

## HELPING FAMILIES DEAL WITH ANGER: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE



Sudi Kate Gliebe  
*Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary*

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*Abstract:* The spiritual effects of anger in families are devastating. However, the Bible offers hope; it provides guidance on how to deal with anger constructively. This article will address the dynamics of angry families and the crucial role of parents. It will explore the contemplative method and its potential to provide biblical guidance and restoration to angry children. Specifically, the article proposes meditation and journaling as viable solutions to help children with habitual anger.

*Keywords:* anger, children, parents, heart, meditation, journaling

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### Introduction

Extreme expressions of rage only account for a small percentage of anger manifested by children. However, less volatile expressions of anger are common and produce adverse effects for children, their families, and society (Golden, 2006). Although the detrimental effects of anger encompass the physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual development of children, this article narrows its focus by presenting a distinctly biblical perspective on the spiritual effects of anger in children and their parents.

Simply stated, Christ-followers are called upon to be imitators of God who is slow to anger and abounding in love and forgiveness (Eph 5:1, Num 14:18). There are two principal results of ignoring God's admonition to rid the self from sinful anger (Col 3:18). First, anger gives Satan room to act, a devastating foothold, and an opportunity to influence attitudes, thoughts, and behavior (Eph 4:27). Second, anger prevents the righteousness of God from being produced in the life of believers (Jas 1:20).

The Bible addresses anger as a sin and proposes a radical treatment, namely, heart transformation. "But whatever comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and this is what makes a man unclean and defiles [him]" (Matt 15:18, Amplified). "I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender,

responsive heart” (Ezek 36: 26, NLT). The following section presents a biblical explanation of anger in general. Specific characteristics and considerations of anger in children will be addressed subsequently.

### **A Biblical Understanding of Anger**

Not all anger is sinful. According to biblical counselor David Powlison (1995), anger can be “utterly right, good, appropriate, beautiful, the only fair response to something evil, and the loving response on behalf of evil’s victims” (p. 40). Powlison believes that it is impossible for a moral person to be indifferent in the presence of evil. Anger was given to humans by God for their good. Powlison adds, “[Anger] stirs us up to vigorous resistance against anything that opposes God’s glory, our salvation, our real good, or the good of our neighbors” (p. 40). If used for its appointed end, anger is good. Jesus exemplified righteous anger when he confronted the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees in Matthew 23:13–39 and when he opposed the temple merchants in John 2:13–17. There are many other examples of God’s holy wrath in the Old Testament (Deut 29; Num 16; 1 Chr 27). His wrath is powerful and all consuming, yet it is “never capricious or ill-humored” (Ps 86:15; Ps 103:8) (Powlison, 1995, p.40).

Satan on the other hand is angry, but his anger springs from malice and a desire to hurt the people God loves (Powlison, 1995). Satan’s anger serves his own cravings (Luke 10:19; John 8:44; 1 Pet 5:8). His anger is the paradigm of sinful anger and the antithesis of God’s righteous anger (Job 1:6). Powlison (1995) declares that anger can be “utterly wrong, bad, inappropriate, ugly, a completely destructive response. Sinful anger is the exact opposite of every aspect of the fruit of the Spirit” (p. 42).

The distinction between righteous and sinful anger is important to emphasize. Sinful activity has the following characteristics. First, sin is an inward inclination; sin infects actions, thoughts, and character (Erickson, 1992). Second, sin is rebelliousness and disobedience against God (Erickson, 1992). Third, sin causes spiritual disability. It distorts thinking; it darkens the mind (Rom 1:21). Lastly, sin displaces God. Erickson (1992) declares, “Idolatry in any form, not pride, is the essence of sin” (p. 181).

Therefore while righteous anger is constructive because it enthrones God and does good to people, sinful anger usurps God and does harm. Sinful anger is divisive; righteous anger unites. Sinful anger destroys; righteous anger edifies. Sinful anger indulges itself; righteous anger is self-controlled. Sinful anger gives way to foolishness; righteous anger is wise. Sinful anger produces war-makers; righteous anger births peacemakers (Powlison, 1995).

