

## PART TWO

### A GOSPEL CONTROVERSY?

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Part two of our inquiry into some current discussions regarding the Gospel centers on the following question: **Is it ever appropriate to teach that God is angry with Christians?** At first this would seem to be a question that would have a simple yes or no answer. However, I think it is more complex than it may appear. A number of questions arise.

- What do we mean by the word “anger”? Is this the Greek word *orge* or some other word? If Jesus has taken for us the wrath (*orge*) of God and satisfied it (propitiation), isn’t it a “slam dunk” that the answer is “no”? Maybe. Maybe not.
- What do we mean by “Christian”? Are we defining Christians as those in the visible church, or only the invisible church? If a part of our defense in answering “yes” to this basic question is to cite OT examples of God’s wrath against Israel, how do we distinguish the believing remnant of Israel from the whole company of Israel?
- Is there a difference in this regard between the old and the new administrations of the covenant of grace?
- If the answer to our question is in anyway “yes”, how do we speak of God’s anger toward (or “for”??) his children in a way that does not actually harm the faith of those (and unfortunately, their number is massive) who have grown up (or who are now growing up) with abusively angry fathers? (It matters little if at all whether this abuse was or is physical, sexual, emotional, or verbal. No doubt, there are forms and patterns of parental abuse that heap sin upon sin in this regard. But it only takes one of these forms of the abuse of paternal responsibility to lead a person to distrust a heavenly Father who is “always angry at me”.)
- How do these issues and questions interface with “the fear of the Lord”? How is a healthy and godly fear of God, which is commanded of us in both the OT and the NT (Prov. 9:10, Phil. 2:12) different from the cringing fear from which we are set free by the Gospel (I John 4:18, Romans 8:15, Hebrews 4:16)?

### The “bottom line” up top:

I am indebted to Rev. Corby Shields for introducing me to some articles on the topic of anger written by Dr. David Powlison in The Journal of Biblical Counseling, and with introducing me to the term **“God’s loving-anger-kindness”**. If I understand correctly, Corby gained this term from Dr. Powlison. Personally, I have never heard the term anywhere else. I assume Dr. Powlison may have “invented” the term. But it would seem that the reason is obvious. If we are searching for a way to say that God’s anger/jealousy/passion FOR the good of His children is NOT the judicial wrath (*orge*) that has been satisfied by the substitutionary death of Jesus AND it is NOT the abusive fatherly anger far too many experienced from their earthly fathers, what better way to express it than to say **that His passion for the good and loyalty of His children is, in fact, an expression of His *hesed* – His covenantal loving-kindness, by which He has bound Himself to us to “do us good, not harm” all the days of our lives?**

### **AN APPROACH IN EXAMINING THIS ISSUE:**

To look thoroughly at the question in hand, it would seem to me that we need to examine it at four levels. They are exegetical theology, biblical theology, systematic theology and pastoral theology.

#### A. Exegetical theology – Old Testament:

1. There are numerous times, of course, that the wrath and anger of God are expressed towards His enemies in the OT. These passages do not seem to be pertinent.
2. The Lord is often angry or wrathful toward Israel as a nation. Notably in the wilderness when they constructed the golden calf (Exodus 32), when they grumbled against the Lord and He sent quail as a rebuke (Numbers 11-12), at the incident of Balak and Balaam (Numbers 22-23), when they refused to enter the Promised Land (numerous passages), and again at the time they were conquered both by Assyria and later Babylon and carried to captivity.
3. Regarding His wrath or anger against individuals:
  - a. He was angry against Uzzah for touching the Ark of the Covenant. (II Sam. 6:7 and I Chron. 13:10)

