A Theological and Biblical Examination of Anger

ROBERT D. GOLDING

Abstract

Not only is Christian anger, properly defined, biblically permissible, but it is also required. In service to this thesis, I will first examine arguments regarding the permissibility of anger. Then, I will seek to refute an argument that states that anger is never advantageous. Finally, I will argue that anger is not only *valid* but is biblically *required* in certain circumstances. It will hopefully be clear that the claim that humans should never express anger is more pagan than Christian. On the other hand, anger is a dangerous emotion that must be checked and balanced by the essence of God as revealed in his word. Humans are made in his image and should emote accordingly.

Keywords

Anger, theology proper, self-defense, biblical theology, indignation, wrath, ethics, sixth commandment, justice, forgiveness

I. *Validating Anger*

There are eight Old Testament Hebrew words for anger and at least two New Testament Greek words.[1] One of the oldest biblical demarcations of anger is connected with the Hebrew word for nose (*ʿaph*; אַף). At some point, this word became equated with anger such that turning anger away from a person is, literally,

[1] For a brief survey, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 2:222.

"to turn your brother's nose [*'aph-'akhikha*; אַף־אָחִיךָ] from you" (Gen 27:45). This use occurs around eighty times in the Old Testament.[2] The significance for our purposes is the apparent connection between one's nose and anger. According to one dictionary, "there is a clear connection between anger and snorting, e.g., in Ex 15:8; Ps 18:16; Job 4:9."[3] The connection seems to be primarily one of displeasure; snorting was equated with displeasure in the Old Testament, as it is today.[4] This core element of strong displeasure is evident across the range of Old Testament words denoting anger. Similarly, in the New Testament, anger is equated with a "state of relatively strong displeasure."[5] The various biblical terms, then, cohere with our modern definition of anger as the result of strong displeasure. The definition of anger and wrath (the terms are used interchangeably) we will operate with can be articulated this way: A disposition of one person to another person or thing that is marked by displeasure, disgust, and the desire to remove the person or thing from the influenced person's perception.

This feeling of displeasure, or anger, has been described as a necessary human response to certain stimuli for thousands of years. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle famously said, "The man who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and, further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is praised."[6] Thomas Aquinas wrote much on this issue.[7] Responding to the objection that Christians should arbitrate passionlessly since this is the way the impassible God operates, Aquinas says, "In God and the angels there is no sensitive appetite, nor again bodily members: and so in them good does not depend on the right ordering of passions or of

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[2] Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 1:77 (hereafter, *HALOT*).

[3] G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 1:351.

[4] *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2004), s.v. "snort." Cf. animals' snorting is often a response to stimuli that indicate personal danger.

[5] Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 720 (ὀργή).

[6] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1125b.25–29, in *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler and W. D. Goetz, trans. Philip W. Ross, 2nd ed., Great Books of the Western World (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.; Robert P. Gwinn, 1990), 8:373–74.

[7] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, n.d.), I, q. 81, a3; I–II, q. 9, a2; II–II, q158; Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Evil*, trans. John A. Oesterle and Jean T. Oesterle (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 12.1; Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger, Aristotelian Commentary Series (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), 800–815 (pp. 256–59).

bodily actions, as it does in us."[8] Aquinas and others argue that certain angry passions are part of who we are as embodied creatures made in the image of God and, therefore, we should allow them to manifest albeit in a masterful way (and not in a mastered way).

William Mattison, building on Aquinas, argues that people should express anger to promote virtue. If it is good to be angry at certain things, like the torture of infants, then "the best way to guard against vicious anger [i.e., bad anger] is not to seek to quell all experiences of anger, but rather to habituate one's anger so that it arises virtuously."[9] Of course, not all anger is good (or virtuous), but depending on its object (that on which the anger is focused), it *can* be good, says Mattison. In the words of Jochem Douma, "Hatred, anger, envy, and vindictiveness are rejected [in the Bible]. Still, all four of these can be expressed in legitimate ways."[10] So, if one is angry over a person torturing children and focuses that anger rationally and in accordance with Scripture (e.g., he does not use blasphemous profanity to condemn the torturer's actions) then his anger should be deemed good.