### Characteristics of Anger

The concept of anger is difficult to define. Anger encompasses unique components and complex facets. In lieu of a single definition, the following attributes of anger are presented as a framework for understanding for this article. Biblical counselor Robert Jones (2005) argues that anger is an active response. Contrary to popular belief, anger is not a thing or a force. Anger is an action. Anger is something people do, not something people have (Gal 5:19–21). Jones goes on to say that the Bible describes people who do anger, not people who have anger. Powlison (1995) asserts that anger does things. Anger accuses, it curses, it exaggerates, it gestures, it hits, it raises decibel levels, it threatens, it yells, it murmurs, it complains, it gossips. Anger is a verb.

Powlison (1995) adds that anger involves the whole person. It is not just an emotion. It encompasses beliefs, feelings, actions, and desires. It involves emotion, cognition (thoughts, mental words), volition (the will), behavior (actions), and physiology (breathing, blood flow, muscles, hormones).

Jones (2005) argues that anger is a negative moral judgment against a perceived evil. Anger is a response against something. Jones affirms that anger does not arise in a vacuum; it arises from a built-in judicial system. Jones goes on to explain that it is called negative not because it is always sinful but because it opposes the perceived evil; it is called perceived evil because the person's own perception casts out a negative vote (1 Sam 18:8; Matt 5:21–22). Jones warns that those perceptions, however, can be accurate or inaccurate, godly or ungodly.

Powlison (1995) believes that anger is learned and that it is modeled by others. People learn from others not only what to get upset about but how to show displeasure. "Habits, styles, and tendencies to sinful anger are easily acquired from others" (p. 47). By modeling volatile and destructive ways of responding to provocation, anger is learned and it becomes rooted or fixed (Prov 13:20; Prov 22:24–25). Powlison goes on to say that constructive anger is also learned; godly habits, styles, and tendencies can be learned through positive examples (1 John 2:6).

According to Powlison (1995), another characteristic of anger is that it is a moral matter. First, when people are angry, they judge something or someone and find it displeasing. Second, God judges the person's judging (Ps 17:3; Ps 44:21; Ps 139:23–24; Matt 9:4). He morally evaluates every instance of anger. Powlison asserts that God judges the criterion for judgment and the reaction to that judgment. He judges the why and the how. Therefore, anger is never neutral. Powlison declares, "A line between wisdom and foolishness runs through the center of every instance of anger" (p. 48).

Jones (2005) concludes by asserting that anger is ultimately a matter of the heart. He adds that the heart is the person's inner self. It is an all-

encompassing term that includes thoughts, will, affections, and emotions. Sinful anger arises from sinful beliefs and motives. It is caused by entrenched pleasures, ruling desires, coveting, and selfish motives. Therefore, according to Jones, the antidote for sinful anger is the transformation of the heart. The heart is transformed when sinful beliefs and motives are uprooted and replaced with the freeing truths that produce healing and godliness. Luke 6:43–44 (New International Version) declares, “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart.” Proverbs 44:23 warns, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”

### **Diagnostic Questions**

Powlison (1995) has developed a series of questions that help determine if anger is righteous or sinful. These diagnostic questions are a means of testing thoughts, attitudes, and actions. They might be particularly helpful if they are deeply pondered upon in written form through journaling. First, do I get angry about the right things? Since anger is a perceived wrong, those perceptions must be evaluated in light of Scripture. Second, do I express anger in the right way? Sometimes people get angry for the right reasons but express their anger sinfully. Third, how long does my anger last? Anger that festers is not righteous anger. Fourth, how controlled is my anger? Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:23). Fifth, what motivates my anger? This question exposes the desires behind the anger (love, status, approval, respect, pleasure). Anger is often motivated by selfishness and a desire to get something. Sixth, is my anger primed and ready to respond to another person's sin? When anger is dealt with immediately, it does not linger. It is not primed to react. Lastly, what is the effect of my anger? Sinful anger affects not only the persons who are angry but also the people around them (Powlison, 1995). Anger has tentacles that reach into every area of life.

