

CHAPTER 7

The Wrath of God as an Aspect of the Love of God

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I. THE NEGLECT OF THE WRATH OF GOD

Two experiences have influenced my thinking in this area. When I was about ten I was taught by a retired man who went by the title of professor. A decade or so later, while studying for my theology degree, I met him again. It transpired that he had studied theology in the heyday of liberalism, prior to the Barthian revolution, and had taught it at a university in Asia. At the stage when we met, in his closing years, he was questioning some of his beliefs. "Where is the God of love in the Old Testament?" he asked. A few minutes later he asked again, "How can you believe in a God of love with so much suffering in the world?" What he did not seem to notice was that the Old Testament and empirical reality cohered; it was his sentimental liberal concept of the love of God that was out of step. Or, as Goethe put it, the whole course of history shows that the God of providence and the severe Jehovah of the Hebrews are

The thinking behind this paper was originally stimulated by a reading of John Stott's *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986). It is offered to him out of appreciation for the benefit that I have received from reading that and others of his works.

one and the same.¹ The dilemma faced by the professor is typical of that faced by so many in the West today. The sentimental view of the love of God proclaimed almost without respite by the Western churches may appear very attractive, but it is not in the last resort credible.

The second experience was more recent. At a church service the reading was from Romans chapter 12. "Love must be sincere," began verse 9. The next word came as a shock. "Hate." "Hate what is evil." For most Western Christians hate is the last word that would be associated with love. But a love that does not contain hatred of evil is not the love of which the Bible speaks. It is most fitting therefore that a volume on God's love should include an essay on the wrath of God. This is necessary, not because we need to balance God's wrath with his love, as rival attributes, but *because God's love itself implies his wrath. Without his wrath God is simply not loving in the sense that the Bible portrays his love.*

The modern silence regarding God's wrath is well described by R. P. C. Hanson:

Most preachers and most composers of prayers today treat the biblical doctrine of the wrath of God very much as the Victorians treated sex. It is there, but it must never be alluded to because it is in an undefined way shameful. . . . God is love; therefore we must not associate him with wrath. God is love; therefore he is indefinitely tolerant. Presumably it is for such reasons that the Christian churches of the twentieth century have in practice turned their backs upon the biblical doctrine of the wrath of God.²

But it was not always thus. The most infamous sermon on the topic is probably Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," preached to great effect at Enfield in New England in 1741. In this sermon Edwards is unrestrained in the language that he uses to describe God's wrath:³

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow,

1. I have yet to trace this passage, but a similar thought appears in Goethe's *Maximen und Reflexionen* no. 1304: "Die Natur ist immer Jehovah. Was sie ist, was sie war, und was sie sein wird" (M. Hecker [ed.] [Weimar: Goethe-Gesellschaft, 1907], p. 273).

2. R. P. C. Hanson, *God: Creator, Saviour, Spirit* (London: S.C.M., 1960), p. 37.

3. Sermon 7 in *The Select Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (London: Banner of Truth, 1959), pp. 183-99, with the punctuation modernized in places.

and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. . . . The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked. His wrath towards you burns like a fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince. And yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment.

O sinner! consider the fearful danger you are in. It is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it and burn it asunder. . . . Consider this, you that are here present, that yet remain in an unregenerate state. That God will execute the fierceness of his anger implies that he will inflict wrath without any pity. When God beholds the ineffable extremity of your case, and sees your torment to be so vastly disproportioned to your strength, and sees how your poor soul is crushed and sinks down, as it were, into an infinite gloom; he will have no compassion upon you, he will not forbear the executions of his wrath, or in the least lighten his hand; there shall be no moderation or mercy, nor will God then at all stay his rough wind; he will have no regard to your welfare, nor be at all careful lest you should suffer too much in any other sense, than only that you shall *not suffer beyond what strict justice requires*. Nothing shall be withheld because it is so hard for you to bear. Ezek. viii.18. "Therefore will I also deal in fury; mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity; and though they cry in mine ears with a loud voice, yet will I not hear them."

God will have no other use to put you to, but to suffer misery; you shall be continued in being to no other end; for you will be a vessel of wrath fitted to destruction; and there will be no other use of this vessel, but to be filled full of wrath. . . . [God] will not only hate you, but he will have you in the utmost contempt; no place shall be thought fit for you,

but under his feet to be trodden down as the mire of the streets. . . . And seeing this is his design and what he has determined, even to show how terrible the unrestrained wrath, the fury and fierceness of Jehovah is, he will do it to effect. There will be something accomplished and brought to pass that will be dreadful with a witness. When the great and angry God hath risen up and executed his awful vengeance on the poor sinner, and the wretch is actually suffering the infinite weight and power of his indignation, then will God call upon the whole universe to behold that awful majesty and mighty power that is to be seen in it.

Is this how the wrath of God should be preached? Leaving aside the fact that such a sermon would not be appropriate in our current context, is the picture of God presented true to the Bible? Is the manner of presenting the wrath of God in keeping with the emphasis of the New Testament? This question will be answered in due course.