Biblical counseling discusses certain types of anger in positive terms. David Powlison shows that human anger (when expressed correctly) is not always wrong since it is ultimately rooted in who God is as the God who hates sin: "You actually work the way that God says you work. You have the capacity for just outrage because he does."[11] Human anger is just insofar as it mirrors God's anger: "Like God, you are displeased at betrayals of love …. The reason these things anger you is because they anger God."[12]

This understanding of anger as rooted in God's character is climactically seen in Christ. The *Dictionary of Bible Themes* has an extensive section on Christ's anger and describes it this way: "Jesus Christ's controlled emotion arising from his unswerving opposition to evil and his determination to eradicate it." It provides at least thirty different instances of Christ's anger displayed in the Gospels and Revelation.[13] If Christ gets angry, then it seems that we should too. However, Christ also does miracles at will, reads minds, and forgives people who did not directly sin against him; we cannot

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[8] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 24, a3, ad 2.

[9] William Mattison, "Virtuous Anger? From Questions of 'Vindicatio' to the Habituation of Emotion," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 24.1 (Spring/Summer 2004): 176.

[10] Jochem Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996), 230.

[11] David Powlison, *Good and Angry: Redeeming Anger, Irritation, Complaining, and Bitterness* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), 111.

[12] Ibid., 110–11.

[13] Martin H. Manser, *Dictionary of Bible Themes: The Accessible and Comprehensive Tool for Topical Studies* (London: Martin Manser, 2009), s.v. "Jesus Christ, anger of."

do those same things Christ does. The discussion above, then, serves to show that Christ's righteous anger is something that we can emulate because it is part of our interaction with the fallen world as his creatures. We should be righteously angry with sin because humans were perfectly created with passions (Aquinas and Mattison) and, as such, are hardwired to hate the breaking of God's law (Powlison). If Aquinas, Mattison, and Powlison are right, then God has created us with certain passions that emulate his perfections. One of those passions is righteous anger. Christ, as the perfect man, exemplified righteous anger for us. We, as renewed individuals, should seek to emulate him.

An Objection to Anger

Though the likes of Aquinas, Mattison, and Powlison argue that anger can be positive, others disagree on more practical grounds. Glen Pettigrove, following a different philosophical trend (that of David Hume) argues that meekness—at the cost of righteous anger—should be sought.[14] He does not argue that a meek person cannot get angry but argues that anger almost always harms the cognitive process and therefore should be avoided. Before we examine biblical arguments regarding the use of anger, we should consider Pettigrove's argument to determine whether the potential allowance of anger is worth pursuing if, practically speaking, anger is always a detriment for humans.

Pettigrove's argument against anger is primarily based on experiments in which patients were angered in one way or another and then asked to perform a variety of cognitive tasks. His main argument against the use of anger is that it is not as effective as meekness, which is substantiated by behavioral experiments. The data seem to show that people were hindered no matter the stimuli (so long as the effect of anger was produced) or the cognitive task when they were angered.

The results indicate that, when compared to a control group of neutral or depressed participants, angry participants were regularly too optimistic about tragedy (underestimating how many people die in various natural disasters), more prone to accept stereotypes even though they see themselves as less biased, and more prone to accept and pursue punitive measures for those whom they perceived to be in the wrong.[15] This cognitive cost borne by anger leads Pettigrove to suggest that we should most highly praise meek people who are able to recognize wrongdoing. In the absence of overwhelming evidence, meek people are unwilling to draw unfavorable

[14] Glen Pettigrove, "Meekness and 'Moral' Anger," *Ethics* 122.2 (January 2012): 341–70.
[15] Ibid., 361–64.

conclusions about the agent's motives. Quoting Butler, Pettigrove shows that this characteristic "freedom from mistrust, and disposition to believe well of our neighbour," extends so far that the meek would "rather be deceived than be suspicious."[16]

Pettigrove, however, counters that the potential communicative capacity of anger (e.g., communicating the authenticity of one's beliefs) does not outweigh its communicative hindrances:

> Anger may, at times, communicate morally significant content to others, but likewise, it may interfere with such communication because the form in which it is delivered draws their attention away from the substance of the message.[17]

Even if the potential clouding of cognition that anger entails is worth the communicative payout, Pettigrove argues, the benefit is slim at best. Marriage counselors take pains to teach couples how to communicate without anger because the presence of anger almost always shrouds intended verbal communication in a veil of fear and defensiveness. He also rightly shows that martial arts training emphasizes the need to remain calm while fighting in order to maintain energy as efficiently as possible and to maximize one's ability to perform strategically advantageous movements. Anger unsurprisingly hurts marriages and surprisingly hinders hand-to-hand fighting.