- b. With Solomon because “his heart had turned away from the Lord”. (I Kings 11:9)
- c. Regarding Moses, the Lord became angry with him when he argued with the Lord at the burning bush. Secondly, twice in Deuteronomy Moses states to Israel “because of **you** the Lord became angry with **me**.” (1:37 and 4:21, bold added). Regarding this incident, the comment of the Psalmist in 106:23 is fascinating. Discussing Israel’s idolatry with the golden calf (the context of Moses’ statements), the Psalmist says, “So He [the Lord] said He would destroy them – had not Moses, the chosen one, stood in the breach before Him to keep His wrath from destroying them.”
- d. Regarding David, if my research is correct, though David became angry with the unjust man in Nathan’s rebuking story of the stolen lamb, the text never says here that the Lord was wrathful or angry against David. Secondly, II Samuel 24 and I Chronicles 23 state that the Lord was angry with Israel (but the text does not specify David) in relation to David’s counting the people of Israel, though one account seems to describe the counting as the reason for God’s anger and the other as the result of His anger.
- e. There are other examples of individuals being the recipient of the Lord’s anger – Hezekiah (II Chron. 32, because of his pride; but when he repents, wrath is delayed until after his lifetime); and again, because of Achan’s sin, the Lord is angry against Israel (Joshua 7).
- f. There are a handful of times in which a Psalmist states that he feels that he is or has been a recipient of the anger or wrath of God (79, 85, 88, 90). These are all psalms of complaint and/or confession.

#### B. Exegetical theology – New Testament.

- 1. Regarding unbelievers or the unregenerate: They are recipients of God’s wrath, now and at the final judgment (numerous passages, especially in Revelation), and are described as “vessels of wrath” in Romans 9. Before our conversions, we also were “children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). And in a warning against apostasy, to exhort those who profess faith in Christ not to “turn back” and find they were not ever regenerate all along, the writer of

Hebrews warns his readers of the wrath of God (chapters 3 and 4, “I have sworn in My wrath, they will not enter My rest.”)

2. **Regarding the converted and regenerate, the NT is remarkable. *Orge* and *thumos* are the two words used for “wrath” or “anger” in the NT. There is not even one instance of either word being used in reference to believers. Not one.** There are notable times in which these words do not appear, when we might have expected it. For example, the slaying of Ananias and Sapphira does not include a reference to the Lord’s anger or wrath. Paul’s warning to not partake of the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner (I Cor. 11) includes that “some are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep” (a reference to death, most believe) but never utilizes *orge* or *thumos* or any other word that could be translated anger or wrath. Lastly, the exhortation in Hebrews 12 to respond appropriately to the discipline of the Lord never mentions that His discipline is motivated by or characterized by wrath or anger. Neither *orge* nor *thumos* are used in Hebrews 12.
3. What we do see in the NT regarding God’s anger/wrath toward believers is also notable. It has been taken by Jesus. The NT writers, in terms of their references to anger/wrath and the believer, focus on our *deliverance* from God’s wrath through the death of Christ (Romans 5:9-“how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through Him?”; I Thess. 1:10 – “...Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.”) “Jesus delivers from wrath because, justified and reconciled in him, they [His followers] are no longer enemies or under condemnation.” (Kittel, Abridged Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Page 726, on *orge*)

#### C. Biblical Theology

How are we to interpret the data we see above? How do we account for it all, especially the lack of references to God’s anger or wrath being given to NT believers, which is precisely the question at hand?

In this section I have more questions and suggestions to offer than firm conclusions. I have not delved yet into any books on OT or NT theology written from a Reformed perspective. And I have not conferred with any trusted OT or NT theologians or professors. But I believe the following questions may point us in a direction toward some answers.

1. Do we see in the data above an indication of the superior administration of the Covenant of Grace in the NT over the old? As those in the NT era, we know we have a “new and improved” experience of His grace and mercy. Is this a clue regarding the difference between OT and NT?
2. In which cases (OT or NT) do we see God’s anger coming upon the visible church but not the invisible church? We know that “not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.” (Romans 9:6) In which cases has His anger come upon those who are *among* His people, but are not *of* His people?
3. We know that Moses was elect. God’s anger first is directed against him at the burning bush. But can a case be made that, in fact, this was his conversion? And that after this, God’s anger is never expressed toward Moses due to his own misbehavior? (In Numbers 20, Moses is told he will not enter the Promised Land because He struck the rock, but the text never here refers to God’s anger or wrath.) Psalm 106:23 gives the intriguing possibility that Moses, as “the chosen one” and as one who “stood in the breach” for Israel, takes the wrath that is due Israel because of their idolatry! This occasion may in fact show him as a type of Christ. If so, it does not show God’s anger against Moses per se, but instead Moses’ chosen role as a substitute, bearing God’s wrath in the place of God’s people.
4. Though there are indeed “grace and truth” in the OT and we as believers are under the law of Christ in the NT, could all this be a way of highlighting that “the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”?

