

THE RIGHTNESS OF GOD'S WRATH: A RESPONSE TO "THE DARK UNDERBELLY: VIOLENCE, CULTURE AND RELIGION."

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Scott Cowdell, in his article ["The Dark Underbelly: Violence, Culture and Religion"](#), (10 March) suggests that: "Christians and Churches have regularly misrepresented Jesus and his message...". His argument is based on the literary criticism of Rene Girard, especially the role of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism. Girard is dealing with the troubling presence of violence in human society and the surprising intrusion of God, giving voice to the victim. Cowdell concludes by putting God's wrath into the category of "supposed" ideas.

My difficulty with this conclusion is that it appears to ignore the testimony of Scripture. For example, the prophet Nahum announces that:

The LORD is a jealous God, an avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies (Nahum 1:2 NIV).

It is likely that we might be uncomfortable with this description of the LORD. In a society where selfish violence is common, and on display, we might want to imagine a God who is only gentle and loving. It seems like a good idea to distance the God of the Bible from the horror of violence and wrath. However, the Bible consistently presents the wrath of God to us, on the lips of Moses, Isaiah, Jesus and John. (See below for a brief survey of the many times we hear of the wrath of God).

Through the prophet Nahum in quote above, we hear the Lord God address the violence of the Assyrian rulers, represented by the city of Ninevah. The Lord is rightly angry with the violence of the ravenous Assyrians. Both the victims of violence and those perpetrating the violence are de-humanised by what is taking place. They are less human, made to be less than God created them to be. The feeling of anger propels action, and when wrongs need to be set right and injustice dealt with it is a good thing to feel angry. God's wrath reminds us that he will not be an indifferent bystander, he will be more than a sympathetic support for those who are victims of violence.

Human injustice stirs up God's indignation, and guilt will not be left unpunished – for God to leave guilt unchecked would be a violation of his being. It is right for the Lord Almighty to be "filled with wrath" against the violence and oppression found in human society. The powerful wrath of God is for the comfort of the victim. It is true that the Lord identifies with the victim, and it is also true that God is able to bring about justice for those who suffer violence and oppression.

To combat a selfish use of power, the Lord approaches us both in weakness and in strength, we do not need to choose only one of these for God. It is comforting when God is able to draw alongside us, in weakness and frailty, and identify with the victims of violence. And is it also comforting when God's strength overcomes injustice and selfish power. This is the comfort of vindication, when the degradation is reversed and those who were de-humanised are given the worth they possess, through God's divine power.

The reality of God's love and his power are brought together in Psalm 62:

One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what they have done. (Psalm 62.11&12)

Here we see the promise of justice, which is made possible because God is strong, and we also see the promise of mercy, which is made possible because God is loving.

In The Order for the Administration for the Lord's Supper (Book of Common Prayer), the prayer of confession invites us to pray:

"We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, Which we from time to time most grievously have committed, By thought, word and deed, Against thy Divine Majesty, Provoking justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent..."

In this prayer Anglicans acknowledge that sin and wickedness provokes God to anger. It is a just anger, for God is not in some 'mimetic desire' rivalry with us, rather (from the first) the human desire was to grasp at being like God (Genesis 3). Discord between people may be fed by mimetic desire and a scapegoat mechanism, but before disrupted relations with one another, came the true foundation of human culture, the disruption of our relationship with God.

To suggest that we have wrongly supposed the existence of God's wrath is to step away from the testimony of Scripture and the heritage of Anglican worship. A far better approach would be to clearly present the rightness of the wrath of God, and so renew an unpopular theology, so that we might respond to our God, who is both strong and loving.

Here are a few of the places in Scripture where we are told of God's wrath:

Moses (Numbers 16, Deuteronomy 9); Jehu the Seer (2 Chronicles 19); Job (Job 21); Isaiah (Isaiah 13); Jeremiah (Jeremiah 7); Ezekiel (Ezekiel 7); Hosea (Hosea 13); Amos (Amos 1 & 2); Micah (Micah 5); Habakkuk (Habakkuk 3); Zephaniah (Zephaniah 1); Malachi (Malachi 1); Jesus (John 3); Paul (Romans 1, Ephesians 5, Colossians 3); John (Revelation 15).

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