Therefore, Pettigrove argues that it is not wrong to display righteous anger, but that it is pragmatically advantageous to resist doing so in the interest of being meek. Meekness, he argues, can detect wrongdoing, but it is generally unwilling to resist that wrongdoing (at least, insofar as anger is required) because it "hopes all things." Meekness is seen to be the opposite of anger since the former hopes that the indications of wrongdoing are misleading, while the latter assumes that they are accurate.

It is not an oversimplification to say that Pettigrove's preference for meekness mirrors much of the modern perspective on Christian engagement. Paul Yeulett aptly describes this sentiment:

> To be a Christian meant simply to absorb every kind of attack, and this maxim applied at every level of society. … To demonstrate anger in the face of any kind of provocation was a denial of the character of Christ, which was what we should all seek to emulate.[18]

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[16] Ibid., 366.
[17] Ibid., 369.
[18] Paul Yeulett, *Jesus and His Enemies* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 74.

When considering Jesus as presented in the four Gospels, on the other hand, Yeulett was "confronted with the notion of righteous anger. To respond robustly to evil was presented as the Christian, even the Christ-like, thing to do."[19]

Even though meekness can provide cognitive benefits over anger, as Pettigrove argues, sometimes clearer thinking is not the most important element in a social interaction. For example, if someone witnesses a woman being mugged, the anger that the bystander should experience is so essential to motivating him to help the woman that a small cognitive reduction seems a meager price to pay. If the bystander, in his anger, is unable to process how severe the future punishment of the muggers should be (which is one of the three detriments to cognitive processes that Pettigrove notes), it is irrelevant to his intervening and helping the woman. The point is that anger can be a beneficial emotion in social situations where action is desired and precise cognition is not of utmost importance. Furthermore, Pettigrove concedes that anger may actually *improve* cognitive ability by reducing confirmation bias.[20] To be sure, anger is not helpful when doing calculus, but it does serve a purpose in limited situations. Thus, it is too simplistic to say that meekness is always advantageous when compared to anger.

Most importantly, Christ and his apostles often opted for a predominantly angry response (though meekness was not completely absent). A key distinction between righteous anger and unrighteous anger is an outward disposition. In his analysis of Christ's incarnational love for humanity, Paul Miller shows that Christ's anger is always "other-centered" and affirms, "His anger is centered on others' welfare. … Jesus gets angry at anything that prevents love to people (compassion) or dependence on God (faith)."[21] On regular occasions, Christ was justly angry.

How do we distinguish between unjust and just anger? First, righteous anger should be outward focused. We should get angry at things that harm God's people or denigrate God. In his commentary on Psalm 35, James Boice says, "It is one thing to forgive a wrong done against us personally. To do so is commendable. But it is quite another thing to overlook a wrong done by an evil person to another party."[22]

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[19] Ibid., 74.

[20] Glen Pettigrove, "Meekness and 'Moral' Anger," 363, n. 71; cf. Maia Young et al., "Mad Enough to See the Other Side: Anger and the Search for Disconfirming Information," *Cognition and Emotion* 25 (2011): 10–21.

[21] Paul E. Miller, *Love Walked among Us: Learning to Love like Jesus* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2001), 97.

[22] James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 1–41: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 301.

Secondly, righteous anger is constructive. Powlison calls this "the constructive displeasure of mercy." Though it seems counterintuitive, anger can be a manifestation of a merciful heart. Powlison puts it this way,

> *The constructive displeasure of mercy* traverses exactly the same ground as simple anger. But it's on a different spectrum altogether. It does not act like the typical hostilities … [Rather,] it says, "That's wrong—and I will be constructively merciful in pursuing whatever is just, whatever makes things right, whatever does good."[23]

Miller also notes the constructive nature of Christ's anger: "He says little—and what he says and does is constructive. Love controls Jesus' expression of anger."[24] Powlison makes the striking point that Adam and Eve should have been angry with Satan in the garden of Genesis 3. Of course, they failed to exercise righteous anger. If it were not for that abject failure, "the first act of anger would have been in Genesis 3, instead of Genesis 4 (when Cain murdered Abel)."[25] Anger, then, is a vital component of the Christian life. We *must* be angry at the things that God *condemns* because he must be angry at the things he condemns.

