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Jeffrey Gibbs

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, gibbsj@csl.edu

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THE MYTH OF “RIGHTEOUS ANGER”

*WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS
ABOUT HUMAN ANGER*

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About the Author

Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs

Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs is a professor of Exegetical Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Gibbs has been a faculty member since 1992. His areas of interest and expertise include the Synoptic Gospels, New Testament eschatology and Matthew.

He earned a Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Va. (1995). He earned a Master of Sacred Theology (1988) and Master of Divinity (1979) from Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Ind. He also received a bachelor's degree from Rice University in Houston, Texas.

After graduating from Concordia Theological Seminary, Gibbs was ordained in 1979 and was called to two congregations in northwestern Oregon. He served there for 10 years.

Gibbs has been a conference speaker for pastors and laity in many venues. He currently is the part-time pastoral assistant at Holy Cross Lutheran Church in St. Louis, and preaches and teaches the Scripture there regularly.

His writing works include *Jerusalem and Parousia: Jesus' Eschatological Discourse in Matthew's Gospel* (Concordia Publishing House [CPH], 2000); *Matthew 1:1–11:1, Concordia Commentary* (CPH, 2006); *Matthew 11:2–20:32, Concordia Commentary* (CPH, 2010); and *Matthew 21:1–28:20, Concordia Commentary* (CPH, 2018).

Gibbs and his wife, Renee, live in St. Louis and are active in life-affirming ministry, especially on behalf of unborn children. They have four grown children and more than a dozen grandchildren, the total number of which is happily beyond their control.

The Myth of "Righteous Anger"

What the Bible Says About Human Anger

Jeffrey Gibbs

This essay chiefly aims to describe what the Bible, and especially the New Testament, actually says about human anger. This is the main goal of my study. At the end and as a second purpose, I will offer some personal and pastoral reflections on anger in our lives, and how to deal with it (rather than deny or ignore it).

Let me invite my reader to read my first sentence again; in fact, I'll just repeat it myself: "This essay chiefly aims to describe what the Bible, and especially the New Testament, actually says about human anger." I decided to repeat myself because as I have been talking with other Christians, some clergy and some lay, about this study and about what I've been finding in the Scriptures, most people have objected to and at times even instinctively rejected the clear, simple answer to the question, "What does the Bible, and chiefly the NT, say about anger?" These friends and colleagues have not wanted to talk about what the Bible actually says about anger. They've wanted to move quickly, instinctively to other topics. People have offered special circumstances, or qualified the scriptural testimony—seemingly anything to avoid being confronted by the answer to a question that, once you search for it, is not hard to find and is really quite clear. If I may speak frankly, without exception my Christian friends and colleagues have wanted to justify their anger; each time they have done this, they have appealed to the category of "righteous anger." And, to be sure, their comments and qualification have not been without merit, and that's why I'll conclude this essay with some reflections of a more personal and pastoral nature.

For Christians, however, when the Scriptures speak to an issue extensively and clearly, that's the place where the discussions should start, and not somewhere else. So, let me say it again. This essay chiefly aims to describe what the Bible, and chiefly the New Testament, says about human anger—and that teaching is pretty clear and pretty direct.

There are four reasons why I decided to do this (fairly basic) study. The first is quite personal: I have a temper, and I regularly am angry. What I have observed about myself when I am angry is that I rarely do or say the wise or loving thing if I simply act out of the anger. To be sure, when I am angry I have lots of energy to do things—do something—but in the times that I have acted in anger or have been

chiefly motivated by it, the things I have chosen to do turned out badly and hurtfully for others every time.

The second motivation for this study arose from my initial impressions from reading the New Testament. There is, of course, Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in which he equates being angry with one's fellow disciples with murder, rendering us fully liable to God's eschatological judgment (Mt 5:21-26). This in itself is quite enough to invite further study. I became curious, about gaining a fuller grasp of the biblical witness.

Third, in my own involvement in the life arena, I have become more aware than ever before of how often "pro-lifers" speak and write and act in ways that flow directly from their own anger.¹ In a practical sort of way, it seems pretty clear that angry speaking or acting will rarely prove persuasive or helpful; it only preaches to the choir of other "pro-lifers" who are also angry. So, I decided that I would like to do something to change the tenor and tone of things. Ironically, the few times I have tried to teach such "pro-lifers" about the New Testament's teaching about anger, these persons became angry at me and (I am not proud to say) I in return was angry at them. This motivated me to think and study more about the topic.

Finally, I am quite convinced that the United States of America in the twenty-first century is a profoundly angry culture, and in contemporary discourse anger (often labeled "outrage") is almost regarded as a virtue. When someone with whom we agree "goes off on" someone with whose position we disagree, we applaud the anger, the belittling, the demeaning words. One factor that seems clearly (at least to me) to be at work behind the distressing number of shootings and mass murders in our country is

the generally angry and violent tone of significant aspects of our culture.² As Christians, if I am correct about this, we find ourselves living in an angry culture, and there is a great danger that the culture's catechesis about anger will affect and infect the church.