Having looked at a biblical view of righteous anger, sinful anger, and their characteristics, the following section will address the dynamics of angry families.

### **Angry Families**

Theologian Richard Baxter (1615–1691) (2008) once wrote, “Anger is a sin that does not leave you to sin alone. It stirs up others to do the same. Wrath kindles wrath, as fire kindles fire” (p. 16). Nowhere is this statement truer than in the context of family relationships. Angry children do not emerge out of a vacuum. They become angry within a context, an environ-

ment that breeds anger. Pediatrician Tim Murphy (2001) calls it “home-grown anger.” He identifies four kinds of families where anger becomes a way of life.

First, there is the troubled family, where anger is the voice of pain. These families experience devastating loss, mental illness, severe financial woes, and marital discord. These families use anger as a way to lash out and relieve the pain that has invaded their lives (Murphy, 2001). This type of family might include families who are experiencing divorce, children whose parents struggle with addiction, and children who have suffered abuse and trauma. These broad and complex topics are beyond the scope of this article.

Second, there is the frantic family, where anger is the voice of stress. These families are overscheduled, overwhelmed, and under enormous pressure. Their busy schedules along with lack of rest and meaningful conversation turn family members into strangers. Poor communication styles and destructive ways of dealing with conflict are common for these families (Murphy, 2001).

Third, there is the angry family, where anger is the voice of power. These families use anger and rage to control, intimidate, and manipulate other family members. Children in this type of family learn to read their parents’ moods and live in fear. Unfortunately they also learn to use anger as a powerful means to get results (Murphy, 2001). Fourth, there is the indulging family, where anger is the voice of desire. Children are pampered and spoiled in this type of family. Over time, children learn that anger is a powerful tool that gets them everything they want (Murphy, 2001). Indulging families are child-centered, where “children believe and are allowed to behave as though the entire household exists to please him” (Priolo, 1997, p. 24).

Researchers believe that angry families mentioned above produce children who tend to be aggressive and non-compliant (Fanning, Landis, McKay, & Paleg, 1996). These children are also less empathetic and have poor overall adjustment. They are often afraid to try new things, might be abusive with younger siblings, and show signs of depression and lethargy (Fanning et al., 1996). The above family patterns are destructive and they confirm that anger does not work. On the contrary, anger triggers more anger, it frightens children, and it is punitive and therefore detrimental. Helping parents to understand their own anger biblically is the best and first way to help children handle theirs.

### **A Close Look at Ephesians 6:4**

The subject of anger cannot be wisely looked at without considering the admonition to parents (*pater*- both parents) found in Ephesians 6:4 where Paul warns against provoking children to anger. A similar warning appears in

Colossians 3:21 where Paul cautions parents “against alienating their children by being too austere” (Garland, 1998). Paul’s chief concern was that overly stern parents would drive their children away from the faith (Garland, 1998). Biblical counselor Lou Priolo (1997) has studied the subject of anger in children from a strictly biblical perspective. He has counseled numerous children who struggle with anger and has observed that there are certain ways in which parents can provoke children to anger. A few of these unhealthy practices will be identified in detail.

### **Lack of Marital Harmony**

According to Priolo (1997), lack of marital harmony is perhaps the greatest provocation to anger in children. A loving marriage is a source of stability and well-being for boys and girls. However, as mother and father begin to drift apart, the father typically develops closer ties at work, while the mother develops an overly intense bond with the children. This lack of intimacy between mother and father is perceived and deeply resented by children. Marriage researcher John Gottman (2011) has found that the health of a marriage can be measured by taking a 24-hour urine sample from the children. The amount of stress hormones, particularly adrenaline, secreted from the child’s body is a reliable measure of marital discord. This shows that children are extremely susceptible to marital strife between their parents.

