

Chapter 1

Introducing Jesus' Anger

Anger has a place in the Christian life. Not the political kind of anger that produces “angry Christians.” Not the nasty kind of anger that gets smeared around when protesters write hate mail. Not malice. Not acrimony. Not irrational, worldly anger.

The world is brimming over with the *wrong kind* of anger. So much ugly anger is pumped into family feuds, divorces, fallouts between friends, trolling, road rage, unresolved disputes, incivility in fights, church splits, religious claims, cutthroat competitions, violent crimes, and all-out war.

But ugly anger is not what Jesus had. Jesus had a different kind of anger. Given the actual history of humanity’s sins of anger, it’s understandable why some Christians are reluctant to believe the world might need a dose of Jesus’ anger.

Jesus wasn’t a sinner; he was perfect. Yet most people have overlooked the example of perfect anger Jesus gives us. What if Jesus’ anger is for our good? Have you ever heard a sermon about imitating Jesus’

good anger? Can you think of any praise song about Jesus' perfect anger? Have you ever asked God to help you to be angry like Jesus?

Christians believe that people need Christ's love. Isn't Jesus' anger part of Jesus' love? Wasn't Jesus showing love for his Father when he drove out the money changers who made God's house of prayer a den of robbers (John 2:13-22)? I bet Peter felt loved after Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matthew 16:23), because six days later, Jesus took Peter with him to witness Jesus' transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-5). I myself feel loved on account of Jesus' anger. Jesus' anger healed me. It airlifted me out of a pit that I had fallen into. Thus, I cannot begin to thank God enough for acquainting me with the anger Jesus had.

Welcome to This Book

This book is about the anger of real love. It's a book that shows the beauty of angry love. It's a book about the truth of how angry love refuses to lower God's holy standards of protectiveness. Jesus wants to protect us from awful things that happen when people are too unyielding to trust God. Jesus' anger elbows us, reminding us of the truth that God is faithful.

If everyone trusted God, godly anger would be superfluous—unnecessary. Jesus' anger is needed on account of people's doubts in the integrity of the God whom Jesus trusted. We do not trust God as Jesus did. That's why we have anger that is sinful, and that's why we instead need anger that is godly. I'll explain that more, especially in chapters 3 and 9.

For now, I shall explain how this book is laid out. To begin with, I have conformed it to the policies of Fortress Press. That means, by default, that I quote from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV) unless I make it plain that I am quoting instead from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) or from another Bible translation. It also means I use no footnotes, which will probably invite more readers. After all, this

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line of books is called "Theology for the People." In addition, it also means there are no study questions included in this book. I do, however, provide a study guide with questions about *Angry Like Jesus* for those who join my blog, which is connected to my website at www.rightonmission.org.

The structure of the book is straightforward. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of Jesus' anger. Jesus' anger shows us what godly anger is. Chapter 2 describes how sinful anger differs from godly anger. Chapter 3 deepens the conversation by exploring how godly anger relates to grief and pain. Chapter 4 reveals the source of godly anger and describes God's wrath in hell. Chapters 5–7 display my own imagination as I recount stories that illustrate the beauty of Jesus' anger. Chapter 8 explains why Jesus' famous cry of dereliction on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), was *not* a cry of anger. It was the greatest cry of faith in all of history. Chapter 9 details the tragedy of what happens when people fail to have godly anger. Chapter 10 casts a vision of the transformative effect of Christlike anger that salts the earth.

Jesus' anger salts the earth. Without the salt of Jesus' anger, people accept what's unacceptable. We allow what we shouldn't allow. We don't make changes we should make. We deceive ourselves into thinking that corruption doesn't need to be opposed. We leave it to God. We stay hands-off. Conveniently, we take ourselves off the hook. When we lack Jesus' anger, we allow evil to prevail.

I realize that it's strong language to use the word *evil*. But evil is real. Sometimes evil comes in the form of ISIS beheadings or a holocaust. More often, it occurs as greed or selfish fear. Greed hardens people by draining them of empathy and leaving them to unsavory devices. Selfish fear does the same. Selfish fear and greed are subtle evils. Part of what makes them evil is they pretend *not* to be evil. But both are deeply lodged in human pride.

