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Anger Management

What you need to now to
handle anger well.



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What you need to now to handle anger well.



Click on an article you'd like to read:

3 INTRODUCTION

Angry? Who's Angry?

by Janine Petry

6 THE HEART OF THE ISSUE

THE GIFT OF ANGER

Here's how to get angry the way God does.

by Christopher A. Hall

11 A CRITICAL LOOK

UNRIGHTEOUS INDIGNATION

Righteous anger is often a mask for mere self-righteousness.

by Frederica Mathewes-Green

16 PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

ANGER WITH NO SIN

It's not easy, but it's possible.

by John Ortberg

19 GETTING PERSONAL

THE ANGER INSIDE

I was out of control, and if something didn't change I'd end up in jail—or dead.

by Steve Troglio, as told to Amber Penney

29 BRINGING IT HOME

ANGER MANAGEMENT

3 questions to ask before you respond in wrath.

by Mayo Mathers

38 LEADERSHIP TOOLS

HEALING UNDERGROUND ANGER

Is something in your organization's past holding everyone back?

by Kenneth Quick

47 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books to help you further.

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Introduction

Angry? Who's Angry?

by Janine Petry



I consider myself to be a rather mild-tempered individual. Being the second born out of three girls, I often play the classic "peacemaker role" that middle siblings are noted for. A listening ear, a calm answer—that pretty much describes me.

So long as everything's going exactly the way I expect it to.





Anger Management

Angry? Who's Angry?

When it comes to the troubles of others, it's easy to be cool and collected, to think through the issues, and come to a sensible course of action. But when someone makes ripples in the peaceful waters of my little world, something happens. I get...*angry*.

I have to admit, uncovering my "anger issues" was a rather recent discovery. It's not that I suddenly developed the ability to get angry, or have come to a place of frustration and difficulty in my life. It's always been there. I just chose to deny it.

Funny thing, though, my anger didn't go away. In fact, I only began to notice its presence more. I started to wonder, "Why do I feel like this?" and "Why am I acting this way?" Something felt out of my control. Then it dawned on me: I'm angry!

Now that I've faced the fact that I *do* get angry—and not always for the right reasons—I've opened myself up to the Spirit's ministry to me in this area of my being. After all, it's not a sin to experience anger. It's a valuable part of the way God made me. When I respond to it in obedience to God's Word—dealing with it quickly and in a godly manner—it serves to warn, guide, and protect me, and others. When I choose to react to the emotion wrongly, it becomes dangerous to me, my relationships, and the things I care about. It can even damage my witness and compromise my effectiveness as a leader in the roles God has placed me in.





Anger Management

Angry? Who's Angry?

If you can relate to struggling with anger, take heart. You are *not* alone! And there is so much power in God's Word to help guide us as we seek to understand the emotion, and only respond to it in godly ways. This resource is a comprehensive guide to help you to get a handle on your anger, to learn to use it in a positive way, and to stay away from its damaging side effects.

Blessings,

Janine Petry

Contributing Editor, KYRIA downloads
Christianity Today International



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The Heart of the Issue

The Gift of Anger

Here's how to get angry the way God does.

by Christopher A. Hall

To live in a world permeated with evil is enough to make you angry. Those we love can arouse deep anger within us as they purposely or unknowingly hurt us. People unleash enormous wickedness and suffering on the world at large, and suddenly we find ourselves sucked into evil's vortex. How should the Christian respond? Is it legitimate to become angry, either over our own pain or the suffering inflicted on others?





Anger Management

The Gift of Anger

At first glance, the New Testament seems to make the issue even less clear to us. Both Jesus (Matt. 5:22) and Paul (Eph. 4:27) teach that anger is inappropriate or at best should be short-lived (Eph. 4:26-27), but both clearly became angry at times (Matt. 22; Gal. 1). Our experience and the Bible both suggest that there is legitimate anger and sinful anger. How are we to distinguish them?

In his book, *The Angry Christian*, Andrew D. Lester, professor of pastoral theology and pastoral counseling at Texas Christian University's Brite Divinity School, helps the Christian community reliably navigate the stormy waters of anger, offering a wise and practical "theology of anger."

Too many Christians, Lester believes, have been taught that anger is always sinful. "One friend said that he didn't hear this explicit message from the pulpit, 'but it is what I heard implicitly, a part of the air I breathed [at church] but never named with words directly'—a common report from the Christians with whom I minister." Therefore many Christians, Lester notes, assume that anger is sinful and should be absent from the spiritually mature.

Lester admits that "anger that is expressed destructively toward others, ourselves, or God adversely affects our spiritual journey. Anger's power can destroy our health, our relationships, our community, and our sense of God's presence and grace." Yet Lester argues that the capacity to become angry, an attribute of Jesus himself, is a significant aspect of humanness, rather than sinfulness. That is, when we read the Bible and historic pastoral





Anger Management

The Gift of Anger

theology carefully, study Jesus' life, and examine the results of neuroscience research, we will see "that anger has its origins in creation, not our sinfulness ... Anger is connected to embodiment and is a basic ingredient in the imago Dei, actually a gift from God." How so?

Lester cites Genesis 1:31, where God blesses creation and declares "it is very good." Included in God's blessing were "the visceral, affective, emotional aspects of our existence as embodied creatures." That is, before the Fall, human beings had the ability to become angry—a reflection of both their physiology and their moral character.

Lester is more than aware of the distorting effect of human sin on the blessings of creation. He also notes that anger easily becomes a tool for evil, rather than blessing, in a world inhabited by fallen people. Still, Lester insists, anger is a gift in at least three ways.