### **Modeling Sinful Anger**

Priolo (1997) declares: “When you or your spouse model sinful anger, you may inadvertently teach your children that the only way to solve problems is to win” (p. 32). Proverbs 22:24 warns, “Do not associate with a man given to anger; or go with a hot-tempered man, lest you learn his way, and find a snare for yourself.” However, children with angry parents cannot disassociate themselves from their angry father or mother. This means that children are particularly vulnerable to being snared by angry parents. “As is common to human nature we catch on to sin faster than we do to righteousness” (Alden, 1983, p. 167). Therefore, if parents find themselves struggling with anger, it is imperative for them to deal with their sinful anger before they make any attempt at helping their own children.

### **Habitually Disciplining in Anger**

The goal of godly discipline is to bring about repentance and transformation of the heart. Angry discipline, however, is likely to be perceived as a personal attack (Priolo, 1997). While disciplining children is essential for

godly instruction, the spirit in which discipline is dispensed cannot be underestimated (Eph 4:26–27). While learning effective methods is helpful, any method carried out in anger leads to rebellion. Priolo (1997) believes that discipline practices such as scolding, being inconsistent, having double standards, practicing legalism, reprimanding children in front of others, not allowing enough freedom or allowing too much freedom, and having unrealistic expectations all provoke children to anger.

### **Practicing Favoritism and Comparisons**

According to Priolo (1997), when parents show favoritism to a certain sibling, anger is likely to erupt. Children need to be assured that they will be treated in a similar manner by their parents. The story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis is a perfect illustration of favoritism gone sour (Gen 37). Equally destructive are comparisons. God gives every child unique gifts and talents (Priolo, 1997). Most children resent being compared to siblings or other children. Children must be appreciated for who they are and encouraged to grow in Christ (Rom 12:13).

Counselor Mike Emlet (2010) proposes the following biblical recommendations. First, parents should practice what they preach; they must set rules that are biblical, clear, and age appropriate. Second, parents must model dependency on God by repenting of their sinful anger in front of their children (1 John 1:9, Jas 5:16). They must also ask for forgiveness (1 Pet 5:6). By doing so, they teach their children that they too can depend on God for help. Baxter (2008) suggests the following practice: “When you are tempted to sin in anger, say to those around you: ‘I feel a sinful anger rising in my heart and am tempted to forget God’s presence and act in a way that is not proper for his glory and speak words that I know would be displeasing to him’” (p. 36).

### **Helping Children Deal with Anger**

Emlet (2010) asserts that emotions are tied to the heart. The heart’s attitude toward God affects the emotions, words, and actions of children (Matt 5:21–22; Matt 15:19; Luke 6:45). While children can experience healthy anger against injustices and sins, most of the anger experienced by children, according to Emlet, is not honoring to God. The good news, however, is that “Jesus, lived, died, and rose again so that all kinds of people—including children with very angry hearts—could be changed into people who love God and others” (p. 1).

Emlet (2010) proposes that by targeting the heart, children can be taught that angry attitudes, words, and actions do not align with God’s plan toward

righteousness (Jas 1:20). He goes on to say that a God-centered focus places the gospel at the center of the struggle. The gospel diagnoses the problem (sin) and at the same time becomes the remedy (repentance and grace). According to Emler, children can learn that the gospel calls and equips people to live responsibly and righteously before God. A vital and growing relationship with Christ must be found “in the midst of all aspects of daily life” (p.1).

### **Introducing a Contemplative Approach**

Michael Anthony (2006) has identified four perspectives on children’s spirituality. These four perspectives are distinctive approaches to teaching children about God. One of these approaches is the Contemplative-Reflective Model, presented by Scottie May in Anthony’s edited volume (May, 2006). Its origins can be traced back to Maria Montessori and Sofia Cavaletti who profoundly influenced Jerome Berryman, the creator of Godly Play. Although largely used in Episcopalian churches, Godly Play (a contemplative approach to children’s ministry) has inspired child-spirituality experts Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May to implement its salient features to evangelical contexts. Their research findings show that contemplative methods are highly effective because they help children to feel God’s presence, to learn that He is always there, and to open up to God. Through contemplation, children engage in thanksgiving, praise, and adoration. They learn the meaning of prayer and the rewards of listening to God. Although the contemplative method was not intended to specifically address anger, based on its rich characteristics, this article explores its potential to provide biblical guidance and restoration to angry children.