... the United States of America in the twenty-first century is a profoundly angry culture...

For all of these reasons, then, I've spent some time learning about what the Bible says about anger. I'll begin with a cursory look at some texts and tendencies in the Old Testament, and then spend more focused attention on the New Testament.³ As I said above, following the Scripture study I'll devote some space to personal and pastoral applications. For we cannot deny that we all get angry; to pretend otherwise would be folly. All we can do is learn what God's word says about it, and then try to apply that teaching in life-giving ways that seek to love even our enemies, as Jesus taught.

Human Anger in the Old Testament

Divine Anger in the OT

Even though this study is focused on human anger, one really has to summarize what the Old Testament says like this: anger rightly belongs to God. I did not even attempt to examine all of the different ways that Hebrew (or Aramaic) can express that someone is angry. To be quite honest, I simply looked at a decent English concordance and found all of the times “anger/angry” or “wrath/wrathful” occurred in the Hebrew Scriptures. What I found is that the strong majority of references to anger refer, in fact, to God’s anger. God’s anger is referred to at least three times as often as all the different sorts of references to human anger (more on that below). In the Old Testament God is angry, most of the time, because of the sin of Israel as well as the sin of the nations.

In the biblical view, of course, God’s anger or wrath is always “righteous anger”; he is, after all, God. Since this study aims to describe the biblical teaching on human anger, I won’t even begin to grapple with the important theological topics that connect to a discussion of the divine wrath. I would like to offer one observation, however, and I do so in order to mitigate or counter what might be a very easy mistake to make after one becomes aware of the (literally) hundreds of times that the Old Testament refers to God’s anger or wrath.

The mistake would be to think that the God of the Old Testament, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is quickly or easily or routinely angered. To be sure, one hesitates to describe the living God in terms too predictable. Nevertheless, in thinking about God’s anger, the divine self-revelation that occurs in Exodus 34:6–7 must never be left behind.⁴ It reads,

The LORD passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation.”⁵

A simple syllogism cannot be used as a comprehensive OT theology, nor can it be used to put God in a box. Nevertheless, there is validity to the following reasoning:

1. Yahweh is slow to anger, as he himself declares.
2. Yahweh is often angry in the OT, especially with his own people, Israel.
3. Therefore, human creatures (and especially Israel) have given Yahweh plenty of reason to be angry; one must never underestimate how grievously Yahweh has been provoked.

In an indirect yet eloquent way, then, the sheer frequency of the OT’s mentioning of God’s anger, coupled with God’s own self-revelation, underscores how deeply and enduringly and constantly humans, and especially God’s own covenant people, have sinned against their God!⁶

Human Anger in the OT

If the OT speaks far more often about the divine wrath/anger, what does it say about the subject of human anger? Again, I have only brief comments to make, but I can organize them to make three basic points.

First, there are OT texts that mention human anger in a natural way, almost in passing, and without explicitly passing judgment or evaluating it. These tend to be historical narrative texts, although not all of them are. Typical examples follow:

(Joseph, to his brothers)
And now, do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. (Gn 45:5)

Now Moses diligently inquired about the goat of the sin offering, and behold, it was burned up! And he was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, the surviving sons of Aaron. (Lv 10:16)

The terror of a king is like the growling of a lion; whoever provokes him to anger forfeits his life. (Prv 20:2)

Second, there are a very few texts in which one might conclude that there is such a thing as human anger that is justified or praiseworthy or (to use the well-known phrase) “righteous anger.”⁷ To be sure—and this is important—there is nowhere any direct discussion or endorsement of “righteous anger.” I will return to that toward the end of this essay. Nevertheless, in many popular presentations Moses seems to be the classic example of “righteous anger,” and Exodus 32:19 is the classic text:



And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses's anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.⁸

Another possible quarry from which one might carve out a notion of "righteous, human anger" is some of the psalms. One thinks, for instance, of Psalm 139:21–22:

Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies.

The psalmists display the complete range of human emotion, and for that reason (and others) the psalms are beloved by God's people. It would be a little simplistic, however, to conclude that because a certain emotion is displayed (directly or indirectly) in a psalm, that this is a general endorsement of that emotion. Just as the benediction on those who kill Babylonian babies by smashing them against rocks has to be carefully handled (Ps 137:9), so does the display of emotions in the psalms.