First, the physiological and psychological ability to become angry prepares "our minds and bodies for actions that contribute to our physical and psychological survival." Second, the ability to "activate our capacity for anger" in appropriate situations continues to protect and preserve our "physical, mental, and spiritual health."

Third, a proper anger—one that reflects Jesus' occasional angry responses to evil—motivates us to speak and act when we may be tempted to remain silent and unresponsive to the vast needs and troubles of a world infected with sin. Happily, positive character traits





Anger Management

The Gift of Anger

such as "hope, courage, intimacy, self-awareness, and compassion" are birthed as we exercise a discerning, holy, loving anger.

The key to dealing with anger, then, is to recognize that we possess "the freedom to choose which events will activate our capacity for anger as well as how to express it." Lester wisely insists that simply expressing anger whenever it surges is as unwise as never expressing it at all. Maturing Christians are those who are able to discern and "decide what makes us angry."

Biblical writers ground the anger of God in the foundation of his love.

"Because God's love is heavily invested in the creation, that love becomes threatened when an aspect of the creation is being hurt or when God's desires for the creation are neglected," he writes. "Thus we may conceptualize God's anger as a response to threats to those in whom God is invested, and for whom he desires abundant life."

Similarly, love will stir anger within the disciple of Christ, particularly in the face of evil. At the same time, love will govern how we display and direct our anger. Apart from the bridling effect of love, anger spills over into self-righteousness and revenge.

As Lester puts it, "If separated from love's guiding light or foundational principles, anger's destructive powers will lead us into unethical behavior even as we try to confront unethical behavior."





Anger Management

The Gift of Anger

Lastly, Lester reminds us all that anger is similar to spiritual dynamite. It is absolutely essential for certain demolition projects, but can blow up in our face if handled haphazardly. These insights may deliver many from false misconceptions of anger that have harmed them, their neighbors, and their enemies.

Christopher A. Hall is professor of biblical and theological studies at Eastern University. This article first appeared in the January 2004 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.

Reflect

- *How have you struggled or seen others struggle with the question of whether or not it is legitimate to become angry? What effect does this have on your role as a leader?*
- *What does it mean that we possess "the freedom to choose which events will activate our capacity for anger as well as how to express it"? How is this the key to dealing with anger?*



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A Critical Look

Unrighteous Indignation

Righteous anger is often a mask for mere self-righteousness.

by Frederica Mathewes-Green



Representatives of many faiths and many causes sat around the big table, and directly across from me was a man who burned with zeal for his. He held forth confidently on the urgency of his organization's mission and concluded by repeating the charge he gives his leaders.

"I tell them to stay angry," he said.





Anger Management

Unrighteous Indignation

Has Anger Become a Virtue?

Of the seven deadly sins, anger has long been the one with the best box of costumes. When the guy in the next car rages at you, he's dangerous. When you rage at him, you're just. We can usually recognize the results of anger, especially in others, as destructive and evil. But there are times when we think our own anger is justified, say as a kind of fuel to fight injustice. There are times when we think it is holy.

It's not just the world that thinks this way. When I want to have a particularly futile argument with a conservative, I tell him (and, in this case, it *will* be a him) that I think the movie *Braveheart* is a revenge fantasy and that, since Christians are supposed to forsake revenge, it's a variety of pornography. My movie-going friend will protest that Mel Gibson portrays Christian virtues of courage and self-sacrifice. I don't have any question about that. But Jesus showed us how to be courageous and sacrificial while we die for our beliefs, not while we kill for them.

Perhaps there are time-and-place situations in which war can be just. But there's never a situation when it's right to gloat in revenge. There's never a time to cultivate delicious anger just for the thrill of it. I've been thinking about why this kind of anger feels so good. It is, I believe, the mask of self-righteousness, and we desperately hunger to know that we are righteous. All humans suffer from free-floating guilt because, well, we're guilty. We're all sinners, and that's the only kind of person Jesus came to save.





Anger Management Unrighteous Indignation

But even for us Christians, it can be difficult to dwell in repentance. We, along with everyone else, itch to find some grounds on which to stake our own righteousness. One way to resolve this anxiety is by finding someone else who is worse than us. We can judge them, unload our indignation, and feel assured of our comparative righteousness. I thought of this a few years ago when news broke of church buildings burned in the South. Immediately the public grew hungry to find an evil conspiracy behind these burnings. We didn't want them to be caused by bad wiring or pranksters or insurance fraud—we wanted to see live, walking, talking evil people. The quantity of anger bubbling under the surface, hungry for a target, was disturbing. It's the result of guilt misfiring.

Should crusaders strive to "stay angry"? It's a bad idea. Someone once said that staying angry is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die. If your cause is just, you would still find the energy to fight for it even without anger. You just wouldn't be self-righteous about it. The worst effect of self-righteous anger is the inner damage. It distorts your clarity about your own sinfulness and undermines your humility. Jesus told us to love our enemies and demonstrated it by asking his Father to forgive his murderers. Christians' failure to emulate such forgiveness is one of the clearest examples of G. K. Chesterton's line that Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.

One way of dealing with our inner sense of guilt is to locate somebody worse than us and to condemn. The alternative is repentance and preferring others above ourselves. Think about the weeping woman who wiped Jesus' feet with her





Anger Management Unrighteous Indignation

hair. Her repentance broadened her heart to receive and express much love. She was more whole and blessed than the Pharisee who judged her, or a modern yuppie who judges Southern racists. A Southern racist who repents in tears goes up to his house justified, and the smug guy who says, "Well, it's about time," but feels vaguely disappointed inside, does not. Self-righteous angry people can't afford to be humble. Their peace is fragile.

