

THE CHURCH IN AN ANGRY WORLD

How a fresh baptism empowers believers to find their voice in this turbulent time

BY MARK RUTLAND

Perhaps when historians paste the final label on 2020, it will be “The Year of Anger.” This has been the angriest year in American history in a century and a half. The murder rate in our inner cities has skyrocketed. Violent riots have done billions of dollars of destruction. Depression, suicide, drug use and divorce have risen alarmingly. In the midst of this the American church has found itself off balance while believers struggling with their anger are longing to know if the church has answers.

I counseled one businessman whose boss and wife threatened to fire him if he did not deal with his anger. He agreed to counseling but tried to defend himself with religion, comparing his outbursts to Jesus cleansing the temple. Of course he was in denial, and his attempt to project his carnality onto the Son of God was gross arrogance. However, he’s not the first Christian to wrap himself in a convenient Bible verse.

Anger is an emotion not an action. The Bible gives us no insight into what Jesus was feeling, only what he did: cleanse his Father’s house. What Jesus felt may have been the wrath of God upon sin, something infinitely holier than our pique at an officious clerk.

Having said all that, the man in my office needed help. His wife did not care what Jesus was feeling when he flogged the moneychangers. She just didn’t want her husband to scream at her or kick a hole in the sheet rock or pound the steering wheel in a traffic jam. She never knew when his anger was going to erupt or, even scarier, how bad it might get.

The Anger Problem

The intersection of faith and anger actually presents a thorny issue. Was the angry man in my office a Christian? He confessed that he was. His anger didn’t make him not a Christian, and up to that point, his Christianity didn’t make him not angry. And that begs important questions.

I attended a conference where the inimitable Bob Mumford spoke. In a Q&A session a woman asked him, “Do you believe a Christian can have a demon?”

Mumford answered brilliantly. “I believe a Christian can have anything he wants.”

I also believe a Christian can have whatever he wants and will have what he tolerates. Perhaps the man in my office wanted his anger. Perhaps it comforted him, or made him feel “in control.” Perhaps issues in his youth so tortured him emotionally that anger became revenge. At first he “had” the anger. After some time the anger had him. Was it demonic or emotional? It may have been either and ultimately both.

The feeling of anger is not a sin. Everyone feels anger occasionally. That’s OK. Anger such as this





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man's is not OK. A deep wound at the root of his anger had to be healed. Some with anger such as his need counseling, and that will require the courage to admit something is wrong and will only get "wronger" without healing. In my book, *Courage to Be Healed*, I point out that in emotional healing the greater variable is not faith but courage.

When Is Anger a Problem?

Anger is part of the human emotional mechanism that informs our built-in flight or fight instinct. If you've ever raised up under a cupboard and nearly knocked your brains out, you remember the pain and anger that made you want to, well, say certain things. OK so far. Painful but OK.

If you took a chainsaw to the cupboard or yelled at your wife who had done nothing, your response to the anger was not OK. Trying to justify it by referencing Christ and the money-changers is also not OK.

We know self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, but that hardly helps unless we can bring anger under the Spirit's control. But how? Destructive anger from an inner wound erupts without warning. When the wound is healed, a gap is created in which the Spirit can take control. In which case the wound, not the anger, was healed.

When Is Anger Personal?

We live in an angry culture. Some are angry at the Democrats or the Republicans or the COVID-19 virus. It seems as though America has become one huge incident of road rage just waiting to explode. Sadly, angry churches are not rare. What's it all about?

"Generalized anger," so called, is really anger at God. People who claim to be angry at the world are deceived. They are angry at the Creator of the world. The problem with anger at God is they cannot find Him or hurt Him, so they lash out at their caregiver or their parents or their pastor. Or they turn to atheism, which is anger at God. *I will deny His existence. We will see how He likes that!*

Vertical anger at God becomes horizontal, and personal relationships suffer. A wife who shrieks at her husband may

then apologize by saying, "I'm not really angry at you. I'm just angry." However, that apology doesn't work because what the husband experienced felt plenty personal to him. No one can be just "angry in general." Anger always becomes personal at some point.

One aspect of anger upon which counselors cannot agree is its possible relationship to depression. I am persuaded that the connection is undeniable. It is no coincidence that as our culture has become angrier, depression has skyrocketed. When outward anger turns inward, depression is the inevitable result. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is more depressing than self-loathing.

If it is true that general anger is anger at God, what can we do about it? It's actually simple. However, simple and easy are not the same. Tell God you're angry at Him. Tell him why. He can deal with your anger. You can't. Ask Him to forgive you and heal you. Tell Him you will no longer blame Him for stuff. Volcanoes erupt. Viruses happen. Spouses sin. Pastors fail. Board members act wickedly. Life happens and people die. Tell Him you will accept life as it comes and that you humble yourself before Him. Tell Him that when this evil world goes mad, you will never again blame Him or doubt His goodness.

Hope in an Angry World

I was recently brought in as a consultant at two of the angriest churches I've ever encountered. I witnessed seriously unhealthy anger fueling unethical behavior that they rationalized with "Christian talk," just as the angry man in my office did. All this while fighting for power like ruthless politicians. The real tragedy was the leaders of both churches bitterly denied that they needed healing and refused to repent.

It's not like those two are the only angry churches in America. Hardly! Unfortunately, the anger level in the church has also risen amidst the madness that is 2020. Politics, race and theology have become flashpoints dividing Christian from Christian in hurtful and angry divisions filled with bitter accusations. Why?

Put simply, we got spoiled. It became mighty easy to be a believer in American culture. Oh sure, the spread of progressive secularism was a bit sobering, but all in all, we've had a long comfortable ride of it.

Then without warning, the church was gobsomped by the angriest political climate since the Civil War and, oh yes, a pandemic. Churches are suffering, especially smaller, older congregations and their pastors are battling discouragement and depression. Church-state tensions are simmering. Congregants are bitterly divided over issues such as who does or doesn't wear a mask.

At a pastors conference, I was asked straight out. "Is there hope?" Yes, first of all, we know there is always hope. God is still God, and He is not shaken by human history. To hurting churches and pastors that can sound like a platitude, but it is nonetheless true and biblical.

The church has survived Roman persecution, Attila the Hun, bubonic plague, Adolf Hitler and communism. I suspect in some of those horrific epochs, anger, depression and doubt staggered the body of Christ. Yet, by God's grace, the church remains. Sometimes weak and frail. Sometimes forced underground. Yet unconquered. The church is of God. He has not forsaken us, nor will He.

The more immediate issue is this. The contemporary American church has lost its voice, and what is left is a snarl. No sullen, self-pitying church can preach the message the world needs to hear. An angry church cannot heal an angry world. To proclaim the glorious message that Jesus saves and heals will require a church whose humble daily prayer remains unchanged after two millennia: "Save us, and we shall be saved. Heal us, and we shall be healed." We must have a fresh baptism of love and power, and for that, we need the Holy Spirit.

O come, Holy Spirit, and be poured out fresh upon us in this angry, angry season. ◀

DR. MARK RUTLAND contributed this article for *Charisma* magazine. His new book, *Keep On Keeping On*, releases in January and is available now on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)