Third, there is abundant OT material that associates human anger with sin or as causing sin. One thinks, for instance, of Cain's reaction to Abel his brother:

So Cain was very angry and his face fell. The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it." (Gn 4:5b–6)

Then there is the example of Jonah the prophet:

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?" (Jon 4:1–4)⁹

Many other texts portray or describe human anger in theologically or spiritually negative terms.¹⁰ There is, of course, one OT book that offers extensive commentary on human anger, and that is the book of Proverbs. In the main, Proverbs links anger with foolishness and with a destructive influence over human relationships. Typical are the following:

A man of quick temper acts foolishly, and a man of evil devices is hated. (14:17)

A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. (15:1)

A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention. (15:18)

Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city. (16:32)

Good sense makes one slow to anger,
and it is his glory to overlook an offense. (19:11)

Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare. (22:23–24)

Perhaps the most eloquent passage comes from Psalm 37:7–11. Exhibiting clear “wisdom” characteristics, this psalm of David actually gives pause to those who too quickly suggest that we should be outraged or angry when we see evildoers prospering:

Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices! Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land. In just a little while, the wicked will be no more; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace. (emphasis added)

Summary of Human Anger in the OT

This brief look at (divine and) human anger in the OT is suggestive and it prepares the way for a closer survey of the New Testament. In no way does the New Testament teach differently; rather, the same trajectories are developed and in some ways intensified. I realize that there are complexities and qualifications, and I know that life is complicated. Nevertheless, the following summary of Wisdom teaching gathers the important thoughts together:

Only the Wisdom literature attempts a true evaluation of human anger. . . . Anger is dangerous because it does mischief and has evil consequences, Prv 6:34; 15:1; 16:14; 19:19; 27:4. It is thus to be avoided and placated There is warning against even understandable anger at the prosperity of the wicked, whose punishment will come, 24:19f; Ps 37:7–9. Hence the longsuffering man . . . is lauded as the true sage . . . while the angry man . . . is condemned as a fool.¹¹

Human Anger in the New Testament

In the New Testament writings, twenty different Greek words or phrases are used to communicate the semantic sub-domain of “Anger, Be Indignant With,” and I have examined the ninety occurrences of these words or phrases.¹² Although various terms or phrases express the general meaning, 50 percent of the time (45 out of 90) the NT uses the noun ὀργή (35 times), the verb ὀργίζομαι (9 times), or the adjective ὀργιλός (once). When you add to that sub-total the uses of the noun θυμός (18 times) and the verb θυμόομαι (once), words formed on these two stems (ὀργ- and θυμ-) account for the strong majority of texts (71 percent).¹³ All of the remaining 15 Greek terms occur only once or twice, with the sole exception of the verb ἀγανακτέω, “to be indignant,” which occurs 7 times.

Divine Anger in the NT

This examination of NT texts should begin with the same observation with which my brief survey of OT texts began: when “anger” is the topic, a large number of NT passages refer to God’s anger, either with reference to the Father or (occasionally) the Son. About 38 times, “anger” words in the NT refer to God’s anger; twice Jesus is explicitly said to be angry (Mk



Jesus clears the temple.

3:5) or indignant (Mk 10:14). There are also other narrative passages where it seems clear that the Christ is angry. One thinks of John 2:13–17, especially because Jesus makes the whip with which he drives people out of the temple precincts. One quickly recalls also Matthew 23:13–36 where it is hard to read the woes against the scribes and Pharisees without attributing anger to Jesus. Most of the time, however, it is God (the

Father) who is angry, or whose wrath comes upon the world in some way, or whose eschatological judgment is promised because he is angry.¹⁴ As in the OT's descriptions of divine anger, so in the NT. God's anger is righteous and justified, simply because he is God. In the case of Jesus of Nazareth who was like us in every way yet without knowing any sin (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15), we acknowledge that his anger was pure and righteous, with no taint of sin.

But what of human anger in general? What do the NT writings say about it? I will organize the data around three categories: (1) the anger of God's enemies, (2) anger among Jesus's disciples, and (3) "righteous anger."

Human Anger in the NT

First, a significant number of texts portray or describe the enemies of God and his people as angry. For example, the synagogue crowd in Nazareth was "filled with wrath" and sought to kill Jesus (Lk 4:28-29). Herod the Great became angry when he realized the magi had tricked him (Mt 2:16). Jesus's opponents (Mt 21:15; Lk 6:11; 13:14), the Sanhedrin seeking to silence the apostles' preaching (Acts 4:2; 5:33; 7:54), the arrogant Herod Antipas (Acts 12:20), the riotous pagan crowd in Ephesus (Acts 19:28), Saul/Paul the persecutor (Acts 26:11), and Pharaoh (Heb 11:27) all are depicted as angry or wrathful. Even more strikingly, the Revelation to John describes the nations who are opposed to God as raging against him (11:18), and the dragon-Satan is enraged because he sees his will being thwarted through the birth of the woman's child (12:12, 17). Those who oppose and hate God and his Christ are fairly frequently described as angry.

Second, what about anger in the lives of Jesus's disciples? Once again, the picture is dominated (with a few exceptions that I will note below) by negative portrayals, and by strongly worded teaching that warns against the spiritual dangers of anger in their lives. In terms of narrative texts, the ten disciples are indignant with the two sons of Zebedee, and in light of Jesus's subsequent teaching their anger must be regarded as selfishly sinful or jealous (Mt 20:24-28; Mk 10:41-45). In their folly, the disciples also are indignant with the woman who anoints Jesus in Bethany (Mt 26:8; Mk 14:4), and this too arises from misunderstanding and error; their indignation indicates sin.