But we can love and forgive them all the same. The illusion, I think, is that we have to fight against our enemies. But in reality our opponents are not our enemies. We have an Enemy, who wants to destroy both our opponent and us. He will entice us to hatred and self-righteousness, even in doing what we think is the work of God. There is only one way to defeat him: to love our enemies instead.

Frederica Matthewes-Greene is an author, speaker, and contributing editor for CHRISTIANITY TODAY. This article first appeared in the October 2000 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.



Reflect

- *The author writes that anger can be "the mask of self-righteousness." What does she mean by this? Do you agree or disagree with her assessment?*
- *How does self-righteous anger distort your clarity about your own sinfulness and undermine your humility? How have you experienced this in your life?*
- *Christopher Hall wrote that righteous anger can move us to action when we might otherwise sit still, but Frederica Matthewes-Greene says that if our cause is just we should find the energy to fight for it even without anger. Do you think these articles are in conflict with each other? Explain. Do you believe that anger can be motivating or is it always a poison?*



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Practically Speaking

Anger with No Sin

It's not easy, but it's possible.

by John Ortberg



Lots of people have the power to hurt me. Only one has the power to make me angry.

Me.

If it is true that no one else can make me angry, it is even more true that no one else can make me respond aggressively or inappropriately when I feel anger. It often seems that way because my response to feeling anger has become so routine that it seems "automatic."





Anger Management

Anger with No Sin

It feels as if the person or event triggered my anger and caused my response.

The truth is my response is learned behavior. I learned it long ago, from people I grew up around, learned it so informally that I was not aware that I was learning anything.

Tommy Bolt has been described as the angriest golfer in the history of a game that has stimulated the secretion of more bile than any other single human activity outside of war and denominational meetings. One (possibly apocryphal) story recalls a time he was giving a group lesson on how to hit a ball out of a sand trap. He called his 11-year-old son over.

"Show the people what you've learned from your father to do when your shot lands in the sand," he said. The boy picked up a wedge and threw it as high and as far as he could.

The good news is: what can be learned can be unlearned. It is possible for me to manage my anger in a God-honoring way: to "be angry and sin not" (Psalm 4:4). Anger is an inescapable fact of life. But the experience of anger is different from the expression of anger. What I do with that anger, how I express and manage it, is another matter.

John Ortberg is the teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Illinois. This article first appeared in the December 1999 Church Leader's Newsletter of LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.



Reflect

- *Would you agree with the author that only one person has the ability to make you angry—you? Why or why not? Would you agree that "no one else can make [you] respond aggressively or inappropriately when [you] feel anger"? Why or why not?*
- *If our responses to our feelings of anger are learned, in what ways do you react and why? How do these response patterns affect your role as a leader?*



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Getting Personal

The Anger Inside



I was out of control, and if something didn't change I'd end up in jail—or dead.

by Steve Troglio, as told to Amber Penney

My fist pounded hard against the guy's already swollen cheek, sending tremors of gratification throughout my entire body. He staggered, dropping his right shoulder and exposing his face to another blow. This one knocked him to the ground. With teeth gritted and fists clenched even tighter, I delivered one punch after the other. First right, then left, then right again.





Anger Management

The Anger Inside

Spectators looked on, some in horror, others with smug satisfaction, but no one intervened. Some thought the guy deserved it. He was always bullying kids in the neighborhood.

I looked down at throbbing hands to find my knuckles peering through shredded flesh. Unable to keep my fists tightened, I grabbed his hair and began to beat his head against the concrete. This was no longer about him picking on my little sister. It was about me—and my anger at the world.

Hands stronger than my own grabbed my arms from behind, yanking me forcefully from the motionless body.

Moments later paramedics strapped my enemy onto a stretcher. As they loaded him into the ambulance, the grip on my arms loosened. I turned to face a silver badge and a hard stare.

"We're gonna be keeping a close watch on you, son," he said. "You better hope that boy wakes up."

Thankfully, a few days later he did, and without any brain damage. I escaped punishment, but I couldn't forget the police officer's words: "You could have killed him, Steve."

Dad Leaves

I hadn't always been so angry and violent. A few years before that incident, life was great. My family and I lived in a big lakefront house in the suburbs. I had horses to ride and a pool in the back yard. I couldn't have asked for more.



Then Dad's business went under, and he had to leave.

I was playing out in the backyard when he came to me and said he was leaving. He hugged me and told me he loved me. Then he got into his car and drove away. It was almost more than my 7-year-old heart could take. Tears streamed down my face as I ran inside the house. There I found my mom trying to console my older sister. My little sister was too young to understand. Mom gathered us all up in her arms and told us not to worry. "Everything will be fine," she promised. "We'll find a way."

Three months later there was a knock at the door. When I answered it, the sheriff told me to get my mom. Then I heard him say, "Ma'am, you have one hour to gather up your three children. You're allowed to take your clothes, your car, and that's it. Everything, including the house and property, is going to be sold in a sheriff's sale for debt. You have one hour to vacate."

The sheriff hovered over us as we hurriedly packed the car. Then we drove across the street where, for the next four hours, we watched as everything we had was carried away. Through sobs I asked my mom why we had to leave our house. She hugged me and my sisters and promised again, "There's no need to worry. Everything will be fine." Then she put us in the car and drove us 14 hours to our new home—a two-room basement apartment in a drug-infested slum.

