas Willard’s comment, “There is nothing that can be done with anger that cannot be done much better without it.”² Ever since sin was ushered into the world, anger has infected the human soul and relationships (Gn 4:5). Historically, there are differing perspectives on the nature of anger and whether it is ever justified. Many philosophers, theologians, sociologists, and psychologists argue anger is necessary in certain situations. Others believe anger is unnatural and incompatible with God’s creative intent and should be avoided and ultimately transformed. This chapter explores various perspectives on anger to increase understanding of this complex and volatile emotion. The chapter is organized around the essential literature underlying the research in this thesis.


Throughout the centuries, Aristotle has profoundly influenced philosophers, theologians, and practitioners. Therefore, his perspective on anger is crucial to understanding the topic. Aristotle believes human actions are ultimately driven by the goal of happiness. The good life, therefore, is a life of happiness. He writes, “Happiness seems more than anything else to answer this description: for we always choose it for itself, and never for the sake of something else . . . Thus it seems that happiness is something final and self-sufficing and is the end of all that man does.”

Aristotle suggests “Man’s good would seem to lie in his function” and his function is a virtuous life. He rejects moral virtues or vices as being strictly emotions “because we are neither praised or blamed in respect of our emotions . . . (a man is not praised for being afraid or angry, nor blamed for being angry simply, but for being angry in a particular way.)” As such, Aristotle believes moral virtue develops through repetitive training:

It is by our conduct in our intercourse with other men that we become just or unjust, and by acting in circumstances of danger, and training ourselves to feel fear or confidence, that we become courageous or cowardly. So, too, with our animal appetites and the passion of anger; for by behaving in this way or in that on the occasions with which these passions are concerned, some become temperate and gentle, and others profligate and ill-tempered. In a word, acts of any kind produce habits or characters of the same kind.

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4 Ibid., 9-10.
5 Ibid., 10-11.
6 Ibid., 29.
7 Ibid., 24.
“The character of the magnificent man” is formed and integrated into life by putting forth effort in virtue training. Similarly, a lack of character is also cultivated through repetitive training.

For Aristotle, virtue and vice are connected to pleasure and pain and it is crucial to learn, through training, “to find pleasure and pain in the right objects.” He writes, “It is pleasure that moves us to do what is base, and pain that moves us to refrain from what is noble.” Pain is the catalyst for anger because, “When someone directly hinders a man from something . . . or if he does so indirectly, or works against him, or merely fails to cooperate with him, or irritates him in some other way when he is in this state of unfulfilled desire, he will always become angry.” Aristotle defines anger as “The impulse, accompanied by pain, for visible retaliation in response to visible disparagement by a man who has no business disparaging one or people dear to one.” The pleasure of anger is found in the prospect it brings of retaliating against the one who originally caused the pain. The possibility of payback energizes and motivates anger.

A crucial Aristotelian perspective is his familiar idea about learning to be “angry on the right occasions and with the right persons, and also in the right manner, and at the

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8 Ibid., 73.
9 Ibid., 26.
10 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
right season, and for the right length of time.”¹³ In general terms he describes virtue as “a kind of moderation, inasmuch as it aims at the mean or moderate amount.”¹⁴ Regarding anger, he contends,

In the matter of anger also we find excess and deficiency and moderation. The characters themselves hardly have recognized names, but as the moderate man is here called gentle, we will call his character gentleness; of those who go into extremes, we may take the term wrathful for him who exceeds, with wrathfulness for the vice, and wrathless for him who is deficient, with wrathlessness for his character.¹⁵

The key to possessing virtue is training to achieve moderation and avoid the excessive and deficient extremes. This produces the end result of happiness.¹⁶ When virtue is at either extreme, it is actually a vice. Excessive anger is “wrathfulness,” and deficient anger is “wrathlessness.” The extremes of anger stir the kettle of trouble. Aristotle urges people to not “lose balance.”¹⁷

Aristotle says, “Gentleness is moderation with respect to anger.”¹⁸ This is critically important to the purposes of this thesis. Aristotle acknowledges the “relative mean” varies depending on the person. He writes, “Different natures are inclined to different things.”¹⁹ At the same time, as a general guide, the right amount of anger in any

¹³ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 80.
¹⁴ Ibid., 31.
¹⁵ Ibid., 34.
¹⁶ Ibid., 30.
¹⁷ Ibid., 80.
¹⁸ Ibid.
¹⁹ Ibid., 37.
situation resembles gentleness. This is instructive when considering if and when anger is useful or productive. Righteous gentleness evokes quite a different image than righteous anger.

There are occasions in which Aristotle believes anger is virtuous. He does not, in other words, advocate for the elimination of all anger. Anger has potential to serve a benevolent purpose. Deficiency is the failure to be angry, and “There are things at which we ought to be angry.” If a friend is being attacked, anger is necessary. In those instances, the motivation behind the anger is the key factor in determining the legitimacy and acceptability of the anger. He cautions, however, that anger is a difficult emotion to properly handle. He writes,

It is not easy to define how, and with whom, and at what, and for how long one ought to be angry—how far it is right to go, and at what point misconduct begins. He who errs slightly from the right course is not blamed, whether it be on the side of excess or of deficiency; for sometimes we praise those who fall short and call them gentle, and sometimes those who behave hardly are called manly, as being able to rule. But what amount and kind of error makes a man blamable can scarcely be defined; for it depends upon the particular circumstances of each case, and can only be decided by immediate perception.

Statements and definitions do not capture the complexity of anger in real life situations. Aristotle acknowledges the need for each person to know themselves and their specific vulnerabilities, to “bend ourselves in the opposite direction; for by keeping well away

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20 Ibid., 43.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 57.
23 Ibid., 82.
from error we shall fall into the middle course.”\(^\text{24}\) Aristotle knew the difficulties and dangers of anger. Moderation is not easy to achieve. His insights about anger’s complexity are remarkably relevant in the present context where anger is ubiquitous.

**On Anger by Lucius Annaeus Seneca**

Seneca’s perspective on anger is included in this research for three reasons. First, he was born around the time of Jesus’ birth, so his life and work unfold in first century Roman culture as the early church begins to emerge. His ethical insights were favorably received by the early Christian community.\(^\text{25}\) As a privileged Roman philosopher, his social standing was higher than common Jews or Christians, but his perspective provides a culturally relevant alternative to the teaching in the Gospels and New Testament. Second, as a Stoic philosopher, Seneca’s core convictions about feelings and passion differ significantly from those of Aristotle. Both seek to articulate the essence of the good life, but Seneca prioritizes the power of rational thought to govern the emotions. Finally, though he lived nearly two thousand years ago, Seneca’s Stoicism is a helpful framework to process the Christian community’s relationship with anger. In the opening line of his book, he writes, “You’ve pressed me Novatus, to prescribe a way of soothing anger: from this I infer that you’ve rightly come to fear this passion, especially and above all, as foul and frenzied.”\(^\text{26}\) His viewpoint on anger is shaped by the practical experience of being

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 37.


\(^{26}\) Ibid., 14.
asked to elaborate on it. Stoicism demands that the only good passion is eradicated passion.\textsuperscript{27} As such, Seneca is an ancient voice advocating the transformation of anger.

Seneca defines anger as “the desire to take vengeance for a wrong or, as Posidonius says, the desire to punish the person by whom you reckon you were unjustly harmed. Some have defined it this way: anger is the arousal of the mind to harm the person who has either harmed oneself or wished to do so. (Lactantius, On the Anger of God, 17.13).”\textsuperscript{28} Similar to Aristotle, Seneca understands anger as the desire to repay the source of the pain. Anger has “defiance as its defining trait.”\textsuperscript{29} It is “hungry for payback.”\textsuperscript{30}

Seneca believes anger is unnatural in human beings and does not produce anything good.\textsuperscript{31} There is no circumstance, regardless of how unjust it may be, where anger is a righteous or useful response. For Seneca, anger is in fact “The greatest evil.”\textsuperscript{32} It “turns everything from what is best and most righteous to the opposite.”\textsuperscript{33} Reason is the highest attribute of humanity and distinguishes human beings from all other creatures.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 16.
Seneca calls Anger “reason’s enemy.” He writes, “Does anyone, then, show greater ignorance of the nature of things than the person who ascribes this bestial, destructive vice to nature’s best and most polished creation?” Seneca’s perspective prohibits anger even in war, or when confronting injustice. In these instances, many moderns believe anger is legitimate, but Seneca rejects anger in every situation because it is “a fault of the mind subject to our will.” Thus, anger is not like walking into a blizzard and immediately feeling cold. Anger then is not inevitable, something that must happen to everyone. Anger only occurs when the mind and the will are in agreement. In war, the wise and rational soldier uses the anger of their opponent against them.

Seneca opposes all forms of “righteous anger.” He believes in defending others who are under attack or wrongly accused, but doing so “willingly, deliberately, and prudently, not impulsively and furiously.” Help is given, in other words, but never motivated by anger or with anger. Anger employed in defense of another is, for Seneca, a sign of a “weak mind” because, as he declares, “Virtue should never be assisted by

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34 Ibid., 17.
35 Ibid., 18.
36 Ibid., 35.
38 Ibid., 24-25.
vice.” He writes, “Anger doesn’t assist virtue; it substitutes for virtue.” This has serious implications in the ongoing debate about “righteous anger.”

Furthermore, the mind is the key to overcoming anger. Seneca writes, “We hold that anger ventures nothing on its own but acts only with the mind’s approval.” Training the mind to apply reason in the heat of a moment enables a measured and controlled response. When anger begins to rise, Seneca advises, “The best course is to reject straightway the initial prickings of anger, to fight against its first sparks, and to struggle not to succumb to it.” He recommends patience throughout the process: “One must always take one’s time . . . Punishment postponed can still be exacted, but punishment exacted cannot be undone.” When anger is permitted in any degree it eventually becomes uncontrollable. Seneca writes, “Not a jot of reason remains once the passion has been let in.” The “first mental jolt” of the passion is an involuntary movement over which people have no control. This jolt occurs in the course of daily life experiences and is not wrong or preventable. The second movement is a rational choice

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39 Ibid., 22-25.
40 Ibid., 26.
41 Ibid., 34.
42 Ibid., 21.
43 Ibid., 50.
44 Ibid., 21.
46 Ibid., 36.
to retaliate or seek revenge. This second movement is where a trained and disciplined mind can choose an alternative to anger. Therefore, it is best to train children so they learn to avoid anger. The third movement is the emotional response in any direction for the purpose of harming the other. There is no possibility of reasoning through this movement. It is simply too late in the process.

The Legacy of Martin Luther

The relevance of Martin Luther to this thesis is not his teachings on anger, but his legendary example of it. Luther started the Protestant Reformation with a significant and aggressive confrontation of Roman Catholicism. His example established a precedence for future generations of Protestants Evangelicals. Luther is well-known and celebrated for his love of anger. In Joan Acocella’s words, “To oppose was his joy.” Luther famously endorsed anger when he stated, “I find nothing that promotes work better than angry fervor. For when I wish to compose, write, pray and preach well, I must be angry.

47 Ibid., 46.

48 Ibid., 36-37.


It refreshes my entire system, my mind is sharpened, and all unpleasant thoughts and depression fade away.”

Many of his writings convey vicious assaults on his Roman Catholic opponents. He liberally offered personal insults to emphasize his point. One of his favorite targets was the Pope Leo X, of whom he wrote near the end of his life, “You are the head of all the worst scoundrels on earth, a vicar of the devil, an enemy of God, an adversary of Christ, a destroyer of Christ’s churches; a teacher of lies, blasphemies, and idolatries; an arch-thief and robber.” Aristotelian gentleness was not high on the Reformer’s list of priorities. His use of profanity to berate his opponents was celebrated by common, ordinary Germans who resonated with his insolence. In one especially contemptuous writing, he insults the pope by calling him “Avarice.” In another piece, he calls Leo X a mouthpiece of Satan: “God has commanded us to keep word and faith even with an enemy, but you have taken it upon yourself to lose his commandment and have ordained in your heretical, anti-Christian decretals that you have his power. Thus through your voice and pen the wicked Satan lies as he has never lied before.”

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52 Martin Luther, Off the Record with Martin Luther: An Original Translation of the Table Talks, trans. and ed. Charles Daudert (Kalamazoo, MI: Hansa-Hewlett, 2009), entry no. 2410b, 110.


54 Acocella, “How Martin Luther Changed the World.”


56 Ibid., 85.
Luther’s anger is often overlooked because his reforms reshaped Christianity and launched the Protestant movement. Therefore, his vitriol is sometimes rationalized as “righteous indignation.” Since medieval Catholicism was a corrupt mess, and Luther was God’s appointed agent to purify it, people overlook the means he employed to accomplish his mission. As a prophet, Luther was the Jeremiah or Ezekiel of his time, confronting religious corruption with zealous fury. Yet, the way Luther fulfilled his calling, became inseparable from his message. Luther is not the cause of every historical uprising, revolt, or religiously-motivated conflict. It is important, however, to consider his anger’s ongoing impact on the character of Protestant Evangelicalism.

**Anger and Forgiveness by Martha Nussbaum**

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum is a convert to Judaism, yet her perspectives on anger and forgiveness possess the quality of a “thick” Christian faith.\(^\text{57}\) Her opposition to anger, and suspicion of transactional forgiveness, reflect the upside-down way of the kingdom Jesus calls “The narrow road that leads to life” (Mt 7:14). Her thoughtful analysis of anger’s destructiveness, and her emphasis on its “irrationality and stupidity,”\(^\text{58}\) distinguishes her from those who creatively try to legitimize anger.

Like Seneca, for Nussbaum, anger hinges on payback or retribution directed at the one responsible for causing the pain.\(^\text{59}\) This pain is caused by a wrongful act by the

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\(^{59}\) Ibid., 15, 17.
perpetrator, or, more commonly, a status-injury.\textsuperscript{60} According to Nussbaum, anger in response to a wrongful act tries to “return pain for pain.”\textsuperscript{61} Anger that results from a status-injury tries to lower the status of the wrongdoer by returning pain or humiliation.\textsuperscript{62} Nussbaum believes the current epidemic of anger in suburbia is driven by status-injuries where “People are always ranking themselves against one another and where the central case of wrongdoing is indeed a down-ranking.”\textsuperscript{63} The victim is not concerned with the broader justice issues in the wider world represented by their injury. They are not worried about others who have similarly suffered. Status-injuries trigger narcissism and how one might regain their lost standing.\textsuperscript{64}

Interestingly, Nussbaum makes virtually no allowance for anger in any situation. She writes, “Anger is always normatively problematic, whether in the personal or in the public realm.”\textsuperscript{65} The idea payback rights an initial wrong or accomplishes anything good is, in her view, “magical thinking.”\textsuperscript{66} Anger is not an essential or helpful motivation to confront or correct social injustices. Oppressive injustice calls for an anger-free response

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 19-20.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 24-25.
of what Nussbaum calls, “revolutionary justice.”67 She explains, “If we examine successful strategies for revolutionary justice over the past hundred years, we see immediately that three of the most prominent—and stably successful—were conducted with a profound commitment to non-anger, though definitely not in a spirit of acquiescence.”68 Anger’s productivity is very limited. As she puts it, the “payback fantasy is profoundly misleading [and] The emotion is highly likely to lead us astray.”69

Nussbaum connects the typical understanding of forgiveness with the payback mentality.70 If the perpetrator is “really sorry,” and is sufficiently contrite to the satisfaction of the victim, forgiveness is granted. Therefore, forgiveness is transactional and conditional. If enough groveling is offered, then forgiveness is granted. This “transactional forgiveness” perpetuates status-injury anger. The groveler is inferior to the forgiver.71 Nussbaum advocates for a “transition mentality” that anticipates a restored future where enemies are friends and collaborators of justice.72 Anger is waived off in favor of generosity, love, and humor to bring forth goodness in the future.73 Many of Nussbaum’s insights on anger and forgiveness are grounded in a robust biblical theology of anger and spiritual transformation.

67 Ibid., 211.
68 Ibid., 212.
69 Ibid., 39.
70 Ibid., 33.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., 11-12.
The Gift of Anger by Carol Saussy

Anger is a “difficult emotion,” and a secondary emotion, behind which lies fear, hurt, frustration, disappointment, or sadness.\(^7\) It is a signal something in life, relationships, or society is threatened and needs to change.\(^5\) Gender, race, class, religion, and social location influence one’s understanding, experience, and expression of anger.\(^6\) There is a broad spectrum of anger representing its various degrees and manifestations. “There are degrees of anger, moving from its softened, often disguised form—annoyance—to its most intense form—destructive rage.”\(^7\) Saussy distinguishes between healthy and negative anger. Healthy or holy anger is “A response to the experience of being ignored, injured, trivialized, or rejected or as an empathetic response to the witnessing of someone else being ignored, injured, trivialized, or rejected.”\(^8\) It can be a life-giving force for creativity and productivity.\(^9\) Anger is an appropriate response to injustice and other social wrongs such as racism.\(^8\)

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\(^5\) Ibid., 16.

\(^6\) Ibid., 3.

\(^7\) Ibid., 15.

\(^8\) Ibid., 16.

\(^9\) Ibid., 9.