Christ Jesus himself, as well as the other NT authors, explicitly teach about anger and warn of its spiritual dangers. The classic passage is, of course, from the Sermon on the Mount. There Jesus teaches that at least in some important ways, being angry with and speaking angry insults against a fellow disciple is the same as murder, and it brings the same threat of eschatological judgment:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment." But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, "You fool!" will be liable to the hell of fire.¹⁵

Let me say again that I do agree that there is a need to discuss the emotion of anger and how one might deal with it, and I will offer some thoughts to that effect.¹⁶ Jesus's words, however, must stand. He makes no distinction between being angry and sinning. To be angry with a fellow Christian is, in fact, sin and terrible sin at that.

This essentially negative teaching about anger is taken for granted elsewhere in the NT, so much so that "anger" or "wrath" can simply occur in lists of sins.¹⁷

For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger (θυμοί), hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. (2 Cor 12:20)

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger (θυμοί), rivalries, dissensions, division, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal 5:20–21)

Let all bitterness and wrath (θυμός) and anger (ὀργή) and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. (Eph 4:31)

But now, you must put them all away: anger (ὀργή), wrath (θυμός), malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. (Col 3:8)¹⁸

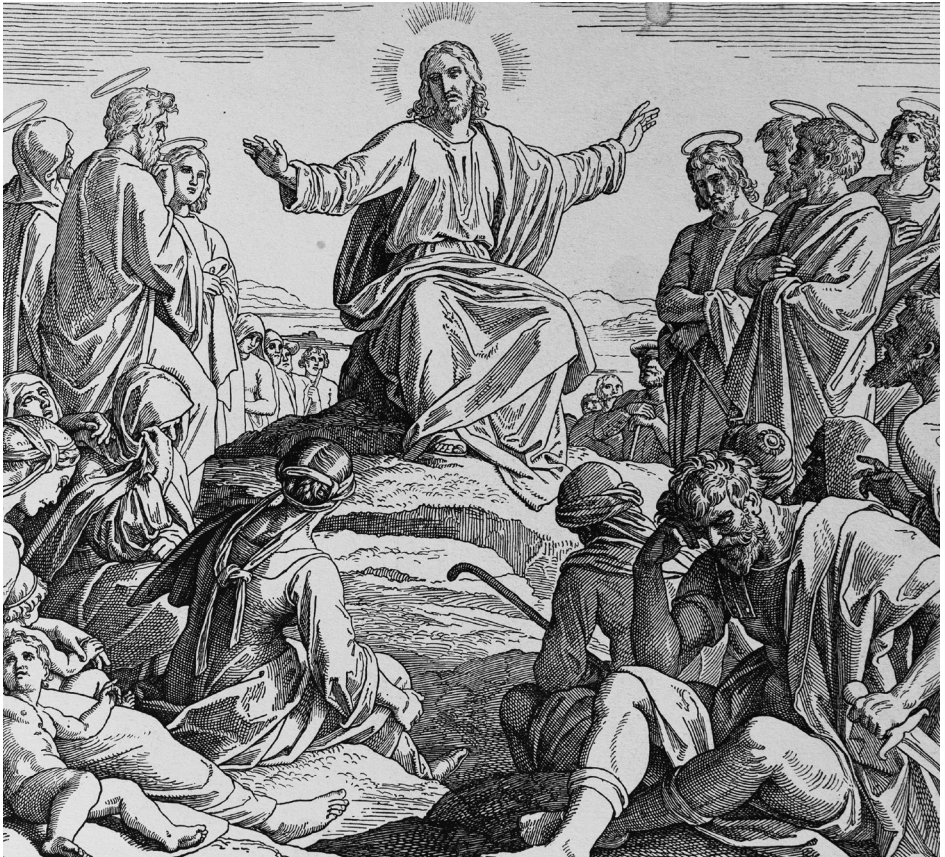
There are a variety of other statements in the NT that partake of this fundamental teaching. Prayers are to be offered in the Christian assemblies "without anger or quarreling" (1 Tm 2:8). In his powerful teaching on love, Paul insists that love is "not irritable or resentful" (1 Cor 13:5).¹⁹ Fathers are not to "provoke their children to anger" as they raise them (Eph 6:14), and believers in general are not to "become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another" (Gal 5:26).

One other passage is significant, and it should be fronted here, namely Romans 12:14–21. Although the specific terms for anger do not occur in these verses, it seems clearly relevant—at least to me.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something

to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.”
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

I might highlight only one thing about this remarkable exhortation, and it is this: There is a place for anger, and for vengeance. But it does not belong to the disciples of Jesus; that prerogative belongs to God alone.²⁰ As I heard someone say long ago, vengeance is too dangerous a weapon to be placed into the hands of sinners. This contrast is utterly consistent with how anger is portrayed, described, and mentioned in both the OT and the NT. Anger belongs to God, not to us humans—and especially not to the disciples of Jesus. Anger is dangerous, and quickly leads to sin. So close is this connection that at times, being or becoming angry is simply equated with sin. That is a remarkable truth, and should be restated, because no other emotion receives that sort of attention in the NT. *The connection between being / becoming angry on the one hand and actually sinning on the other hand is so close that most of the time, Jesus and the apostles simply equate anger with sin.*