I had never been in the city before. My very first day on the street I walked down an alley only to discover that the only way out was the way I'd come in. I turned around to



leave, and there were five kids blocking the entrance. I thought, *Great! I'm gonna make some new friends.*

Well, I did. But their rules of friendship were different from any I'd ever known. They punched and kicked me until I didn't move anymore. Then they picked me up, carried me home, and dropped me on my doorstep—broken nose, cracked ribs and all. That was my welcome to the neighborhood.

Mom Turns to the Bottle

Things only got worse.

Mom began drinking a lot, and when she got drunk, she was violent. She'd spit on me, hit me, throw beer bottles at me. She'd also kick me out of the house. Sometimes it was only for a few hours, but other times it was for a couple of days. When that happened I'd have to sleep in abandoned buildings and dig in the trash for food.

I became incredibly angry. I was like a cocked pistol, ready to fire at the slightest provocation. I guess that's why I responded so violently when that bully started picking on my little sister. A few words was all it took. The police officer told me then that my life was heading in the wrong direction. I knew he was right, and I wanted to change.

Soon after that, change did come, but I had nothing to do with it. With little explanation, my dad showed up. He remarried my mom and moved us all back to the suburbs. I still didn't understand why he'd left us the first time,





Anger Management

The Anger Inside

but I was glad to have him back. I was also glad to get out of that neighborhood. I saw the move as a chance to start over.

I started high school in the fall. And while the temptation to fight wasn't always in my face, I still had a lot of anger inside. I found that sports helped me stay out of trouble. So I started playing football.

When the season ended, I wanted to try another sport. I heard a coach was starting a swim team, so I went to him and asked to be on the team.

"There's only one little problem," I told him. "I can't swim." The coach looked at me questioningly, but he let me try to swim the length of the pool anyway.

My body was quivering slightly when I jumped into the water, partly because the water was cold and partly because I was scared. Taking a deep breath, I pushed off the wall with my feet and began thrashing my arms and legs, trying to copy what I'd seen the other guys do. I only made it a few feet before I swallowed a mouth full of water. I came up choking and groping for the lane rope. I held on until I caught my breath. Then I launched myself back into the middle of the lane, where I repeated the thrashing, choking and grabbing. Fifteen minutes later I reached the other end of the pool. It was all I could do to pull myself out of the water and onto the pool deck. My heart felt like it was going to explode out of my chest.

When I looked up, the coach was smiling. "Still want to be a swimmer?"



I nodded, even though I knew I'd just looked like an idiot in the water.

"Fine. See you tomorrow at practice." His answer surprised me.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I see something in you I believe in," he said.

That was the first time anyone had ever said anything like that to me. I didn't know how to respond except to show up at practice day after day.

A lot of people laughed at first. But by the end of the season, no one was laughing anymore. I was the leading varsity sprinter and held two school records.

God Loves Me?

At home, things weren't going nearly as well. The move and remarriage had little effect on my mom's alcoholism. During her drinking binges, I might come home to find all my clothes strewn across the front yard and all the doors locked. I'd have to find another place to stay until she decided to let me back in. As for my dad, he was away on business half the time. But by then I was learning to block out my emotions.

Then along came Chera. On our first date she said some things that shot past my defensive walls. We had just pulled out of her driveway when— wham! Out of nowhere she looked at me and said: "I'll never love you or anybody else more than I love Jesus Christ. Do you understand that?"



Her boldness caught me off guard. I was expecting a movie and a bite to eat, not some religious declaration. Still, I was intrigued. I had heard about Jesus before, but his name was usually mixed into the lecture I got from people who told me I was going to hell. I'm not sure I'd ever heard his name and the word "love" used in the same sentence.

"Have you ever heard John 3:16, Steve?" she asked. "You can put your name in that verse—'For God so loved *Steve* that he gave his only Son so that if Steve believes in him, *Steve* won't perish but will have eternal life.'"

It was like Chera was speaking another language to me. But I didn't stop her; I was interested in what she had to say—so interested that even after the date was over, I continued to think about it.

Over the next few weeks, we talked more about Jesus and what it means to be a Christian. I talked with her parents, too. There was just something about them, something so comforting, so inviting. I wanted what they had, and I wanted it desperately. But I was still skeptical about becoming a Christian. The thought of having to trust in anyone, even God, was really hard for me.

I was alone in my bedroom the night I realized I had to make a decision—one way or the other. When I knelt beside my bed, the prayer that followed was a rough one. I said, "Hey, Jesus, if you're as great as people say you are, then here's my heart. But if you ever leave me, I'll hate you 'til the day I die."

The single tear that trickled down my cheek surprised me. It had been almost ten years since I cried last. For the first



time in my life, I felt like my heart was clean, like I didn't have to feel guilty and ashamed about my past anymore.

In the following weeks, God continued to change me. He pointed out lots of things in my life that I needed to give him control of. He also showed me I needed to forgive my mom.

"I Forgive You, Mom"

I had been staying with my grandparents since Mom's most recent lockout. I wasn't sure she'd even let me in the house, but I knew I had to try.

Surprisingly, when I found her sitting at the kitchen table, she seemed happy to see me, even though several beer bottles told me she'd been drinking for a while. I asked her how she was doing, then I told her I loved her.

"I love you too, Steve," she said. That was a rule in our house. It didn't matter if we'd just had a knock-down-drag-out fight. Mom insisted we tell one another we loved each other.

"And Mom," I added, "if I've ever done anything to hurt you, I'm sorry. I also want you to know I forgive you."

When I said that, Mom snapped. She lunged toward me, knocking her chair to the floor, swinging both fists with all her might. It wasn't exactly the response I was hoping for.