\(^8\) Ibid., 16.
Negative, or sinful anger is “A vengeful, hostile, sometimes explosive reaction to an interpersonal or social situation that aims to injure persons or institutions and tears at the fabric of society.”81 The key to discerning whether anger is holy or sinful depends on one’s self-awareness of anger and the amount of respect for the person or institution that provokes the anger. Motivations are often mixed so any given anger episode is likely a combination of self-seeking and justice-seeking so discernment is important.82 Finally, since Saussy believes anger can serve a redemptive purpose, it is critical to understand the particular details of any given experience of anger, to discern the process to deal with it in wise and healthy ways.83

_Anger: Taming A Powerful Emotion by Gary Chapman_

Gary Chapman’s experience as a Christian psychologist informs and shapes his perspectives on anger. His insights emerge from his hands-on experiences helping people and relationships navigate the complexities of the emotion of anger. For Chapman, anger is a response to a particular event or situation one notices or experiences.84 Similar to Saussy, he believes anger is fueled by underlying feelings of disappointment, hurt, rejection, and embarrassment.85 He describes anger as a “cluster of emotions involving

81 Ibid.
82 Ibid., 116-117.
83 Ibid., 117-118.
85 Ibid.
the body, the mind, and the will,” so it is a whole being experience.86 “In all anger there is first a provoking event; second, an interpretation of that event; and third the rising emotion of anger. Physiological changes take place in the body, and we are ready for action.”87 It is aggressive or passive, explosive or suppressed, outward or inward, and instantly or gradually destructive.88 Chapman’s strategy for dealing with anger is indicated by the title of his book. Anger is to be “tamed,” or “handled.”89

Chapman categorizes anger into two kinds. Definitive anger is a legitimate response to an actual wrongdoing. Distorted anger is not a legitimate response because it is a reaction to a perceived wrongdoing. The frustration, hurt, or embarrassment behind the anger is real emotion, but the perpetrator did not actually do anything wrong. The anger on display during freeway commutes is frequently motivated by perceived, not actual wrongdoings. The epidemic of anger in today’s world is more accurately an epidemic of distorted anger.90

Chapman argues anger is rooted in God’s holiness and love.91 God’s deep concern for justice and righteousness ignite his anger. As Chapman puts it, “Thus, when God sees evil, anger is His logical response to injustice or unrighteousness.”92 Since humans are

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86 Ibid., 18.
87 Ibid., 62.
88 Ibid., 83-92.
89 Ibid., 67.
90 Ibid., 58.
91 Ibid., 20.
92 Ibid., 21.
created in the image of God, they have a moral sense of right and wrong. Anger is stirred
by actual or perceived moral wrongs. He writes,

What we are establishing is that anger originates in the perception that something
is wrong and that this sense of morality (some things are right and some things are
wrong) finds its root in the fact that we are created in the image of a God who is
holy and has established moral law for the good of His creatures. Anger is not
evil; anger is not sinful; anger is not a part of our fallen nature; anger is not Satan
at work in our lives. Quite the contrary. Anger is evidence that we are made in
God’s image; it demonstrates that we still have some concern for justice and
righteousness in spite of our fallen estate . . . The experience of anger is evidence
of our nobility, not our depravity. We should thank God for our capacity to
experience anger. When one ceases to experience anger, one has lost her sense of
moral concern. Without moral concern, the world would be a dreadful place
indeed.93

Anger is “not sinful” or “part of our fallen nature” and it reveals “nobility, not our
depravity.”94 Chapman links anger with morality when he writes, “When one ceases to
experience anger, one has lost her sense of moral concern.”95 These perspectives have
significant implications for the transformation of anger. Since anger is a divine attribute
and part of the divine image in human beings, it is not necessary to transform or eradicate
it, but tame it. It is, in fact, immoral to be free of anger. It is not possible, in other words,
to respond righteously to anti-shalom, injustice, sin, oppression, or evil without anger.
This contradicts Willard’s perspective that “There is nothing that can be done with anger
that cannot be done better without it.”96

93 Ibid., 23.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
96 Willard, The Divine Conspiracy, 151.
Angry Like Jesus by Sarah Sumner

As indicated in this brief literature review, there is disagreement about whether anger is ever good, necessary, or justified. Saussy believes anger can be “productive, appropriate, life-enhancing, holy” and is a righteous and moral response to injustice and oppression. 97 A common argument historically and at present is that the oppression of the weak by the powerful, whatever its form, demands an angry response.98 Theologian Sarah Sumner advocates for this perspective. Sumner writes, “Some things can’t be done for the sake of the kingdom of God apart from the gift of Jesus’ anger.”99 Sumner’s perspective is based on the example of Jesus. She outlines fifteen stories where Jesus was angry. Borrowing Aristotle’s cadence she writes, “He was angry and not angry in all the right ways and at all the right times.”100 The person who passionately cares is motivated by Godly anger to take action to confront wrongs.101 Sumner claims the fall of humanity “traces back to selfish angerlessness.”102 Hence, Adam and Eve failed because they were not angry about the serpent’s temptation (Gn 3:1-5). Sumner suggests they committed a sin of omission because anger was the right response.103 Sumner believes there is hardly a

98 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 35.
100 Ibid., 32.
101 Ibid., 140.
102 Ibid., 148.
103 Ibid., 144.
more egregious sin than “inirascibility.” She writes, “Inirascible Christians have no zeal. On the contrary, they take pride in their lack of zealousness. They don’t realize their inaction renders them guilty. They don’t see their culpability because they’re patting themselves on the back for not being angry.” For Sumner, there seems to be a link between zeal, passion, and anger as if they are inextricably connected.

The title of her book suggests Jesus got angry, anger can be good, therefore people can and should emulate Jesus’ anger. She offers cautions and concerns about the dangers of anger, but spends little time explaining how broken human beings can become the kind of people who skillfully and wisely utilize such a volatile and complex emotion. Her emphasis in saying “like Jesus” seems to permit getting angry, but she does not unpack what Jesus’ anger actually looked like and how it differed from typical displays of human anger. In a culture and Christian community where the kettle of anger is already boiling, it seems spurious to offer Jesus’ endorsement without careful consideration of his unique interior life, intimacy with the Father, and perfectly holy expressions of anger that may not in any way resemble today’s anger.

It is evident from this brief literature review that there are a variety of issues and perspectives related to the legitimacy or illegitimacy of anger as a human emotion and response. The ongoing differences of opinion about anger that exist between philosophers, theologians, and psychologists must be evaluated against the biblical perspective on this complex topic.

104 Ibid., 141
105 Ibid., 140.
CHAPTER 4

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

This chapter examines representative biblical passages to develop a working theology of anger. The chapter is written with a keen awareness of the inherent risks of saying too much or too little and the impossibility of exhaustively covering the subject. The chapter begins with considerations from the Hebrew bible, followed by Jesus’ teaching and example, and finally the epistles. The final section of this chapter proposes a practical theology on anger.

Hebrew Scriptures

There are numerous examples of human and divine anger found in the narrative sections of the Hebrew Bible. In addition, certain passages in the Psalms and Proverbs offer practical teaching and wisdom on the perils of anger. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine every biblical reference, but representative passages and examples provide an overall hermeneutic of anger.
There are a variety of words for anger and wrath in the original language of the Hebrew Scriptures. The specific meaning of these words helps clarify the components of anger and distinguish the various forms and degrees of human and divine anger. This section provides a brief overview of some Hebrew terms to clarify the meaning of anger in the Hebrew Bible.

Psalm 78:49 reads, “He unleashed against them his hot anger, his wrath, indignation and hostility.” This single verse contains multiple biblical terms for God’s anger and wrath. “Hot anger” translates the Hebrew words haron and ap which are frequently translated “fierce anger” in the English Bible. The basic meaning of haron is “heat” or “burning.”

According to theologian Gerard Van Gronigen, the root word hara “emphasizes the kindling of anger, like the kindling of a fire, or the heat of the anger, once started.”

That is, anger is beginning to heat up or burn, similar to a fire that is beginning to blaze as it is stoked and kindled. Haron is used in reference to both God’s anger and human anger. It is translated “fierce” in Exodus 32:12 where Moses pleads with God to turn from his “fierce anger.” In Genesis 4:5-6, Cain becomes “very hara” because God prefers Abel’s offering over his. God asks Cain, “Why are you hara?” Why are you “heating up” in anger? In Numbers 11:1, hara is translated “aroused” as God’s “anger was aroused” by the complaints of his people.

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107 Ibid.
Ap is by far the most common word for anger in the Hebrew Scriptures.\textsuperscript{108} It is usually translated “anger,” but literally means nose, nostril, face, or countenance. This is the word in Genesis 2:7 where the writer relates, “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being” (emphasis added). The nose and nostrils are essential to breathe, so they are necessary for life. Ap is translated “anger” because the rising emotion of anger often becomes visible in the reddening of the nose or face, or the flaring of the nostrils. As anger is kindled within the body, one’s face and nose frequently convey the rising anger.

Both humans and God experience ap, but God’s anger, even when fierce, is never sinful or wrong. It gradually builds or is kindled in God, but he does not experience violent or momentary outbursts of ap.\textsuperscript{109} In addition, it is important to note the limitations of language in trying to describe God’s anger. “God is spirit,” so he does not have a literal face, nose, or nostrils (Jn 4:24). The human perception of “kindling anger,” in other words, is an insufficient image to precisely describe and understand the totality of God’s anger. In 2 Samuel 6:7, for example, God strikes Uzzah dead because Uzzah touched the ark of the covenant when the oxen stumbled. In this verse, “The Lord’s ap burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act.” God’s action, while difficult to understand, is not a heated outburst of anger unleashed in the moment. Similarly, in Exodus 32:10 God is displeased with the unfaithfulness of his people and he says to Moses, “Now leave me alone so that my ap may burn against them and that I may destroy

\textsuperscript{108} Gerard Van Gronigen, \textit{Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament}, 808.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 58.
them.” God’s anger is rising because of the unfaithfulness of his people, but his response is not the impulsive or erratic rage of one who is emotionally out of control.

Another term in Psalm 78:49 is the Hebrew word ebra, which is translated as “his wrath.” It is a term that links the ideas of pride and anger. The basic meaning is “overflow” or “excess.” It is a derivative of a word that means “movement.”110 Ebra conveys the idea of moving beyond or “surpassing measure.”111 It means fury, or even rage, in response to deep dissatisfaction. Anger builds to the point where it can no longer be restrained or held back. When ebra is in reference to human anger, Van Gronigen describes it as “cruel and merciless (Am 1:11) having wounded pride as its motivation.”112 God’s ebra “burns, overflows, sweeps away everything before it.”113 Isaiah 13:9 says, “See the day of the Lord is coming—a cruel day with wrath (ebra) and fierce anger.” His ebra is unstoppable and all-encompassing toward everything displeasing to him.

Another word commonly used for anger is the Hebrew term hema. It means “heat, hot, displeasure” and is generally used to express what Van Gronigen calls “the concept of inner, emotional heat which rises and is fanned to varying degrees.”114 It evokes the idea of the process of becoming increasingly angry. Esau’s fury (hema) over Jacob’s

110 Ibid., 641.
111 Ibid., 643.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid., 374-375.
deception depicts the intensity of the heat that had risen in Esau and needed time to subside (Gn 27:44). Proverbs 6:34 reads, “For jealousy arouses a husband’s fury [hema].” Conversely, Proverbs 15:1 advises, “A gentle answer turns away wrath [hema].” Gentleness, in other words, cools the heat of anger and causes rising fury to subside. God also experiences hema at the fickleness and unfaithfulness of his people. Nahum 1:2 relates, “The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath [hema]. The Lord takes vengeance on his foes and vents his wrath against his enemies.” In some way, God “heats up” over the disobedience of his people.

_Qesep_ is another Hebrew word typically translated indignation or wrath. It describes God’s righteous punishment in response to the unfaithfulness of his people or the hard-heartedness of anyone who rebels against him (Dt 29:27). Van Gronigen writes, “When either people from without, or the covenant people themselves, profane, thwart or reject this love of the covenant God, God expresses his vexation, agitation, displeasure, anger and/or hatred: he pours out his wrath.” Careful consideration of the meaning and implications of God’s wrath is important in this thesis because it either provides a divine example of anger to mimic, or a unique divine right and responsibility. Van Gronigen summarizes an important perspective when he writes,

> The wrath of God, then, must not be considered a permanent attribute of God; it is an ever-present divine potential because of the ever-present divine qualities of love, holiness, and jealousy . . . The working out of God’s wrath is tempered by his grace and mercy. In fact, it is in the midst of wrath that God may reveal his mercy (Hab 3:2), manifesting and bestowing his grace upon guilty sinners (Gen

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115 Ibid., 808.

116 Ibid.
3:15). There is no question of “despotic rage” and there is nothing of “the demonic in God’s nature” which leads him to pour out his wrath or to determine the object, method and occasion for it apart from consideration of condign justice.\textsuperscript{117}

Whatever God’s \textit{qeseq} is, it is not an uncontrollable, irrational, overly emotional divine reaction to human rebellion.

There are similarities between the various Hebrew words for anger and wrath. In many instances, the words are interchangeable. God and humans are both described in the Hebrew Bible as at times being angry or acting in anger. The general sense of the words is anger is an emotion that gradually rises within God or people. Anger is kindled within, and typically finds expression in the body and through various reactions and responses to the instigating source. God’s anger is always consistent with his love and holiness while human anger is sometimes out of control and irrational.

The Wrath of God

Biblical scholar Greg Boyd writes, “Our attitude toward God is completely determined by our mental picture of him.”\textsuperscript{118} An unhealthy fear of God is one reason why people avoid him. He is perceived by some as a deity who prowls the universe looking for miscreants to punish and, if necessary, destroy for non-conformity to his standards. Some television preachers reinforce this stern image by waxing ferociously about the perils of sin and God’s imminent violent judgment on those who refuse to repent. In a

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{118} Gregory A. Boyd., \textit{Is God To Blame?: Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Suffering} (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 15.
similar vein, a local pastor in Folsom, California intimated online that the November 2018 wild fires across California were a sobering reminder of the coming day when the fire of God’s judgment would consume all things.\(^{119}\) God is regularly portrayed as an angry deity who sends fires, natural disasters, and diseases to arrest the attention of sleeping sinners.

Anthropomorphism distorts human understandings and descriptions of God’s wrath. At the same time, as Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel writes, “It is, indeed, impossible to close one’s eyes to the words of the wrath of God in Scripture.”\(^{120}\) The God of the Hebrew Scriptures only restrains his anger for so long. Isaiah 13:9-13 graphically describes the reality of God’s wrath,

> See, the day of the Lord is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger— to make the land desolate and destroy sinners within it. The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless. I will make people scarcer than pure gold, more rare than the gold of Ophir. Therefore I will make the heavens tremble; and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the Almighty, in the day of his burning anger.

The prophet Nahum asks, “Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him” (Na 1:6). Psalm 95:10-11 reads, “For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, ‘They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways.’ So I

\(^{119}\) After receiving negative feedback, the pastor removed this Facebook post.

declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’” Countless other Old Testament passages refer to the fierceness of God’s wrath.

The Golden Calf Incident

A shocking description of God’s wrath is found in Exodus 32:9 which reads, “I have seen these people,” the Lord said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation”. Moses pleads with God on behalf of the Israelites and “Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened” (Ex 32:14). Some suggest this passage portrays an image of God pacing the floor, fed up with his people, yet Moses somehow calms God down allowing a cooler head to prevail. The story becomes more bizarre as Moses instructs the Levites to enact God’s judgment by going “back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor” (Ex 32:28). Taken at face value, this account reveals God approving the mass murder of people he also alleges to love. Approximately 3,000 Israelites were slaughtered by their own priests. God’s anger, however, is not yet satisfied. Moses intercedes again and offers himself as a sacrifice for their sins. God ultimately decides to forgive, but not before promising to punish the people in the future: “However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin” (Ex 32:33). Even after the mass slaughter, God is apparently still seething, so “The Lord struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made” (Ex 32:34-35).
This story disturbs because it contradicts the image of a God of love, patience, and grace. God seems red-faced with anger and prepared to destroy the Israelites and restart with Moses as the new father of an upgraded “great nation” (Ex 32:8). He is volatile, and when offended, erupts with lethal anger. Commentators often describe God’s reaction to the golden calf with a casual acknowledgement of his wrath and brief reference to the reality of his judgment against sinners.121 These descriptions do not adequately capture the practical implications of God’s actions and his readiness to exterminate his people. Even after Moses calms him, God authorizes murderous violence, inflicts his people with a plague, and promises more punishment in the future. God appears emotionally unstable, vindictive, and unforgiving. In other words, he responds like a frustrated human when he does not get his way or is status-injured or offended. It is crucial to grapple with this depiction of God and reconcile it with the Old Testament’s description of him as being “slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion” (Nm 14:18).

His anger is crucial to understand because, as theologian Walter Brueggemann writes, “Our discernment of God has remarkable sociological implications.”122 The way God relates with and reacts to others is a model Christians imitate. In the words of Heschel, “The prophets, we are told, spoke of a God Who stands for all the virtues we

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121 John H. Sailhamer, The Pentateuch As Narrative (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 312-313.

should like to see in human beings.”123 The “virtue” of God’s wrath often justifies human anger.124 It is crucial, therefore, to carefully discern stories like the golden calf to grasp what it actually says and does not say about divine wrath.

The Hebrew Bible describes God as one who feels, or “The God of pathos.”125 He is not detached, barking out orders from a remote corner of the cosmos, but close at hand, intimately aware of the heartaches of this broken world. Heschel writes,

He does not simply command and expect obedience; He is also moved and affected by what happens in the world, and reacts accordingly. Events and human actions arouse in Him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath. He is not conceived as judging the world in detachment. He reacts in an intimate and subjective manner, and thus determines the value of events. Quite obviously in the biblical view, man’s deeds may move Him, affect Him, grieve Him or, on the other hand, gladden and please Him. This notion that God can be intimately affected, that He possesses not merely intelligence and will, but also pathos, basically defines the prophetic consciousness of God.126

To simplify, one of God’s eternal attributes is that he is affected, in some way, by human action and choice. God’s pathos, including his anger or wrath, is a response to humanity.127 His anger, however, must be understood within the larger context of his holiness, perfection, love, and goodness. His anger is genuinely divine, so it is shaped by God’s love and goodness and perfectly consistent with his overall character. When, or if,

123 Heschel, The Prophets, 358.
125 Heschel, The Prophets, 288.
126 Ibid., 288-289.
127 Ibid., 371-374.
God’s wrath is understood anthropopathically, it resembles volatile human anger. Once again, Heschel offers helpful and clarifying insight,

The prophets never thought that God’s anger is something that cannot be accounted for, unpredictable, irrational. It is never a spontaneous outburst, but a reaction occasioned by the conduct of man. Indeed, it is the major task of the prophet to set forth the facts that account for it, to insist that the anger of God is not a blind, explosive force, operating without reference to the behavior of man, but rather voluntary and purposeful, motivated by concern for right and wrong.¹²⁸

Heschel identifies a key factor in understanding God’s anger. “The nature of the divine pathos is a mystery to a man . . . The prophets had to use anthropomorphic language in order to convey His nonanthropomorphic Being.”¹²⁹

The Bible was written by particular people living in a particular historical time. The divine inspiration empowering their writing did not make them disengaged and objective scribes. The perspective, training, and understanding of God at the time the biblical authors wrote surely influenced their content and perspective. Their interpretation of God’s reactions and responses are imperfect, limited by language, and by their own understanding. As Heschel states, “All our utterances about Him are woefully inadequate. But when taken to be allusions rather than descriptions, understatements rather than adequate accounts, they are aids in evoking our sense of His realness.”¹³⁰ The biblical writers portrayed God the best they could at the time they wrote, given the experience they had and the limitations of language.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 362.
¹²⁹ Ibid., 354.
¹³⁰ Ibid., 355.
Anthropomorphism and anthropopathism are influential factors to consider when discerning a biblical theology of anger. When finite humans attempt to describe an infinite God’s character or emotions, they are limited by their own ability to comprehend God’s ways, and by the limitations of language. Human words are not able to fully or perfectly describe the actions and emotions of God. God is moved by injustice. He is disappointed by human sin. His standard of holiness will not be compromised. His reactions to human sin and disobedience, however, are beyond the typical human response, and beyond a human’s ability to perfectly describe. He is ultimately motivated by care.\textsuperscript{131} God’s anger is a temporary response to a broken world, or as Heschel describes it, “not an emotion he delights in, but an emotion he deplores.”\textsuperscript{132}

Cain and Abel

The story of Cain and Abel is important in developing a biblical perspective on anger for at least two reasons. First, it is the first major event recorded in the Hebrew Bible after the sinful choices of Adam and Eve. It contains the first use of the word sin.\textsuperscript{133} The social implications of the fall are graphically displayed in the account of Cain and Abel. Post-fall relationships, including and perhaps especially familial, are contaminated by competition, jealousy, anger, and violence. In a way, Cain’s anger and violence toward Abel foreshadows Matthew 5:21-26, where Jesus emphasizes the primacy of

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 374.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 377.