### **Characteristics of a Contemplative Model**

Contemplative ministry to children “intentionally creates an environment that enables children to move at a slow pace, in relative quiet, so that they can reflect on a story of Scripture that helps them to know who God is” (May, 2006, p. 47). May asserts that adults may wrongly assume that children and contemplation do not go together. This happens when adults only consider what children say they need while ignoring what “children actually long for and yearn for. Children are spiritual beings and are able to engage in deep reflection even as young as preschool age” (May, 2006, p. 46). Contemplative approaches encourage children to invite the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Childlike trust and openness are fostered by the contemplative method where children are drawn to contemplate, to observe thoroughly, and to gaze



upon Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Children's needs for belonging, security, understanding, meaning, quietness, and connecting with God are met (May, 2006). Calming atmospheres such as the one offered by a contemplative approach help children to be calm and to self-regulate (Tollison, Synatschk, & Logan, 2010).

Contemplative experiences have been found to foster joy, peace, and serenity. They cultivate awe and wonder "flowing from awareness of the presence of God (May, 2006, p. 69). Wynn McGregor (2006) has developed a contemplative curriculum called *The Way of the Child*. The primary intentions of the curriculum are to help children to learn and practice spiritual disciplines, to lead children to talk regularly about their relationship with God and His presence in their lives, and to offer children an opportunity to be heard by adults and peers who listen with heart, mind, and soul.

The goal of the ministry is to provide "good soil, nutrients, paths, and experiences for a child to grow spiritually (McGregor, 2006, p. 31). McGregor (2006) believes that spiritual disciplines make children more receptive to the Holy Spirit, and that these disciplines may be fostered in a contemplative environment characterized by quiet, silence, solitude, imagination, peace, reverence, and respect. These qualities ought to describe not only the setting but also the adults who lead as shepherds and servants. Lastly, the importance of creating this calm setting counteracts the noise, activity, and competition that children are exposed to daily. "This bombardment of noise and activity leaves no room" for children to reflect, think, and know themselves in relationship to God (McGregor, 2006, p. 33).

For all these reasons, this article explores the potential this model has to provide biblical guidance, restoration, and healing to angry children. Anger is an agitating and noisy emotion. Yet, Psalm 131 reminds believers that inner "composure is learned, and it is learned in relationship" (Powlison, 2000, p. 3). Self-mastery arises only in the context of a relationship with Jesus, where dying to irritability and fretfulness is made possible not through technique or formula but through the One who stilled the storm in Mark 4. Stillness of heart is a discipline that requires alertness and focus (Powlison, 2000). Psalm 131 calls Christ-followers to compose their souls. According to Powlison (2000), "to quiet the soul means to silence the noise and tumult" (p. 5). It means to learn to say "ssshhh" to inner desires, fears, anxieties, and irritabilities (p. 5).

My heart is not proud, LORD, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content. Israel, put your hope in the LORD both now and forevermore. (Psalm 131:1–3 NIV)

In light of the angry soul's need for composure and stillness, two features of contemplative methodology will be considered: meditation and journaling.

**Meditation.** The word *meditation* in Hebrew means to speak or to mutter. "When this is done in the heart, it is called musing or meditation" (Piper, 2004, p. 125). Meditating on God's word simply means to speak to oneself the Word of God (Piper, 2004). Meditation helps children to focus on God. It teaches them to "become like tea bags, soaking deeply and quietly in God and his Word" (Hess & Garlett, 2004, p. 19). But before the benefits of teaching angry children to meditate on God's word are explored, it is essential to understand the dark side of meditation, namely, angry rumination (Turansky & Miller, 2006).

