

"If you are angry, do not let anger lead you into sin; do not let sunset find you still nursing it; leave no loophole for the devil... Have done with spite and passion, all angry shouting and cursing, and bad feeling of every kind." Eph. 4:26,27, 31.

Christians are supposed to follow the way of love. We are to love other people in all circumstances, no matter who they are even if they count themselves our enemies. Jesus said that love was the great commandment-love for God and love for our neighbors. Paul ranked love as the supreme Christian quality, above even faith and hope. And love is spelled out for us in practical terms- helping, forgiving, caring, seeking the other person's good. It is to this kind of life, to this attitude to those who cross our path, that we are committed- no matter how far short of it we fall. This passage from Ephesians drives it home again: "Be generous to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you." We can have no doubt about this being the one dominating, absolute principle for the Christian. All all times, and with all people without exception, act in love.

Then how about your anger?

Perhaps you wish to argue that you have no anger, that you are so possessed by the Spirit of Christ that you have eradicated all anger from your heart. It may well be that you have learned not to explode, that it has been years since you blew your top. Perhaps you can sincerely say that there is no one you hate, no one to whom you wish any kind of ill. But give a good psychiatrist half a chance, and he will almost certainly uncover a smoldering volcano of rage and anger you did not know was there. He may even suggest that sitting on that volcano is a reason for the moods of depression that afflict you- a suggestion that might touch off some of the rage you have been hiding! However, as Jesus said, "you shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free." And the truth is that we are all at times, every one of us, very angry men and women. If we were not, we should be scarcely human. (In that very human book we call the Old Testament, one little word meaning "anger" occurs 224 times. This word, even if it applies at times to God himself, is no mild term: it literally means "snorting.")

If anger, then, is rooted in our humanity, the question arises as to whether it belongs to what Paul calls the "old man", the sinful nature that has to be replaced by the new "man in Christ". To put it another way, is anger ever compatible with love? Can you think of no time when the anger of a parent, a teacher, a friend- or a politician or a preacher- seemed to you perfectly wholesome and Christian? Are we right to assume that anger is the opposite of love? Hate, yes: hatred has no place in a life

dedicated to love. But anger?

What does the Bible say? This passage from Ephesians has more to say about anger, and with more fascinating implications, than any other I know. It is all the more helpful for us in that it was written by the hot-blooded and irascible apostle who was not known to suffer with fools or knaves gladly. I sometimes wonder if his bad temper was not the "thorn in the flesh" he prayed to have removed. The contrast between Paul and his Master at this point is highlighted by their behavior when each in turn appeared before the ecclesiastical court. Here is Jesus: "At this the High Priest rose and said to him, 'Have you no answer to the charge that these witnesses bring against you?' But Jesus kept silence.... Then they spat in his face, and struck him with their fists." And here is Paul: "At this the High Priest Ananias ordered his attendants to strike him on the mouth. Paul retorted, 'God will strike you, you whitewashed wall!'"

So it is from a man of fiery temperament that we hear the Word of God on the subject of anger. And you will find that there is no contradiction between what he has to say and the Spirit of the Lord who inspires him.

His first words on the subject are startling. "If you are angry do not let your anger lead you into sin." At once we learn that anger is not necessarily without condemnation. In fact, the Greek is much more explicit. It is an imperative, which the KJV retains: "Be angry and sin not." Whatever Paul meant - the extraordinary commandment: "Be angry" or just "If you are angry" we are clearly being told that a Christian can be angry without betraying the rule of love.

Lest we should think that Paul is here giving us an "Out," saying in effect that, after all, we cannot be expected to love all the time, or making allowance for his own temptations to blow off steam, we should have another look at the Gospel record of Jesus in action.

The word anger is not common in the Gospels, but on at least one occasion it is bluntly applied to the reaction of Jesus to the people around him. In a synagogue that he was attending one Sabbath there was a man with a withered arm. Immediately the love that was in him went out to the sufferer. And immediately his critics seized on the occasion to accuse him of being a Sabbath-breaker. As he called the man out before him he posed the simple question: "Is it permitted to do good or to do evil on the Sabbath, to save or to kill?" Then we read: "They had nothing to say; and, looking round at him - them with anger