Turning away from pride requires humility. The English word *humility* derives from the Latin word *humus*, which means "earth."

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As Christians, we're commanded to be earthy—like salt. Salt is so down-to-earth that it refuses to cave in to the fallen human tendency to deny truth rather than face it. Salted anger is not afraid. It assumes responsibility. It motivates us to confront things we wish did not exist.

Salt is gritty. It's an irritant, yet medicinal. Jesus' anger was medicinal. It was irritating and gritty precisely because it was salted by truth. Salted anger makes people well enough—spiritually healthy enough—to stop denying truth. The salt of righteous anger is needed in this world because the world is a dangerous place. *Deliver us from evil*, we pray. The salt of Jesus' anger is God's gift to help deliver us.

"You are the salt of the earth," Jesus said. "But if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again?" (Matthew 5:13, NASB). People who aren't salted become cynical. Cynicism breeds hopelessness—"Why try to make things better when they're not going to get better?" Cynicism is anger in disguise. It pulls down people's perspectives with bad memories of frustration and been-there-done-that-it-didn't-work fatigue. Cynicism turns people into quitters.

Professor Henri Nouwen used to say that cynicism is "cold anger." The thrust of what I'm saying is that cynical anger weighs people down. Jesus' anger, by contrast, lifts people up and gives them hope. Jesus' anger hopes against all hope. When Jesus died on the cross, he spurned the work of the devil *in hope* that none might perish, but that all might come to repentance on account of his loving sacrifice of himself. To put it in the grammar of my own creative language, Jesus' anger wasn't cynicized. It was salted.

Salt preserves the truth of the difference between right and wrong. Salted people remember that right is better than wrong. Salted individuals have truth in their inmost parts. Jesus said, "I am the truth" (John 14:6). As followers of truth, we have a calling to tell the truth, not only to each other, but to ourselves.

When Jesus said to his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth,” I believe he was saying that those who fear the Lord are the *conscience* of the earth. If we aren't salty salt, we have no flavor. We hold back. Salt is only salty when it's truthful. When Christians ignore the truth, society misses out. There's no irritant—no salt—to help heal society's wounds unless Christians are openly honest about the truth.

Seared consciences in the church promote seared consciences in society. For example, the seared consciences of priests who were convicted for crimes of child abuse gave way to *more* seared consciences that enabled pederasty in the football locker room at Penn State. Tragically, in both cases, there was no accountability until the lawyers and the courts became involved. Where were the bishops? Where was the Penn State board?

Governance today, even in Christian organizations, is typically so broken that expensive external force is the only thing potent enough to prompt internal change for the better. What's happening in the mainstream culture is happening in the church subculture. Accountability is becoming a joke; thus, integrity is becoming a joke. Hope is now becoming a joke as well.

Now that America is said to be “post-Christian,” Americans are becoming post-hope. This book is meant for Christians who are struggling to have hope. I wrote this book especially for agitated people who refuse to be post-hope but who need help in figuring out how to be strong. There is so much hopelessness in Christian churches and organizations. I believe this hopelessness is grounded in bad theology, particularly with regard to our wrong theological thinking about anger.

The Need for Jesus' Anger

As a Christian girl in Texas, sheltered as I was, I never knew about godly anger until after my Christian parents were divorced. Their divorce shook like an earthquake in me. Here I was, “Sweet Sarah,” who never

got mad. That's what my mother called me—Sweet Sarah. But now I was twenty-two, and my parents had just split up, and I could not feel anything but the aftershock.

Despite my privileged upbringing, I was ill equipped to face the breakdown of my beloved family unit. I wasn't mature enough to transcend the disequilibrium of disturbances within myself caused by my anxiety and grief. So I started losing weight. And the skinnier I became, the more I felt in control of the pain deep in my soul that I denied.

My denial was not deliberate. I was not aware of my own pain. I knew I didn't feel good, but it didn't occur to me that I might be angry. My preoccupation was that I couldn't find Sweet Sarah. I couldn't settle down or find my normal self or my normal family.