Anger, like no other emotion, is fueled by self-righteous inner monologues that fill the mind with ammunition to stay angry. The longer children ruminate about what makes them angry, the more "good reasons" they find to stay angry (Goleman, 1995). Goleman (1995) states, "Brooding fuels angry flames" (p. 59). The choice and discipline to reframe a situation more positively is the most powerful way to put anger to rest (Goleman, 1995). The need to replace destructive meditation with God-honoring meditation cannot be overstated.

The Apostle Paul urges his hearers, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind" knowing that spiritual battles are fought in the mind (Rom 12:2 NIV). Negative meditations can easily become "temporary obsessions" (Turansky & Miller, 2006, p. 153). They place the mind on autopilot, nagging the heart with judgments and faulty conclusions (Turansky & Miller, 2006). Turansky and Miller (2006) declare that children can be taught that "we all have a library in our hearts with racks and racks of books. Each represents either a positive or a negative situation in our lives" (p. 153). Helping children to identify unreliable thinking will call them away from spending all their time in the angry section of their heart's library.

The following explanation on negative rumination by Baxter (2008) portrays the gravity of destructive meditation:

Do not allow your thoughts to feed upon [past injuries]. If you do, you will be like the devil to yourself, and tempt yourself to anger when there is no one else to do it. You will make your solitude as provocative as if you were in the midst of those who provoke you. You will stir up anger in your heart by your own imagination. (p. 33)

Another important consideration according to Turansky and Miller (2006) is that "meditation moves thoughts from the head to the heart, where they turn into action" (p. 155). This highlights that negative rumination does

not end with the mind, but it infects the heart and inevitably corrupts behavior. Therefore, it is essential to help children to replace distorted thinking with life-giving thinking and to teach them this transforming truth in the context of unconditional love and acceptance.

God-honoring meditation consists of speaking to oneself the Word of God (Piper, 2004). This can be done by reading a verse or passage of Scripture several times and then paraphrasing it verbally or in writing. It can also be done by memorizing Scripture, particularly passages that are especially meaningful and applicable to children's situations. Another suggestion is to choose a passage like Psalm 19:14 (NIV): "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer" and to recite it emphasizing the first word, "may"; then recite it again, emphasizing the second word, "the"; then recite it again, emphasizing the third word, "words"; and so on (Piper, 2004).

Neuro-linguists have introduced the concept of anchors to help children to regulate their emotions. In the context of emotional regulation, anchors are concrete resources (person or thing) that when brought to mind bring agitated students a feeling of relief or well-being (Tollison et al., 2010). This might be a creative way to introduce children to meditation. Anchors are devices dropped by a chain to the ocean to prevent the motion of a ship; anchors typically have hook-like arms that bury themselves in the bottom of the sea to provide a firm hold on the ocean bottom. In a similar way, meditation (thinking about Jesus) keeps angry (stormy) hearts from constant motion and agitation by securing the heart to the firm hold of God's love and truth. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, becomes the Anchor who leads children "beside quiet waters" for comfort, support, and stability (Ps 23:2 NIV).

Meditation can help angry children to center themselves on God. This discipline "enables [children] to locate, and more rapidly return to, an internal core within themselves" where they know God is waiting (Hess & Garlett, 2004, p. 21) Meditation can be nurtured from an early age. For example, children might benefit from taking nature walks where they are encouraged to observe and listen to nature without saying any words (Hess & Garlett, 2004). They can later share what they observed in God's creation. For small children, Hess & Garlett (2004) suggest taping a picture of Jesus on the bathtub along with a simple phrase like "Jesus loves me." By encouraging children to focus on Jesus and repeat the simple phrase several times, children can learn to "soak" in both the warm water and God's love. Another two suggestions by Hess & Garlett (2004) are, (a) to show children that just as hot water softens hard pasta noodles, so meditating on God's word makes hearts soft toward God (this can be an actual object lesson in the kitchen by the stove), and (b) to illustrate meditation with tea bags and hot water. The hot water represents

believers and the tea bag represents God. The longer the tea bag soaks in the heart, the more that person becomes “stained with the likeness of God” (Hess & Garlett, 2004, p. 29). Listening to Christian music by meditating on the lyrics is another practical suggestion (Hess & Garlett, 2004). Seeds Family Worship records Bible verses to music. This would be an excellent choice for meditation through music. Additionally, Bible verses can be placed in strategic places like school binders, the refrigerator, and the bathroom mirror, making Bible meditation more readily accessible.