II. *Self-Interested Anger?*

There is also an egoistic element to anger in Christian ethics. Though anger should be primarily channeled to the offenses against God and secondarily to the ones that offend the neighbor, it is also the case that we as individuals can, and even should, be angry with offenses against ourselves. Indeed, the Bible does not teach Stoicism—the idea that anger should always be avoided. Biblical anthropology applies to all people, including us, not just others. If another person holds to the biblical ethic, they will be angry with offenses aimed at us. It should not, therefore, be seen as sinful to feel the same way as that other person. If *they* are justified in feeling angry at an offense levied at us, *we* should be similarly justified in feeling the same way about the same offense. To argue otherwise would be more Stoic than biblical. This is implied in such texts as Mark 12:31, where our Lord says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31; Matt 19:9; Luke 10:27; cf. Gal 5:14; Jas 2:8, referring to Lev 19:18). The self-love referred to is a necessary component of the teaching. If it were sinful to love oneself, it would be contradictory to use that sinful inclination as the basis for righteously

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[23] Powlison, *Good and Angry*, 73.
[24] Miller, *Love Walked among Us*, 92.
[25] Powlison, *Good and Angry*, 63.

loving others. Since it is biblically warranted, on the other hand, to love oneself, self-love is then used as the litmus test for other-love. The standard by which we—justly—love ourselves should be the same standard by which we judge our love of others.

1. *Pacifism: Philippians 2:3?*

We must, however, deal with biblical data that might indicate the opposite. In response to the claim that the Bible teaches personal pacifism, we will look at a range of texts that will help us survey the issue. The command to "count others more significant than yourselves" (Phil 2:3) does not negate the responsibility to be angry with personal harm. Counting one as more significant by no means entails that the more significant person may sin against or otherwise willfully harm the less-significant person. This was and is a foundational element of revolution and reformation alike—though the powers that be are indeed more significant and are due honor and respect (Rom 13:1–7), they nevertheless are bound by a mutual ethical code that requires equitable treatment of subordinates. The status of the king as superior does not provide him with the justification to lord it over his subjects and abuse them (Matt 20:25; Luke 22:25). Therefore, considering one as more important than oneself does not necessitate that the subordinate never become angry when the superior abuses him.

2. *Pacifism: Matthew 5:39?*

Most significant in the biblical data, perhaps, is the command to "turn the other cheek" when personally harmed (Matt 5:39; Luke 6:29). In examining this key passage, we must remember that the historical context indicates that the topic Jesus is addressing "is more a matter of honor than of physical injury."[26] Jesus's historical milieu was that of a thoroughgoing honor-shame culture. Therefore, his interactions with the Pharisees often dealt with this topic (and it is also why his statements were shocking). William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker show that the context indicates that Jesus's primary intention was to combat vindictive revenge (which would be ubiquitous in an honor-shame culture):

> When Christ's words (verses 39–42) are read in the light of what immediately *follows* in verses 43–48, and when the parallel in Luke 6:29, 30 is explained on the basis of what immediately *precedes* in verses 27, 28, it becomes clear that … Jesus is condemning the spirit of lovelessness, hatred, [and] yearning for revenge.[27]

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[26] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 220.

[27] William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to*

Therefore, Jesus's words are directed against a spirit of vindictiveness, not righteous self-preservation. Of course, this does not justify all attempts at self-perseveration since this desire can easily give way to selfishness and greed. The point is that some level of self-preservation is warranted. We will further analyze this passage by means of another in the next section.

3. *Pacifism: Romans 12:21?*

This emphasis on negating revenge in Matthew 5:39 seems to be borne out by, in Calvin's words, "the best interpreter of this passage," that is, Paul.[28] In Romans 12:21, Paul says, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Though there is not a direct allusion to Christ's words here, the content is clearly parallel. Paul seems to summarize the teaching of Christ by telling the Romans to overcome evil (e.g., a slap on the cheek) with good (e.g., a longsuffering response). The impetus for Paul's remarks is seen two verses before: "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'" (Rom 12:19, citing Deut 32:35). The Old Testament imperative to leave vengeance to the Lord is followed by the Pauline imperative to overcome evil with good. Therefore, Paul is connecting longsuffering (or cheek-turning) with the refusal to enact vengeance, not anger. Thus, we see contextual clues in Matthew, Luke, and Romans that cheek-turning is imperative in the realm of vengeance, not in preventing continued abuse or personal harm via righteous anger.