I knew I was upset, yet it was hard for me to access the truth of my negative feelings, because I wanted to be a good Christian. I didn't know that Christians could be angry in a truly Christian way. Due to the unbiblical theology I grew up with, I didn't think it was right for a genuine Christ follower to be angry. I thought anger, by definition, was sinful. My impression from weekly church lessons was that holiness prohibited human anger. As far as I was concerned, it was my inner consternation (not anger!) that troubled me. My inner consternation seized my sense of self and threatened my Christianity. You see, I couldn't afford to be honest about my unacceptable anger, because I myself did not approve of it.

I did not want to be angry.

How many people are disregarding God precisely because they're censuring their own anger? How many are revolting because they're trying to be happy, yet life is making it hard for them to cope? How many well-churched people are secretly embittered against God? How many feel incapable of loving the living God who has allowed them to be visited by evil? How many professing Christians are conflicted inside, waging war against themselves, because they're failing to be honest about their anger?

Many of us know what it is to be disillusioned. Dis-illusioned. To diss an illusion. To be awakened by the thought that things are different from how they seemed. To dismiss a view of life that isn't real. Practically every person is painfully disillusioned at some point. Therefore, we have protested and cried about the outrageousness and absurdity and hideousness of evil. Yet I would venture to say that we've done this without realizing God *wants* us to be angry, but not in the usual way that we might think. God wants us to be angry in a different kind of way, with a different kind of anger. That's what this book is about—different anger. Jesus' anger. What I call "salt."

Salt is salty. It isn't bitter or sour or sweet. It isn't mean (as bitterness and sourness are), and it isn't nice (as churchy sweetness pretends to be). Salt is powerful enough to heal a giant wound or melt a glacier. Yet too much salt is ruinous, not only to the taste of food, but also to the health of a human body. Excessive salt causes high blood pressure. Too much anger does the same.

But a healthy amount of the right kind of anger turns the church into a self-cleaning oven. It pulls pastors out of depression and congregants out of complacency. It awakens Christian board members and elders. It brings victims out of victimhood. It defies the gravitas of self-pity. Glimmering godly anger rouses Christians to get up. It spotlights our big sins, so we can see them. It shows us that our problem is that we aren't trusting God.

Godly Anger and Forgiveness

The salt of godly anger partners with forgiveness. Consider Pope John Paul, who went to visit his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, in prison. The pope went to express his forgiveness. What the pope did *not* do was ask for the prisoner's release. The pope's forgiveness did not make discipline unnecessary. Nor did the pope's forgiveness dismiss the need for justice and ongoing civil protection for society.

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Yes, forgiveness is the hallmark of Christianity. To forgive is to let go of hateful anger. To forgive is to set bitterness aside. The pope forgave Mehmet Ali Agca, but he did not excuse him or say that attempting murder is acceptable.

To trivialize the problem of irresponsible behavior is to enable. Dysfunctional enablement puts up with chronic unrepentant sin. Enablement lets people keep being destructive. The enabling wife of an alcoholic husband, for instance, tolerates and perpetuates his drunkenness. Godly anger, by contrast, does not. Coupled with forgiveness, godly anger says, “I forgive you, yet I respect you enough to hold you to account, even though I’m not here to punish you.”

Pope John Paul didn’t punish Agca. The government confined Agca in his prison cell in congruence with God’s plan for legitimate power to mitigate evil (Romans 13:4). The pope, I believe, forgave Agca and then put any latent anger aside.

Scripture says all anger—regardless of whether it’s sinful or godly—is daily to be set aside. Paul says, “Do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26). Every night, we as Christians are commanded to take a vacation away from anger. I don’t mean that literally, in a crude, simplistic way, as if to say a person can’t be angry in the middle of the night when someone is raped. The point is that godly anger takes rest. It regularly rests. If it is fighting a long-term battle against a behemoth, godly anger may pick up again in the morning, but as soon as evening comes, it rests again.

