

The Wrath of God

By Peter Gray

INTRODUCTION:

This paper will address the question, “Is the wrath of God an aspect of the love of God?”. I will firstly look at, and seek to define, the wrath of God. Following this, I will look at the nature of the love that God has for us. Finally, I will demonstrate the relationship between wrath and love, and finalise with a conclusion.

THE WRATH OF GOD:

It is clear from the Biblical witness that God does get angry with His people, and that His wrath is evident toward us. While God is not the enemy of the sinners, nor does He hate them, it is common for the Old Testament to refer to God as being angry with them. (Erickson, 1996: 604)

Tony Lane suggests that the doctrine of the wrath of God has been neglected, and a sentimental view of the love of God has been universally proclaimed across the Western church. (Lane, 2001: 138-139). While I do not agree with Lane on this point, I will briefly look at the reason he states for this apparent neglect. According to Lane, the Christian rejection of God’s wrath is a typical example of the distortion of the Christian faith, by allowing secular ideas to creep into our thinking. He links this strongly to the Enlightenment saying that the sentimentality of that era has left us with a sentimental understanding of God and His love. (Lane, 2001: 153-154).

While I do not wish to argue with Lane regarding his view, as I am sure his experience and research is accurate to a point, I simply wish to say that I do not believe the problem is as widespread as Lane suggests. I would also like to suggest an alternate theory as to why the doctrine of God’s wrath has been neglected in some places.

The doctrine of the wrath of God is a difficult one, but we must seek to understand it, rather than to dismiss it. A major problem that we face is that the only frame of reference we have for discussing God’s wrath, is a human one. This is of course also true for the love of God, and this will be addressed in detail in the next section. When we look at the anger or wrath of God, we invariably understand it in terms of human anger. According to the popular Jesuit author John Powell, this leads us to a disastrous misrepresentation of the character of God. Father Powell insists that our thinking is the exact opposite to what the creation account in Genesis shows us as truth. Genesis 1:27 reads, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (NIV). Yet we do the opposite of this, and create a God in our image and likeness. He writes, “*It is critically important to*

understand that God does not stop loving, He does not become angry and vindictive, anxious to punish us in order to get even. That would be a God made to our human image and likeness.” (Powell, 1984: 95)

By viewing God’s anger in human terms we misrepresent Him. There is a long and fearsome tradition of giving God an angry face. The God who is disgusted with us and at the end of His patience. We approach this God at our own risk. His demands on us are so high that there is no room for anything but failure, and this failure arouses divine wrath. (Powell, 1984: 91-92). The fact that many people have chosen to reject such a misrepresentation of God can hardly be viewed as surprising. I believe that Jesus Christ Himself would reject this view of God. In opposition to, or rejection of, this understanding of God, Christians around the world have rejected the notion of wrath altogether. This is an understandable, though I believe incorrect, reaction. A better reaction is to reject the notion of wrath as it has been presented, and the portrait of God that it paints, but seek to understand the doctrine in light of Jesus Christ.

In summary of this section, it is my suggestion that while the wrath of God has been neglected in some places, it has not been universally neglected. There are many Christians who hold strongly to a vision of God as a wrathful, legalistic tyrant, hell-bent on punishing us as soon as He gets the chance. It is also my suggestion that the reason those people have rejected the doctrine of God’s wrath, has more to do with the description of wrath in the previous sentence, than it does a throw back to the Enlightenment.

THE LOVE OF GOD:

Allow me to begin this section by stating what love (both God’s and ours) is not. We must shatter the myth that love is a warm, fuzzy feeling. In fact we must understand that love is not a feeling of any kind whatsoever. Love, it is true, is generally accompanied by nice, positive feelings, but it is not a feeling in and of itself. Continuing with what love is not, it must be said that love is not joy. This may seem strange at first but upon closer examination we can see that our modern society has a great tendency to use the word ‘love’ instead of ‘joy’. We say ‘I just loved that film’ or ‘I love watching sport’ etc. In truth we enjoyed watching the film and we get joy from watching a particular sport, but there is no love there. Love can only exist between two people or between a person and God. (Powell, 1978: 68).