I made it out of the house and onto my motorcycle. But I hadn't gotten too far when the police pulled me over. "We





Anger Management

The Anger Inside

got a call from your mother," the officer explained. "She says you beat her up."

Luckily, I was able to convince the officers of the truth. It helped, of course, when they saw my mom didn't have so much as a bruise on her.

Things were different after that. Despite the way she'd responded to me, I began to look at my mom through different eyes. I saw her as someone who was hurting and in need of the same grace I had received. As I considered how I was forgiven when I didn't deserve it, I was able to forgive my mom and show her love.

Looking back, I see that was a turning point for me. I see that if I hadn't forgiven Mom, anger and bitterness would have continued to control my life. I also see that Mom might have never given her life to Christ. That's right—it took years, but God changed her.

And Jesus—no, he's never left me.

Steve Troglia is pastor of Eagle Rock Church in Orland Park, Illinois. You can find out more about his message on the Teen Reach Web site at www.graphicsland.com/teenreach. This article first appeared in the May/June 2001 issue of CAMPUS LIFE.



Reflect

- *Describe the role of anger in your family of origin. How does it still affect you today?*
- *How is unforgiveness related to anger and bitterness? How can forgiveness play a role in helping you to manage anger in a healthy way?*



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Bringing It Home

Anger Management

3 questions to ask before you respond in wrath.

by Mayo Mathers



The frosty night held only a hint of moonlight as I wound up the dark mountain road with my teenage sons, Tyler and Landon. We'd been visiting my mother who lived several hours away. As we crested the summit, I smelled something burning. I pulled over and Tyler jumped out to take a look.

"Uh, oh!" he groaned, peering under the car. "This doesn't look good."



I got out to kneel beside him and gasped. The undercarriage glowed fiery red! I hurriedly turned off the motor and headlights. Instantly, heavy darkness closed in around us. We were still an hour-and-a-half from home, and there were no towns within walking distance. My first thought was one of irritation toward my husband, Steve, who was off on a hunting trip. *He's always hunting when things go wrong*, I inwardly fumed. Outwardly I kept my voice light. "Well, boys," I said, "looks like God has an unexpected adventure for us. Shall we pray?"

Just as I said "amen," a car stopped to offer assistance. The driver happened to live in our town, and his sons knew mine. He kindly delivered us right to our house.

Grateful to be home, I wearily unlocked the door and flipped on the light switch. Nothing happened. I flipped it back and forth. Still nothing. *Was there a power outage?* I looked around the neighborhood and saw a few lights glowing.

A new chill seeped down my spine. *Was someone in the house? Had he cut the power line?* My heart hammered wildly as we took a few tentative steps into the living room. I felt around for the telephone, thinking to call the police.

I wasn't interested in resolution— I wanted revenge!

"Hey Mom! There's a note on the door." Tyler brought it over and held it up to the lighted dial of the cordless phone. "Due to—," he struggled to read the words in the faint glow, "lack of—payment—your power—"



"Wha-a-a-t?!" I shrieked. "You mean to tell me your father didn't pay the electric bill?" Immediate fury replaced my exhaustion. *How dare Steve go off hunting and leave me to contend with undependable cars and discontinued electricity!*

I stood there sputtering incoherently. Tyler and Landon had never seen me in such a state.

"Mom! It's OK," they soothed. "It's no big deal."

I'd never before spoken ill of their father in their presence, but suddenly I'd lost all self-control.

"*Scum* don't pay their bills!" I hissed.

They stared in shocked silence. "Let's just go to bed and deal with this in the morning," I said through clenched teeth. Quietly we felt our way down the hallway, using the faint illumination from the telephone dial to light our way.

The next morning, I woke up still very angry. I knew my sense of betrayal was disproportionate to the circumstances. Steve wasn't responsible for the car's breakdown and he hadn't intentionally ignored the power bill. However, I magnified every tiny fault, every mistake he'd ever made, into gargantuan proportions to justify my anger.

The humiliating prospect of finding a way to get to the power company only increased my anger. Just as Tyler



offered me some moral support, Steve pulled into the driveway. He'd come home to replenish his camp supplies.

At the sight of Steve, I stomped off into another room, leaving Tyler to explain what had been going on. Steve quickly paid a sheepish visit to the power company and then, sensing it best not to hang around, hurried back to camp.

When I realized that if I'd known a hit man, I cheerfully would have hired him that day, I became aware of anger's potential to bring about consequences no one in her right mind ever would choose to pay.

Obviously some things in life warrant anger. But God cautions us not to let that anger give way to sin (Ephesians 4:26). In other words, it's not the emotion of anger that's sinful, but how we *respond* to our anger. We need to respond in a way that brings positive resolution. And we need to be more discriminating in what we allow to provoke our anger. Too often it springs from small matters—forgetful spouses, distracted drivers, inconsiderate co-workers, cranky children—none of which warrants the energy anger wastes or the control it assumes over us.

From the moment I discovered the reason behind our lack of electricity, I was completely under the control of anger. I behaved in a way that went utterly against my nature. Several days later, when I could look at the circumstances more reasonably, it scared me to realize just how out of control I'd been. I knew if it happened once, it easily could happen again.



To prevent this, I developed three questions to ask every time something made me angry. In the beginning, I read the questions daily and asked God to bring them to mind as needed, so my answers rather than my anger would determine my response. These questions now have become an effective tool for maintaining my self-control.

1. Is my anger out of proportion to the circumstance?

While there was a legitimate basis for my anger that night (it wasn't the first time I'd dealt with Steve's inattention to basic details), my anger far outweighed the offense, to the point that I wasn't interested in resolution—I wanted revenge! Because my response was so disproportionate, it made Steve defensive. This only pushed resolution further out of reach.