\textsuperscript{133} Cornelius Plantinga, \textit{Not the Way it’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin} (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 158.
transforming anger in the journey of becoming kingdom-centered. When Jesus plunges into the details of human life and relationships in his great sermon, he begins with the subject of anger. Willard notes, “It is the elimination of anger and contempt that [Jesus] presents as the first and fundamental step toward the rightness of the kingdom heart.”

Secondly, God communicates directly with Cain as he hovers on the brink of a murderous outburst. God watches Cain struggle with this temptation and tries to guide and help. This intimate interaction between God and a man on the verge of anger is a unique Biblical story offering timeless insights into the various issues involved in the human struggle with anger.

Abel was a shepherd and Cain was a farmer. Cain brought a sacrifice from the fruits of his labor and Abel “brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast” (Gn 4:3-5). Old Testament scholar H.C. Leupold writes, “With true psychological insight the author narrates how this strong anger displayed itself outwardly.” God disapproved of Cain’s offering. Perhaps Cain’s anger initially targeted God, but as Leupold suggests, “Cain’s anger pivots. He had hated the God who was so hard to satisfy. But then, in his anger, Cain slowly swivels around until he has Abel in his sights . . . A poisonous little

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fire is eating Cain’s innards. And his terrible conclusion is that only his brother’s blood can put it out.”\textsuperscript{136} Cain’s anger provoked him to lash out and retaliate against his brother.

God asks Cain two important questions in Genesis 4:6. “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?” God is inviting reflection on the root reasons behind his anger. The question “why” invites Cain to self-examine and allow God to calm the turmoil of his inner world. In asking why, God shows in a post-fall world, there are often deeper and darker motivations behind human anger. It is crucial to uncover what is brewing beneath the surface of the anger. “Sin is crouching at the door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it” (Gn 4:7). Leupold comments, “This crouching beast is not a mild, passive thing, a tame leopard or some harmless pet. Rather it thirsts after your blood.”\textsuperscript{137} Once again, God offers rich insight into the deeper realities of anger. Cain is in the midst of an internal war, and he must rule over it. He cannot succeed in his own strength. The beast within is only restrained by a more powerful force. In Leupold’s words, “In the strength, which the Word of God here offers to man as a means of grace, and supplies for man, he is to rule over and master the threatening danger.”\textsuperscript{138} It is not enough to contain, manage, or tame the crouching beast. It must be mastered. Cain’s only hope is to grant God access to his inner being. Cain refuses and violently kills Abel.

Other Passages and Examples

The Hebrew Bible is full of evidence of God’s emotions. When his people are

\textsuperscript{136} Plantinga, \textit{Not the Way it’s Supposed to Be}, 158-159.

\textsuperscript{137} Leupold, \textit{Exposition of Genesis 1}, 201.

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
unfaithful, his anger is aroused. The specific look and feel of God’s anger in the Old Testament often makes him appear worse than a hot-headed commuter in rush hour traffic. Regardless of the uncertainty about the particular look and feel of God’s anger, the Old Testament authors depict him as angered by human unfaithfulness and quick to punish those who reject him. For example, after their liberation from Egypt, as the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, they “complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord, and when he heard them his anger was aroused” (Nm 11:1). God’s anger is awakened by unfaithfulness. The arousal of God’s anger is a repeated concept in the Hebrew Scriptures. The exile in Babylon is another example where God’s anger manifests itself. Jeremiah 44:2-6 reads,

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “You saw the great disaster I brought on Jerusalem and on all the towns of Judah. Today they lie deserted and in ruins because of the evil they have done. They aroused my anger by burning incense to and worshiping other gods that neither they nor you nor your ancestors ever knew. Again and again I sent my servants the prophets, who said, “Do not do this detestable thing that I hate!” But they did not listen or pay attention; they did not turn from their wickedness or stop burning incense to other gods. Therefore my fierce anger was poured out; it raged against the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem and made them the desolate ruins they are today.

His “fierce anger” (Dt 13:17), another repeated theme in the Old Testament, is awakened after Israelite unfaithfulness exhausts God’s patience.

The Hebrew Bible also describes God’s anger as “burning against” people or nations (Nm 12:9). A disturbing example is found in 2 Samuel 6. It recounts the strange story of Uzzah, who reached out and touched the ark of the covenant in order to steady it. 2 Samuel 6:7 says, “The Lord’s anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God.” At a minimum,
God seems quick-tempered, petty, and intolerant. His actions cut against the very qualities and characteristics inherent in the name God. It is maddening to try and reconcile this God with the one who is “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love” (Ps 145:8). David reflects the conflict by being angry with God for the death of Uzzah.

Psalm 78 is a history of the Israelites and of God’s interactions with them at key points. The Psalmist describes the volatility of God when he writes, “He was furious . . . his wrath rose against Israel . . . God’s anger rose against them; he put to death the sturdiest among them, cutting down the young men of Israel. Yet he was merciful; he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time, he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath.” The Psalm vacillates between depicting God as at times merciful and gracious, and other times ferocious and angry. On the surface, God suffers from severe mood swings.

The Hebrew Scriptures are equally clear on the dangers of anger. Psalm 37:8 warns, “Refrain from anger and turn from wrath—do not fret—it leads only to evil.” Proverbs 29:11 reads, “Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end.” In a story reminiscent of the Cain and Abel saga, 1 Samuel 18 describes Saul’s anger toward David. As David succeeded in battle, Saul became increasingly angry and “kept a close eye on David” (1 Sm 18:9). Throughout the story, Saul’s fear of David is expressed in anger at him. Over time, Saul’s anger intensified and he attempted to kill David on several occasions. As Saul’s anger slowly devoured him, the Bible says God left Saul (1 Sm 18:12). The Psalms and Proverbs offer many wise insights about the hazards of anger. Proverbs 29:8 reads, “Mockers stir up a city but the wise turn away
anger.” Proverbs 30:33 warns, “For as churning cream produces butter, and as twisting the nose produces blood, so stirring up anger produces strife.” Anger stirs the kettle of conflict and trouble. Ecclesiastes 7:9 provides an excellent summary of the Old Testament perspective on human anger: “Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.”

**Jesus And Anger**

Similar to the discussion about God’s emotions in the Old Testament, Jesus displayed an array of emotions. One of the most popular pro-anger arguments is Jesus’ anger. In Sarah Sumner’s book *Angry Like Jesus* she describes fifteen occasions where Jesus was angry. She uses these events to suggest “Anger has a place in the Christian life.” Sumner even asserts Jesus’ disciples were “tacitly taking anger lessons specifically from him.” Since Jesus got angry, it is considered a legitimate response in certain situations. Borrowing from Aristotle, Sumner concludes, “He was angry and not angry in all the right ways and at all the right times.”

**Jesus as the Ultimate Reflection of God**

Jesus made startling statements about his relationship with God the Father.

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140 Ibid., 1.

141 Ibid., 75.

142 Ibid., 32.
“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). “No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father” (Jn 14:46). “The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me” (Jn 12:45). Jesus puts flesh, bones, and blood on the invisible God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. His life, teaching, and example incarnate who God is and how he responds in particular situations. Jesus adds finer details to the broad-brush sketch of God in the Old Testament. Theologian and pastor Greg Boyd writes, “Jesus is the perfect revelation of everything that makes God God.”¹⁴³

The incarnation is the most crucial development in the progress of revelation because he “who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (Jn 1:18). As Boyd suggests, “We should therefore regard Jesus as the key that unlocks the revelatory content of every passage of Scripture.”¹⁴⁴ The ideas and perspectives gleaned from elsewhere in the Bible, in other words, are vetted by a hermeneutic of Jesus’ example and teaching. Regarding themes like God’s anger and wrath, human beings and language are limited to fully grasp and convey the true nature and character of God, but Jesus fills in the details. Jesus is the best lens through which believers attain their vision of God and God’s character.

The New Testament also establishes Jesus as the penultimate expression of the character of God. Colossians 1:15 explains, “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.” Biblical scholar Robert Wall comments on this verse,


¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 22.
“Paul means that Jesus is the very substance of God’s purposes and intentions for
creation. He is God’s pattern for all of life, and through him God will restore a broken
and fallen creation in his likeness.”\textsuperscript{145} In Colossians 2:9, Paul expresses similarly, “For in
Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” The implication is before the
incarnation, the fullness of the Deity was only partially known. Wall writes, “Through the
person of Jesus, God is able to disclose more perfectly and intelligibly the Creator’s kind
intentions for all things . . . God is “fully” present in Jesus. In no other person at no other
time in the course of human history are God’s truth and empowering grace so completely
embodied and so easily recognized as in the Lord’s life and work.”\textsuperscript{146} God revealed
himself through the Old Testament Scriptures, but not completely. Boyd writes, “For this
reason, Jesus must be our sole criterion to assess the degree to which previous prophets
were catching genuine glimpses of truth and the degree to which they were seeing
clouds.”\textsuperscript{147} The writer of Hebrews recounts, “In the past God spoke to our ancestors
through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has
spoken to us by his Son, in whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also
he made the universe” (Heb 1:1-2).

Since Jesus is the ultimate revelation and reflection of God, he also brings clarity
to the emotions of God, and in particular, the anger of God. God’s anger is understood
through Jesus’ perfect reflection of the fullness of God. “The Son is the image of the


\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 109-110.

\textsuperscript{147} Boyd, \textit{Cross Vision}, 21.
invisible God, the firstborn over all creation” (Col 1:15). Paul tells his readers the Son is the perfect image of God which includes his heart, character, and emotions. The writers of the Hebrew Bible grasped for language to describe the various actions and responses of God. The finite language of mortals is always inadequate to completely describe the infinite and immortal. In addition, God’s revelation was limited to his spoken word, occasional displays of miraculous power, and examples of flawed people attempting to live faithfully. His revelation progressed when “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn 1:14). Hence, events such as the golden calf must be reexamined in light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:3 clearly conveys, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.” As Hays writes, “The New Testament witness is finally normative. If irreconcilable tensions exist between the moral vision of the New Testament and that of particular Old Testament texts, the New Testament vision trumps the Old Testament.”148 The anger of God in the Old Testament must be funneled, filtered, and interpreted through the perfected life, teachings, and example of Jesus, the Logos of God in human form.

Jesus’ Interaction with the Pharisees

On one occasion, Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath about to heal a man’s shriveled hand. The Pharisees watched closely to see if he would violate Jewish law and heal on the Sabbath. “He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their

stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored” (Mk 3:5). Mark gives an unusual insight into Jesus’ inner world when he says, “He looked around at them in anger.”

The Greek word for anger in this verse is *orge*. The word is used thirty-six times in the New Testament and is similar in meaning to *thymos*, the other common New Testament word for anger. These terms are mostly interchangeable with the only exception being the use of *thymos* to depict in-the-moment outbursts of anger while *orge* involves a more rational and deliberate thought process. The prevailing understanding of *thymos* and *orge* in the New Testament is that they are both considered vices and sins.\(^{149}\)

There is nothing in Mark 3:5 to indicate what Jesus’ anger looks or sounds like. The only definitive conclusion is in some way he is inwardly angry. There is no verbal outburst, argument, or showdown. As he did on many occasions, Jesus challenges the legalism of the religious leaders. In this instance, however, his anger prompted the good work of healing the man’s hand. Counselor and theologian Robert Jones comments on this passage: “How did Jesus’ anger show itself? With perfect self-control. He kept his head, not venting rage or flying off the handle. Nor did this righteous anger immobilize him or prevent his healing work. He remained sober and bold in ministering to the crippled man.”\(^{150}\)

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Matthew records a long rant of Jesus systematically berating these same religious leaders. He calls them “hypocrites” (Mt 23:13), “blind guides” (Mt 23:16), “full of greed and self-indulgence” (Mt 23:25), “whitewashed tombs” (Mt 23:27), “snakes” and “brood of vipers” (Mt 23:33). It is understandable to think Jesus’ anger fuels his indictment of the religious leaders. Once again, however, his words alone do not necessarily convey his emotional disposition. The fact Jesus spoke boldly and directly does not require anger in any form typically recognized as such. What is holistically recorded about Jesus’ character is a better guide to determine what is less known about him. His perfection, in other words, is a better predictor of what his emotional makeup consisted of than any anthropomorphic projections might attempt to describe.

On another occasion, when small children were presented to Jesus, his disciples rebuked the crowds but “When Jesus saw this, he was indignant” (Mk 10:14). Jesus’ emotions are triggered, but Mark does not elaborate on how Jesus’ anger is expressed, or how it alters his voice or body language. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus frequently rebukes disciples, demons, and others who oppose his will. The Greek word for rebuke is epitimaō. It carries the idea of censuring, or in some cases is used by Jesus to keep a person or demon from telling others about Jesus’ power to heal or exorcise evil (Mk 3:12; 8:30). The term often implies disapproval, but can also indicate the authority and power to rebuke in order to “repress.” When a parent rebukes a child for getting too close to a fire, it may seem as though anger is implied in the rebuke, but it is not required. Fear, for example, may be the reason a parent shouts “Don’t touch!” In a flawed human, this fear

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frequently looks and sounds like anger. In imperfect people, fear frequently becomes anger. Jesus, however, is not like other people. Sumner insightfully says Jesus was accused of being many things but “was never accused of being a hothead.” He was called a drunkard presumably because he drank but he was never called a hothead perhaps because people did not observe anger in any recognizable form. Jesus got angry, but the Gospels do not provide much detail about what it actually looked like. One exception, however, is his well-known outburst in the Temple.

### The Myth of Righteous Anger

Jones writes, “Righteous anger remains self-controlled. It keeps its head without cursing, screaming, raging, or flying off the handle . . . Christlike anger is not all-consuming and myopic but channeled to sober, earnest ends.” Many social causes and efforts are pursued under the banner of “righteous anger.” The phrase is weighted, silencing any opposition to the efforts by legitimizing the motivating zeal and anger. Jones provides a much-needed guide for critically evaluating whether one’s anger is indeed righteous.

Jesus’ well-known episode in the Temple courts, where he overturned tables and drove out the merchants and bankers, is perhaps the most commonly cited justification for what is typically called “righteous anger.” All four Gospels include the story, but John’s version (Jn 2:12-17) is the most graphic. In John’s account, Jesus went to

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152 Sumner, *Angry Like Jesus*, 32.

Jerusalem near the time of the Passover. When he saw the Temple courts functioning as a marketplace, he made a whip, drove out the merchants, scattered their money, and overturned their tables. “To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” (Jn 2:16). In this instance, Jesus appears angry in a familiar and recognizable form. His motivation is the preservation of the purity of his father’s house, which is why this story is frequently referenced by advocates of righteous anger. As previously stated, however, Jesus is perfect and the exact manifestation of God’s character and being. Who he was, in his character, shaped his anger. Willard writes, “Anger and condemnation, like vengeance, are safely left to God. We must beware of believing that it is okay for us to condemn as long as we are condemning the right things. It is not so simple as all that. I can trust Jesus to go into the Temple and drive out those who were profiting from religion, beating them with a rope. I cannot trust myself to do so.” Jesus was perfect in character and integrity throughout his clearing of the Temple. He was not out of control for a single moment. He was not motivated by selfish gain or insecurity. His anger did not produce any action he later reflected upon with regret. There was nothing unrighteous or impure in his expression of anger. Given Jesus’ uniqueness compared to any other person who has ever lived, it is suspect to turn a single incident in his perfect life into a rationale for righteous anger. It is profoundly risky to be angry like Jesus without possessing his inner righteousness.

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\[154\] Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 221.
Matthew 5:21-26

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches a new ethic and way of living. Willard explains, “The aim of the Sermon is to help people come to hopeful and realistic terms with their lives here on earth by clarifying, in concrete terms, the nature of the kingdom into which they are now invited by Jesus’ call.”\(^{155}\) Theologian Donald Carson suggests the Sermon “deals with ethical issues of fundamental importance in every age.”\(^{156}\) A substantial part of the sermon confronts the religious leaders’ misunderstanding of the Old Testament.\(^{157}\) In this teaching, Jesus is not eradicating the ethical demands of the Old Testament law, but clarifying its original intent and meaning in human life (Mt 5:17-20). Scholar Craig Keener notes, “Jesus was not antinomian. He expected his followers to understand and apply the moral principles already revealed in Scripture.”\(^{158}\) The teachings are not new laws to rigidly follow and legalistically enforce in every situation. Rather, they offer guidelines for how individuals and the faith community are to live out the reality of the kingdom of God. In the words of Dallas Willard,

The aim of the sermon . . . is to help people come to hopeful and realistic terms with their lives here on earth by clarifying, in concrete terms, the nature of the kingdom into which they are now invited by Jesus’ call: “Repent, for life in the kingdom of the heavens is now one of your options.” The separate parts of the discourse are to be interpreted in light of this single purpose. They are not to be read as one disconnected statement after another. One must discern the overall

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\(^{155}\) Ibid., 133.