Third, I come to the concept that so quickly arose when I spoke about this study to Christian friends and acquaintances. I'll treat the issue in the form of a question. Is there a New Testament teaching on "righteous anger" on the part of humans and especially on the part of Jesus's disciples? In a phrase, and to speak somewhat bluntly, not really. Yes, there are a few examples of believers who are angry and not censored or criticized theologically for it. In addition, there are two passages that do seem to concede to Christians the reality of anger, and to allow for the distinction between the emotion of anger and that anger actually becoming sin. But there is no actual teaching that Christians should expect to be able to experience "righteous anger," and least not in the sense of "anger that has not led you into sin" or "anger that leaves you with no cause for repentance." It's just not there. And this fact is all the more remarkable because (at least in my limited experience) the category of "righteous anger" is a quick go-to category for many Christians.

Having pondered and read a bit, I've discovered that there is no "official" definition of human "righteous anger."²¹ Often the truth that God has anger/gets angry is appealed to, but this doesn't help much, nor does an appeal to the perfect human, Jesus. We're not talking about the divine wrath, but anger on the part of humans who are far from perfect. As I have asked a few people to describe what they mean, they often say that "righteous anger" is anger that arises because of something that is genuinely wrong or evil. When pressed, they admit that this can quickly become an excuse, because "righteous anger" seems to generally carry along with it the notion that if my anger is "righteous," then I am not sinning. There is, as far as I can tell, no agreed-upon definition of "righteous anger."²²

Is the anger of Christians/disciples ever a good thing in the New Testament? In terms of narrative portraits of disciples' anger in the NT that are positive or at least neutral, Paul's reaction to the idolatry that was rampant in Athens has been mentioned above. Acts simply narrates the fact, and as far as the narrative runs, we see no evidence that Paul's feeling of being provoked caused him to sin (Acts 17:16). Fair

*There is a place for anger...
But it does not belong to the
disciples of Jesus...*

enough. There is also the irritation that Paul feels after a long period of being followed and harassed by the spirit-possessed slave girl in Philippi (Acts 16:18). As a result of his irritation, he exorcises the demon from the slave girl. This is

actually an odd passage, because one wonders why Paul did not exorcise the demon sooner, but only waited until (apparently) he got mad. But that is a "gap" in the narrative that we are not able to fill with any certainty.

There is also the interesting reference in 2 Corinthians 7:10–11, where it seems that repentant Christians are to be indignant or angry at themselves because of their own sins:

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation (ἀγανάκτησις), what fear, what longing.²³

Finally, there are two well-known passages²⁴ that speak of anger, but scarcely in a way that commends it. Indeed, both passages reinforce the NT's mostly negative testimony. Here is Ephesians 4:25–27.

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry, and do not sin; I command that the sun not go down on your anger; and give no opportunity to the devil.²⁵

It does seem valid to remark that Paul here allows that anger is not automatically sinful. This is, however, hardly a rousing endorsement of "righteous anger." To the contrary, so dangerous is anger that Paul immediately warns against sin. Indeed, the apostle hastens to add that unless a believer guards himself and gets rid of his anger, he has left an opportunity for the devil. It seems clear enough that Ephesians 4:26–27 is part of the NT's almost exclusively negative judgment of anger in man. Winger comments rightly,

The connection of anger and not sinning in this verse has led to the proposition that there can be “righteous anger” (as when God is angry with his sinful people), as if Paul were saying, “Be angry in such a way that you do not sin.” Yet the Scriptures rarely portray human anger as righteous It is worth considering the possibility that Paul intends [with the use of “be angry,” ὀργίζεσθε] “tremble” in accord with [Psalm 4:4’s] original meaning; that is, fear the wrath of God in such a way that you deal with the cause of sin and anger in the church community.²⁶

Does Ephesians 4:26–27 “teach” the concept of human righteous anger? To repeat myself, “not really.” The other passage that is sometimes cited in support of claims about righteous anger is James 1:19–20, which reads:

Know this, my beloved brothers; let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

As with Ephesians 4:26–27, the most one can say is that James here allows for the possibility of anger that is not sinful. After all, to be “slow to speak” does not mean “don’t speak at all”; so also, one might say to be “slow to anger” doesn’t mean “don’t ever be angry.” The clause that follows, however, reveals James’s understanding that human anger on the part of Jesus’s disciples is a dangerous proposition, and all too often fails to conform to the ways that God wants to put things right in the world. At most, “as in Eph. 4, the apparent concession is followed at once by the verse (20) which rejects anger.”²⁷

The testimony of the NT barely acknowledges the presence or possibility of “righteous anger” in the sense that people normally use this phrase. There is certainly no direct teaching about or encouragement to such a thing. Whatever people may mean by “righteous anger,” it is a construct based on actions of various people (Moses, the prophets, Paul, etc.). But there is no such thing as a genuine, clear, biblical definition of or justification for “righteous anger”—unless the anger is the Father’s or the Son’s wrath.