4. *A Biblical and Confessional Defense of Self-Defense*

To answer the question as to whether a Christian may exhibit anger toward another person, other passages must be considered. Matthew 5:39 and passages like it read in isolation could be understood to indicate pacifism. However, the biblical corpus generally precludes it. (As an aside, we will not occupy ourselves with a discussion on national pacifism. Though personal and national pacifism are related, they are distinct discussions. We will therefore only occupy ourselves with the former, as it pertains to the topic at hand.) The connection between justified anger as a response to personal abuse and self-defense seems obvious. According to our definition, anger is a feeling of strong displeasure that naturally lends itself to responding to the stimuli by seeking its removal. Therefore, if we can show that the

Matthew (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953), 310.

[28] John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 298.

Bible presents self-defense (or the physical neutralizing of another person by physical force) as warranted, we will see *a fortiori* that it also warrants the feeling of displeasure that must precede the action. Warranted self-defense necessitates warranted anger.

We will quickly note the highpoints in defending the doctrine of personal self-defense. Both Reformed and Arminian theologians support self-defense as a biblically warranted action. Norman Geisler says, "God permits life taking in self-defense (Exod. 22:2), in capital punishment (Gen. 9:6), and in just war (cf. Gen. 14:14–20)."[29] Francis Turretin similarly defends the rightful use of lethal self-defense:

> Defensive homicide is not forbidden when anyone, for the purpose of defending his own life against a violent and unjust aggressor (keeping within the limits of lawful protection), kills another. … The reason is clear. Although it is not lawful to return like for like and to avenge oneself, still to repel force by force and to defend oneself belongs to natural and perpetual right.[30]

The Westminster Larger Catechism 136 makes a similar statement in regard to the sixth commandment:

> The sins forbidden in the sixth commandment are, all taking away the life of ourselves, or of others, *except in case of* public justice, lawful war, or *necessary defence*; the neglecting or withdrawing the lawful and necessary means of preservation of life; sinful anger, hatred, envy, desire of revenge; all excessive passions, distracting cares; immoderate use of meat, drink, labour, and recreations; provoking words, oppression, quarrelling, striking, wounding, and whatsoever else tends to the destruction of the life of any.[31]

In the Edinburgh edition, Exodus 22:2 is cited as the prooftext in a footnote following the italicized text above, which shows a consistent interpretation of the passage (Geisler and Turretin cite the same text). The Westminster divines may have had in mind national defense and not personal defense, but this interpretation seems to ignore the personal nature of the context in which things like "anger, hatred, envy" and "immoderate use of meat [and] drink" are primarily personal and not national actions. Also, if "necessary defense" is to be understood as national, the inclusion of "lawful war"

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[29] Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 114.

[30] Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), 2:115.

[31] Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1851), 294–96 (emphasis added).

would seem to be redundant. Further, it seems the Larger Catechism is not only allowing for necessary defense but is mandating it since "neglecting … the … necessary means of preservation of life" is listed as one of the "sins forbidden in the sixth commandment." Finally, we note that the Larger Catechism distinguishes anger in general from "sinful anger," which indicates that there is such a thing as righteous anger.

We turn next to Luke 22:36. Just before Jesus's betrayal at the hands of Judas and the religious leaders, "He said to them, 'But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one.'" Some interpret this passage spiritually and see Jesus speaking of a spiritual sword.[32] This interpretation would have Jesus mean that his disciples ought to take courage in the midst of upcoming trouble. However, this spiritualized understanding bifurcates Jesus's literal use of "moneybag" and "knapsack" with a spiritual use of "sword." If the disciples really needed money and provision, would they not really need a sword? Further, that the disciples furnish real swords two verses later would imply that Jesus meant it literally. Jesus's response to the presentation of these swords is simply, "It is enough" (Luke 22:38). Note that he does not condemn his disciples or encourage the amassing of more arms. He does not tell them to get rid of their swords, but he does not congratulate them either. Exodus 22:2, Turretin, the Larger Catechism, and Luke 22:36 all allow for the use of lethal self-defense for Christians.