\(^{157}\) Ibid., 148.

plan of life within which the separate parts of the discourse make sense. So far from being additional laws to crush us or show us we can’t make it on our own (of course we can’t), the separate parts are distinct perspectives on the sweet life of love and power, of truth and grace, that those who count on Jesus can even now lead in his kingdom.\(^{159}\)

The Sermon on the Mount is ultimately about the radical transformation of one’s inner world.\(^{160}\) It goes beyond external conformity or behavior modification, penetrating to the original source of words, actions, reactions, and motivations. The order in which the different topics are discussed is important in understanding the sermon’s overall logic and progression. Willard writes, “To understand correctly what Jesus is teaching us to do in his Discourse, we must keep the order of the treatment in mind and recognize its importance . . . The various scenes and situations that Jesus discusses in his Discourse on the Hill are actually stages in a progression toward a life of agape love.”\(^{161}\) Jesus is not randomly sharing pithy proverbs. He is building a case for how life in his kingdom actually works in the everyday details.

Anger is the first ethical topic Jesus undertakes because, as Willard states, “Jesus treats hostility at greater length than any of the other matters he takes up. This is certainly because it is most fundamental. If you pull contempt and unrestrained anger out of human life, you have thereby rid it of by far the greater part of wrong acts that actually get carried out.”\(^{162}\) If anger is transformed (not managed, controlled, or tamed), many other

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\(^{159}\) Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 133-134.

\(^{160}\) Keener, “Matthew,” 113.

\(^{161}\) Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 138-139.

\(^{162}\) Ibid., 159.
troubles and problems will simply stop. The transformation of anger, in other words, would generate a positive ripple effect and influence many other inner dispositions toward the good.

Jesus’ teaching on anger and hostility in the Sermon on the Mount are the most crucial passages to understanding a biblical perspective of anger. He begins in Matthew 5:21-26 by connecting anger with the prohibition against murder found in the Ten Commandments and outlined in Exodus 20:1-17. He says, “Anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment” (Mt 5:22). Beyond the obvious violence of murder, anger hidden in one’s interior world is also violent as it will inevitably produce different kinds of bad fruit, including derogatory name-calling (Mt 5:22). Jesus is “radicalizing the demands of the law” and demonstrating the purpose of the law was never merely to prohibit killing, but to promote unity and love in relationships. He is setting forth a vision of what happens when God reigns as king over the interior of a human being. They no longer function with high degrees of hostility and condemnation toward others. In fact, a kingdom-oriented person is so sensitive to the Spirit’s activity within, that they notice his promptings and are willing to do the work of reconciliation even if it means interrupting a worship experience. They understand the negative potential of relational fractures, so they purposefully work for reconciliation. Willard asserts, “Jesus is not here giving a law that you must never carry through with your religious practice if an associate has something against you.”

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describing a kingdom heart that understands the dangers of anger, and does whatever is necessary to diffuse it before its destructive power does its damage.

Matthew 5:38-48

There are two sections in these eleven verses, and they provide further insight into Jesus’ perspective on anger and retaliation. The teaching shatters the typical framework of “an eye for an eye” (Ex 21:24) or “hate your enemy” (Mt 5:43). Jesus’ radical, upside-down teaching has extensive application in the current culture where the “road of payback” is so frequently traveled. 165 The instinct to retaliate against those who threaten or harm is so strong, one can hardly envision an alternative. The way of the kingdom described in these passages is regularly dismissed as religious idealism without relevance in the practical realities of a difficult and divided world.166 The counter-cultural nature of Jesus’ teaching makes it difficult to take at face value. Keener observes, “Jesus’ way scorns the world’s honor and appears realistic only to those with the eyes of faith.”167 Once again, if Jesus’ teaching becomes a rigid law to follow every time, then the point has been lost. He emphasizes how those who are “children of their Father in heaven” (Mt 5:45) respond when they are attacked or suffer personal injury at the hands of another.

Willard writes,

When we are personally injured our world does not suddenly become our injury. We have a larger view of our life and our place in God’s world. We see God; we


see ourselves in his hands. And we see our injurer as more than that one who has imposed on us or hurt us. We recognize his humanity, his pitiful limitations (shared with us), and we also see him under God. This vision, and the grace that comes with it, enables the prayer: “Father forgive them for they do not really understand what they are doing.” And in fact they don’t, as Jesus well knew when he prayed this prayer over his murderers.\textsuperscript{168}

Retaliation, anger, and getting even no longer fill the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the person who is living the “abundant life” Jesus promised his followers in John 10:10. Loving one’s enemies and praying for one’s persecutors will not be consistently lived out by merely trying to do this in one’s own strength. It is only possible to live like this if the Spirit of God transforms the inner being, so it is like the inner being of Jesus.

To best comprehend the magnitude of what Jesus is actually teaching, it is helpful to remember his audience for this sermon. The people he is talking to are not powerful. Hays notes, “The community of Jesus’ disciples, as envisioned in the Sermon on the Mount, stands outside the circle of power.”\textsuperscript{169} Jesus is calling those who have no power to love those who oppress them and pray for those who mistreat them. He clearly has the occupying Roman government and military in mind as the primary oppressor, enemy, and persecutor. The new ethic Jesus is teaching confronts standard ideas of retaliating, paying back, or in any way returning violence for violence. Keener states, “Because we value God’s honor rather than our own, because our very lives become forfeit to us when we begin to follow Jesus Christ, we have no honor to lose.”\textsuperscript{170} These teachings may be hard

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{168} Willard, \textit{The Divine Conspiracy}, 176.
\item \textsuperscript{169} Hays, \textit{A Moral Vision}, 325.
\item \textsuperscript{170} Keener, “Matthew,” 128.
\end{itemize}
to comprehend, but only because the Christian community tends to tailor the gospel to fit its agenda.

Jesus and the Wrath of God

Jesus makes only a few references to God’s wrath, most notably in John 3:36 when he says, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them.” Similar to the way the word “wrath” is used in the Old Testament, Jesus identifies an emotion God experiences in response to those who reject him. “God’s wrath remains on them” suggests God is angry at those who reject him, and he will eventually punish them.

The other instance in the Gospels where Jesus uses the word wrath is in reference to the coming desolation of Jerusalem: “There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people” (Lk 21:23). This predicts the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans that occurred in 70 A.D. In other instances, Jesus describes the pain and suffering of those who reject his way. For example, he tells the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. When the rich man died, he was “in torment in Hades” (Lk 16:23). In the parable of the ten minas, Jesus remarks, “Those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and kill them in front of me” (Lk 19:27). Here Jesus’ teaching about God’s wrath centers on the punishment he eventually brings upon those who turn away and reject him. Prior to the second coming of Christ and the culmination of all things, God’s wrath comes in the form of trouble or disaster inflicted on a group of people, usually by another group. God uses enemy armies and nations to punish his people when they stray from him.
It seems in these instances, God allows natural human forces and factors to unfold. At the culmination of all things, however, God somehow initiates and orchestrates the punishment of those who stubbornly reject him (1 Pt 3:3-10). This impending punishment is tempered by accounts such as the one recorded in Luke 9:51-56. Jesus is heading for Jerusalem and sends messengers into a Samaritan village to make lodging arrangements, but the village people did not welcome Jesus. “When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them (Lk 9:54-55). The disciples assumed Jesus would punish the villagers for rejecting him, perhaps employing a “hate your enemy” paradigm. They were, however, projecting their response to the villagers onto Jesus. Instead of punishing the villagers, Jesus rebuked his disciples. God’s wrath is real, but it is nothing like spontaneous human anger. In the words of J.I. Packer, “God’s wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil.”

The Epistles

The Apostle Paul implores his readers, “In your anger do not sin: do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (Eph 4:26). The Christian community can hardly help itself from turning the wisdom of Scripture into oppressive rules, so this verse is sometimes used in support of resolving anger before going to bed. The impulse to turn

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the wisdom of Scripture into new rules and laws must be resisted. Paul is setting forth a wonderful perspective on anger through his short phrase, “in your anger do not sin.” In explaining this passage New Testament scholar Andrew Lincoln states,

> It is not granting permission to be angry. Although v 26b recognizes that anger will occur, v 27 indicates how dangerous it is and v 31 repudiates all anger. The focus of 26a, then, is on not sinning by indulging in anger. Its paradoxical formulation was not meant to encourage speculation about what types of anger might be permissible. Whatever the merits of the traditional notion of righteous anger at injustice or the modern notion of the healthiness of expressing rather than suppressing anger, they should not be thought to have support in the concessive aspect of this prohibition. Its force may be conveyed by a paraphrase, “Anger is to be avoided at all costs, but if, for whatever reason, you do get angry, then refuse to indulge such anger so that you do not sin.”

Paul is realistic about the ways the flesh wars against the Spirit and the old self battles against the new self (Eph 4:20-24). In this fallen world, it is hard for Christians to avoid anger, so the next best thing is to be mindful of anger’s dangers and careful to not allow it to catalyze sin. Paul continues in Ephesians 4, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice” (Eph 4:31). He is not proposing a strategy of controlling, taming, or managing anger, but one of eradication. This is the “way of life” (Eph 4:20) for those in Christ. Getting rid of anger is part of “putting on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24).

In a similar passage in Colossians, Paul outlines the life and virtues of those who “have been raised with Christ” (Col 3:1). He writes, “But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips” (Col 3:8). Once again, the way of transformation gets rid of anger and its various forms

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and expressions. In another passage, the Apostle Paul contrasts the life of the Spirit with the life of the flesh. The “acts of the flesh” (Gal 5:19) include “discord, jealously, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy” (Gal 5:20). Paul would never encourage taming, controlling, or managing these vices, but rather living by the Spirit so as to “crucify the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24).

James similarly instructs, “be slow to become angry because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.” (Jas 1:19-20). It is notable that James is likely referencing latent tensions and conflicts within the Christian community. He urges the people of God to navigate their differences in a way that avoids anger and the corresponding envy, selfishness, and discord it brings (Jas 3:14-16). He describes God’s wisdom as “peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere” (Jas 3:18). He continues in the next chapter to explain the roots of the “fights and quarrels among you” (Jas 4:1). His focus is on forming the community into a people who embody the virtues of Jesus. James’ insights about anger are reminiscent of the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, especially Ecclesiastes 7:9, “Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.”

A Practical Theology of Anger

So far, this thesis has described the epidemic of anger in the culture and in the Christian community (chapters one and two), historical and philosophical perspectives on anger (chapter three), and a biblical perspective on anger (chapter four). The remainder of

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this paper (chapters five and six) focuses on practical ways for people and churches to cooperate with God’s Spirit in the transformation of anger. Before proceeding, a working perspective on anger must be established. The practical ideas for transforming anger described in chapters five and six are built upon the eight principles outlined below.

First, anger is a complex human emotion with physiological and cognitive components. The experiencing of anger is usually accompanied by physiological and biochemical changes in the body. A flushed face, rise in blood pressure, or increase in voice levels are some of the physiological effects. Anger is also typically the way one expresses a combination of other emotions, so it is often considered a secondary emotion. One experiences fear or pain but has trained oneself to respond to these root emotions by getting angry. Philosophically, at its essence, anger is the urge to retaliate against or eliminate whatever has opposed one’s will or agenda. The opposition can be inanimate, like a wall or window, but anger is most destructive when it targets another person. A desire to overwhelm or even harm one’s opponent motivates anger. Popular strategies for dealing with anger include developing ways to handle, tame, or manage it in constructive ways. Yet righteous anger or Godly anger is often considered an appropriate response to injustice and other kinds of oppression.

Second, it is quite evident from the Bible that God experiences emotion, including anger. In some way, metaphysically God experiences anger and expresses wrath. There were occasions in Jesus’ life when he was angry. The particulars of divine anger, in terms of how it was actually “felt,” and by what means anger’s “feeling” was expressed, are less clear. God’s anger is aroused by human sin and by the unfaithfulness of his people. His wrath, in other words, results in a tangible punishment intended to lovingly discipline
his people (Heb 12:4-11). At other times, his wrath is restrained by his patience. A day will eventually come when God will pour out his wrath upon those whose unfaithfulness warrants it (Rm 2:8).

Third, God’s anger is distinct from human anger. There is a significant degree of anthropomorphism in human attempts to describe the wrath of God. God is too frequently depicted as hotheaded and short-tempered. It is not logically possible for God to be angry, wrathful, hateful, or vindictive in any of the forms recognizable in human expressions of the same. There are vast differences between God’s anger and human anger, making such similarities and comparisons risky and potentially dangerous. Being angry like Jesus too often resembles being angry like everyone except Jesus.

Fourth, and closely related, finite humans are limited by both capacity and imagination to fully and accurately describe an infinite God’s thoughts, words, feelings, actions, and responses. These limitations are an excellent reason to proceed with caution when making definitive statements about the details of divine anger. The writers of Scripture were inspired, but they were not verbatim transcribing every divine word, thought, or emotion. The writers of Scripture brought their unique perspective and nuances to their work. Who they were, and their historical and cultural contexts surely shaped what they knew and wrote. The descriptions of God’s anger in the Old Testament, or Jesus’ anger in the New Testament, must consider the authors’ limitations. This does not invalidate their perspective but promotes the importance of letting Scripture interpret Scripture instead of inserting theories into the text.

Fifth, Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God. His life and teachings fill out many of the details about who God is and what he does. Ideas about God’s anger and wrath
must be interpreted and vetted in light of the character of Jesus. If a perspective on God’s wrath does not align with the character of Jesus, it must be reimagined and reconsidered. The life and character of Jesus are the ultimate means to vet human understanding of God’s anger.

Sixth, God is infinite and perfect, therefore God must also feel and express anger perfectly. Jesus incarnated human flesh and lived a perfect and sinless life in the body. That means he also felt and expressed anger perfectly. Whenever Jesus was angry, he never lost control or walked away regretting what he had said or done. His anger was never self-destructive or socially destructive. In this way, Jesus’ anger resembles Aristotle’s description of gentleness.¹⁷⁴

However, it is a long leap from Jesus’ perfectly felt and expressed anger to the typical person’s imperfectly felt and expressed anger. The New Testament teaches anger is a concession, not a virtue or a right. The ultimate vision of life in God’s kingdom is a life without anger. Before sin infected life in the garden, it is hard to imagine Adam and Eve ever becoming angry with each other, or with the land, weather, or animals. Human anger is only coherent when understood as a broken reaction to the cursedness of the world. The Scriptures allowing for human anger represent the realism of the authors who recognize the necessity of making concessions to accommodate human depravity and sin. This is not, however, a Biblical loophole for disciples of Jesus to use in justifying their

persistence in their anger. God’s desire is for his followers to live without anger under his reign and rule. The transformation of anger is the biblical ideal.

Seventh, righteous anger is hard to achieve by people prone to unrighteousness. Once again, these wise words of Willard are instructive, “We must beware of believing that it is okay for us to condemn as long as we are condemning the right things. It is not so simple as all that. I can trust Jesus to go into the temple and drive out those who were profiting from religion, beating them with a rope. I cannot trust myself to do so.”175 Many in the Christian community believe righteous anger is biblically justified, and non-anger in certain situations is sinful. Sarah Sumner expresses common sentiment:

Godly anger is a form of moral authority. Moral authority rests on truth that is transcendent. When anger is infused with moral authority, it displaces selfish pettiness and revenge. Moral anger is deeply principled. Moral anger understands that right and wrong aren’t washed away by shades of gray. Moral anger holds high standards and refuses to lower them. It’s commanding. It’s relentless. It prevails. Moral anger, as a result, looks like stern leadership. It leads. It does not mislead. Moral anger dares to promote God’s standards. Moral anger stands like steel. It isn’t tossed by waves of self-preserving doubt or philosophical winds of deception. Moral anger acts out of genuine love for God. Thus moral anger trumpets one main thing: the unrelenting truth that God is faithful.176

Plantinga offers a similar perspective, “Good people oppose evil emotionally as well as every other way. Good people have the capacity, in a word, for indignation—for justified anger.”177 Proponents of righteous anger believe it is a necessary response to social ills like racism, poverty, and other abuses and oppression. While righteous anger

175 Willard, The Divine Conspiracy, 221.
176 Sumner, Angry Like Jesus, 33.
177 Plantinga, Not the Way it’s Supposed to Be, 166.
may be theoretically and theologically possible, several concerns are important to consider.

People generally get angry because of “status-injuries.” These micro-injustices are personal slights, unworthy of even being called an injustice. The righteous anger argument opens a loophole to equate personal inconveniences and everyday life frustrations with injustice. Righteous anger in these instances, covers up the root issues of pride and self-absorption. Linking righteous anger with injustice runs the risk of justifying flashes of anger at anyone or anything that blocks a personal agenda or otherwise makes life inconvenient. DeYoung asks, “Does our image of a just universe mean that things have to go ‘our way’ and we will personally take it upon ourselves to set them right if they don’t?”

In addition, the world aches with countless manifestations of genuine injustice. Many in the world regularly experience systemic injustices with minimal hope of liberation. It is right and good for the Christian community to care about these injustices and devote time, energy, and resources to alleviate them. It is wrong to ignore these injustices, or delegate their alleviation to the government, or to those who seem to care about such problems. God cares about injustice and those who follow him should as well. It is perfectly possible, however, to care, invest in solutions, and challenge others to

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178 Nussbaum, Anger and Forgiveness, 20.

179 Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 122.

180 Ibid.
action, without being angry. It is possible to prosecute and punish oppressors and perpetrators of injustice without being angry. As Nussbaum suggests, “When there is great injustice, we should not use that fact as an excuse for childish and undisciplined behavior. Injustice should be greeted with protest and careful, courageous strategic action.”

Righteous anger too often focuses on shaming, guilting, or otherwise retaliating against the perpetrator, or against those who fail to take action on behalf of the oppressed. This energy is better employed in work to bring forth justice where it is currently lacking.