Disproportionate anger makes resolution difficult, if not impossible. I was once on a civic committee with several other people, and one of the members was habitually late to our meetings—a huge irritant to the chairman. The chairman wasn't wrong to expect everyone to be on time, but her poorly handled anger regarding this became the greater problem. Eventually she was replaced as chairman.

For anger to have healthy results, it needs to be reasonable and thus, controllable. It needs to allow you to approach others in ways that will let them hear what you're saying, making them more likely to consider adjustments.

2. Is the momentary release I'll get from expressing my anger worth the long-term havoc it will wreak?

The very nature of anger promotes exaggerated emotions. We say and do things we never would otherwise. Those words and actions never can be undone.





Anger Management

Anger Management

As Christians, we can't be too careful in monitoring our anger. Jill, a friend, found herself in a business dispute with a woman she'd met at church. At one point during negotiations, Jill's anger boiled over. "I'll see to it everybody knows about your dishonest policies!" she shouted, instantly slamming the door on possible resolution. As a result, the woman, a brand-new Christian, left the church and today still associates her negative experience with Jill with her opinion of Christians.

I shudder to think that even when I've moved beyond my anger, whatever hasty words I spoke in the heat of it never will lose their power to wound.

3. Is my anger worth dragging other uninvolved people into it?

Anger invariably affects the people around you. It's human nature to take sides even when you're not involved. But to allow outside parties to be drawn into your anger is a cheap way to feed your ego and justify poor behavior.

I once watched as two sisters-in-law let an argument over their small children turn into an ongoing dispute that separated a close family. Years later there's still division because the two women drew their now-grown children into the dispute.

Anger is usually a self-centered emotion. Your attention is turned inward on the wrong you've suffered, the wound you've had inflicted. In contrast, the principle of selflessness is woven consistently throughout the entire Bible: viewing others as more important than yourself (Philippians 2:3);



dying to your desires and your wounds (Matthew 16:24). Such an attitude isn't accomplished through destructive expressions of anger.

To his credit, Steve never again has neglected to pay the electric bill. He sincerely apologized once I became approachable, and time reduced the incident to what it should have been all along: a good-for-a-laugh story.

Of course there have been other instances to spark my anger since that episode. Recently, I returned from a speaking engagement to find I couldn't park the car in the garage. I'd been gone only three days, but Steve had taken advantage of the empty space to sort through his hunting paraphernalia.

The garage always has been a bone of contention in our marriage, and my anger flared as I viewed his junk piled where my car should go. My first instinct was to drive into the garage right over his junk. My second was to stomp into the house and give him a piece of my mind. As I vacillated between the two options, I reluctantly forced myself to review my three questions:

Is my anger disproportionate to the circumstance? *Well, probably.*

Is the momentary release I'll get from expressing my anger worth the long-term havoc it might wreak? *Actually, at that moment, I was willing to risk long-term havoc in favor of momentary release!*

Is my anger worth dragging other uninvolved people into it? *Definitely not! It would upset Tyler and Landon if I behaved like that.*





Anger Management
Anger Management

I sighed in resignation. Two out of three meant it wasn't worth trading self-control for anger. I left the car parked in the driveway and entered the house, taking deep, calming breaths.

"So, dear," I said, greeting Steve with a begrudging kiss, "want me to help you sort your hunting gear?"

He smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, I thought I'd be done before you got home."

His obvious remorse soothed my irritation. I gave him another less begrudging kiss. After all, at least we'd have electricity as we worked in the garage!

Mayo Mathers lives with her family in Oregon. This article first appeared in the January/February 2004 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.



Reflect

- *The author writes, "Several days later, when I could look at the circumstances more reasonably, it scared me to realize just how out of control I'd been. I knew if it happened once, it easily could happen again." How can losing self-control become a frightening experience? In what ways have you experienced this?*
- *Which of the author's three questions targets your greatest area of weakness when it comes to dealing with anger—overreacting, losing sight of long-term consequences, or getting innocent people involved with your concerns?*



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Leadership Tools

Healing Underground Anger



Is something in your organization's past holding everyone back?

by Kenneth Quick

Twenty-two years before I arrived on the scene as pastor, our church had experienced a devastating split. For years we had experienced its repercussions. We just didn't know it.

Church Therapy

Our church atmosphere became a topic at board meetings. I encouraged our leaders to see the church as a larger form of family, one which might benefit from a process of historical review. So I proposed a retreat. They were hesitant but game. I thought with one retreat we could rehearse and evaluate the history of the church. It took three, a retreat for each of the church's three pastorates.



"How was the church born?" was our first question.

As the group covered those first 17 years, I heard marvelous things I hadn't heard before, though I had been in the church for eight years. In its early days, our church had a reputation as a training ground for evangelism. Pastors came from across the country for training. Scores of people were introduced to Christ. Hundreds of children were reached through our Sunday school. Yet I seldom had heard these stories. Why?

Cut Off From A Legacy

The reason became clear as we explored the end of the first pastor's tenure, the time of the horrific split. A few of our leaders had lived through the trauma, and they wept as they remembered the pain.

"He was wonderfully strong as a leader," one of the elders remarked. "He built this ministry from nothing. But he used to say with pride, 'I work my board members so hard that they are glad to get off after three years.'"

Another said, "His strength became a weakness when it was time to share control with others. He had trouble letting go." The story came out. Covert opposition began to increase. Rumors began about the pastor's counseling ministry. It was a mess.