5. *Combining Cheek-Turning and Sword-Wielding*

How do cheek-turning and sword-wielding fit together? Jesus tells us to turn the cheek, and he allows for the use of a sword to defend oneself. Are these not contradictory commands? No. These commands cohere in that the former is given in regard to vengeance (see II.1–3 above), while the latter is given in regard to personal defense. Jesus commands us to turn our cheeks to those offenses that are against our reputation. He does not want us to return the offense as a means of saving face or balancing the scales, as it were. However, he does not tell us to turn our cheeks to fatal blows. If our lives are in danger, the proper Christian response is to seek to preserve life. Therefore, anger (or the disposition of strong displeasure) is a justifiable state for Christians in circumstances where their well-being is threatened. For example, it is warranted for a Christian to be angry with a person who wants to imprison him unjustly (cf. Acts 23:3). This is notably the case in

[32] William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953), 976.

colonial and early American slavery. Black Christians regularly used the Bible as justification for their anger toward whites who were enslaving them.[33] In this way, we have an example of just Christian anger constructively utilized for both personal and corporate good.

Therefore, the foregoing shows that the key distinction between licit and illicit Christian anger is that of offense and defense. If a Christian's anger is in service of an offensive attack upon an enemy in the interest of vengeance, he has trespassed upon God's sole territory, for vengeance is his and his alone (Rom 12:19). On the other hand, if a Christian is angry when compelled to defend himself or another from a violent attack, he is doing not only something permissible but also something good because he is emulating God's love for creation that is manifest as anger for those who seek to do it harm.

III. *The Categorical Imperative to Anger*

In this final section, we will examine the potential for a theological imperative to anger. The previous sections sought to establish anger as a valid Christian response to certain stimuli. In this section, we will seek to take another step in the same direction by showing that God's attributes not only *permit* anger but *compel* it.

When conducting biblicoethical investigation, there is nothing more foundational than the being of God. Ethical imperatives are not arbitrary for the Christian. Rather, they are rooted in who God is as the immutable creator of all things. Therefore, ethics cannot change since God cannot change (Num 23:19; 2 Tim 2:13; Titus 1:2). John Murray puts it this way: "The ultimate standard of right is the character or nature of God. The basis of ethics is that God is what he is, and we must be conformed to what he is in holiness, righteousness, truth, goodness, and love."[34] Friedrich Julius Stahl says,

> The good is not a law for the divine will (so that God wills it because it is good); neither is it a creation of his will (so that it becomes good because He wills it); but it is the nature (*das Urwollen*) of God from everlasting to everlasting.[35]

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[33] See Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 220–24.

[34] John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (1957; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 177.

[35] As quoted in Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 3:261.

Though the conversation regarding God's nature and ethics usually centers around God as a God of love, we also must consider his wrath. Murray, for example, focuses on the imperatives that are spawned by God's love, but he also says, "The demand of love, unrelenting and all pervasive as it is, does not abrogate the demand of justice."[36] In his commentary on Romans, Murray shows that God's wrath, or hate, is something that must be reckoned with rather than relegated to the dustbin of theological inquiry. He says,

> We must, therefore, recognize that there is in God a holy hate that cannot be defined in terms of not loving or loving less. Furthermore, we may not tone down the reality or intensity of this hate by speaking of it as "anthropopathic" or by saying that it "refers not so much to the emotion as to the effect." The case is rather, as in all virtue, that this holy hate in us is patterned after holy hate in God.[37]

At this point, Herman Bavinck provides a caveat in regard to God's hate: "YHWH's hatred almost always has sinful deeds for its object (Deut 16:22; Ps 45:7; Prov 6:16; Jer 44:4; Hos 9:15; Amos 5:12; Zech 8:17; Rev 2:6), only rarely sinful persons (Ps 5:6; Mal 1:3; Rom 9:13)."[38] God's wrath, according to Bavinck, is only rarely aimed at individuals.

When we put these claims together, we see at least two pertinent implications of God's being that shape our ethical inquiry: 1) God's hatred for sin compels us to action no less than his love for goodness; 2) the major note struck in terms of God's wrath is that of a disposition toward evil in general, not individuals.[39] Individuals are nevertheless objects of God's wrath to some lesser degree. The question is, then, do we allow ourselves to be angry with specific persons rather than just evil in general? This is pertinent because God may do things that we cannot. In Bavinck's words, "Just as a father forbids a child to use a sharp knife, though he himself uses it without any ill results, so God forbids us rational creatures to commit the sin that he himself can and does use as a means of glorifying his name."[40] As we conclude, we will seek to answer two questions: 1) If God is only "rarely" angry with individuals, *can* we be angry with individuals? 2) *Should* we?