All old anger is sinful. Only fresh anger can be godly. Anger is like manna. Overnight it rots. It turns rancid in a matter of hours. In other words, every kind of anger is perishable. Another way to say it is that sinful anger is acid, and godly anger is soap. Acid and soap both burn skin. Thus, both need to be rinsed off. Forgiveness is a rinse. It washes off all anger, removing the burn of acid *and* soap.

Three Disclosures

Since anger is so potent, it's important to be cautious as we proceed into the rest of this book. For this reason, I intend to be extra careful in the way I speak about it. Thus I would like to offer three disclosures.

First Disclosure

Writing a book on Jesus' anger daunts me. The last thing I want to do is spur people to indulge in self-approved resentment in the name of Jesus Christ. Resentment never has a rightful place. Resentment is essentially fleshly. Fleshly anger forgets that vengeance belongs to God. It's the *law* that does the avenging here on earth. The apostle Paul explains that "the law" is a "minister of God, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who practices evil" (Romans 13:4, NASB). God has given us recourse through the laws we have on earth, so that we can stand for truth without indulging in sinful anger, even if it seems needful to file a lawsuit.

The other thing this book is *not* meant to promote is petty church splits over doctrinal disagreements. Since I am a theologian, I understand the importance of right doctrine, yet I also know that Scripture says to teach "with great patience and instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2, NASB). So let me try to establish that godly anger isn't meant for attacking people, especially other believers who are honestly seeking truth but coming up with different spiritual insights. Jesus' anger never blasted against the Sadducees, for example, for saying that there is no resurrection.

Second Disclosure

All of us are inclined to see our own anger as godly when it's not. Chances are our anger isn't godly. There is wisdom in the statement made by a friend of mine: "Whatever can be done *with* anger can be

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done better without it.” But there is also something missing from that claim: an acknowledgment of the reality that some things can’t be done for the sake of the kingdom of God apart from the gift of Jesus’ anger.

Consider David, who killed Goliath, and Queen Esther, who saved her people. In both Old Testament stories, godly anger produced great courage in each hero. When Goliath taunted God, the mighty men of Israel ran away. David alone chose to face the giant. Because David had faith in God, he also had moral courage that came to him in the form of godly anger. David said to Goliath:

You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have taunted. This day the LORD will deliver you up into my hands, and I will strike you down and remove your head from you. And I will give the dead bodies of the army of the Philistines this day to the birds of the sky and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. (1 Samuel 17:45-46, NASB).

Similarly, when Haman plotted genocide for the Jews, Esther had the singular courage to take action against Haman’s wicked schemes. Aside from Mordecai, Esther’s Jewish cousin, the rest of the Jewish people collectively fell into group panic when Haman arranged for an edict to be pronounced against the Jewish population. It was Esther, no one else, who decided to approach the Persian king. Queen Esther knew full well that simply standing before the king unsolicited was a violation of Persian law unless the king decided to extend his favor. How did Esther summon the courage to blow the whistle? I believe she did so by abhorring the evil that Haman had devised. Esther’s abhorrence of evil made her angry with the right kind of anger.

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It was socially risky for Queen Esther to take on Haman. Haman was so adept in his political maneuvering that Haman did not seem evil to most people. Similarly, David took a risk at a relational family level by taking the initiative to size up Goliath's strength. Goliath was so impressive that when David peered down to see what the giant looked like on the battlefield, David's brothers put down David, not Goliath.

It took so much moral courage for David and Queen Esther to stand up for what is right. Both confronted foes who had good résumés. Both took on opponents who were respectable in society. Both opposed leaders of notoriety.

David and Esther risked their very lives. Their anger was self-giving, not self-indulgent. David didn't have to fight Goliath. Esther wasn't forced to take on Haman. Both went out of their way to challenge evil.

Because David and Esther chose to take decisive, angry action, two colossal evil agendas that were targeted against God—and therefore targeted against God's people—were both thwarted. After David killed Goliath, the Philistine army was slain. After Esther exposed Haman, Haman's plan for the annihilation of the entire Jewish people was abruptly turned on its head such that Haman was hung on the gallows he had spitefully prepared for Esther's cousin.

All that is to say that Jesus' kind of anger is powerfully beneficial. It can even save a whole nation.