New elders were elected, and at the first meeting of that board, the pastor asked each elder, "Do you give the pastor a vote of confidence on his ministry to date?" Of eight elders present, seven voted, "No confidence." That Sunday, the pastor stood and read a letter of resignation.





Anger Management

Healing Underground Anger

The church was instantly divided. The business meeting he announced invited war. The salvos began immediately. Pro-pastor forces circulated letters. The chairman of the board fired back the next Sunday, giving the worst insult a Canadian can give to anyone: he accused the pro-pastor group of "mounting an American-style political campaign."

At the business meeting, amid shouting, fist-waving, and red-faced anger, the church voted 54-45 in favor of the pastor. He was heard to say on his way out of the meeting, "You want me, and I'm back!" He was back, but the whole board resigned. In the course of a month, half of 500 people left the church, about 125 on one Sunday alone.

The survivors at our retreat spoke of hating to come to church because they didn't know who among their friends would become the next casualty. Voices broke, and tears flowed as they opened the wound before my eyes.

Corporate Distrust

I then realized why the effective ministry of the first 17 years wasn't broadcast. The pain caused by the split was still so great, no one who lived through it wanted to think or talk about what went on before, when their friends were part of church life. That the early memories were so positive made remembering them all the more painful. Our church had cut itself off from a wonderful legacy.

Since the split, a spirit of distrust of boards pervaded the congregation. I had encountered this in business meetings but couldn't explain it. At one point, we had to call business meetings on three consecutive Sundays in an attempt to pass



a budget. People believed the board was "up to something" or "trying to pull a fast one." The attitude was so blatant, even a conflict avoider like me had to confront it. I had each board member stand and then asked the congregation, "Which of these individuals don't you trust?"

The distrust wasn't about individuals; it was corporate.

Turning point

How do you face wounds and sins and anger from decades old? The retreats to uncover the pain of the past were only the first step. We felt we needed to do something publicly to begin the healing process. The church's 40th anniversary was our opportunity.

I preached a series from Deuteronomy on remembering and learning from Israel's history—how God works in good times and bad. I weaved in stories about the split and the blessings that had preceded it. I started my first sermon by reading the minutes of that fateful board meeting.

"That is our history," I said. "We can understand why Israel wanted to forget some of its history—its failures, grumbling, and rebellion. Yet over and over God reminded them of those times, to have the people learn from them. But for Israel, and for us as well, it wasn't just bad times," I continued. "There were awesome things to remember and celebrate, like God's deliverance and provision. We are going to connect our story with theirs—bad and good—as the people of God."

We decided to create a service on Good Friday to focus more intensely on the issue. We did this based on one of the most





Anger Management

Healing Underground Anger

painful "split stories," always told with anger: "The Day the Choir Joined Another Church." What stuck in the craw of those who recounted the event was that the choir practiced on Wednesday night at our church and then performed on Sunday in another small church nearby, which had no choir previously. Our music ministry was gutted, and many people felt the musicians had rubbed our noses in their leaving.

Now, many years later, as part of a regular prayer group, I had been meeting with the pastor of the church to which everyone had migrated. A trust had formed between us. I opened up the possibility of a reconciliation service with his church.

"I'm not sure our people would know what it is about," he said. "Very few are left from that time, and it really wasn't our issue. Our church has no ill feelings toward your church."

"Then let's not say anything publicly at the service itself," I said. "I will just prepare our people for what they are to do." I would speak, and he would lead Communion.

To my congregation, a week before the special service, I told the story about the choir's exodus.

"Now, with the gracious permission of that church, and to heal the wound caused by that action," I announced, "our present choir will sing there at the Good Friday Service. Our musicians will play, and our choir director will lead their church in singing. We are not saying, 'Nyaah, nyaah,' but we recognize that God has restored what we had lost.





Anger Management

Healing Underground Anger

Now we can serve them musically, and we can minister together before the Lord." I encouraged everyone to submit our church's painful memories to the Cross, to seek Christ's forgiveness and healing, and to extend forgiveness to those who had hurt us.

On Good Friday, both congregations packed the other church. People sat on the floor under the coat racks in the foyer. The man playing their organ had left in the split, and the young man who played the piano was the son of the only choir member who stayed in our church. I spoke on "By his wounds, you were healed."

"The wounds in us that his wounds heal are not always physical," I said. "Nor are they only individual and personal. Sometimes they are corporate." I spoke about how wounds limit life, freedom, and service, how wounded people sometimes stop serving in the church or stop coming altogether.

I concluded with an invitation: "As you hold the bread today, enclose it in your hand as if crushing it, and let your woundedness be passed to his broken body. As you hold the cup, immerse your wounds in the blood of his wounding, and let them drown there." Only the Spirit of God could have produced so many tears. There was a sense of both sorrow and repentance followed by healing, unity, and joy.

Happy Days, Here, Again

The atmosphere changed at our church. We heard from former members who returned, "Wow! Something is different here." Guest speakers offered unsolicited comments on the positive atmosphere. One said, "I have



never seen a foyer filled with so many happy people." What changed? I can identify two things:

1. Security. Through this process we have become a safer, warmer, more open community. Reconciliation creates that. At our 40th-anniversary weekend celebration, we invited back the former pastor, the one at the time of the split. Some who had left in anger many years ago returned for the first time and greeted him.

2. Identity. When I came to the church, several people made an intriguing statement: "Our church doesn't know what it wants to be when it grows up." I understand that statement now.

I believe the split had affected our ability to discern our corporate identity. In children, trauma can block emotional development. The people who went through the split felt so much pain, they chose to block out the good days of the early years. That made us orphans. It cut us off from the mission of the godly people who planted our church. That disconnection translated into a struggle to answer "Who are we now? Where are we going?"

