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A Psychological and Theological Approach
to Anger Management for Christian Counselors

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Anger is frequently a bigger part of our lives than we admit. People often struggle on how to manage it so that it will not create unhealthy patterns in their relationships. Anger is an emotional and psychological reaction to a real or imagined threat to an individual's well-being (Cofield, 2000). The reaction always results in responses designed to protect the individual from the attack. Occasionally, the reaction results in responses intended to punish the attacker (Cofield, 2000). During these situations anger can easily get out of control and become unhealthy. The purpose of this paper is to explore the myths concerning anger and present a variety of ways to managing anger effectively.

First Myth of Anger

There are four myths often associated with anger. The first myth is that anger is *always* sinful. This is false. Anger is not always sinful (Cofield, 2000). In the Bible God was angry at times. He became angry with Israel because they had not been faithful and had not placed their trust in Him (Numbers 32:13). Likewise, in John 3:36 it states that whoever rejects and says no to Jesus Christ has the anger of God the Father upon him. God cannot sin, but He does have anger. Jesus also became angry at times. He had emotional reactions to the real threat of righteousness and holiness. When Christ was trying to heal on the Sabbath day He looked around at the religious leaders in anger. This was due to the fact that they did not want Him to heal a person on a religious day (Mark 3:5). Likewise, Jesus made a whip and began beating people in the Temple who were selling and making money off the religious experience of animal sacrifices (Mark Chapter 11). If an individual believes in anything dearly they will likely become angry when those beliefs and values are attacked (Cofield, 2000). There are times when anger

is called for because the situation is extremely threatening to the individual's well-being or to righteousness. Anger is a normal feeling. It is perfectly natural to become angry and there is no such thing as "never getting angry" (Rapha Handout 1996). Everyone feels angry sometimes. If an individual never becomes angry outwardly, it can be a sign of a psychological dilemma or a serious theological problem (Cofield, 2000).

It must be pointed out that some authors counter and state that anger really is not okay in *most* situations. If anger is characterized with a theological understanding of being linked to the pre-fallen world, would anger then be normal? Unquestionably, Christ encountered feelings of anger and He was perfect. However, would man and woman have had feelings of anger if they had never fallen? These authors have written that anger is not righteous a majority of the time. Even though a person assuredly experiences anger regularly, he or she should carefully examine it and scrutinize whether it is justified or whether he or she may be falling into a sinful response.

Regardless, both sides agree that anger is *not always* sinful, but it can quickly lead to sin. As Paul states, whenever a person is angry they are not to sin (Ephesians 4:26). He obviously realizes anger is a natural emotion. The Greek word employed there is "orgizesthe," a decree. However, Paul goes on to caution to control anger in such a way that they do not sin. Sin would be to violate someone in the assertion of anger, and Scripture prohibits that. A spiteful plan toward others and prejudiced administration of anger are unacceptable (Stafford, 1997).

Second Myth of Anger

The second myth about anger is that it is readily identified. That is, it is easily seen by oneself and others. Anger is often experienced as an emotional outburst that is easily detected such as screaming, indignation, and crying. It can also show itself through resentment, aggression, frustration and destructiveness. However, there is an anger that also runs far below the surface of many persons. Individuals can often suppress their

anger and hold it in (Rapha Handout 1996). Sometimes the most angry persons are those who are silent. The field of psychology often identifies these individuals as possessing passive-aggressive characteristics (Cofield, 2000).

Passive-aggressive people are often attracted to those with strong leadership because they resist doing things on their own. They are often dependent on others for their emotional stability because they want others to do the things necessary to make the relationship work. They resist sharing their feelings because they know they may be taken advantage of or rejected. Finally, they tend to blame others when things go wrong (Cofield, 2000). Some typical traits of individuals who are silent in their anger are that they are perfectionists. They tend to use “have to,” “ought to,” and “should/must” statements. They give others the silent treatment when they are angry with them. They habitually procrastinate, are readily compliant, and become easily depressed. These are all signs that anger may be deep in the soul and needs to be addressed (Cofield, 2000). Hence, not all anger is easily identified.

Third Myth of Anger

The third myth concerning anger is that it is mostly irrational. Anger comes when an individual's goals, values, and expectations are blocked or when one's self-worth is attacked. Anger is that emotion which speaks up for a individual's needs and personal beliefs (Cofield, 2000). There is a close connection between anger and a person's rational side. When this connection becomes blocked irrationality can take place. Anger is the emotional signal telling the person that some thing needs to be changed. So in some ways anger can be positive and be rational. It tells the person what they hold on to passionately and what they really believe in. It can help teach things when it does not override a reasonable expression (Cofield, 2000).