**Journaling.** Journaling is a spiritual discipline. It provides self-accountability and engenders spiritual growth (Whitney, 1997). Among its many benefits are: helping to express feelings to the Lord, clarifying insight and goals, and helping with meditation. Journaling is an excellent tool for self-understanding and evaluation (Whitney, 1997). Journaling provides a space where believers can think of themselves with sober judgment (Rom 12:3). In that way, the journal page becomes an altar where the Holy Spirit shows areas of sin and gives insight into hidden motives (Whitney, 1997). The goal of journaling is not self-absorbed introspection but “self-examination by Scripture, followed by the discipline of confessing and forsaking sin and renewing one’s gratitude to Christ for his pardoning mercy” (Ryken, 1990, p. xiii). Puritan biographers declare that “Cotton Mather made it a point of having at least one good action to set down in his diary on every day of the week” (Whitney, 1997, p. 208).

Helping children to process anger is vital. Turansky and Miller (2006) believe that “emotions are meant to run through our heart, they’re not designed to stay there and build up” (p. 109). Turansky and Miller argue that like a clogged sewer pipe, a congested angry heart causes problems. Through journaling, children can clear out their hearts, so that anger can run through them instead of staying permanently within them. McGregor (2006) explains that journaling is a “way to discover thoughts and feelings as well as a means of going deeper into thought and prayer” (p. 67). Journaling provides the structure for children to look inward (Klein, 2010). Klein (2010) declares that journaling is a “contemplative inquiry based not on data [and] information, but on knowledge, wisdom, and insight” (p. 50).

Additionally, journaling can be a tool through which children learn the importance of confession. Hess & Garlett (2004) suggest getting children a “frustration journal” where they are allowed to write anything they feel when they are angry. Once the intensity of the angry feelings subsides, parent and child can hold a consecration session where children write on the angry journal entry the words “In God’s Hands.” This can be accompanied by a moment of prayer. For smaller children who would have a hard time expressing their feelings in writing, they can journal through drawings. Instead of writing “In God’s Hands” on their drawing, they could draw a big cross as a symbol of the consecration session.

**The Anger Journal.** Although freestyle journaling can be beneficial for children, the Anger Journal provides a more structured journal option. Priolo (1997) believes that the Anger Journal is a helpful tool for parents and their children. It provides an avenue for introspection, confession, and healing. Hess and Garlett (2004) believe that “confession allows us to enter the grace and mercy of God in such a way that we experience healing of our past sins and forgive those who have sinned against us” (p. 137). The Anger Journal helps children and their parents to identify the events that trigger angry responses, evaluate inappropriate expressions of anger, design alternative biblical responses to the events that trigger anger, and express anger in God-honoring ways.

Step one consists of identifying the circumstantial provocation of anger; it identifies external circumstances that trigger internal responses (What happened that made me angry?). Step two describes the outward manifestation of anger; this helps parents and children to analyze their response to anger (How did I respond when I became angry?). Examples include yelling, slamming doors, throwing objects, etc. Step three evaluates the nature of anger biblically; this step teaches parents and children to use biblical terminology to describe their actions (How does the Bible classify what I did when I became angry?). Step four consists of developing a biblical response to the provocation; this trains parents and children to respond to provocation in godly ways (How can I respond biblically when I become angry?). Job 12:22 (The Message) says: “He shines a spotlight into caves of darkness, hauls deepest darkness into the noonday sun.” That is the purpose of the Anger Journal. It places a spotlight on anger that stands in the way of loving God and others.