Proponents of righteous anger commonly point to the numerous passages in the Bible where God clearly states, “I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing” (Is 61:8). Jesus similarly said he came to “proclaim good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim freedom for the captives, and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free” (Lk 4:18). The Bible resounds with God’s passion for justice and his hatred of injustice. The challenge is once again linguistic. It is harder to conceive of God hating anything in any form typically recognizable as hate, than it is to imagine the biblical authors groping for words to describe the inner attitude of an infinite God. It is impossible for God’s hate, in other words, to resemble the vivid images that come to mind at the mention of the word. God could not actually be divine if his hate resembled human hate. If righteous anger is to be genuinely Godly then its motivation and manifestation must be righteous. Anger inspired by the righteousness of justice, in other words, must also be expressed righteously. Speaking of Jesus’ example, Hays comments:

“He does not seek to defend the interests of the poor and oppressed in Palestine by organizing armed resistance against the Romans or against the privileged Jewish collaborators with Roman authority. Rather, his activity consists of healing and proclamation. He submits to being persecuted and killed.”\textsuperscript{182} Aristotle’s idea of gentleness is one guide for gauging the rightness of anger. Jesus’ reaction to the injustice of his own death is another good test. As Peter said, “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pt 2:23). Perhaps Jesus left the best example of righteous anger when, while dying, he said, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing (Lk 23:34).

Theoretically, and perhaps theologically, righteous anger can be virtuous. Practically, the human heart is deceptive and evil so there are too many instances where righteous anger is wrongly expressed. When Jesus dialogued with Pilate, he was in the midst of experiencing the greatest injustice in the history of the universe (Jn 18:33-40). If there were a legitimate occasion for righteous anger, this was it. It would have been perfectly holy for Jesus to stop his show trial. Righteous anger would resist this injustice and retaliate against Pilate and his minions. Jesus, however, turned the tables when he said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place” (Jn 18:36). Fighting is a weapon used by the kingdoms of this world. Jesus lived according to the ethics of his father’s kingdom. Peter argues, “When they hurled their insults at him, he

\textsuperscript{182} Hays, \textit{The Moral Vision}, 324.
did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pt 2:23).

Caution must be exercised in any claim to righteous anger, especially in a social media world where one hides behind a screen and fiercely fights ideological wars divorced from the context of real relationships. Silence can be sinful, but one must learn to speak up and respond without devolving into anger. The practice of righteous anger must filter through the high standard of Jesus’ perfection. His actions and responses to cultural and personal injustices is the gold standard of righteous anger.

Eighth, some in contemporary Western culture perceive the anger of the Christian community in response to various social trends like homosexuality as indicative of a lack of love and acceptance. The legitimate and important debate and discussion about God’s design for human sexuality gets lost in the un-Christian way the people of God angrily and defensively react to those whose views differ. The hypocrisy of Christians who are angry about these kinds of social developments but tolerant of their own duplicity, weakens the Church’s witness. In addition, American society is currently boiling with anger. The question is not whether anger is biblically permitted, but whether it is wise given the tense, fractured, and divisive state of the current culture. As the Christian community seeks to be a city on a hill in today’s post-Christian culture, Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians are timely:

“I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others . . . So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks, or the church of God—even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they
“may be saved” (1 Cor 10:23-24, 31-33).

Miroslave Volf explains,

Christians never have their own proper and exclusive cultural territory— their own exclusive language, values, practices, or rationality. They speak the language they have learned from others, though they metaphorize the meaning. They inherit the value structure of the culture at large, yet they change more or less radically some of its elements and refuse to accept others. They take up the rules of a given culture, and yet they subvert them, change them partly, refuse to obey some of them, and introduce new ones. To become a Christian means to divert without leaving. To live as a Christian means to keep inserting a difference into a given culture without ever stepping outside that culture to do so.¹⁸³

Since it is generally accepted the culture is now post-Christian, the Christian community must think and act like a missionary. One of the first practices of good mission work is to understand the culture to contextualize the gospel. Today’s culture is undeniably angry about all sorts of things. It makes sense for the Christian community, in the name of good mission strategy, to lay aside anger. Those who believe they have experienced the absolute truth of God through the transforming presence of Jesus, need not be defensive toward those who disagree. Christians can have deep convictions about abortion, sexuality, poverty, social justice, racism, sexism, and materialism without upholding these convictions by angrily lashing out or fighting. The authentic transformation of anger in individuals and in the Church will catch the attention of an increasingly angry culture and perhaps open up a fresh space for sharing the gospel. The particulars of how this transformation happens are the focus of the remainder of this paper.

PART THREE

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS
CHAPTER 5

TRANSFORMING ANGER IN THE INDIVIDUAL

Dallas Willard describes the goodness in a world without anger, “To accept, with confidence in God, that I do not immediately have to have my way releases me from the great pressure that anger, unforgiveness, and the need to retaliate imposes upon my life. This by itself is a huge transformation of the landscape of our life. It removes the root and source of by far the greater part of human evil we have to deal with in our world.”

Given the animosity in today’s culture, and the way anger and retaliation are routine responses to everyday conflicts and challenges, it is difficult to imagine the kind of life Willard describes. Anger flows hot in the bloodstream of the human race. It is a common, and seemingly inevitable, reaction by those who are “only human.” The one who seeks to reconcile with their adversary (Mt 5:24), refuses to retaliate (Mt 5:38-42), loves their enemies (Mt 5:43-48), works for the good of others (1 Thes 5:15), and repays evil with blessing (1 Pt 3:9) inhabits another planet. Willard elaborates,

The presence of vanity, egotism, hostility, fear, indifference, and downright meanness can be counted on among professing Christians. Their opposites cannot

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be counted on or simply assumed in the “standard” Christian group; and the rare individual who exemplifies them—genuine purity and humility, death to selfishness, freedom from rage and depression, and so on—will stand out in the group with all the obtrusiveness of a sore thumb. He or she will be a constant hindrance in group processes and will be personally conflicted by those processes, for he or she will not be living on the same terms as others.²

For some, Jesus’ vision of a life free of anger is considered unrealistic and far too passive in a contentiously aggressive world. For others who embrace Jesus’ vision for spiritual transformation, there is a lack of expectation it can happen, and a lack of specificity about how it happens.

The focus in this chapter is the transformation of anger in the individual. The compiled research has sought to establish that while it is theoretically and theologically possible to be angry without sinning, it is extraordinarily challenging to actually do this. Self-unawareness and self-deception make it difficult to accurately self-diagnose the damage and impact of one’s anger. The likelihood for self-delusion is high. It is tempting to think anger is managed, tamed, or handled when in fact one’s anger is out-of-control and destructive.

In addition, anger is a complex and volatile emotion, impossible to consistently manage, handle, or tame by trying hard in the moment it is about to emerge. The toxic levels of anger in today’s post-Christian culture create a unique mission context in which the Christian community seeks to be salt and light (Mt 5:13-14). Willard claims, “To cut the root of anger is to wither the tree of human evil.”³ An excellent way for followers of

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² Ibid., 48.

Jesus to influence an angry culture is to be people in whom the root of anger has been cut or transformed by the Holy Spirit’s ministry in the inner life. Again, while it is perhaps theologically and theoretically possible to express anger virtuously, transforming anger is best and desperately needed to show the world how much better life is without anger.

The current chapter expounds upon the extraordinary vision of Willard regarding anger: “There is nothing that can be done with anger that cannot be done better without it.” Here consideration is given to some of the disciplines, relationships, learnings, and experiences in which one engages to cooperate with the Spirit of God in the transformation of anger. Willard asserts, “One of the amazing things about the human being is that it is capable of restoration, and indeed of a restoration that makes it somehow more magnificent because it has been ruined.” Willard’s comment establishes a crucial conviction underlying this chapter. The gospel of the kingdom of God is good news about the kind of person one can become under the guidance and leadership of Jesus. The gospel unveils a new kind of kingdom-ethic life and expects growth in Christlikeness as one cooperates with the Spirit’s interior and transformative work.

This transformative work happens in the details of one’s inner world. For example, as Willard writes, “It is the elimination of anger and contempt that [Jesus] presents as the first and fundamental step toward the rightness of the kingdom heart.” As one cooperates with the Spirit, in the inner world of thoughts, choices, feelings, and soul

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4 Ibid., 168.
5 Ibid., 63.
6 Ibid., 165.
is reshaped and transformed to be more like Jesus’ inner world. For the particular issue of anger in this paper, the Spirit gradually converts the old way of destructive anger into the new way of gentleness and patience. One’s anger, if it remains at all, increasingly looks like Jesus’ anger. Righteous anger in response to injustice, if there is such a thing, increasingly looks like Jesus response to injustice. This new, anger-free inner world is expressed in and through one’s body, and drastically changes one’s relationships. The Spirit is the primary agent of this change, but transformation does not happen without the purposeful cooperation of the individual. The transformation process is not a linear progression of sequential steps. Rather, it is dynamic, ongoing, and at times tumultuous and disruptive. The disciplines described in this chapter are concrete and practical suggestions to incorporate on the journey, but they are not formulaic steps with money back guarantees. At the same time, the transformation of anger is not mysterious or vague. There are tangible actions one can take to eradicate anger, rage, malice, slander (Col 3:8), and all other forms of anger. When one decides to transform anger, the Spirit works in the details of the human self to bring forth this radical change.

**Role of Intention**

There is a man who is an active participant in the various programs and services of his local church. He worships on Sundays, receives communion, participates in a small group, and uses his gifts and skills to serve the church and the broader community. He has a tenderness that occasionally peeks through his crusty exterior. He also has industrial-strength anger ingrained in every aspect of his being. Anger is his friend, and has been, since childhood. On many occasions throughout his life, his anger has been an
effective deterrent to aspiring bullies. People close to this man regularly endure his angry outbursts. The countless sermons, Bible studies, accountability groups, personal devotions, and intercessory prayer meetings, have rarely touched, and much less, transformed his anger. There is no apparent check in his spirit as he receives the communion elements, even though a friend with whom he has an ongoing feud sits on the other side of the sanctuary.

Anger is “just how he is.” He learned it early in life and will likely take it to his grave. He has spent a lifetime training himself to be angry. It is now an integral part of who he is. He has absolutely no vision of what life would be like without anger. He says he wants to be free from it, but also claims it is part of who he is. His gospel does not expect or require the transformation of anger. His gospel forgives his sin and guarantees heaven after death. His response when he is cutoff on the freeway is divorced from his understanding of the gospel he professes to believe. Discipleship to Jesus and the transformation of his anger are like the leather seat option in a new car. It would be nice to have, but it is not necessary and costs too much in any case. This man exemplifies Willard’s assessment, “Perhaps the hardest thing for sincere Christians to come to grips with is the level of real unbelief in their own life: the unformulated skepticism about Jesus that permeates all dimensions of their being and undermines what efforts they do make toward Christlikeness.”

It is a simple idea, but a first and frequent choice one must make on the journey of transforming anger is whether they actually want to be free of anger. People who have

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witnessed their anger’s destructive power are quick to express their desire to be different. This decision, however, requires careful thought and consideration because transformation is costly. It requires sustained effort because old habits die hard. “Training to be Godly” (1 Tim 4:7) is similar to losing weight, getting in shape, or training for a marathon. The journey to gentleness is a commitment to engage in certain practices and experiences. Effort and work are an essential part of the process, and as such, one must intend to be transformed if there is any chance of it actually happening. William Law, writing many years ago, put his finger on a fundamental problem in the lives of many Christians: “Let us be assured that these disorders of our common life are owing to this, that we have not so much Christianity as to intend to please God in all the actions of our life, as the best and happiest thing in the world.” The disorder of unrighteous anger can only be transformed if there is a resolve to cooperate with God and do the work required to bring about the change. The friend mentioned at the beginning of this section is representative of the Christian who professes to believe but does not intend to have “Christ formed in them” (Gal 4:19). One of the reasons genuine transformation is so relatively rare in the Christian community is because, in spite of it being a work of the Spirit, it requires effort and hard work on the part of the individual. Jesus does not typically wave magic wands to instantly repair unformed character. Vices and cultivated bad habits do not vanish after a week of training. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum states, Anger is hard. But so are many other things in life. Why do contemporary Americans tend to think that healthy, and learning, and fitness deserve tough

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personal effort, and anger does not? Why do we think medical and economic research deserve our public political effort, and that the social disease of anger does not?  

Nussbaum writes as a philosopher who respects the Christian faith, but is not committed to it. Even so, her description of American’s lack of effort to eradicate anger applies similarly to the lack of intentionality by the Christian community.

Circles of the Self

It is helpful to begin by understanding how such transformation takes place by briefly outlining a particular way of organizing and thinking about one’s inner world. Willard suggests six basic parts to every person and together these comprise “human nature.” The six aspects are will, thought, feeling, body, social context, and soul. The work of transformation involves practices and disciplines designed to touch and reshape the various dimensions of the self.

The will, also known in Scripture as the heart or spirit, is where choices are made. The will shapes one’s choices and is also shaped by those choices. More specifically, the will is where the choice is made to either rely on or reject the content of one’s thoughts and feelings. For example, if cutoff during a freeway commute, the will determines the validity of the reactive thoughts and feelings leading to anger, gentleness, or patience. Willard states, “It is, above all, this spirit (or will) that must be reached, cared for, and

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11 Ibid., 32-38.
transformed in spiritual formation. The human will is primarily what must be given a Godly nature and must then proceed to expand to its Godly governance over the entire personality.”

Thoughts and feelings arising in the mind which originate from various situations and interactions are the typical starting point of anger. Willard notes, “The connection between feeling and thought is so intimate that the ‘mind’ is usually treated as consisting of thought and feeling together . . . What we feel and think is to a very large degree a matter of choice in competent adult persons, who will be very careful about what they allow their mind to dwell upon or what they allow themselves to feel.” One’s settled thoughts and feelings, in other words, are finally a matter of choice, which become cultivated by habit over extended periods of time. Thoughts and feelings do not, as is commonly understood, emerge out of nowhere. Both thoughts and feelings are legitimate because they exist, but that says little about whether they are accurate, good, or worthy of inspiring action, compelling a response, or being replicated.

The transformation of the inner being gradually becomes part of one’s overall character and is always expressed in and through the physical body. Anger cultivated into one’s will is expressed in and through one’s body. The body is trained to act or respond with anger, so the body is another “primary area of spiritual formation.”

12 Ibid., 34.
13 Ibid., 33-34.
14 Ibid., 35.
15 Ibid.
body is often ignored in spiritual transformation in spite of Paul’s many reminders that “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body” (2 Cor 4:10).

Additionally, humans are social creatures, connected to both God and others. As such, transformation includes a social aspect. Relationships, especially in families, are shaped and influenced by the inner character of those in the relationships. The transformation of a husband’s anger, for example, profoundly shapes his marriage and family culture. The culture of a home is influenced by the transformation of a single member’s anger. Willard states, “Just ask yourself how many divorces would occur, and in how many cases the question of divorce would never have arisen, if anger, contempt, and obsessive fantasized desire were eliminated. The answer is, of course, hardly any at all.”

Finally, the soul holds the human self together. It “correlates, integrates, and enlivens everything going on in the various dimensions of the self.” To speak about the soul is to talk about the deepest aspects of one’s being. Important as it is, the transformation of the soul mostly happens indirectly, as the other aspects of the self are reshaped and reformed into Christlikeness.

It is apparent from this brief overview of the human self that any authentic discussion of the transformation of anger must press far into the entirety of one’s inner world. Techniques to manage or tame anger fail to reach into the depths of the human

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16 Willard, The Divine Conspiracy, 172.

17 Willard, Renovation of the Heart, 199.
person and deal with the root issues behind the anger. Paul writes, “May God himself, the
God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul, and body
be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thes 5:23). The
transformation of anger is a sanctification process all the way through the various aspects
of the human self. The ultimate failure of anger management strategies is they focus on
behavior management. They are attempts to tie up the unruly dog, instead of training the
dog to respond in new ways.

When anger has been nurtured for years or even a lifetime, it settles into all the
various aspects of the human self. There it lies in waiting for the right circumstances to
activate. The angry person drives on the freeway cultivating various thoughts about other
drivers. Other drivers are the competition or the opponents. When other drivers perform
various maneuvers, the angry person perceives disrespect. The angry one has driven like
this for so long, the thought process happens quickly and automatically whenever they
travel the freeway. This cycle unfolds without conscious thought or planning. The cutoff
happens, sending a myriad of thoughts and feelings through the angry person, whose
body is trained to tense from fear which quickly converts to an episode of anger that
occasionally ends in disaster, all of which threatens deep damage to the soul.

When one nurtures anger in the various aspects of the self, they eventually
become attached or addicted to the anger. Put differently, anger becomes an integral part
of who they are. They need it and come to rely on it. They befriend anger and cannot
imagine life without it. In an insightful passage, novelist Marilynne Robinson writes, “I
have always liked the phrase ‘nursing a grudge’ because many people are tender of their
resentments as of the thing nearest their hearts.” The longer anger is nurtured, the deeper it settles into one’s being, and the harder it is to transform it.

Counseling

Anger sometimes has a dangerous grip on one’s inner world because of severe familial wounds, sexual abuse, or other traumatic experiences. Spiritual practices such as solitude, self-examination, and confession open up space for spiritual transformation but may not be fully sufficient on their own to address the deep soul wounds caused by human sin. In these instances, it is wise to seek the guidance of a skilled professional counselor. Even if one’s anger is not extreme or imminently dangerous, counseling is often an important part of the transformation journey. In some Christian contexts, there is a negative stigma around the practice of Christian counseling. The inability to “trust God enough” to heal old wounds is interpreted as a lack of faith. These kinds of social and emotional barriers stand in the way of making genuine progress in the journey of transforming anger.

Training Versus Trying

In his book Anger, Chapman writes, “The good news is that couples can learn to handle anger responsibly. In fact, they must learn if they are to survive. I’m not

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19 In a recent setting with a group of pastors, the consensus was that Christians in their congregations are hesitant to admit their participation in therapy for fear it would be perceived as a sign of weak faith. In addition, this same group of Christian leaders expressed concern about their congregation finding out if they themselves had ever been to a Christian counselor.
suggesting that learning to handle anger is an easy process. I am suggesting that it is a necessary one, and any couple can be successful . . . Let me suggest a six-step strategy for handling anger in marriage.”20 This articulates a popular approach to dealing with the complex range of emotion connected to anger. The claim any couple can learn to successfully handle anger may be theoretically true, but “a six-step strategy for handling anger” focuses on behavior modification instead of training to transform the core of the human self where the anger originates. It is obviously good for couples to learn how to manage anger, but behavior modification strategies can ultimately become efforts in only trying hard to be different. The familiar advice of taking a timeout or counting to 100 when on the verge of anger may reduce incidents of angry outbursts, but rarely produce authentic and sustainable change.

The transformation of anger involves entering into training with God’s Spirit to become a new kind of anger-free person out of whom new and better reactions and responses routinely and easily flow. Spiritual transformation requires the same kind of disciplined and purposeful effort as physical or intellectual formation. Paul’s instruction to young Timothy is the mantra of those seeking the transformation of anger: “Train yourself to be Godly” (1 Tim 4:7).

