

DO REAL CHRISTIANS GET MAD?

- ☐ Of course.
- ☐ Only on weekdays.
- ☐ Never!!#%*@!

A newly married couple resolved never to have an argument. "As long as we live," they promised each other, "we will not lose our tempers." If ever a discussion seemed to be edging toward anger, one of them would go out for a walk around the block to cool down.

At their silver wedding anniversary, the man claimed success.

"You all know about our commitment not to argue," he told the assembled guests. "Well, we've kept that vow. We've been married 25 years, I've had pneumonia 47 times, but we've never had a fight!"

Sure.

Most of us don't work nearly that hard at controlling our outbursts. In fact, we live in an age that says it's O.K. to blow up once a week or so. The "primal-scream" therapists of the 1970's thought it might even be healthy. "Go ahead and ventilate,"

they said. "Don't bottle up your feelings; you'll get high blood pressure. Let the frustration out."

Sounds reasonable . . . except that most of our grandparents didn't live that way, and it's not nearly so much fun to be on the *receiving* end of a tirade. And what about such

ancient wisdom as "A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself

under control" (Prov. 29:11)? Didn't Jesus say getting mad at your brother was close to murdering him?

So what's a Christian to do with traffic jams, surly sales clerks, tax hikes, and personal insults? Stifle the comebacks? Pray to become a stoic? Clench our jaws so hard we crack a tooth? Is *nothing* in our slam-bang world worth blowing up about?

HEAVENLY HUFF

The Bible does not say anger is

forbidden. If it did, it wouldn't be the revelation of *God*, who got plenty steamed more than once throughout the Old and New Testaments.

He fumed at Moses for stalling after God had called him to lead the Exodus. He fumed at the worshipers of the golden calf, at Achan the thief, Uzzah the man who touched the ark, King David, King Ahab, phony prophets, sanctimonious Pharisees . . . not to mention Syrians, Philistines, Ammonites, Moabites, Babylonians, and assorted other Gentile nations. More than 300 times the Bible says God was *mad*.

So anger can't be entirely off limits.

God gets upset about sin, rebellion, hypocrisy—and nowhere does he forbid us from doing the same. Certain parts of life are truly outrageous.

The trouble is, those usually aren't the things that set us off. We can fall asleep reading about people being maimed and starved by tyrant governments, yet complain heatedly if dinner isn't ready on time. The companies where we work can price-fix in violation of the law, but what really gets us is having to pay a parking ticket (entirely legal). Homelessness we can handle, but not the messy rooms of our kids. Racist remarks, but not insinuations about *us*.

I always thought that I was a self-controlled, cool-headed fellow until the birth of my first child. Babies, as you may have noticed, are not especially logical. They don't adjust their behavior upon considering the needs of the situation.

It was a hot June Saturday afternoon, and my wife had gone shopping, leaving our 8-month-old in my care. Toys and tickles eventually lost their charm, and though my son was both dry and recently fed, he would not stop crying. I tried to calm him; then I tried ignoring him; I tried everything I knew. The wailing increased.

I shall forever be ashamed of the moment when I lost it. Grabbing

him tightly under the arms, I swooped him up to my face and shook him hard as I spat out the order, "Stop it!"

You can well imagine how much good *that* did. His wail became a terrified screech.

Suddenly I was struck with an awful thought: *Dean, do you realize you actually have the power to injure this child?* I sat down, my heart pounding. He continued to cry as I held him close, wondering how to apologize to an 8-month-old.

Soon thereafter, my wife came home. I said little. But a few days later, the Lord said something

strong to me from my old King James Bible: "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God" (James 1:19-20).

My anger had done nothing to advance God's righteousness. Human anger, I came to see, was often not only wrong but counter-productive. It didn't help the situation at all. The baby didn't stop crying. "The wrath of man worketh not"!

I cannot say that day back in 1973 was the last time I became an angry father; my three children could easily testify otherwise. But ever since I have been trying to stay in touch with what kind of thing merits anger and what doesn't. Childishness is not a cause for anger. Neither is inconvenience. Forgetfulness. Clumsiness. Illness. Personal preference, so long as it is not vicious. I need to save my wrath for the sin, injustice and hypocrisy that get my heavenly Father irate.

UNCONTROLLABLE?

You may be saying by now, "Wait a minute. All this polite discussion about anger isn't going to do any good. When I'm mad, I'm *mad*. I do

whatever I do, almost by instinct—and that's that. I can't help it. I can't 'manage the situation.' I'm teed off—you understand?"

Well . . . the Word of God seems to think you and I can control our anger. Otherwise, it wouldn't have said things like "Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it only leads to evil" (Ps. 37:8). In other places, the Bible allows for outrage but sets boundaries: "In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Eph. 4:26-27).

God must have thought our anger was not a wild hornet buzzing madly about the room stinging everyone in its random path. He must have intended to empower us with self-control. In fact, anger can be channeled for good, for the defeat of Satan. Martin Luther, a spirited man who simply could not stomach the religious abuses of his day, said, "I never work better than when I am inspired by anger. When I am angry I can write, pray, and preach well; for then my whole temperament is quickened, my understanding sharpened, and all mundane vexations and temptations depart."

Luther was upset about things that upset God. His anger served as a stimulus to bring about change. In so doing, he did his Father's will.

But before we launch a similar crusade today, we must ask some hard questions. *Does this offense really call for anger? Could I write an Elijah- or Amos-like prophecy about it? Or is this just one of life's run-of-the-mill aggravations that comes along to cultivate my longsuffering?*

Dr. Willard Gaylin, a New York psychotherapist, once bloodied his hand smashing a bus door window when the driver wouldn't let him in out of the rain. Thirty years later he wrote a book, *The Rage Within*, in which he said, "Expressing anger is

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a form of public littering. . . . It just makes for an uglier community, full of shouting, horn honking and fender benders."

The Scriptures wisely give two guidelines to keep that from happening:

1. *Warm up s-l-o-w-l-y.* "Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools," says Ecclesiastes 7:9. Such is the call of the apostle James as well: ". . . slow to wrath." Even God himself put up with months, sometimes years, sometimes centuries of insulting behavior before speaking out. The prophet Joel called him a God who "is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity" (2:13).

2. *Cool down quickly.* "Let not the sun go down. . . ." Don't keep the adrenaline churning. It produces everything from indigestion to peptic ulcers to hives, which are caused by blood serum being pumped into the skin. Four out of every five headaches come from tension, which often comes from anger.

I was raised by a father who early on taught me a wise concept: "Never forget, son, that in any situation, you can always be in control of *you*. People may be yelling and screaming, feelings may run high, things may happen over which you are powerless—but there will always be one person on the scene whom you can control: yourself."

That was good advice for schoolyard arguments . . . for scary tests . . . for dates on moonlit nights . . . for the many challenges of adulthood. I have not always maintained the reins of myself, but I have known it was possible.

The release of all our emotions—and especially anger—can be channeled for good or set loose for andemonium. In the first case, God's righteousness moves ahead. In the second, the damage falls not only on other people but also on ourselves. ■

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