So what then is thing we call love? Love is a choice and an action. First we must make a choice or a decision to love someone. We cannot deeply love all those we meet, we must decide whom we will love. This is the first decision of love. The second decision of love is the decision to put the welfare of another person before your own. This leads us to the action component of love. Having made our decisions we must now act toward the best interest of the one whom we love. We must make a commitment to the ongoing well being and personal growth of our loved one, always thinking of them before ourselves. This is the very nature of love; it has as its focus not itself, but another. Love never asks ‘what can you do for me?’ it only ever asks ‘what can I do for you?’ (Powell, 1978: 68).

Love does not remain static; it changes to be whatever is needed of it at any given time. John Powell writes, "I truly want to be whatever you need me to be, to do whatever you need done, and I want to say whatever will promote your happiness, security and well-being... This means that love may be tough love, not all sweet and coddling. You may ask me for another drink when you are already inebriated, or you may ask me to join you in some deception. Of course, if I truly love you, I must say an emphatic 'NO' to these requests. If you are on a self-destructive course like alcoholism, you will meet in me a firm and confronting love. But, when needed, my love will also be tender. If you have tried and failed, and you just need a hand in yours in the darkness of disappointment, you can count on mine." (1978:69-70).

I have already said that love is a gift. This means that there can be no conditions attached to love. Love must be a gift that I choose to give to you irrespective of your reaction to me. If I make my love conditional upon something that you do or say or how you look, I am no longer offering you a gift; I am only offering you an exchange. Unconditional love, the only true love, says I love you no matter what you say or do or how you look. With unconditional love, you can say whatever is on your mind, tell me of your deepest fears or your darkest moments, without ever having to fear that I will take my love away from you. The moment that you attach an 'if' to love (I love you if you are successful or if you have wealth or fame etc.) it ceases to be love. Unconditional love lasts forever; it cannot be stopped because no external influence can alter it. We must understand that it is in this way that God loves us. (Powell, 1978: 70-71).

Our problem in accurately portraying the love of God is the same problem we have in dealing with His Wrath; that we paint God's face the with brush of our human experience. The love that we experience in our relationships is invariably conditional and as such we view the love of God that way. Because of this, the predominant view of God is one of a contract God as opposed to the more accurate vision of a covenant God. (Torrance, 1970: 52-70). The point needs to be made that while unconditional love in our human relationships is a wonderful thing to aim for, and must always be our aim, it is unlikely that we will ever truly achieve it. Our humanity and sinfulness stands in the way of such a goal. But just because we cannot manage to achieve this doesn't mean that God can't. It is true that God can and does love us in this genuinely unconditional manner. Genuine love is not earned, it is a free gift. Genuine love walks many undemanded miles, goes far beyond the requirements of justice and reciprocity. Genuine love cannot be withdrawn nor does it understand going ninety per-cent of the way. Genuine love is not conditioned by the response of the beloved. It is God and God alone that loves us with this genuine, unconditional, covenantal love. (Powell, 1984: 95).

Unlike humanity, God loves us because of what lies within Himself, not for anything inherent in us. He doesn't love us because we are good or lovable. "*He loves the...unlovable...He initiates love, He is love without motive. Jesus, who lives for those in whom love is dead, and died that His killers might live, reveals a Father who has no wrath.*" (Manning, 1986: 20). Manning accurately portrays the love of God in this statement, but as a result, he claims that God has no wrath at all. John Powell does the same when he writes, "*Biblical scholars assure us that there is no wrath in God...the wrath of God mentioned in the Scriptures is an anthropomorphism.*" (Powell, 1984: 97). Powell and Manning are both making the same point. God's

wrath, as it is popularly understood is an anthropomorphism with no foundation in God. Hence, their point is correct - there is no wrath of that type in God. But as I said earlier, even though the doctrine of the wrath of God is a difficult one, we must seek to understand it, rather than to dismiss it.