As mentioned earlier, according to Aristotle, virtue avoids the extremes of excess and defect and strives for the mean or moderate amount.21 In the case of anger, he calls

the moderate level “gentleness.”22 He says gentleness is the opposite of anger, and this
gentleness provides an excellent gauge on whether one’s anger is appropriate in a given
situation.23 The cultivation of virtue and character, or growing in gentleness, happens by
training. Aristotle writes, “None of the moral excellences or virtues is implanted in us by
nature; for that which is by nature cannot be altered by training . . . The virtues, then,
come neither by nature nor against nature, but nature gives the capacity for acquiring
them, and this is developed by training.”24 Gentleness and patience are formed into one’s
inner being by training in various practices and disciplines. The transformation of anger
is not a matter of trying hard to be gentle or remain patient. It is not about managing or
handling anger. One of the first choices in the journey of transformation is the decision to
train toward the desired end. This decision must be made many times in the process
because a multitude of factors are always at work to demotivate one’s desire to remain in
the training. On a regular basis then, one must revisit the vision of life without anger and
renew one’s intention to realize this vision with the Spirit’s guidance and assistance.

The journey of transforming anger is involves intentionally engaging in various
spiritual disciplines or exercises designed to retrain the various aspects of the self, so they
no longer default to anger. It is not enough to read, talk, or try to think differently about
anger. It is also not enough to focus on anger in broad, overarching terms. If progress is

22 Ibid., 80.

2018), Book Two, Section [3], Kindle.

24 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 23.
to be made, one must set aside time to practice the spiritual disciplines to create space for
God’s Spirit to remake and renew the inner being. This involves diving into the details of
one’s unique attachment to anger and becoming an expert on the various ways it
manifests in one’s responses and reactions.

The Practice of Self-Examination

St. Ignatius of Loyola is a helpful guide on the journey of transformation because
he goes to great lengths to guide people into the details of their inner world. For some,
Ignatius may seem to major in the minors and expend too much energy obsessing over
the fine details of the inner world. For those serious about confronting a specific sin like
anger, however, it is essential to aim small. Aristotle writes, “For in reasoning about
matters of conduct general statements are too vague, and do not convey so much truth as
particular propositions. It is with particulars that conduct is concerned.”

Ignatius’ exercises, gently practiced, gradually reveal the truth about what is happening in a
person’s inner world. He writes,

By the term “Spiritual Exercises” is meant every method of examination of
conscience, of meditation, of contemplation, of vocal and mental prayer, and of
other spiritual activities . . . For just as taking a walk, journeying on foot, and
running are bodily exercises, so we call Spiritual Exercises every way of
preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and,
after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of
our life for the salvation of our soul.

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25 Ibid., 32.

For Ignatius, the purpose of the exercises is “The conquest of the self and the regulation of one’s life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment.” As applied to the transformation of anger, spiritual disciplines or exercises are the means by which the inordinate attachment of anger is conquered and eradicated.

An important exercise to help transform anger is the practice of self-examination. Ignatius suggests the first week or phase of the spiritual exercises is a time of personal reflection on the specific problem area sins or defects. For the purpose of this thesis, the practice of self-examination sets aside time each day to pay attention to anger, and how and when it emerges in the course of everyday life. It reflects on the specific occasions of anger rising in the thoughts, feelings, body, or relationships. It is, as Ignatius says, “going over the single hours or periods from the time he arose to the hour and moment of the present examination” to identify the particulars of one’s experience with anger. This practice is especially important early in the process to gain an accurate understanding of the unique pressures and triggers surrounding the anger.

Martin Luther King Jr. is frequently upheld as an example of properly exercising righteous anger. He orchestrated protests, marches, and lunch counter revolts in an effort to arrest the attention of a racist White empire. King was unswervingly committed to the idea of civil incivility and did not tolerate the use of force, violence, or vitriolic rhetoric.

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27 Ibid., 11.
28 Ibid., 15.
29 Ibid.
to accomplish his vision. King is an excellent example of passion governed by the practice of self-examination. He recounts in his biography,

That Monday I went home with a heavy heart. I was weighed down by a terrible sense of guilt, remembering that on two or three occasions I had allowed myself to become angry and indignant. I had spoken hastily and resentfully. Yet I knew that this was no way to solve a problem. 'You must not harbor anger,' I admonished myself. 'You must be willing to suffer the anger of the opponent, and yet not return anger. You must not become bitter. No matter how emotional your opponents are, you must be calm.'

The practice of self-examination can be done in a number of ways depending on one’s living situation and schedule. One idea is to track the specifics of anger for a few weeks or a month. When anger arises, the associated thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations are jotted down in a journal. The situation provoking the anger is noted. It may be helpful to rate the anger on a simple scale to see if any themes begin to emerge around cause and intensity. It is unrealistic to stop living to make detailed notes about one’s anger. It is helpful, however, to write down a few ideas in sufficient detail to provide a basis for later reflection and interaction with trusted companions. In the words of St. Ignatius, “While one is going through the Spiritual Exercises, a far deeper insight into his sins and their malice is acquired than at a time when he is not so engaged with what concerns his inner life. Since at this time he attains to a deeper knowledge and sorrow for his sins, there will be greater profit and merit than he would otherwise have had.”

The purpose of self-examination in the journey of transforming anger is to begin to gain

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deeper insight into this sin and how it has become a fixture in one’s inner being, and a
default strategy for dealing with life.

The Warning Light of Defensiveness

Growing self-awareness is vital to retraining the will, mind, and body to respond
like Jesus when life does not cooperate or when one’s will is crossed. Trying hard to act
differently in the pressure of a tense moment will not produce consistently different
responses over the long haul. The key is to recognize anger’s initial signs and stirrings
and retrain the inner being to respond in a new, Christlike way. Nussbaum writes, “Anger
is not always, but very often, about status-injury. And status-injury has a narcissistic
flavor: rather than focusing on the wrongfulness of the act as such, a focus that might
lead to concern for wrongful acts of the same type more generally, the status-angry
person focuses obsessively on herself and her standing vis-à-vis others.”33 What
Nussbaum calls “status-injuries” are a significant anger trigger in today’s world, and
often defensiveness in one’s body is a first and nearly infallible signal of imminent anger.

A crucial part of the transformation journey is learning to recognize these ego
status-injuries as they happen, notice the rising defensiveness, and right in that moment
learn to turn away from the impulses of the self and toward the resources of the Spirit.
“Abandonment of all defensiveness” is indicative of one whose inner transformation is
reshaping their relationships.34 Too often, the angry person (whether it is a passive or

33 Nussbaum, Anger & Forgiveness, 21.
34 Willard, Renovation of the Heart, 195.
aggressive version) trusts their defensiveness as a reliable indicator signaling a genuine injustice committed against them. The experienced disrespect compels retaliation without thought or calculation. The retaliation does not, however, spring out of thin air but is instead the prepared fruit of years spent training to respond this way. The process of retraining the inner being to instinctively orient toward the Spirit realigns the inner self to its ultimate source of identity and strength. “Our life in him is whole and it is blessed, no matter what has or has not been done to us, no matter how shamefully our human circles of sufficiency have been violated.” When defensiveness rises for whatever reason, the Spirit’s reminder that in Christ one is whole and complete (Col 3:10) counters the automatic thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and reactions associated with status-injury. The practice of self-examination gradually sharpens one’s ability to actually notice the rise of defensiveness while it is happening, rather than discovering it later in a time of reflection.

The Practice of Confession

DeYoung writes,

The practice of confession is where the “dying” of conversion repeatedly occurs. We come as though to the edge of our own graves and renounce our old self and its habits and practices. Yet that renunciation, as a preface to new life, requires knowing our sin . . . Rather than praying in general for the forgiveness of sin, or reducing all our sin to pride or generic selfishness, we can lay specific sins before God, ask for the grace to root them out, and engage in daily disciplines—both individually and communally—that help us target them. Naming our sins is the confessional counterpart to counting our blessings. Naming them can enrich and

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35 Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 121-122.

refresh our practices of prayer and confession and our engagement in the spiritual disciplines.\textsuperscript{37}

In confession, the specific sin of anger is named and laid before God. As anger is clarified in self-examination, it is specifically named and described and acknowledged before God. The practice of confession involves sharing weaknesses and failures with God and a few trusted friends, to experience afresh God’s grace and forgiveness. Anger, like all sins, grows and festers in the dark. Confession is about bringing forth the anger discovered through self-examination and offering it to God and a few trusted friends. Confessing anger helps one understand it is a moral failure and sin rather than an unfortunate character trait they possess. People sometimes think of things like anger the same way they think of eye color. Confession is a tangible way to own one’s anger, instead of minimizing it or blaming outside factors for it. The more anger is owned, the more one realizes they are in fact an angry person rather than someone who occasionally gets angry. This realization, though painful, opens the space for deep transformation of core issues and challenges. Confession acknowledges, in other words, one has trained themselves to be an angry person. There is transformational power in specifically confessing the details of one’s anger to trusted friends whose prayer and encouragement help sustain one on the path of righteousness.

St. Ignatius’ \textit{Spiritual Exercises} were intended to include the “one who is giving the Exercises and the exercitant.”\textsuperscript{38} The journey to a deeper life and experience with God

\textsuperscript{37} DeYoung, \textit{Glittering Vices}, 20-21.

\textsuperscript{38} Ignatius, \textit{Spiritual Exercises}, 11.
was communal, in other words, not the solo effort of a devoted disciple. Bonhoeffer similarly encourages people to practice the discipline of confession. He writes, “Our brother stands before us as the sign of the truth and the grace of God. He has been given to us to help us. He hears the confession of our sins in Christ’s stead and he forgives our sins in Christ’s name. He keeps the secret of our confession as God keeps it. When I go to my brother to confess, I am going to God.”

Bringing the disturbances and turmoil of the inner world into the light of God and the care of others helps to move one along on the way of transformation.

Certain behaviors like drinking too much wine or blurting out an occasional cuss word are socially acceptable in some circles of the Christian community to the point of even being humorous to discuss. Other sins, like outbursts of anger, are perceived to expose a darker side of one’s inner life so they are less acceptable and remain hidden. This makes confessing anger a difficult discipline to practice. Richard Foster describes,

Confession is a difficult discipline for us because we all too often view the believing community as a fellowship of saints before we see it as a fellowship of sinners. We feel that everyone else has advanced so far into holiness that we are isolated and alone in our sin. We cannot bear to reveal our failures and shortcomings to others. We imagine that we are the only ones who have not stepped onto the high road to heaven. Therefore, we hide ourselves from one another and live in veiled lies and hypocrisy.

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The practice of confession helps foster a much-needed authenticity in the Christian community. People discover the liberation of sharing real things, however unsavory and painful, with fellow travelers on the journey of inner transformation.

**The Practice of Solitude**

It is important to reiterate that cooperating with the Spirit of God in the transformation of anger, while requiring intentional effort, is not a linear, step-by-step process. There are ebbs and flows on the journey. The practices described in this chapter are surely only starting points toward a life without anger, and one needs to cultivate a habit of regularly engaging in them over a period of time. The Spirit moves and works in mysterious and surprising ways, and his transforming work often happens in the deep regions of the soul, beyond one’s conscious awareness.

Anger is frequently triggered by one’s will being crossed, or to a downgrading, slight, or status-injury. DeYoung asserts, “A slight to my honor, damage to my reputation, disrespect to my person—these are frequent anger triggers.”

The angry reaction on these occasions is spontaneous, but not unexpected. The reality of who one is surfaces when pressure is applied. The pressure of crossing the will, downgrading, slighting, or injuring one’s status sets off a learned chain reaction. Almost instantly, thoughts, feelings, verbal responses, and bodily reactions occur on cue because this is who one has trained themselves to be.

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41 DeYoung, *Glittering Vices*, 122.
Solitude is a foundational practice in the life of a Christian.\textsuperscript{42} It is the practice, as Willard describes it, where “We purposefully abstain from interaction with other human beings, denying ourselves companionship and all that comes from our conscious interaction with others . . . Solitude is choosing to be alone and to dwell on our experience of isolation from other human beings.”\textsuperscript{43} Ignatius explains, “Ordinarily, the progress made in the Exercises will be greater, the more the exercitant withdraws from all friends and acquaintances, and from all worldly cares.”\textsuperscript{44} The decision to step away from people to be alone with God knocks down the scaffolding one typically stands on to promote and uphold their fragile inner self.\textsuperscript{45} Solitude is a return to the vulnerable nakedness of the Garden of Eden (Gn 3:10). In this time alone with God, and with no props in the way, one’s identity in Jesus is formed, recalibrated, and solidified. In solitude, one learns how to entrust themselves to the one who judges justly (1 Pt 2:23).

In the place of solitude, the true self can be discovered. Things easily hidden within the daily noise and chaos of constant activity gradually begin to emerge. In solitude, the core pain of the inner being slowly inches toward the light. The true self strains and groans, fighting to emerge. Solitude is a painful experience, and at times disruptive and unsettling, but in the emptiness of solitude one begins to discover the

\textsuperscript{42} Willard, \textit{The Divine Conspiracy}, 357.


\textsuperscript{44} Ignatius, \textit{The Spiritual Exercises}, 9.

fullness of Christ (Col 3:10). God may seem far away, and the taunts and stabs of dark forces are common in the early days of learning solitude. It is in the quiet of solitude, however, God’s question can finally be heard: “‘Why are you angry?’” (Gn 4:6). The Spirit gradually unearths the deeper story behind the anger. Anger works like a Trojan horse and in solitude the Spirit climbs up inside and explores the real motivations and issues hiding inside the horse. Solitude opens a space for the Spirit to move into the details of the inner being and reveal the truth behind the anger.

Solitude is not magic. Formative things happen, but change takes time, and often the darkness becomes darker before the light breaks through. Still, solitude trains the inner being to find its value, worth, and identity in the love of God. This is not a slogan to recite but a reality from which to live. As one becomes deeply grounded in the reality of Jesus’ liberating love, the typical events and situations of everyday life have less power to trigger the thoughts, feelings, and responses associated with emerging anger. As one’s identity is “rooted and built up in him” (Col 2:7), life is lived from the strength of knowing who one is not from the weakness of uncertainty. When normal life triggers happen, one naturally and routinely rests in the knowledge of who they are in Jesus Christ as his beloved daughter or son. As Ignatius states, “The more the soul is in solitude and seclusion, the more fit it renders itself to approach and be united with its Creator and Lord; and the more closely it is united with Him, the more it disposes itself to receive graces and gifts from the infinite goodness of its God.” 46

46 Ignatius, The Spiritual Exercises, 10.
The Practice of Slowing Down

Typical anger management strategies outline a process that is often unrealistic to implement in the midst of daily life. At the conclusion of her book, Carroll Saussy sets forth a three-step process for “understanding and using anger well.”47 The process is thoughtful, but in the fast-moving current of everyday life, few can apply this sort of on-the-spot method for managing anger. Her process activates once anger begins to arise, which assumes the ability to notice it in the moment and recognize it as a malfunction. If one is this self-aware and attentive, they are likely on their way to becoming a different kind of person. Similarly, Chapman counsels a five-step process for taming anger, including “Acknowledge to yourself that you are angry; restrain your immediate response; locate the focus of your anger; analyze your options; and take constructive action.”48 This elaborate process is impossible to apply while driving on the freeway in angry commuter traffic. It is unrealistic to stop in the middle of a busy life to work through a three or five-step process to deal with anger. Life moves too fast and these kinds of time-outs are impractical. In addition, Chapman’s suggestion to restrain the immediate response fails to account for the way habits of anger are ingrained into the inner being through years of constant training. One might successfully restrain an angry response now and then, but the only way to sustain this effort is to become a different person who learns how to consistently respond differently.


48 Chapman, Anger, 37.
When personal threats, status-injuries, or downgrading happens and anger arises, the speed of the moment rapidly increases. Emotions begin to churn fast, and responses follow instinctively based on years of practice and training. The mind, feelings, and body react in the manner they have been trained. The episodes catalyzing anger happen quickly and without time to think or strategize. Before realizing what is happening, the angry person is already responding, and the damage is already done.

It is possible, however, to retrain or re-form the inner being to recognize the early stages of anger, instinctively realize what is happening, and choose a new way. Seneca captures the sense of this with his advice to “reject straightway the initial prickings of anger, to fight against its first sparks, and to struggle not to succumb to it. Once it has begun to carry us off course it’s difficult to sail back to safety, since not a jolt of reason remains once the passion has been let in and some sovereign right has been granted to it by our own will.” As one is trained in Christlikeness, this inner shift gradually happens naturally and routinely without straining or trying hard. As one grows in Christlikeness, episodes producing anger slow down, and one sees what is happening while it is happening.

Philosophers like Seneca and Aristotle describe the very moment when the emotion of rising anger threatens to overwhelm reason. As such, how one responds to what Seneca calls “The first mental jolt produced by the impression of an injury” will

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determine how the rest of the event will transpire. Unlike the initial mental jolt triggered by a slight, downgrading, or status-injury, and choose a redemptive response. In Willard’s words, “Those who let God be God get off the conveyor belt of emotion and desire when it first starts to move toward the buzz saw of sin. They do not wait until it is moving so fast they cannot get off of it. Their aim is not to avoid sin, but to avoid temptation . . . they plan their path accordingly.” It is crucial to emphasize this will only happen by spiritual formation training. Even before one has become the kind of person who does this naturally, however, it helps to exert the effort to respond differently than one has in the past. Initially, because this is not who the person is, this will require straining and striving to resist the default response of anger. This “trying hard,” however, at least begins to disrupt the old system and break deep-rooted patterns of behavior.

Past experience is a friend to the one pursuing the transformation of anger. They have a plethora of data to prove anger rarely, if ever, produces the favorable results promised by its initial promptings. Humble and rational people do not generally emerge from an angry outburst feeling good about what they have done. Decent people who allow their anger to run wild for whatever reason, rarely come out the other side reveling in the goodness of their response and the turmoil it produced. The opposite is typically, if not always true. Anger leaves a trail of destruction. The temporary euphoria it provides is

50 Ibid., 36.
51 Ibid.
52 Willard, Renovation of the Heart, 119.
outweighed by the damage it causes. It is imperative, therefore, to catch anger when it first begins.