#### D. Systematic Theology

I was not able to ascertain much, if anything, that was pointedly related to the central question of this paper by looking at Berkhof, either his one volume Systematic Theology or his Summary of Christian Doctrine.

I did, however, attempt to read carefully every part of the WCF and the Westminster Catechisms that seemed at all to relate to the topics at hand; and did the same with J.I. Packer’s Concise Theology and Knowing God.

1. In chapter eleven (Of Justification), paragraph 5, the Confession says that the elect “may, by their sins, **fall under God’s fatherly displeasure...**”. I think that the Westminster divines chose their words very carefully! This would have been an appropriate time to warn the elect of God’s continued anger toward them if they

sinned, if the Westminster divines had wanted to do so. Instead, they chose the words **“fatherly displeasure”**. The reason, it would seem, was to try, best they could, to interpret and apply the NT closely and to markedly avoid the appearance (at least the appearance, if not the actual doctrine) of the believer being the victim of double jeopardy – that is, bearing the wrath or anger of God that has already been born and satisfied by Christ at that cross. Question 74 of the Larger Catechism (“What is adoption?”) also mentions that the elect are “under [God’s] fatherly care and dispensations”.

2. The only place in the Confessions or Catechisms in which I found a reference to God’s wrath, other than his wrath to those who are outside the church, is in chapter thirty, “Of Church Censures”. Paragraph three states “Church censures are necessary... for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer His covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.” The scripture references for this paragraph seem to point to occasions in which those “among”, but not “of”, God’s people should be excommunicated. G.I. Williamson’s study guide on the Confession does not address this warning of wrath, focusing instead on the redemptive intention of discipline and the common objections to its practice, as well as outlining practical steps to be taken in church discipline. The most pertinent comment Williamson makes in regard to the issue is, perhaps, “Christ cares not for the reputation of a church when it is spiritually dead.” (He makes this statement in response to the objection, “Won’t church discipline harm the reputation of the church?”) I am uncertain what to make of this in regard to whether this judgment would be a declaration of the church’s apostasy. Perhaps, but perhaps not. However, Hebrews 10:26-31 (and many other passages in Hebrews) illustrate well, if we interpret these passages as Calvinists and not as Aminians, that a judgment upon “the house of God” or people of God (Hebrew 10:30) can be a judgment of wrath/vengeance upon those with a false profession of faith. Sadly, we in this day see all too often churches that profess the name of Christ but do not believe at all in orthodox doctrines about Christ or salvation and who, regarding the law of God, call evil good and good evil. This, of course, would be an extreme example of failing to practice church censures.
3. In Packer’s Concise Theology I found no references at all to God’s anger or wrath resting upon a believer.

4. In Knowing God, Packer pulls no punches. As I said in the first document on these issues, he is certainly not antinomian. He has whole chapters on “God the Judge”, “The Wrath of God”, “Goodness and Severity”, and “The Jealous God”. Though I cannot say that I re-read every word of every chapter of the entire book, I did attempt to re-read every chapter that might appear to be pertinent. He never once, as far as I could find, says that God is “angry toward” or “wrathful toward” a believer. He instead describes God’s jealousy for our affection and loyalty, but never mentions the anger or wrath of God toward us. However, God’s judgment may fall on those who have an empty profession of faith.
5. On the other hand, his chapters “The Heart of the Gospel” (which he says is propitiation) and “Sons of God”, as well as “The Adequacy of God” will, I think, make any believer celebrate the turning aside of God’s wrath once for all and our amazing blessing of being dearly loved children! (By the way, Packer’s chapter on “The Adequacy of God” contains another example of what it means to “preach the Gospel to yourself”. He says (p.236), “Think of what you know of God through the gospel, says Paul [in Romans chapter 8], and apply it. Think against your feelings; argue yourself out of the gloom they spread; unmask the unbelief they have nourished; take yourself in hand, talk to yourself, make yourself look up from your problems to the God of the gospel; let *evangelical* thinking correct *emotional* thinking.”)