RECONCILING LOVE AND WRATH:

Finding an accurate synthesis of God's love and His wrath is difficult. People tend to take one of two directions on this topic. One is to hold to the unconditional nature of God's love and say that He does not get angry at all. The other makes God into a contract God, saying that God loves those who obey Him, and pours out His wrath upon those who disobey. That makes sense to us. After all, God cannot overlook sin. He is totally just and holy. And to most of us, a God who pours out His wrath upon the disobedient is the only kind of "just God" we can imagine. The trouble is, who obeys God perfectly? If I believe that God loves only those who obey Him, and is wrathful toward those who don't, how can I ever be sure which side of the ledger I'm on? We usually say our faith in Christ puts us on the "love side." But if that's the case, then what hope is there for me if I am as yet unconverted? If God is wrathful towards sinners like me, then He certainly will never do anything to initiate my salvation. He'll have to remain wrathful and withdrawn from me until I make myself able to qualify for His love. The point is, unless God initiates my salvation despite my sin, unless He loves me despite my sin, I have no hope.

1 John 4:8 tells us that "God is love." That means that God personifies perfect love. Love is His nature and is manifested through His character. All that is of God is of love. There is nothing God does in any life which is not motivated by His love. As God is love, and is always unconditionally loving each and every human being regardless of their sin, then it leads us to only one possible conclusion: God's wrath is His love.

Clearly, we need to redefine our ideas about the wrath of God. We need to rethink our assumption that God rewards those who obey Him, and punishes those who don't. We need to rid ourselves of the idea that God is sitting in heaven, eagerly waiting for the chance to punish us the first time we step out of line.

The major point that needs to be made here is that wrath and love are not the opposite of one another, and nor are they equal and different characteristics vying for control in some kind of schizophrenic power play. God's love is spontaneous to His very being, He is love. Nowhere do the Scriptures tell us that God is wrath or that He is anger. Love flows from the core of God's being but wrath does not. We conclude from this that wrath serves love, that wrath is an expression of God's love. (Elwell, 1997: 1196).

Baxter Kruger powerfully describes the concept of God's wrath. He says that God's response to Adam's fall into death can be summed up in one word, "No!". He says, "*Creation flows out of the circle of divine sharing and out of the decision...to share the Triune life with human beings. That will of God for our blessing, that determined 'yes' to us, translates to an intolerable 'NO!' in the teeth of the fall.*" (2000: 13).

It is because God is utterly and eternally for us that He is so passionately opposed to our destruction. St. Athanasius describes the aftermath of the fall as humanity “being on the road to ruin” and “lapsing into nothingness”. (1953: 6-8) This fiery, determined and passionate opposition to our self-destructive path is the correct understanding of God’s wrath. Far from being the opposite of love, wrath is rather the love of God in action. They are not mutually exclusive opposites, but wrath expresses God’s love. In fact, we could say that without wrath, without opposition to our alienation, God would not be loving. (Kruger, 2000: 14). Indeed as Karl Barth said, “*It would be a strange love that was satisfied with the mere existence and nature of the other, then withdrawing, leaving it to its own devices.*” (1957: 95).

In this way we can finally view wrath and love, not as opposites, but as inextricably linked, for there can be no genuine, compassionate love without wrath. (Hudson, 1995: 26). P.T. Forsyth agrees that love must be accompanied by anger in order to be love and in fact that God can only be really angry with those whom He loves. (1994: 243)

CONCLUSION:

In summary, it is my position that the answer to our question is “Yes – God’s wrath is an aspect of His love”. The only way to rightly understand this is to rethink our presupposed ideas of love and wrath. If love is to be understood as an emotion that come and goes, or as something that is given conditional upon the receiver’s actions, then there is no room for wrath in love. If wrath is to be understood as vindictive punishment or revenge – as something that serves only itself – there is no room for it as a part of love. But nothing flows from God that serves itself because God is not self-serving. God is not inwardly focussed, He is outwardly focussed. He is not self-centred, but other centred. So all that flows from God is concerned with another. Concerned with you and me. Love is one of God’s perfections; wrath is not. If wrath is not a perfection, then it must be an expression of one, and I have suggested that it is an expression of love. God speaks His wrathful ‘NO!’ to our rebellion and alienation only because He has already spoken an eternal ‘YES!’ to our adoption as His sons and daughters. (McGregor, audio: 2002). God’s wrath toward us serves a purpose, indeed an eternal purpose. It serves the will of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that we alter our path from being on the road to ruin and lapsing into nothingness, and live an authentic life as an adopted son or daughter. There is nothing more loving than this.

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