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[36] Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 179.

[37] John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 2:222.

[38] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:223.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid., 2:218.

1. *Wrath for the Individual?*

It is difficult to claim that God is only angry at actions when he punishes agents for those actions: "The objects of the Divine anger, accordingly, are *men* who oppose themselves to the Divine will."[41] For example, Samuel records the anger of the Lord that prompted his judicial wrath against Amalek. The Lord commands Saul to mete out his punishment upon Amalek: "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have'" (1 Sam 15:2–3a). God's anger is directed toward Amalek for his actions against Israel. In regard to Saul's sin, the individuality is heightened. Even though "Saul *and the people* [who] spared Agag and the best of the sheep" (1 Sam 15:9) and Saul placed the responsibility on the latter by claiming that it was they, not he, who kept the sheep (v. 21), the response of the Lord is, "I regret that I have made *Saul* king" (1 Sam 15:11a). Samuel concludes the narrative this way: "And Samuel said to Saul, 'I will not return with you. For you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel'" (1 Sam 15:26). The word translated by "reject" (*ma'as*; מָאַס) is the same whether its subject is Saul or God. This word can also mean "to spurn, despise."[42] First Samuel 15 is then not only an instance of divine anger against an individual, but it also seems to emphasize the individuality of this wrath.

It is much the same in the New Testament: "It is possible to deny the doctrine thus conveyed [i.e., God's wrath], and to rid our hearts of the fear it conveys; but it is not possible to deny that NT writers held this doctrine, and owned this overwhelming terror."[43] In Acts 5:4–5, we see the sins of two individuals being met with divine execution as Ananias and Sapphira are punished for sinning against the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the penalty for the sin of this couple is meted out individually since Ananias dies about three hours before his wife is given a chance to repent (cf. Rom 1:18; 4:15; 9:22; Eph 2:3; 5:6). Clearly, therefore, God's wrath toward individuals is biblical and probably not rare, as Bavinck thought, as indicated by God's recurring wrath for *individuals* when they commit sinful *actions*.

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[41] James Hastings, John Selbie, and Louis Gray, eds., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: T&T Clark, 1908), 1:478 (emphasis added).

[42] Koehler et al., *HALOT*, 1:541.

[43] Hastings, Selbie, and Gray, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 1:479.

2. *Biblical Data Regarding Individual Anger*

In answering the primary question (regarding biblical data that may delimit, mitigate, or condone Christians emulating God's hatred for certain individuals), one immediately calls to mind the difficult imprecatory psalms. We have already dealt with passages that would seem to mandate personal pacifism and have shown that they are in reference to an offensive action motivated by pride. Therefore, they do not preclude humble self-defense. We must now deal with passages that seem to say something different. The imprecatory psalms (e.g., Pss 7, 35, 69, and 109) give one the sense not only that they exculpate the elect for feeling hatred toward certain members of the reprobate community but that they provide a paradigm for following suit.

Outside the imprecatory psalms, similar locutions are be found throughout the Psalter and in other places (cf. Job 19:25; Jer 11:18–20; 18:19–23; Neh 4:4–5; Rev 6:10; 18:20). For our purposes, we will briefly examine a psalm that is not typically regarded as imprecatory. David says, "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" (Ps 139:21–22). This passage perfectly illustrates the theological concept we have been arguing in distinctly practical terms—the hatred of individuals must be modeled, and based on, God's hatred. That is to say, "If God hates or implacably opposes the wicked (Ps 11:5; cf. Ps 5:7; Jer 12:8; Hos 9:15), the psalmist enthusiastically pledges his likemindedness (cf. Ps 26:5)."[44] Furthermore, we remember that "evil for the psalmist was no abstract idea; it was embodied in evil people."[45] David's disdain for an individual is based on that same disdain for that same individual in the heart of God.