This structured method of journaling would be most appropriate for older children (5th–6th graders). It should be used in combination with biblical instruction and in the context of nurturing relationships. It is worth noting that some children are not at all inclined to writing, so this method may not be attractive to all children. However, the concept of exploring one’s own thoughts, motives, words, and actions in light of Scripture is a skill worth fostering in children of all ages. Possible benefits of the Anger Journal are increased self-awareness, strengthened biblical reflection, and an enhanced ability to identify anger triggers. These benefits can create an atmosphere where children’s hearts are softened toward repentance.

### **Ministry Implications**

Anger is rarely addressed at church. Most emotional struggles are left to be addressed by family therapists. The problem with this reality is that most struggling families are not in therapy. Families might not even know they need it, or if they recognize their need, they may not be able to afford it. The

Puritan concept of church and fellowship reminds the reader that “the church is a common hospital, wherein all are in some measure sick of some spiritual disease or other; that we should all have ground of exercising mutually the spirit of wisdom and meekness” (Ryken, 1986, p. 132). The Puritans believed that the fellowship of believers brought both strength and encouragement “in the ways of holiness” (Ryken, 1986, p. 133). This leads to the conclusion that church should be a place of healing and restoration. Anger issues must be addressed at church both preventatively and curatively. Seminars, classes, and one-on-one counseling can offer angry parents biblical solutions to their heart problem in non-judgmental ways. The church must be a safe place where struggles, such as habitual anger, are identified, discussed, and resolved with solid biblical instruction and compassionate support.

For example, a seminar on discipline is a feasible means to introduce the topic of anger. These seminars are usually well attended. Researchers agree that discipline should never be done in anger (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964; Murphy, 2001; Priolo, 1997; Trumbull, 1993; Turansky & Miller, 2002). A gentle introduction to the topic of anger is appropriate in such seminars. The book *When Anger Hurts Your Kids: A Parent's Guide* (McKay, Landis, Paleg, and Fanning, 1996) includes a useful Parental Anger Inventory. Parents who attend the seminar on discipline could be given the inventory, which can be used as a springboard from which a more in-depth class on anger can be introduced. Parents do not have to struggle alone. The gospel is practical and has transforming power to intervene, heal, and set captives free.

Compassionate and effective solutions to help angry children can only be reached when all factors of children's anger are considered. Ideally all recommended solutions would be implemented with warm parental support and committed parental example. Contemplative classes that focus on meditation and journaling might be offered to parents and their children who struggle with habitual anger. When angry children cannot count on parental support, help might be provided by ministers or trained volunteers at church. Teaching children meditation and journaling might be beneficial to their struggle with anger. Additionally, the peaceful climate of the contemplative method would provide a retreat for struggling children. In either case, the role of family ministers is essential. The church is the only redemptive and healing institution that can teach parents how to help their children repent and heal, and the place where children who do not have supportive parents can find a retreat of peace, truth, and inner restoration.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the subject of anger in families from a biblical perspective. It has established that an anger problem is a heart problem that

calls for inward transformation (Rom 12: 1–2). The unhealthy patterns of angry families have been observed. Additionally, the warning against provoking children to anger was explored heeding the admonition found in Ephesians 6:4. Lastly, a contemplative approach to ministering to children was proposed.

Habitual anger points to a heart problem. The spiritual ramifications of sinful anger include giving Satan a foothold and preventing righteousness from developing in the lives of believers. Parents play a crucial role in the prevention and cure of anger in children. The best approach they can adopt to help their angry children is to deal with their own anger biblically. Through meditation and journaling children can draw near to God and find the forgiveness, guidance, and comfort they need.

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#### AUTHOR

Sudi Kate Gliebe is a doctoral student in Childhood Education and Foundations of Education at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary where she also completed the Masters in Christian Education. Her areas of interest include the spiritual, emotional, and social development of young children. E-mail: sudste@hotmail.com