The ability to slow down one’s mind and “take captive every thought” (2 Cor 10:5) gradually develops in the one who is growing in Christlikeness. The episodes that trigger anger no longer happen faster than one can respond. They see what is happening as it occurs, and sometimes before it happens. They are rarely caught off-guard, so instead of panicked reactions, they gently respond. Rather than being ruled by unchecked feelings, the game slows down and reason, along with Christlike character, shapes their responses.53

**Anger Support Groups**

Finally, an individual’s journey toward the transformation of anger is not something one can accomplish on their own. Certainly, the process requires one’s intention and effort and the ongoing influence of the Spirit of God. In addition, however, the journey requires a few trusted friends who encourage the person to stay the course and trust the Spirit’s lead. The transformation journey, in other words, is always a communal experience.

A number of years ago, OHC started a new type of small group called “one thing groups.”54 The idea was to gather with a few others who were serious about spiritual

53 Ibid., 125.

54 The idea for these groups came from a private conversation with Dallas Willard during one of his visits to OHC. He suggested that those who want to experience spiritual transformation should focus on “one thing” for a period of time. As thought, prayer, and action are understood to cooperate with the Spirit in the transformation of the “one thing,” many aspects of the inner being are changed as well. The “one thing” focus then actually can catalyze many things being transformed.
formation in the details, to dedicate a year in an intentional spiritual formation process. Each person in the group chose one specific character quality as their focus for the year. For the purposes of this paper, the point is not the particulars of the process the groups worked through, but the importance of journeying with like-minded others. People were encouraged and motivated by shared intentionality, and many found the experience deeply transformational. Given the current epidemic of anger, a helpful practice is to gather with others who want to experience the transformation of anger. The opportunity to share spiritual practices, discoveries, and experiences along the way kindles hope that anger-free living is possible.

The vision of life without anger is hard to imagine in a world so full of anger. Perhaps the idea of transforming anger rings hollow because it seems unattainable in today’s contentious and divided world. Perhaps for some, “transformation” is a religious word that sounds good in sermons but means little in the grind of real life. More than ever, Jesus’ good news about the possibility of new life is desperately needed. William Law, writing over a century ago, captures the beauty of the vision when he writes,

For the Son of God did not come from above to add an external form of worship to the several ways of life that are in the world, and so to leave people to live as they did before in such tempers and enjoyments as the fashion and spirit of the world approves. But as he came down from Heaven altogether divine and heavenly in His own nature, so it was to call mankind to a divine and heavenly life, to the highest change of their whole nature and temper, to be born again of the Holy Spirit, to walk in the wisdom and light and love of God and be like Him to the utmost of their power, to renounce all the most plausible ways of the world, whether of greatness, business, or pleasure, to a mortification of all their most agreeable passions, and to live in such wisdom and purity and holiness as might fit them to be glorious in the enjoyment of God to all eternity.55

55 Law, A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life, 144-145.
In an angry world, Christians experiencing the transforming power of the Spirit are a compelling witness to Jesus’ power.

Beyond the individual, the Church’s task is to proclaim and incarnate the good news through its communal life together. A church free of anger is a compelling witness to the difference Jesus makes when a group of his people allow him to be their king. The final chapter of this paper explores the congregation’s journey to transforming anger.
CHAPTER 6
TRANSFORMING ANGER IN THE CONGREGATION

When the term evangelical first became associated with the Protestant Reformation, historian Mark Noll writes it “rapidly assumed a critical cast, since it was posing a contrast between faithful adherence to the gospel message of the New Testament and Catholic perversions of that message. In the heat of conflict, the positive and negative connotations of ‘evangelical’ multiplied rapidly.”¹ In chapter two, several historical developments were explored as possible contributing factors for the animosity and anger characteristic of Protestant Evangelicalism since its inception. This chapter examines a handful of practices and perspectives to help transform the spirit of anger in a congregation. The focus in this chapter is the practices, values, and overall attitudes of a particular local congregation, rather than on the broader Church as a whole. At times, examples from OHC help illustrate the ideas presented.

In the midst of a tense and divided culture, it is imperative for a local congregation to find ways to be, what Hunter calls, “faithfully present” without defaulting into anger or us-versus-them paradigms.\(^2\) In the words of Richard Hays, “The church’s embodiment of nonviolence is—according to the Sermon on the Mount—its indispensable witness to the Gospel.”\(^3\) When the church plays the anger game, including what it considers righteous anger, it blurs the distinction between the culture and the church. When the culture sees the church angrily opposing homosexuality, for example, it confirms the culture’s hunch that Christianity is primarily about what it is against but makes no real difference in the character of its adherents. The anger and lack of civility weakens the witness of the church. Anger, in its various expressions, is a “weapon of the world” (2 Cor 10:4) to reject and avoid. This does not mean, however, the church is to passively observe cultural decay. Robert Mulholland writes,

> The church is not called primarily to be confrontive but to be obedient and faithful to God’s presence and purposes in the culture. The result will be confrontive, but that should not be the purpose. Our purpose should be to live out the values and dynamics of New Jerusalem in the midst of the values and dynamics of Fallen Babylon. When we do this, Fallen Babylon is going to be disturbed. Fallen Babylon will not appreciate the bringing to light of its value system. Yet the confrontation comes not because we see it, but because falsehood cannot stand in the presence of truth.\(^4\)


\(^4\) M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 166.
It is possible Mulholland overstates the effects of a church living out the values and dynamics of the kingdom in the midst of the culture. Even so, his insight refocuses a local church to live out the values of the kingdom as the primary way of opposing the values of the culture. This is an important and overriding theme throughout this chapter.

Perhaps it is helpful to think about the transformation of a local congregation using Willard’s concentric “circles of the self” described in chapter five. For the purposes of this brief discussion, these “circles of a congregation” help delineate the particular aspects of a congregation where anger sometimes settles and needs to be transformed. In the first circle, a local church has a heart, or will, where choices are made about values to defend and positions to uphold. The church’s perspective on the current political tension or sexual and gender identity debates, for example, ultimately emanates from the will of the congregation. The topics emphasized and taught are determined by the will of the church. Choices made about advertising and overall presence in a community flow from the will of the church. This heart or will is most certainly shaped by the disposition of the staff and lay leadership, but it is bigger than the collective will of those individuals. The heart of the church is sensed and known by those who regularly attend and participate. People who have not attended very long can also detect the heart of a church by paying attention to conversations people are having and values they are incarnating.

The second circle, the mind of the church, represents its thoughts and feelings about various issues and situations. How the congregation feels when a homeless person walks into the auditorium on a Sunday morning, for example, and its thoughts about this person, are in the mind of the congregation. Again, these thoughts and feelings are connected to and influenced by the leadership, but also bigger than the sum of those
individuals. In some cases, the thoughts and feelings of a congregation are actually stronger and more influential than the leadership, so the pastor or staff have to decide whether to follow their convictions or acquiesce to the congregation. The dynamics in these maneuvers profoundly influence the overall culture of a congregation.

Obviously, the third circle of the body is a vital aspect of the congregation’s biblical identity (1 Cor 12:12-31). The inner being of the local congregation is manifested and expressed through its body life. That is, the character of the congregation is revealed through the relationships, experiences, conversations, conflicts, and overall dynamics of church life. The way the congregation processes change, responds to crisis, cares for those in need, welcomes the broken and disenfranchised, spends money, among other things, are embodied in a congregation and expressed in concrete ways. The body life of a congregation, in other words, is exactly what it has been trained to be.

Fourth, the church has a social dimension. The relationships between participants in the church comprise a major part of the social aspect of a congregation. The quality of those relationships shapes the overall soul of the church. The vision of relational reconciliation, or lack thereof, influences the culture and soul of the congregation. The relationship the pastors and staff have with the people, and vice versa, significantly shape a local church. If parties are vying for power and control, this dysfunction infects the soul of the church. In addition, the social dimension includes the relationships the local church has with its surrounding neighbors, the community where it is located, and the other churches in that community. All of these circles of the congregation connect and interrelate in the church’s soul.
The last circle is the soul of a church. Congregations that split because they are not able to agree on the color of the chairs have deep dysfunctions embedded in the soul of their church. Local churches filled with people who are unable to process their differences or navigate cultural issues without heated arguments deform the soul of a congregation. Pastors and leaders afraid of losing their job if their voting record is revealed exposes core reasons why the church is increasingly impotent in today’s culture. The inability to navigate differences and speak the truth in the context of grace deeply harms the church’s witness in a community. These serious church soul problems will not be resolved until a revival of humility sweeps through the leadership and congregation.

It is perhaps unfamiliar to conceive of a congregation through the grid of various circles. A church is, however, a living organism animated by the Spirit of God. As such, a congregation has a spiritual formation beyond the sum total of each individual’s formation. The challenge of this chapter is to imagine ways to transform anger in a congregation. This is an increasingly crucial endeavor in an angry, post-Christian culture. Given my pastoral role at OHC, I have taken the liberty in this chapter to offer a few insights and learnings from my own pastoral leadership experience.

**Courageous Leadership**

A local church needs courageous leaders, otherwise it will inevitably cater to the flippant and fickle whims and preferences of religious consumers. The inverted ethics of the kingdom of God breaking forth into the details of congregational life is not typical or expected in the American Evangelical Church. As such, though God can do anything through anyone, church leaders content to dabble in ecclesiastical minutiae have more
than enough distractions to fill their time and energy. Rooting out the anger embedded in a congregation, conversely, requires purposeful leadership and courage. Challenging a congregation to a level of spiritual maturity beyond the pseudo-spirituality of fighting against, opposing, and expressing anger over cultural decay requires prayer, patience, and guts. In the early pages of their book, Dallas Willard and Gary Black Jr. write,

In these pages we will suggest to followers of Jesus who are leaders, spokespersons, and professionals that they must responsibly and explicitly address the public issues, proposals, and processes of society within their spheres of influence through teaching, proclaiming, modeling, and manifesting the reality of the benevolent rule of God, which includes working together as the body of Christ by God’s empowering grace. This influence encompasses every sphere of human action, not just those we think of as religious in nature . . . Their responsibility for what honors God and what is good for the public as well as for their closer “neighbors” dictates that they deal with economic, political, professional, and social issues that seriously impact life and well-being. It is not a religious conspiracy we are to pursue, but God’s conspiracy, founded, led, and empowered by Jesus Christ.¹

From the vantage point of local church leadership, the task of “addressing public issues through teaching, proclaiming, modeling and manifesting the reality of the benevolent rule of God” requires Spirit-given courage to disrupt Christians and reorient them to a kingdom-centered gospel.² Christian mindsets and attitudes are frequently formed by their vocational goals, culture, FOX News, CNN, or personal references and desires. From Volf’s perspective, faith is “thinned-out,” to “fit our own desires and our capacity to live in a given situation.”³

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² Ibid.

A practical way to disrupt this system is through courageous local church leaders calling their congregations to the high ground of kingdom living. Church leaders must challenge, for example, the deep-rooted anger hiding in the hearts of those who profess allegiance to Jesus. Leaders must pray and work to unearth the bitterness and unforgiveness trapped in the inner being of Christians who regularly celebrate the Lord’s supper, but do not incorporate the reconciliation ethics of the table into their relationships or attitudes. Leaders need courage to lovingly confront the dismissive and degrading ways Christians speak of those struggling with their sexual or gender identity. Acts of social media violence must also be gently confronted even when doing so offends those who flock to the forum. The potential consequences of courageous leadership include declining attendance, lower offerings, and an overall sense of church decline. This decline, however, could indicate the church is actually on the rise. Faithfulness to a big gospel may not attract a crowd, but it does generate its own quiet satisfaction and peace. Rooting anger out of a congregation is not accomplished through a retreat, class, or program. It begins and is often contingent upon the courage of those in leadership.

**Incarnated Kingdom Ethics**

Stanley Hauerwas writes, “The idolatry most convenient to us all remains the presumed primacy of the nation-state.”8 In today’s post-Christian culture, the local church is constantly at risk of forgetting its identity and instead orienting itself around

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improving the culture through various social efforts and political processes. Willard and Black Jr. write,

Perhaps one of the most troubling and convoluting subjects in many contemporary Christian settings is the issue of the appropriate role Christians are to play in a democratic society. There are good reasons for this. One of the primary reasons stems from the tawdry way Christians have engaged public issues in the past. There have developed several “unholy unions” between political and religious groups over the lifetime of our national political conversation. The assumption of many secular members of society that Christians must be from one particular political party is testament to the degree of convolution that exists on multiple levels. This coalescing of political ends gained through religious means has repeatedly occurred in subtle and presumptive ways. Yet the results are routinely awkward and unseemly.  

When these efforts inevitably fail to produce the desired change, Christians often become angry and frustrated over the growing secularization of the culture. As Hunter says, “Those who embrace the ‘defensive against’ paradigm continue to believe by and large, that the main problem in the world is secularization; if only God could be re-enshrined in the social order, they assume, the culture would be restored.”  

The church works to restore the culture through preaching, teaching, and other efforts to encourage Christians to reflect kingdom values as they live and work in the culture. The church does not as often, however, embrace the calling described by theologian John Howard Yoder, “to be today what the world is called to be ultimately.”  

When a local church is not purposeful about embodying the alternative ethics of the kingdom in and through its life together,

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Christians look elsewhere to solve cultural problems and the culture marginalizes the church.

Politics is a favorite focal point for Christians on the right who sync their religion with Republicanism so the two become one. Social justice is frequently the priority of Christians on the left for whom Jesus is reduced to a mascot who cheers their progressive reforms. Christians across the political spectrum fall into the trap of, according to Hunter, “politicizing their concerns.”12 In the nitty gritty of modern culture, Christians overinvest in political solutions and presidential candidates to bring forth a good and virtuous society. The local church is complicit by mumbling about the intersection of faith and culture and failing to challenge Christians to reconsider what Hunter calls the “proclivity to think of the Christian faith and its engagement with the culture around it in political terms.”13 The quest for the good and virtuous is primarily pursued through power politics and legislation. The whole arrangement hinges on power so anger is always nearby, particular amongst those losing the power game. It is rather ironic Christians are increasingly angry because non-Christian institutions like the government and educational system fail to create a good and moral society. Christian overconfidence in politics ultimately demonstrates a lack of vision about the local church’s role in culture.

One way to transform anger in the church is to remember the ultimate source of the church’s power and influence in today’s culture. McKnight writes,

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13 Ibid.
In one simple sentence: what Christians want for the nation should first be witnessed reality in their local church. Until that local church embodies that desire for the nation, the church witness has no credibility. When it is embodied in the local church, that embodiment is the only activism the church needs . . . But too many Christians have ignored the politic of the local church and bowed down to the politics of the world.  

Cultural influence does not come from winning a power game, regaining control, or standing up to secular forces and employing whatever means to eradicate those forces. The task for the local church is to refocus the congregation’s attention off politics and presidents, toward learning how to incarnate the kingdom ethic within the faith community. Hays captures the primary calling of a local church:

The community’s vocation to be “salt” and “light” for the world is to be fulfilled precisely as Jesus’ followers embody God’s alternative reality through the character qualities marked by the Beatitudes. The community of Jesus’ followers is to be a “city built on a hill,” a model polis that demonstrates the counterintuitive peaceful politics of God’s new order.

The primary call is to incarnate the way of Jesus, and the goodness of the kingdom, within the community of the church. When the priority shifts from trying to change the world “out there” to embodying the kingdom “in here,” expectations recalibrate. Instead of being frustrated because a secular government is not upholding the ethics of the kingdom of God, the responsibility is on the shoulders of the local church to embody and manifest the kingdom to the culture. The energy devoted to angry reactions is applied to finding creative and imaginative ways for the church to incarnate the kingdom. Rodney Clapp asserts, “There is a place for the church in the postmodern world, not as a

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sponsorial prop for nation-states but as a community called by the God explicitly named Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The radical option is nothing more or less than for the church to be a way of life.”

The transformation of anger in a local church begins, therefore, by raising the stakes on the role of the church in the community. The church is not a purveyor of religious goods and services to satisfy crowds of consumers. The church is a political reality that is, in Yoder’s words, “held together by commitment to important values . . . and the will of God for human socialness as a whole is prefigured by the shape to which the Body of Christ is called.”

Transformation Training Center

The proliferation of small gospels that do not transform the details of life, relationships, and cultural interactions gives rise to a plethora of curious ideas about the role of the local church in society. Willard and Black Jr. write,

In short, our communities will remain helplessly deadlocked in futility until the leaders of our local congregations become involved in and dedicated to what the local church is and should be: a glorious beachhead of the kingdom of God where disciples of Jesus the Christ are trained to receive divine empowerment, responsibility, and blessing. There is one place and one place only that provides the incubator of loving sufficiency by which such task can be accomplished. This is the church, the body of Christ, the hope of the world.

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Much could be said about this, but for the purposes of this paper it will simply be noted that the outward success of a church, measured by rising attendance and offerings, has little to do with whether or not the church is actually training Christians to receive “divine empowerment, responsibility, and blessing” in today’s post-Christian world.¹⁹ A local church is a training center for growth in the character of Jesus; a training center for the transformation of anger.

It is common for churches to devote a portion of their resources to a department of spiritual formation. This is not sufficient. Spiritual formation is not an add-on to the church’s main priorities. What is consistently talked about and taught in a local church forms the soul of the congregation. If spiritual formation is only referenced because of an upcoming retreat, class, or program, the congregation essentially ignores the topic. If the transformation of character concerns like anger is infrequently taught or carefully unpacked, people learn not to think about or expect it. If the success of the church is linked to rising numbers, dollars, or the launching of new programs, the congregation will equate these accomplishments with success. In short, a local church is a training center—for transformation or for something else.

The urgent issue for a local church is to do the hard work of training people to live their actual lives under God’s guidance and leadership. This is not a small project. Hunter writes,

The problem for Christians—to restate the broader issue once more—is not that their faith is weak or inadequate. In contemporary America, Christians have faith in God and, by and large, they believe and hold fast to the central truths of the Christian tradition. But while they have faith, they have also been formed by the

¹⁹ Ibid.
larger post-Christian culture, a culture whose habits of life less and less resemble anything like the vision of human flourishing provided by the life of Christ and witness of scripture. The problem, in other words, is that Christians have not been formed “in all wisdom” that they might rise to the demands of faithfulness in a time such as ours, “bearing fruit in every good work.”