This is not to say, however, that anger is always needed. Often it's *not* needed. When Jesus called the multitudes—sinners—to follow him, never did he preach to them in anger. Jesus' anger is not a weapon to be used against sinners in society. Jesus is a friend of sinners. He's an advocate for those who need to hear his loving call and realize that his love can make them clean. Jesus welcomes sinners to come home. It's when people deny the fact that we ourselves are sinners that our dishonesty provokes the ire of God.

Third Disclosure

I have been re-salted in the process of producing this long gestated book. Believe it or not, this book has been in the making for over twenty-five years. Slowly it emerged from my study of the Scriptures, my scholarly theological endeavors, and also the real footprints of my faith. I wrote it from my heart, not just my head.

To offer a glimpse of the backstory, when I was in my twenties, I started studying godly anger independently in the context of my quest to live for Christ. What drove me to this subject were my questions about anger that I didn't know how to process theologically in the wake of my parents' divorce. I selected the topic of godly human anger for the sake of my own spiritual formation. As the basis of my study, I read the Bible twice from cover to cover and asked God to help me see what godly anger is, if there were even such a thing at all. After I shared my initial findings with my seminary professors, they affirmed me to the point of allowing me to write a biblical theology of godly human anger as the subject of my doctoral dissertation.

Unrelated to my research, but as part of my pursuit of purposeful living, I crafted a mission statement for myself: "to build integrity in the church." For me, doing this was not a rote exercise. All this time, my life mission statement has been encoded inside my life trajectory. For over two decades now, I have consciously been trying to build integrity in the church and to live out what I have learned about godly anger.

When at one point a prominent publishing company offered a generous contract for me to write a book on godly anger, I couldn't bring myself to sign the paper. Now I understand that I simply wasn't ready to write this book. Back then, I had not yet fused my mission statement (to build integrity in the church) with my doctoral research (on godly anger) to give me the perspective I have now. Although both concepts guided my thinking, they were two discrete ideas in my mind. It

wasn't until I walked through some unexpected losses that I cognitively reached convergence. Suddenly, everything came together in my efforts to write this book, once it finally dawned on me that godly anger is a mechanism for building integrity in the church.

So here I am today with the final revised version of these pages. The long, extended process of writing and rewriting has been humbling yet restorative for me. Visiting and revisiting Jesus' pain and Jesus' anger has helped me understand Jesus' faith. Jesus' faith was honest. He truly trusted God. Because Jesus trusted God, Jesus wasn't characteristically angry. When Jesus *did* get angry, his faith kept his anger clean and pure. Jesus' faithful anger magnificently triumphed over evil.

I can't help but wonder how empowered we could be to overcome evil ourselves, as Christians, if we would trust in God as Jesus did. Jesus *trusted* God because he *knew* God. He knew God because he *obeyed* God. He obeyed God because he *loved* God. Unless we honestly love God, we won't really care about obeying God. Unless we obey God, we won't know God. If we don't know God, we won't trust God.

When Christians don't trust God, we become fearful and insecure—too fearful to stand up for what is right. Fear makes people less truthful. Fearful people are too weak to carry truth. When we Christians become so fearful that we refuse to imitate Jesus, we may gain the world, but it will be at the expense of losing our capacity to trust God.

Godly Anger and Integrity in the Church

Hebrews 11:6 unequivocally states that without faith, it is “impossible” to please God. Part of having faith is trusting God to forgive our sins, but another part of faith is trusting God to the point that we *stop doing* our sins. Daring to act rightly is the way to build integrity in the church.

But now, who am I—a sinner—to attempt to build integrity in the church? Answer: I am someone willing. I'm available to God for this. I

am a partaker of God's grace. I'm someone Jesus died for. No one has to be perfect in order to be used by God to make things better. If we surrender ourselves to God and admit the humbling truth of who we are and what we've done, God will do something marvelous with that. I believe our repentance makes us game changers. It changes the game, so to speak, when one is truthful enough to admit one's personal shortcomings and work toward correcting them.