Far more often—in fact, almost exclusively—Christians are warned about the dangers of anger. The texts rarely, if ever, distinguish between the emotion of anger and sinful thoughts or words or deeds that may arise from that emotion. Here, simply and clearly, is the New Testament’s teaching about human anger: it is spiritually dangerous, and at times it can straightforwardly be called sin. The only reason I have taken (perhaps) more space than was necessary to establish the presence of this teaching in the NT has been the amount of resistance that I experienced from pious, well-intentioned, well-informed Christians—all of whom happen to be Americans living in a culture that increasingly glorifies and praises anger.

Conclusions and Reflections

What can be said as a summary and reflection? These final comments will come in two parts. The first will gather and summarize the scriptural testimony. The second part will be my reflection on the fact that people—and not least Christians—do, in fact, become angry. Further, since anger on the part of non-perfect humans is such a volatile and potentially deadly reality, we need to learn to do something with our anger that is pleasing to God and not destructive for ourselves or our neighbor.

The Bible, and especially the New Testament, teaches straightforwardly that human anger is a common and dangerous reality in our lives. That is the dominant message, and it should be the dominant way that Christians think about their anger. It would be going too far, I believe, to say that the emotional reaction of anger is always and intrinsically sinful; it is not. It would not be going too far, however, to say that anger is always spiritually dangerous and that we need to deal with it seriously and piously. Anger is never extolled; it is not a fruit of the Spirit. As I noted above, the connection between anger and actual sin is so close that both Christ Jesus and his apostles can simply equate the two: anger in many New Testament texts simply is a form of sin.

This means that, if American society currently extols “outrage” and admires those who speak out of anger and who speak with angry words and insults, then believers must reject that cultural value. We have a responsibility to stand out and to be different, as salt and light. Even when we feel angry at the injustice or evil or immorality in the world around us, we are not to give free reign to that anger—and then justify our sin by labeling it “righteous anger.”

Is there such a thing as “righteous anger”? With regard to sinful human creatures, the answer is, “It is a theoretical possibility.” Nowhere, however, are we commanded to act in righteous anger and even when it seems a possibility (as with Eph 4:25–27 or Jas 1:18–19), there is an immediate warning against sinning. For what it’s worth, I suspect that the category of “righteous anger” most of the time is a smoke screen, an attempt to justify sarcasm and punitive actions and angry insults. Yes, in the case of Moses or Elijah or Paul, the texts do narrate that they were angry and then acted in response to evil of some sort. But this does not mean we should think that our anger is like theirs, or even that in their anger they did not sin at all. And if someone would like to appeal to the anger of Almighty God or of the Lord Jesus Christ in support for the category of “righteous anger,” the simple answer is that God is pure and unable to sin and the Lord Jesus Christ was perfect. And we are not.

Some have said to me, “But anger motivates you; it makes you get up and do something.” This is certainly true, at least in my experience. I ask in return, however: why should it take anger to get me out of my inertia? Why do I not find sufficient motivation in compassion or courage or mercy or simply the greatest fruit of the Spirit, love for my neighbor? The fact that it takes anger for me to actually do

something strikes me not as a reason to extol anger, but as a reason to repent of my coldness of love and hardness of heart. My prayer should be, “Lord, fill me with love for my neighbor and for those in need, so that I may serve and help them.”

If a person has read this far, he or she might well say, “Fine, you’ve shown me what the Bible says about human anger. But the fact remains—I get mad. What do I do about that? What am I supposed to do with my anger?” I can share some thoughts, without any claim to originality.

In the first place, I do agree that we can begin with the notion that human emotions, including anger, are not intrinsically sinful. This is not a justification to remain angry. It does serve to establish the situation, however, so that I can say, “OK, I am angry; really angry. What do I do now?” It is of deepest importance that we are aware of our emotions and acknowledge that we have them. To be able to do so with a somewhat neutral stance is incredibly helpful.

The second point follows naturally on the first: anger has to be acknowledged. It is

The image is a screenshot of a Facebook comment thread. It features five comments from different users, each with a profile picture icon, name, and date. The comments are as follows:

- Tom Osterndorf on Facebook** (October 19, 2015): "Ooooooo... you professional theologians make me soooo mad" (with a REPLY button).
- Jeff Gibbs** (October 20, 2015): "Tom—nicely played."
- John Schultz** (October 19, 2015): "Thanks Jeff, wonderful exposition and exploration of this topic. I too have often wondered about what may define 'righteous anger' in the human experience. From those who have written about that, I'm not sure they have been on firm exegetical footing. In your description of our American culture, I couldn't help but think how 'offended' everyone claims to be over everything these days! Thanks Austin!" (with a REPLY button).
- John Schultz** (October 19, 2015): "Again, not 'Austin'"
- Jeff Gibbs** (October 21, 2015): "John, Yes, I've thought about the connections between 'taking offense' and 'being angry.' Part of it is the issue of defining terms. That's why I took the easy way out, and let the lexicon do it for me. Hope that doesn't make you mad . . . Thanks for writing! Jeff"

A snapshot of the comments to Professor Gibbs' article as it first appeared on www.concordiatheology.org.

far worse to be angry and pretend that I am not. Anger denied often simply becomes anger under pressure—and as we all know, it grows and takes a toll. There are, by the way, a whole host of English terms (just as there are at least twenty Greek terms and phrases) that signify essentially the same thing. So, I would suggest that when I am irritated, or peeved, or outraged, or offended, or a bunch of other things—these are all merely different ways of saying that I am angry. And I need to own that, and then do something with it.