However, it is true that anger is an emotion that can and often does override reason. When it does this it becomes destructive. A person needs to watch how they

manifest it by asking themselves what the impact of this expression can have on others. The Bible teaches a composed assertion of anger. Individuals are not instructed to let all their anger out however they choose. The essential component of control is love. Underneath even the most fierce assertion of anger must be love for the person who is the recipient of it. The person's purpose toward others, as well as the confines of love, are the essential control suggested in Scripture. Thus, love deters anger (Stafford, 1997).

Fourth Myth of Anger

The final myth of anger is that it is easily managed. Scripture states the importance of being slow to anger (James Chapter 1&2). Likewise, Paul states that love is not easily angered (1Corinthians Chapter 13). Anger can be a catalyst for Christian growth. It assists an individual by helping them find out what they truly believe in and then strengthening them to fight for the truth (Cofield, 2000). Anger can serve a good purpose, but can easily become out of control. It is mismanaged when it is repressed or expressed in unhealthy or inappropriate ways. This ultimately leads to hurting ourselves and others.

Theological Approaches to Managing Anger

There are a number of theological approaches which are beneficial in managing anger. The first theological approach is for the individual to identify and avoid their pressure points. In Ephesians 4:27 it states that one should not give the devil a foothold. This means a person should realize that the devil is going to get the better of them in regard to their anger in specific situations. It is important to identify what those situations are, and to the best of their ability avoid them (Cofield, 2000). It is important to stay away from what triggers a person's anger. Furthermore, asking others to help in uncovering their personal warning signs is beneficial in preventing the person from expressing unhealthy anger. Consequently, it is crucial to remember that the Bible urges control of anger, not its denial or suppression. To deny it is to remove it from

examination. In the Bible acceptance that one is angry is a necessary step in handling it (Stafford, 1987).

The second theological approach in managing anger is refusing to take revenge at any cost. Revenge has a manner of feeding anger that is very destructive. This concept is supported in Romans 12:17-21, which pronounces never to repay evil for evil and to be careful to do right. As much as possible live in peace, but leave room for God's wrath. By taking revenge it only hurts the individual doing it and those involved. The suggestion is to avoid retaliation because individuals are not impartial judges when they are angry (Cofield, 2000).

Instead, the individual needs to learn forgiveness. That is not to suggest that one is to automatically forgive. One must feel and experience the full weight of the violation against them before one can begin to forgive. Forgiveness is releasing the wrongdoer from the full debt they owe the individual. Unless the person experiences forgiveness fully, one cannot release the wrongdoer from it (Cofield, 2000).

Forgiveness does not necessarily mean to erase all recall, but to no longer hold it against the person. The individual's emotions will follow their choice to forgive so they must be patient. It may take time. Forgiveness is a process (Rapha Handout 1996). However, while in that process it is crucial to not take revenge. Finally, the individual is to ask the Lord to help them do what He did. Christ released all of us from the debt that we owed Him. The individual is to do the same for others. Thus forgiving the person chooses to obey God because of His unconditional love and forgiveness.

The third theological approach to managing anger is developing more appropriate responses. Responses to anger are learned, and therefore can be unlearned. Everyone has the emotion naturally, but what the person does with it is learned from their friends, family and others who influence them. A crucial change is how the person views the problematic situation. For example, the person should consider it a blessing and be

joyful when facing trials (James 1:2-3). That is a major change to wanting to take revenge and becoming extremely angry! This is also much easier said than done. However, an individual *can* develop new responses to anger. It is habit that must be unlearned and it may not be easy. It may take quite a bit of work and include the assistance of others. It can begin by replacing the bad response by thinking “what would Jesus do?” The person needs to submit to Christ and contemplate how He would react in the individual’s situation and try to act accordingly (Cofield, 2000).

The final theological approach to managing anger is putting oneself in the full light of Christ’s love. Ultimately, this is where the individual must go. First John 4:10-11 talks about the love of Christ for us. Individuals who chronically act out anger are those who do not feel loved and do not view themselves as worthwhile (Cofield, 2000). Anger is ultimately a reflection of a person’s self-image. The less secure a person feels, the angrier they tend to become. The individual has to bathe themselves in the love Christ has for them. Security is ultimately found in His unconditional love (Cofield, 2000). The result is a person having a healthy sense of who they truly are. If one can see themselves as loved unconditionally by Jesus they will begin to see themselves as worth something and not be so defensive. If a person fails to accomplish this they will live life as an angry and bitter person.

Psychological Approaches to Managing Anger

After clarifying the myths of anger and developing theological approaches toward it, we next move on to psychological approaches to managing it. The first step is educating the client on the components of unhealthy and healthy anger. Physiologically, anger can create unhealthy bodily responses, including: heart problems, ulcers, headaches, and high blood pressure. In contrast, anger can be expressed in a healthy way physically through regular exercise such as taking walks. Emotionally, anger can be expressed in a negative manner by shaming, freezing one’s feelings, and becoming

explosive. However, some positive ways to express anger are through writing feelings down, drawing and talking.