The imprecatory psalms indicate that there should be a tension in the Christian such that part of him hates those who hate God, but another part of him longs to see those same people lovingly redeemed into the warm confines of God's blessed community. There should be a simultaneous hatred for them and desire to see them abundantly blessed, even at great personal cost. Though this may sound contradictory, it is rather an anthropomorphic manifestation of God's will. God both hates the evil one (Ps 5:6; Mal 1:3; Rom 9:13) and desires to see him saved (John 3:16; 1 Tim 2:4). Part of this tension is due to the hidden will of God. Some men are eternally predestined for salvation, while others are passed over in reprobation before the foundation of the world. In Calvin's words, "God hates sin [and] we are also hated by him as far as we are sinners; but as in his secret counsel he

[44] Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, WBC 21 (Waco, TX: Word, 2002), 330.
[45] Ibid.

chooses us into the body of Christ, he ceases to hate us: but restoration to favour is unknown to us, until we attain it by faith."[46]

There is, however, another sense in which the imprecatory psalms indicate tension, namely, between two good things—God's justice and his mercy. Both justice and mercy are good. To place one above the other would be to place one part of God beyond another. However, all that is *in* God *is* God. We cannot say that his gracious disposition to the reprobate is better than his wrath. His mercy is not ontologically superior to his justice since they are both attributes of his infinite perfection. At this point the analogy (an analogy that should not be confused with an univocism) between our actions and God's is striking. Our constant tension and failure to be properly oriented to the reprobate is a manifestation of God's perfection. The impossibility that we experience in trying to hate an evil person but also desire to see him saved is part of the liturgy of adoration. For God does not fail in this regard, and our failure sends us Godward. That which is incomprehensible is, somehow, reality for God.

This is not a bare mystical abdication of theological precision. There is for us, at the same time, an experience of simultaneous hatred and forgiveness, both in regard to others and even ourselves. For example, there is a part of us as Americans (or at least there should be) that wanted to see Osama bin Laden converted to Christianity, even though another part of us rejoiced when he was dealt deadly justice. In a similar way, we hate the part of us that is still clinging to sin (Heb 12:1) but rejoice in the part of us that is being renewed day by day (2 Cor 4:16; cf. 3:18).

This anthropological consideration leads us to a theological insight. Calvin's introduction to his theological masterpiece shows that thoughts about God are inextricably linked to thoughts about man.[47] The tension we see in the Bible regarding God's disposition toward sinners is ultimately rooted in *us*. There is no tension in God. There is no "part" of him that fights against another "part," because he has no parts. This recognition of the ostensible difference between God's gracious and wrathful orientation(s) to man serves to show the disunity of fallen man. Man is created to be in right relationship with God; the ethical rejection of that relationship creates in man a failure to be human.[48] God's disposition to fallen man is not hard to understand because God is divided; it is hard to understand because we are.

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[46] John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 198.

[47] John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.1.1.

[48] Cf. Robert D. Golding, "Making Sense of Hell," *Themelios* 46.1 (2021): 145–62.

God's disposition, however, will be much easier to understand at the consummation. This is because the sheep and the goats will be clearly divided (cf. Matt 25:32). Individual humans will be either wholly devoted to Christ or not. The division between saint and sinner will no longer reside within the heart. The demarcation will be the unbridgeable chasm between those in Christ and those without him.

Until that time, we should seek to imitate God by being gracious to those who wrong us and hating evil people who want to destroy the kingdom of God. We recognize the inherent disparity between these two positions and praise God that he unifies them. But we also grieve that the incongruity is a result of the de-creational aspect of sin, which we brought into the world. This recognition enables the Christian to do something that no other man can do—he can hate the evil person from a position of humility. This is because the things in the person that he hates are also in himself. In the words of J. H. Bavinck,

> As soon as I understand that what he [i.e., a hostile person] does … I also do and continue to do again and again, although in a different form; as soon as I actually stand next to him, I can in the name of Christ stand in opposition to him and convince him of sin, as Christ did with me and still does each day.[49]

There is, therefore, a grief in the heart of the Christian who hates God's enemies, such that another part of him wants to see those enemies saved. The world, on the other hand, can only hate by means of a (false) sense of superiority. Not so for the Christian. The haughty enemy is only unchristian. The Christian sees the destruction of himself in the destruction of God's enemies, for he made himself God's enemy no less—and perhaps even more—than the other (Rom 5:10). Nevertheless, his unquenchable desire for God's glory causes him to sing with great pangs of yearning the words of the LORD to our Lord Jesus, "The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool'" (Ps 110:1). Christians are biblically justified in being angry, but they recognize that only God's anger is perfect. God's perfection, far from being detrimental to our action, compels us to strive to follow him.

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[49] J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), 242–43.