Third, what then shall we as Christians do with our anger? There is, of course, wise counsel in having a third party to whom I can express my anger. A safe and careful listener can be a great help in letting me dispel some of that energy inside of me, the energy that could so quickly manifest itself in the form of attacking another person rather than loving them. To use a somewhat homely image that I think I made up myself, expressing your anger in a safe place with a safe person is like vomiting into the toilet while someone holds your forehead. It's hard, but you usually feel better afterwards, and you can think more clearly and more Christianly about what to do next.

Fourth, some anger in our lives is more deeply rooted. Some people are chronically angry. That sort of situation might call for a more deliberate and sustained effort at counseling, learning about oneself to discover why it is that anger is the reaction that so quickly comes to the surface. Even if I wouldn't count myself as someone who is chronically angry, my marriage to my wife, Renee, has been instructive. Although Renee certainly has her faults and her flawed patterns of reacting to things, to become angry is not one of them; she is about the least angry person I know. This gives me an opportunity, at least, to ask myself, "Well, why is it that I react with anger? Here is another Christian person right next to me, and her reaction is a different one. What is it about my psychology or my patterns of thought or my life experience that leads me to becoming angry?" It's an important question for all believers, I would think, and it has been important to me personally. This is where a professional, a skilled counselor, can be a wonderful blessing.

In the end, for a Christian the Bible's teaching needs to lead the way. Anger is not to be extolled in our lives or in our discourse. Anger quickly becomes sin, and we simply must think in those terms. It is hard to do given the climate in which we find ourselves. We will have opportunities, however, to show ourselves to be different, Spirit-filled sorts of people who respond with good when others have done evil, who leave vengeance in the hands where it belongs—in God's hands.

And this, of course, reminds me of the most important biblical teaching with regard to anger. God has provided a way for us to be saved from his righteous (!) wrath which will come upon a rebellious and sinful world on the last day. In gratitude and peace we lay claim to Paul's beautiful "how much more" proclamation, even as we seek to live with our neighbors in ways that manifest the grace and compassion of God, leaving anger to the side:

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Rom 5:8–11)

ENDNOTES

- 1 I have placed the phrase “pro-life/pro-lifers” in quotations because I, with others, have become convinced that it is no longer a useful way to speak. For better or worse, in our current context the phrase “pro-life” simply means “Republican” or “angry.” Whether those perceptions are accurate is not relevant; these perceptions are dominant. For my part, I am not a Republican, and as a Christian who wants to be comprehensively life-affirming, I am seeking to become less angry.
- 2 Lest any of my readers become suspicious at this point, I assure everyone that my words here do not indicate a particular view or position regarding “gun control.” On the one hand, I am not a gun person and I confess that I do not really understand those perspectives; I need to learn more about them. On the other hand, I am a very large fan of the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights, including the Second Amendment. I realize, of course, that there are many debates swirling around these matters. In no way am I taking part in those debates here.
- 3 I have made no real attempt to gather or examine texts where anger is present implicitly, either through the way an account is narrated or through use of terms that indirectly evoke the notion of “anger.” For example, I am quite sure that James 3:1-11 aims to curb and condemn the use of angry words. Since no “anger vocabulary” is used, however, I have not referred to those verses.
- 4 J. Horst, “μικροθυμία κτλ,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT) vol. IV*, comments, “The set formula of Ex.34:6 echoes again and again through the biblical writings and into later Judaism.” It seems likely as well that God’s self-revelation as “slow to anger” serves as the background to various NT passages, especially perhaps Rom 2:4; 9:22.
- 5 There are relatively clear echoes or references to Yahweh’s self-revelation to Moses at Nm 14:18; Ps 86:15; 103:8; Neh 9:17; Jl 2:13; Jon 4:2; Na 1:3; Ws 15:1.
- 6 As my colleague Tom Egger reminds me, the truth that Yahweh is slow to anger can never be used to justify a decision to remain in sin, nor to predict when his anger will actually manifest itself.
- 7 In common usage “righteous anger” seems to mean “justified anger” and often “non-sinful anger.” In addition, the phrase typically entails that anger is directed at something at which God himself is angry. This is the sense in which I will be using the phrase in this essay. I do find it odd that discussions of human “righteous anger” cite as supporting biblical passages places where God is righteously angry. In addition, people are quick to cite places where Jesus is angry in support of the concept of “righteous human anger.” My response to this is, “Yes, but none of us is Jesus.”
- 8 Other possible examples of “righteous human anger” in the OT include Ex 11:8; Nm 16:15; 31:14; 1 Sm 11:6; Jb 32:2-5; Ps 2:12. Perhaps most striking is the story of Phineas’s zeal in killing an idolatrous and adulterous Israelite and his pagan partner. Phineas and his descendants receive a covenant of priestly service because he “was jealous with my [i.e., God’s] jealousy” (Nm 25:11). The context makes it crystal clear that Yahweh’s jealousy included his anger over Israel’s apostasy (Nm 25:3-4).
- 9 As the narrative continues, of course, Jonah gets angry again when the plant Yahweh sent to shelter him from the shade withers and dies. He insists that it is right for him to get angry—a claim that in turn withers under the gracious logic of his God who is slow to anger (Jon 4:5-11).
- 10 See Gn 27:45; 30:2; 49:6-7; Nm 22:27; 24:10; Dt 32:21, 27; Jgs 9:30; 18:25; 1 Sm 25:32-35; Est 1:12, 18; 3:5; Jb 5:2; Ps 55:3; 78:10.
- 11 J. Fichtner, “The Wrath of Men and the Wrath of God in the Old Testament,” TDNT V, 395.
- 12 See Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains, vol. 1* (United Bible Societies, 1989), 761-763.
- 13 The concentration around the stems ὀργ- and θυμ- is even stronger when compound forms are taken into account: παροργισμός (once), παροργίζω (twice), θυμομαχέω (once).
- 14 An interesting use of ὀργή occurs in Rom 13:4-5. There “the governing authorities” (13:1) seem to manifest or inflict the divine wrath on evildoers. At the same time, then, Paul seems to be referring to God’s anger as well as the anger of the civil authorities.
- 15 For a discussion on how anger is not like (literal) murder in every way, see Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1-11:1*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 276-279, 284-285.