#### E. Pastoral Theology

1. As we have said already, our churches and our communities are filled with people, young and old, who have only known sinfully and abusively angry fathers. If not angry fathers, then absent or emotionally removed fathers. How few are among us who have experienced an appropriate fatherly displeasure from a father who never left us, abandoned us, deserted us (physically or emotionally); who did not abuse his superior size or strength; but instead was only and always for us in his passion and actions? This is a heavy burden for any preacher or pastor!
2. In this regard, I highly recommend the work of David Powlison. He rightly shows the difference between sinful and appropriate human anger. He helps us deal with our own anger issues, and helps us help others. And he begins it all with a wonderful understanding of both God’s anger and His love. (He says, for example, “You can’t understand God’s love if you don’t understand His anger.” “The Good News is always presented in terms of how love and anger come to be resolved. God

expresses His love for His people by each of the three ways He expresses His anger at wrong. First, in love, the anger your sin deserves fell on Jesus. ... Second, in love, God's anger works to disarm the power of your sin. His anger at sin is again expressed for your well being. ... Third, in love, God's anger will deliver you from the pain of others' sins." (p. 41, The Journal of Biblical Counseling, volume 14, Number 1, Fall 1995) Though written for reasons to help the counselor help people with anger issues, the articles are very well done in terms of their theology.)

3. Perhaps there are those who think that God's discipline toward His children would always imply His anger. If so, they might want to consider the counsel of James Dobson. Though not as scholarly as other references in this paper, James Dobson, in several of his books on parenting, made a point of telling parents to NOT discipline while angry, especially when using the much dreaded "spanking spoon". Be firm? Yes. Be serious? You bet. But don't be driven by your anger. Perhaps that is how God handles us. We may grieve the Spirit. And He may grieve as He brings to us His discipline. Of course, His discipline is a serious thing! We are NOT to "regard it lightly" (Hebrews 12). We are to be in reverential awe of God. It is a fear that is born of our intense desire to please Him because we love Him so much. And, conversely, we welcome his training of us as an expression of his intention to "bless us and keep us, and make His face shine upon us". There is no contradiction between the loving and trustful fear of the Lord, which drives us to Him in humility, and the grace that takes away from us "the spirit of fear" and replaces it with "the Spirit of Sonship". (Romans 8:15)

#### CONCLUSION:

So.. what do we do as preachers? I think we closely follow the text, and interpret that text in the context of the scriptures as a whole and of the meta-narrative of the story of salvation. (There will be more on how to preach and teach all this "Gospel and Law stuff", and how to evaluate the teaching and preaching of others, in the third document related to my original list of questions regarding grace and the Gospel.)

I think this will lead us to do one of two things. (a) We may choose, as I think J.I. Packer has done in his writings and as the Westminster divines did in their chapter on Justification, to avoid confusion by always using the words "anger" and "wrath" when speaking of God's judgment of the wicked and never of His training of His children. We choose to use those terms exclusively to refer to God's judicial wrath that, for the believer, has been satisfied by the cross. OR (b) We adopt a term like Corby Shields' and David Powlison's, such as God's "loving-anger-

kindness". If we do so, it would seem to me that we would do so perhaps more because of the psychology of "love involving anger for the good of the one loved" than for exegetical reasons. However, if we do so, then I believe it is *critical* that every time we talk of God's anger FOR the good of His people, we care enough about the damaged people in front of us to take about 10 minutes to carefully and lovingly explain (with empathetic emotion toward those damaged by earthly fathers) what we mean and what we do not mean.

This is a difficult topic. If I am in error on any part, I stand ready to be corrected.