Unhealthy anger can have negative consequences on an individual's relationship by fostering mistrust, blame, and avoidance. However, expressing anger in a loving confrontive manner and being honest when expressing feelings can be beneficial for the relationship. Finally, unhealthy anger can impact the person spiritually. It can lead to bitterness, resentment, judgment, and revenge. Healthy anger can lead to prayer, forgiveness, and reconciliation (Rapha Handout 1996). It is important for the client to be educated on the differences between healthy and unhealthy anger and the impact it can have.

After the client has achieved this step they can begin to personalize and understand their own anger. The psychologist works with the client to assist them in this process. The client is asked to write down the first thing which comes to mind when they read particular words or phrases. It is important for them to be honest with themselves to gain the most from the exercises. Phrases such as "When I get angry I," "I get angry when," "When people get mad they should," and "People who get angry are" help the client in understanding how they view anger in general and how they express it themselves (Rapha Handout 1996).

Often the client has hidden their anger and may not be aware of it. If this is the case, the psychologist can go over a checklist to help them determine if they are indeed hiding their anger. Checking statements such as "sarcasm in conversation," "smiling when hurting," "excessive irritability over trifles," and "frequent sighing" can be indicative of unexpressed anger (Rapha Handout 1996). When the client has reached this point they can make personal comparisons regarding their anger with what they have learned about unhealthy and healthy anger.

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At this point the client has identified his or her anger and the unhealthy ways in which he or she express it. From here clients begin to learn the steps to appropriately express their anger. First, they need to acknowledge when they are angry and to realize that it is okay. It is also important to learn how to recognize the physical, mental, and behavioral warning signs of their angry feelings. From that point they can evaluate why they are angry. They can ask themselves if their anger is justified (Rapha Handout 1996). Is it an overreaction to a situation that is beyond their control? Are they misplacing anger with themselves onto others? Are they expecting too much of themselves and others? Or are they taking things too personally?

After evaluating their anger it is important to explore their options. They can play out different scenarios in their head and with someone they trust. If possible, try to let go of the problem for a day or two. Do something physical like taking a walk, playing ball, or exercising to relieve stress. Let things cool down. Help the client remember that important decisions should be made only when they are in a calm, rationale frame of mind (Rapha Handout 1996).

Next, remind to client to recall what solutions worked for them in the past. Remind them that difficult feelings, no matter how strong, are always temporary. No matter how uncomfortable their feelings are at that moment, they will go away. Help the client see that acting impulsively, exploding, or getting depressed will only make matters worse (Rapha Handout 1996). This does not mean they should ignore difficult feelings and hope they will go away, but only that they do not need to get overwhelmed by them. Help the client see that they can deal with difficult feelings. Finally, when the client has successfully handled a difficult situation remind them to reward themselves. They should be proud that they met their goal and succeeded in handling their anger in a healthy manner.

When a client is learning how to cope with anger in a relationship there are number of guidelines that be beneficial. Help the client in be an active listener. They need to acknowledge the other person's feelings as valid. It is also important for them to express their anger if it is appropriate at the time. View the other person's anger as a sign of caring and an opportunity for growth and closeness. At this point they can work quickly towards a resolution. The goal should be specific and stick to the point by keeping things in the present.

Teach the client to have a potential solution in mind and to be prepared for a workable compromise. It is important to pick an appropriate time and place. Do not humiliate the individual by expressing anger in front of others. If tempers are too hot, take a break. Something needing to be said may have to be postponed until the client is cooled down. Practice with the client appropriate self-disclosure by having them make "I" statements and empathic assertion such as "I am upset because you cut me off." (Rapha Handout 1996). Stress the magnitude of showing appropriate and consistent non-verbal behavior as well. Remind the client to expect a response and to listen. Finally, when it is all over have the client use relaxation skills to calm down.

Conclusion

The inappropriate expression of anger is condemned in the Bible, but anger itself is not. The disciples, God, and Jesus Christ all became angry. It is acceptable for persons to become angry if they can acquire how to express it in a biblical manner. The authority over anger, instead of its denial, is advised in the Bible. Anger management methods center on Christ as an example for the suitable assertion of anger. Insight is drawn from the lives of Jesus and Paul to represent how to properly expound a person's anger (Stafford, 1997). Working with psychological methods and tools, individuals can learn to model Christ in their processing and expression of anger. The purpose of anger

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management then ought to be to guide anger in such a way that boundaries on behavior are instituted, pain and agitation are eliminated, and reconciliation is made workable.

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