How can we correct our own shortcomings? I, for one, can't do so without other people's help. So years ago, in my twenties, I started praying a crazy prayer: *Lord, help me to love correction—to just love it!* I believe that that prayer has really helped me. I have made great progress because I have been so helped by other people.

Which would you rather be: uncorrected and stuck, or corrected and delivered from your sin? I would rather be healed, wouldn't you? I am still asking God to help me love correction, even though it's rare for most professing Christians (especially positional leaders) to trust each other enough to offer and receive gifts of correction.

It's impossible for any of us to be a faithful friend unless we love each other enough to disrupt each other's worst sin patterns. I imagine we agree that to stage an intervention for a self-destructive addict is a loving thing to do, not a caustic thing to do. Sure, the addict might feel judged. During an intervention, the addict *is* judged. It takes good judgment to discern that a person is an addict who needs help. This principle applies in all relationships; it takes good judgment to become a faithful friend.

Godly anger makes us faithful friends. Proverbs 27:6 says, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend" (NASB). A faithful friend is true enough to "wound" another person with truthful confrontations when that person is unrepentant yet professing to be a follower of Christ. "Care-frontation" is a gift from a faithful friend. It's when Christians *don't* confront—when we fail to care enough to help each other repent and be restored and get on mission and stay on track—that we miss out.

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Virtually every Christian I know claims to want to experience more of God's presence. Yet how quickly we forget that turning away from evil—repenting from our sin—invites the palpable presence of the Lord. We each move closer to God when we repent. If we draw near to God, God draws near to us (James 4:8). Repentance makes it possible for us to experience God in fresh new ways.

Some time ago, I was asked to speak to a group of about a hundred high school kids who were connected to the police department in Los Angeles. These kids all hailed from homes that were unstable and unsafe. I was told before addressing them that some of the kids slept on mattresses that were laid directly on the floor, not placed on bed frames, because their beds needed to be lower than the bedroom window, since at any given time, a bullet might fly through that window. These kids were well acquainted with corruption. They had seen authority figures, including their own parents, abuse power. These kids were not naive. After teaching them for two hours or so about what it means to have good character, and after apologizing to them on behalf of all the adults who had betrayed them, I asked them if they thought they could have better character themselves. I said something like “Raise your hand if you know you haven't tried that hard to be humble, courageous, and honest in the way you live your life. Raise your hand if you know you could do better—I'm not talking about being perfect, I'm just asking if you know you could do better starting today.”

Every person in the room raised a hand.

Of course, none of us are able to stop making mistakes. To some extent, all people are going to be somewhat sinful. We simply have to bear each other's fallenness. But God gives common grace. By the power of God's grace distributed commonly to all, we can practice basic decency together. We won't be perfected until our Lord returns, but in the meantime, we can grow. We can blossom into people we never dreamed we'd be. We can be freed from subtle fears that limit us in our

ethical development. We can remove our masks. We can choose to be truthful. We can be salt.

A Note of Assurance

Generally speaking, this book is more informative than instructive. It teaches rather than trains. I have chosen this approach because people are set free, not by a list of do's and don'ts, but by hearing the basic principles of reality. "The truth will make you free," said Jesus (John 8:32). Commandments do not make people free. If you were simply told to stop being bitter or stop doubting God, you probably would not be able to stop. But if someone were to convince you that God is on your side, and that you have no need to fight and clamor desperately for yourself, then your rancor might subside. It's the knowledge of the truth—the truth of God's great love—that miraculously sets people free. Jesus said, "And you shall *know* the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free." (John 8:32, NASB) italics added)

The truth is God is for us, not against us (Romans 8:31). Do you know that? Or have you merely been informed without believing it quite yet? I believe that the more you know this truth, the less you will feel compelled to resort to sinful anger in self-defense. Eternal God is for us, together and individually. The more we understand that, the more we can trust God in the day of evil. Infinite God is *for* me. Infinite God is *for* you. The more we truly believe that, the more able we become to step out in godly anger to make things right.

Jesus' anger makes things right. It's part of his spiritual legacy to us. I wrote this book specifically to recipients of Jesus' legacy. I wrote it for the purpose of helping people understand that while sinful anger extinguishes love, godly anger ignites it.