The job of the church is to form Christians in wisdom to live faithfully in a post-Christian world. Christians default to anger, in part because they follow the culture’s example and the church has not sufficiently taught Jesus’ transforming gospel. Willard and Black Jr. emphasize the critical role of the church:

Quite simply, there is no other social institution, no other arena of public life that remains exclusively devoted to the definition and proliferation of agape, truth, goodness, general welfare, and holistic flourishing than the church of Jesus Christ. If local churches and professional ministers charged with their care are not focused and resolutely devoted to the promotion of these qualities and the character of the leaders who embody them in the world, no other group, charity, agency, or institution is prepared and equipped to carry such a task to completion.

The local church and her leaders have a high calling as transformation training centers that offer ongoing guidance in following Jesus in the details of life and relationships. People need training in the practices, experiences, and relationships to help them progress in the transformation of anger. A local church is where individualistic consumers learn how to respond when they do not get what they want. It is where couples divided by angry conflicts learn mutual submission under the guidance of Jesus. A church experiences anger transformation when it orients its efforts and ministry around its calling as a spiritual formation training center.

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20 Hunter, To Change The World, 227. Italics original.

The Practice of Reconciliation

The communion table is a crucial symbol and essential practice in a congregation desiring the transformation of its anger. In fact, if the communion table is off-to-the-side literally and metaphorically, it is difficult for the church to experience the transformation of anger. When the celebration of the Lord’s Supper only occurs a few times a year, in other words, the challenge to transform congregational anger becomes even more difficult. If the celebration of the Lord’s Supper lacks careful thought and prayer to creatively retell the redemption story, then the celebration will be mostly a symbolic reminder of Jesus’ sacrifice for sins. Conversely, when people begin to understand the reconciling power of the Lord’s table, the Spirit of God begins to break down dividing walls and heal relational wounds. At OHC, prioritizing the table is an essential spiritual formation practice that has been instrumental in catalyzing the transformation of anger. Missiologist David Fitch writes, “Around the table we recognize what forgiveness, reconciliation and the renewal of all life looks like.”22 This recognition shapes the way the church responds to the culture and to those who are different in whatever way.

Philosopher James K.A. Smith writes, “The Lord’s supper is a feast of forgiveness and reconciliation.”23 The table is a place of reconciliation with God where his love is encountered and his forgiveness received. At the Lord’s table, the church gathers as sinners to remember, rehearse, and relive God’s amazing love and liberating

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23 James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: (Cultural Liturgies Volume 1) Worship, Worldview, And Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 201, Kindle.
forgiveness. The communal practice of the Lord’s supper trains a congregation in humility and grace. The reconciliation of the table, however, is not only between God and humanity. Smith also writes,

Given the brokenness of our relationships, the abuses and violence and competition that fragment our communion, the body must be reknit together through practices of reconciliation and forgiveness. A kingdom-shaped community cannot be satisfied with private, isolated individuals only reconciled “vertically” to God, for the manifest witness of such reconciliation will be love of neighbor . . . in a broken and fragmented world, the church is called to be the firstfruits of a new creation by embodying a reconciled community; and the way we begin to learn that is at the communion table . . . The communion table is a historic catalyst for practices of reconciliation.  

Unlike many potential organizing principles of a local church, the Lord’s table provides a substantial center infused with applicable meaning in congregational life.

Ephesians 4:32 admonishes the church, “forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you.” Colossians 3:13 similarly says, “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” Jesus puts the matter in more shocking terms, “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Mt 6:14-15). These teachings on forgiveness compel a ministry of reconciliation within the body of Christ where brothers and sisters, spouses, siblings, and friends forgive each other in the radical way God forgives them. The lingering bitterness and anger hindering relationships in the faith community are washed away by extravagant grace. These blunt passages are a riveting picture of God’s forgiveness received and offered. Extravagant grace demonstrated in

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24 Ibid., 201-203.
authentic forgiveness transforms a church, and by extension, the world. The ministry of reconciliation practiced first in the close circles of family, friendships, and the church, disable resentment, anger, and the urge to retaliate.

The bitter conflicts looming in a congregation deform the church and suffocate kingdom ethics. The pettiness of many of these conflicts reveals core problems in the soul of a congregation. Bickering over the color of the carpet, or the arrangement of the chairs exposes the unchristian heart prevalent in many Christian churches. The practice of the Lord’s table possesses power to snap Christians out of the trance. Smith notes,

The Eucharist is just a macrocosm of what the church is called to be as the new humanity: a community that gathers, irrespective of preferences, tastes, class, or ethnicity, in order to pursue a common good . . . This is not to claim that we accomplish perfect reconciliation, or that somehow the Eucharist magically undoes injustices we’ve experienced or committed in the past. Rather, the claim is that liturgical practices of reconciliation and forgiveness constitute a training ground for making a start.  

The table awakens Jesus-followers to the hypocrisy of anger and resentment. Partakers of the table should be deeply concerned about their readiness to receive Jesus’ grace but their unwillingness to offer it to others. The lack of flow through forgiveness is not too hard or impractical. Where kingdom demands exceed human ability, the Spirit empowers and does “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power at work within us” (Eph 3:20).

Addressing the Controversial Issues

There are serious moral issues facing the culture. Sexual and gender identity

25 Smith, Desiring the Kingdom, 202.
debates, ongoing racial tensions, violence towards women, and heated political disputes are everyday topics in the news. It is difficult to know how the local church should engage in these discussions and debates. These topics are frequently a lightning rod of anger in a local church because of differing opinions and an obsessive addiction to being right. The way controversial topics are discussed or ignored in a church sometimes stirs the kettle of anger. Reflecting on this challenge, Hunter writes,

> In public discourse, the challenge is not to stifle robust debate, but rather to make sure that it is real debate. The first obligation for Christians is to listen carefully to opponents and if they are not willing to do so, then Christians should simply be silent. To engage in a war of words is to engage in a symbolic violence that is fundamentally at odds with the Gospel. And too often, on such hot button issues as poverty, abortion, race relations, and homosexuality, the poor, children, minorities, and gays are used as weapons in ideological warfare. This too is an expression of instrumentalization.\(^{26}\)

Hunter’s advice is a helpful guide through controversial topics. The all-too-familiar “war of words” approach weakens the witness of a church because the truth is not spoken “with gentleness and respect” (1 Pt 3:15). When truth is a weapon, the church is further marginalized from important conversations. In addition, when a church weaponizes the truth, Christ-followers are trained to similarly handle the truth in their interactions with others who have different value systems. The “symbolic violence” of verbal warfare stokes the anger of the Christian community.\(^{27}\)

To prevent this, sometimes a church avoids addressing the hard topics in its public services. “We are not going to talk about those things around here” is the strategy

\(^{26}\) Hunter, *To Change the World*, 266.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.
for dealing with controversial issues. This avoidance strategy, however, marginalizes the church because it confirms the culture’s belief the church is irrelevant in everyday life. The church traffics in religion, which matters to only a select few who are interested.

A few years ago, OHC did a weekend sermon series called “Laying Down Stones.” It was based on Jesus’ interaction with the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:3-11) to provide guidance in how to negotiate difficult cultural issues. The goal of the series was not, however, to establish policies on these various topics. The hope was to openly discuss complex and difficult issues without animosity. The series confronted the brash and angry ways Christians verbally assault stereotypes. The congregation was encouraged to have face-to-face conversations with those whose views differed from their own. The perils of social media were outlined, especially the temptation to post angry comments on the faceless and nameless internet. Some in the congregation wanted a louder conservative voice on issues like homosexuality. Others wanted stronger statements affirming same-sex marriage. Both groups were unsatisfied, but the soul of the church was formed by wading into these subjects and encouraging ongoing dialogue.

When a church walks graciously and truthfully into issues like homosexuality, racism, gender identity, and other challenging topics, it opens up space for a congregation to think through their views and imagine a way to engage with one other and the world without anger. Bringing up ideas and encouraging dialogue helps drive home the value of people over policies. It trains a congregation to love and dignify those with whom they genuinely disagree. It trains the insecurity out of congregation and encourages confidence in the truth of the gospel. Equally important, talking through tough subjects helps establish the church’s reputation as a place where important issues
impacting life and culture are freely discussed. At a time where the church continues to be marginalized, finding ways to dispel preconceived notions is exceedingly important. A local church willing to gently and respectfully interact with God’s perspective on controversial subjects catches the attention of a skeptical society.

Lastly, talking about tough issues does not mean the truth is up for grabs and anything goes. In the good words of Richard Mouw,

Christian civility does not commit us to a relativistic perspective. Being civil doesn’t mean that we cannot criticize what goes on around us. Civility doesn’t require us to approve of what other people believe and do. It is one thing to insist that other people have the right to express their basic convictions; it is another thing to say that they are right in doing so. Civility requires us to live by the first of these principles. But it does not commit us to the second formula. To say that all beliefs and values deserve to be treated as if they were on par is to endorse relativism—a perspective that is incompatible with Christian faith and practice.28

The willingness to discuss difficult issues with gentleness and respect does not mean truth is relative. Congregations need vision and training in how to hold convictions and uphold the truth without berating and belittling those who disagree. On many of the controversial cultural issues, the church has a perspective because of its convictions about the truth of the Bible. There is a way of upholding these convictions and having these conversations without being angry. A church that learns how to do this is being formed in the way of Jesus and shining as a witness in an angry culture.

A Community of Differents

Catholic theologian Ronald Rohlheiser punctures the idyllic image of the church

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when he writes,

To be in church is stand, shoulder to shoulder and hand in hand, precisely with people who are very different from ourselves and, with them, hear a common word, say a common creed, share a common bread, and offer a mutual forgiveness so as, in that way, to bridge our differences and become a common heart. Church is not about a few like-minded persons getting together for mutual support; it is about millions and millions of different kinds of persons transcending their differences so as to become a community beyond temperament, race, ideology, gender, language, and background.29

A local church is a culture. It has a way it functions, relates, and interacts. There are values inculcated in the congregation. The way a congregation interacts and relates confirms or denies the values listed in brochures or proclaimed from the pulpit. The culture of a church is shaped by the congregation, just as the congregation is shaped by the church’s culture. The culture of a church is incarnated in the people, but it also permeates the atmosphere of the campus and facilities. People sense the culture when they attend a service or spend time on the campus.

Many churches strive for a culture of unity in keeping with Jesus’ desire and prayer in John 17:20-23. Unity lacks substance, however, when the people in a congregation similarly think, vote, look, talk, interpret the Bible, earn income, and see the world. It is not hard for like-minded people to be unified. Christian unity amongst those who are genuinely different, however, is a significant signpost in a divided world. The disunity of Evangelicals in a particular area indicated by multiple denominations undercuts the overall Christian witness in a town. Local churches pursuing unity with one another is an excellent way to transform anger in the Church of a given region. Merging

local churches, though difficult, is also an excellent way to demonstrate an authentic commitment to unity. For unity to carry significant meaning within a given local church, a congregation must be comprised of different kinds of people. McKnight writes, “The church is God’s world changing social experiment of bringing unlikes and likes to the table to share life with one another as a new kind of family. When this happens, we show the world what love, justice, peace, reconciliation, and life together are designed by God to be. The church is God’s show-and-tell for the world to see how God wants us to live as a family.”

“Unlikes” will probably not gather in the same congregation unless there is a purposeful and intentional vision to bring different people together in mutual submission to Jesus. As McKnight explains, “Our homogenous churches, though perhaps not sinister in intent, certainly lead to sinister tendencies that inhibit our ability to interact well with other groups in the body of Christ.” People typically gravitate to churches comprised of those who are similar creating us-versus-them narratives that are breeding grounds for anger and animosity.

Purposefully building a community of “differents” gradually transforms latent congregational fears and prejudices and promotes unity. As the culture of church is infused with the value of real (not virtual) relationships between “unlikes,” the Spirit gradually converts anger into gentleness and judgments into grace. Once again, the

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30 Scot McKnight, A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God’s Design for Life Together (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 16.

31 Ibid., 35.

32 Christina Cleveland, Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that keep Us Apart (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 30-35.
Lord’s table is essential to bringing “unlikes” and “differents” together and transforming them into a congregation whose identity is in Christ. As Paul puts it, “Here there is neither Jew nor Gentile neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Praying and working to purposefully grow as a community of “differents” is not about checking boxes to fulfill racial, gender, or socioeconomic quotas, but to add much needed flavor to the blandness of sameness in the body of Christ. McKnight says, “In fact, the success of a church is first determined by how many invisible people become visible to those not like them.”

This is such a fascinating and contrary metrics to the typical “more is better” success gauge.

Over the last two years, OHC has had a Cultural Learning Group (CLG). Developed by a seminarian in the congregation, this ten-week experiment brought thirty different people together to listen to each other’s stories without correcting, questioning, or advising. The group differed racially, politically, economically, in gender, age, marital status, and sexual orientation. The experience was an extraordinary example of McKnight’s assertion that in the church,

There are different cultures, there are different socioeconomic classes, there are different genders, and there are different sexualities. And there are different educations, incomes, kinds of work done, and preferences in music and art, worship style and sermon length. And they are all together at the table . . . thrashing it out with one another. That thrashing it out is what the church is about.34

33 McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents*, 20.
34 Ibid., 23.
It was painful for many to listen to others without commenting. The socially acceptable addiction to being right was frequently exposed. The process was deeply formative for those who experienced the CLG. Participants realized their stereotypes blinded them to the actual person and their story. Their animosity was confronted, and space opened for connection with those who were different. Experiments like the CLG provide practical ways for a congregation to face fears, learn to listen, and grow in unity with those who are different.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The thesis of this dissertation is Willard’s assertion: “To cut the root of anger is to wither the tree of human evil.”\(^1\) Many of the current problems plaguing individual lives, relationships, and cultures are energized and sustained by anger. As such, transforming anger can change lives, relationships, cultures, and even the whole world. The ubiquitous tension and division in today’s world makes transforming anger an urgent priority.

While almost everyone agrees the world is getting angrier, there is disagreement about the merits of anger in certain situations. One of the clear debates in the literature on anger centers on whether anger is ever necessary or beneficial. Redemptive anger may be theoretically or theologically possible, but there are serious questions about whether this is realistically wise or plausible without deep soul transformation. The exception of righteous anger is frequently claimed without thoughtful consideration given to the specific qualities of such anger. The fight for justice, for example, is truly based in righteous anger only when both the means and ends of such a fight are righteous. How one fights, in other words, is just as important as the cause for which one fights. There is no such thing as righteous anger when the underlying attitudes pulsate with animosity and contempt, or when the methods and means utilized are patently evil. The vast majority of the anger ruining lives and relationships, and contaminating the current culture, is unrighteous and destructive, and needs to be transformed.

Another theme permeating the literature is the popular idea of managing anger. There are innumerable books and articles suggesting ways to handle or control anger. The assumption in these works is that anger is a normal and natural human emotion to be expected in a fallen world. This thesis suggests, conversely, that anger deforms the human soul and severely weakens the witness of the Christian community. Anger is a volatile and complex emotion with potentially devastating consequences. It is not something to tolerate, handle, or manage, but something to transform to the point of elimination. A central conviction throughout this paper is that anger can be transformed. When this transformation starts to happen, patience and gentleness will replace anger as the default response. The Christian community does not need and should not use anger in order to fulfill its calling in this world. It is possible to live well, build strong relationships, care deeply about important things, and fight against injustice, all without anger. The tender wounds energizing the anger in one’s inner world can be healed. As Willard provocatively states, “There is nothing that can be done with anger that cannot be done better without it.”\(^2\) The way of the kingdom is anger-free. There need not be concern for total or complete transformation. Transforming anger is about transforming one’s inner world toward Christlikeness, and the ripple-effect impact of even small degrees of progress can be profound.

The Christian community is comprised of missionaries in America’s post-Christian culture. In this increasingly angry era, it only makes sense for the Christian community to contextualize the gospel by abandoning anger. Christians need a fresh

\(^2\) Ibid.
vision of life, relationships, and cultural interactions that are free of anger. Christians need a vision of life under Jesus’ leadership where they are learning to recognize the early signs of anger before the emotion sweeps them into another caustic argument with a stranger or violent verbal exchange with a family member. Christians need to realize the old wounds in the depths of their soul are often the source of their short-temper and readiness to fight. These wounds can be healed by the Spirit. Christian marriages need a picture of what it would be like to listen to their spouse instead of prosecuting them, discuss instead of pontificate, and respond gently instead of angrily. Families need an alternative way of negotiating conflict where children feel safe and loved even in the midst of a disagreement. Christians need to awaken to their obsession and addiction to being right. Most of the time, fighting to win in an argument or be right on an issue harms the souls of all involved and confirms the culture’s perception of the unchristian qualities of Christians.

The Christian community needs a fresh vision of engagement with a post-Christian culture. It is time to redirect the time and energy spent on political solutions into building churches centered on kingdom-ethics and committed to incarnating the Shalom of the kingdom. The Church is wasting time yelling about homosexuality and abortion instead of cultivating kingdom-centered communities where God’s design for sexuality and life is nurtured, taught, and embodied. The Church needs to remember that if Jesus ever did get angry in a recognizable way, it was clearly directed at the actions and initiatives of religious leaders. When he interacted with prostitutes, lepers, thieves, adulterers, or the lonely, greedy, or forgotten, he was compassionate and kind, patient and gentle. It is time for local churches to stop fixating on all the wrongs in the culture and
start investing time and resources into becoming transformed communities of extreme
and radical grace where the inverted ethics of the kingdom are on display in the lives and
relationships of those who attend.

Marilynne Robinson’s wonderful novel *Gilead* is a long letter written by a dying
pastor named John Ames to his seven-year-old son. In one passage, he tells his son both
his grandfathers were ministers,

That life was second nature to them, just as it is to me. They were fine people, but
if there was one thing I should have learned from them and did not learn, it was to
control my temper. This is wisdom I should have attained a long time ago. Even
now, when a flutter of my pulse makes me think of final things, I find myself
losing my temper, because a drawer sticks or because I’ve misplaced my glasses.
I tell you so that you can watch for this in yourself. A little too much anger, too
often or at the wrong time, can destroy more than you would ever imagine.³

Those who have struggled with anger know the wisdom of Ames’ insight. As a pastor
who spent decades battling the beast of anger, I know firsthand how hard it is to have the
right amount of anger, express it in the right way, and at the right time. It would be far
better if the Spirit of the living Christ transformed the anger out of both his people and
Church in order to better demonstrate to the world the loving beauty and goodness of life
with God in his kingdom.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