- 16 As far as I am aware, the Bible never explicitly articulates the modern (and, I think, mostly valid) distinction between experiencing an emotion such as anger or fear or loneliness and what one does with that emotion. I do think the distinction is valid. I also am of the opinion, however, that the distinction can be used as an excuse for sinning, especially with regard to anger.
- 17 In the list of qualifications for those who would be overseers and God's stewards, Paul touches on anger: "For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered (ὀργιλός) or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain" (Ti 1:7).
- 18 Notice that either the singular (Eph 4:31; Col 3:8) or the plural (2 Cor 12:20; Gal 5:20-21) noun can be employed to refer to anger which is sinful.
- 19 The verb, "to become irritated" (παροξύνωμαι) occurs also in Acts 17:16, where Paul's spirit "was provoked" within him when he saw how idolatrous Athens was. I'll return to the Acts 17 reference below.
- 20 Romans 13:4-5 does teach that civil authorities will enact God's anger against wrongdoers—at least if the authorities are doing what they should be doing.
- 21 A quick search on the web shows many Bible studies and Christian discussions of "righteous anger." Most if not all claim that human anger is righteous when it arises from something that also makes God angry. Other factors, such as purity of motive sometimes are discussed as well, and the example of Jesus' anger is also frequently mentioned.
- 22 In an internet search for "righteous anger" a number of Bible studies pop up, and from the few that I have surveyed, no clear definition emerges. Herman Kleinknecht, "ὀργή, κτλ," (*TDNT V*, 384) while noting the occasional reference in Greek thought to a "moral wrath which protects against evil and which is sometimes expressly called δίκαια ὀργή," immediately states that even in Greek thought anger "came under a predominately negative judgment."
- 23 The noun ἀγανάκτησις, "indignation," occurs only here in the NT. It is cognate with the verb, "to be indignant"; see Matt 20:24 and parallels.
- 24 As I have been discussing this essay with colleagues and friends as it has developed, Eph 4:26a has been the almost universal rejoinder to "prove" that there such a thing as righteous anger. Rarely, I might add, did anyone also cite Eph 4:26b-27.
- 25 In italics I have offered my own translation of the Greek. In English, the familiar rendering, "and do not let the sun go down on your anger" can be understood as "don't allow this to happen." In Greek, however, it is a third-person imperative and in this hortatory context, it has the force that I have offered.
- 26 Thomas Winger, *Ephesians* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 522. Gustav Stählin, "The Wrath of Man and the Wrath of God in the NT," *TDNT*, V, 421, comments, "In Eph 4:26 . . . [the imperative "be angry"] by no means has the full force of an imperative, for it is a quotation (Ps.4:4) according to the sense given by the LXX. Thus it is better to translate, not: "Be angry for my sake but do not sin," but: "If you are angry, be careful not to sin." Anger is not called sin here, but there lies in the background the thought that when one is angry sin crouches at the door. For this reason there is added: μη ἐπιδύετω ἐπι παροργισμῷ ὑμ. The quotation is to be read in the light of the saying five verses later (v.31), with its repudiation of πᾶσα ["all anger"]."
- 27 Stählin, "Wrath of Man," 421.

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All correspondence should be sent to:
CONCORDIA PAGES
801 Seminary Place
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