Our healing meant we could accept our past and face our future. We have written a new mission statement that reflects both our history and our present multi-ethnic context: "Sharing the light and love of Jesus Christ in every way with everyone."

More important, we possess a new sense of mission to guide our choices. We have reconnected with our history of evangelism and outreach to children. In the last year, our





Anger Management

Healing Underground Anger

church has birthed a vision to reach kids through after-school programs and has freed our youth pastor to pursue it.

We are an inner city church now, and we face the tension of choosing between becoming a commuter church or staying a community church. Our history again has guided that choice—we will work to stay a community church.

By retelling the stories and reconciling with our past, we've come home again. And we've found we like it here.

Worth Remembering

Here are 5 steps to healing spiritual issues in your organization's past:

1. Gather information. Your best sources are old records, older members of the organization, and previous leaders.

2. Organize the information. Divide your organization's history into periods. For each period, identify major events, blessings, challenges, core values, key influences, forces for change, and "What we feel God was trying to teach us."

3. Tell stories. Get people to recount the events to fill out the details found in the documents.

4. Look for patterns. Try to discern why things happened repeatedly.



5. Take steps to rectify past hurt or evil. Even if only a few from that time remain, call people (including yourself) to deal personally with these issues.

Kenneth Quick is pastor of Parkway Bible Church in Scarborough, Ontario. This article first appeared in the 1999 issue of LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.

Reflect

- *Think about the atmosphere of the organization you're involved in. What is the corporate attitude like? Is there any unresolved anger or pain that needs to be dealt with?*
- *The author writes: "I believe the split had affected our ability to discern our corporate identity... That disconnection translated into a struggle to answer 'Who are we now? Where are we going?'" How can past pain create an "identity crisis"? How have you seen this to be true in your life?*
- *How can healing from past hurts and present angers help your organization accept the past and face the future? If you can relate to being in a corporate "identity crisis," how can you lead in getting the healing process started?*



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Additional Resources

Anger: Handling a Powerful Emotion in a Healthy Way, by Gary Chapman (Northfield, 2007). From road rage to daily exasperations in the home and workplace, Americans are getting madder! Offering up-to-date stats, facts, and real-life examples, Chapman discusses helpful—and surprising—insights on the reasons behind our anger and how to not only manage it, but use it for good!

The Anger Workbook, by Les Carter and Frank Minirth (Thomas Nelson, 1992). Whether your anger is from tension at work, frustration at home, or just life in general, this workbook will help you modify the anger that keeps you from inner peace and contentment. Carter and Minirth, esteemed Christian counselors, walk you through a 13-step program of interactive exercises that will help you identify learned patterns of relating, thinking, and behaving that influence your anger.





Stopping Gossip

Additional Resources

Face Conflict with Confidence, a downloadable resource from the Kyria.com. Conflict is inevitable. Download this Life Guide and learn how to be confident when confronting others. You'll receive practical tips and tools from others who have learned from their own mistakes. Discover how inviting God into your conflicts can help you grow. You just might learn more about yourself during your next conflict than you ever thought possible.

Getting Anger Under Control, by Neil T. Anderson and Rich Miller (Harvest House Publishers, 2002). Are you a captive to unresolved resentment? Has anger "broken into" your heart and robbed you of joy and peace? Gain the upper hand when you discover these biblical principles and constructive methods for overcoming such overwhelming emotions. You'll learn about righteous vs. unrighteous anger, how to trust Jesus for emotional control, and more.

Getting the Best of Your Anger, 2nd edition, by Les Carter (Revell, 2007). *Getting the Best of Your Anger* helps you take charge, whether you need to use anger less frequently or more powerfully. Dr. Les Carter explains: what anger is and why we experience it; how to identify your level of anger; behaviors that make anger an enemy; how to express anger in constructive ways; how to argue fairly. Don't let anger get the best of you. With the guidance in this book, you can learn to control the emotions you've been given.

Make Anger Your Ally, by Neil Clark Warren (Tyndale House, 1999). Learn how to make anger work *for* you rather than against you! With solid biblical principles and psychological insights, Dr. Warren shows you how to



harness the energy of this powerful emotion—instead of resorting to suppression or denial. You'll discover creative and constructive ideas for coping with pain and resolving problems without aggression.

Managing Conflict Well, a downloadable resource from **BuildingChurchLeaders.com**. Most people don't like conflict—leaders included. We don't even like to say the "c" word, let alone deal with it. We try to avoid it at all costs. But whether we say it, or see it, or not—conflict is normal, and at times, necessary. In leadership, we just need to be ready for it. This training pack will help you do just that.

She's Gonna Blow: Real Help for Moms Dealing with Anger, by Julie Ann Barnhill (Harvest House Publishers, 2005). *She's Gonna Blow* provides hope, laughter and understanding to moms struggling with anger. Author Julie Ann Barnhill helps moms cope with anger and control issues through a combination of biblical counsel and practical help.

Taking Charge of Anger: How to Resolve Conflict, Sustain Relationships, and Express Yourself Without Losing Control, by W. Robert Nay (Guilford Press, 2003). Angry people often get into trouble and "putting a lid on it" is easier said than done. This powerful and destructive emotion can be tamed with the effective six-step program presented in this book. Anger expert Dr. Robert Nay combines innovative self-discovery tools and targeted exercises for understanding and managing the five unproductive faces of anger, from passive-aggression to all-out rage. Quizzes, worksheets, and practice tips help readers assess when and why their anger becomes a problem, switch gears before it escalates out of control, and channel anger in more productive ways.

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