Today one would have to travel far to hear a sermon remotely like Edwards's. The problem with today's theology and preaching is not that the wrath of God is exaggerated but rather that it is muted or even suppressed. There are four different ways in which this happens. These will be considered in turn, with the greatest emphasis on the third.

The first way is simple denial of the wrath of God. Given the wealth of material in the Bible about God's wrath, this approach is relatively rare, but not unknown, in Christian theology.⁴ But while explicit denial may be rare, implicit denial by virtue of simply ignoring the topic is very common.⁵ Also, open denial is more likely to be found at a popular level. At the church to which I belong there was recently a preparation meeting for a children's holiday club. The biblical material chosen for the week, wisely or otherwise, was the early chapters of the Book of Joshua. At one point it was suggested that the treatment of this material should include some element of the idea of judgment. This suggestion was vigorously rejected by a minority, for whom true Christianity did not include any such negative ideas. Such a reaction at the popular level would be far from uncommon today. As often happens, the unsophisticated layperson expresses bluntly what

4. G. H. C. MacGregor, "The Concept of the Wrath of God in the New Testament," *New Testament Studies* 7 (1960-61): 101-2.

5. H. G. L. Peels, *The Vengeance of God* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 271-74, notes the way in which Old Testament theologies have all but ignored the related theme of God's vengeance.

some more sophisticated theologians really think but are not prepared to state openly.

Interestingly, the idea that wrath is unworthy of God is nothing new. Lactantius in 313 or 314 wrote one of the very few Christian books devoted to this theme, his *De ira dei*. He begins by recording the opposition of Greek philosophers (Stoics and Epicureans) to the idea:

Many persons hold this opinion, which some philosophers also have maintained, that God is not subject to anger; since the divine nature is either altogether beneficent, and that it is inconsistent with His surpassing and excellent power to do injury to any one; or, at any rate, He takes no notice of us at all, so that no advantage comes to us from His goodness, and no evil from His ill-will.⁶

The second way, more sophisticated than philosophical denial, is the theological approach of Marcion, the Christian thinker who took the principle of Christological concentration with full seriousness, *really* believing that God is revealed only in Jesus Christ. Marcion differentiated between the wrathful God of justice revealed in the Old Testament and the merciful God of love revealed in those parts of the New Testament that remained after he had, as Tertullian put it, exercised textual criticism with the knife rather than the pen.⁷ Tertullian describes the Marcionite gospel in words that might well apply to much contemporary preaching: “a better god has been discovered, one who is neither offended nor angry nor inflicts punishment, who has no fire warming up in hell, and no outer darkness wherein there is shuddering and gnashing of teeth: he is merely kind. Of course he forbids you to sin — but only in writing.”⁸ Tertullian is biting in his critique. Marcion views God as a being of simple goodness, to the exclusion of other attributes (like his wrath), which are transferred to the Creator God. Marcion has removed from God “all functions involving severity or criticism.” But when Marcion’s God delivers humanity, he rescues us from a rival God, the Creator God of the Old Testament. This rivalry must, says Tertullian, in-

6. Lactantius, *A Treatise on the Anger of God* 1, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969-73), vol. 7, p. 259.

7. Tertullian, *The Prescription against Heretics* 38.

8. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.27, in *Tertullian Adversus Marcionem*, ed. E. Evans, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), p. 77.

volve ancillary passions, such as anger, hatred, and displeasure. Furthermore, Marcion's God issues commands. But "to what purpose does he lay down commands if he will not require performance, or prohibit transgressions if he is not to exact penalties, if he is incapable of judgment, a stranger to all emotions of severity and reproof?" Commands without a penalty are ineffective, for "in real life an act forbidden without sanctions is tacitly permitted." Again, Marcion's God is not really offended by sin. For "if he does take offence, he ought to be displeased; and if displeased, he ought to punish. For punishment is the outcome of displeasure, as displeasure is the due reward of offence, and offence . . . is attendant upon wishes set at naught. But as he does not punish, it is plain that he is not offended." Again, a God, says Tertullian, "can only be completely good if he is the enemy of the bad, so as to put his love of good into action by hatred of the bad, and discharge his wardship of the good by the overthrowing of the bad."⁹

While crypto-Marcionism is a powerful influence at the popular level, modern biblical studies are too responsible to subscribe to such a crude approach. Few would dissent from the judgment of MacGregor that "it is clear that Scripture definitely regards 'wrath' as an attribute of God; we must reject the Marcionite view that the contrast between the God of the O.T. and the God of the N.T. is that between a wrathful, avenging deity and a loving Father who is incapable of anger."¹⁰

There is a third and more subtle way in which the wrath of God is undermined. C. H. Dodd, in a brief but highly influential section of his Moffatt Romans commentary, offers a reinterpretation of the concept.¹¹ Talk of God's anger is too anthropomorphic. "Paul never uses the verb, 'to be angry,' with God as subject." While the original meaning of "the wrath

9. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1:25-26, on pp. 69-75. ("Displeasure" in this passage translates the Latin word *ira*, which is more appropriately translated "wrath" or "anger.") R. P. C. Hanson makes a similar point, describing the popular concept of God as an impotent God who is "too gentlemanly to involve anybody in wrath, and too tolerant to punish anybody" and who therefore "seems to be no more effective than the United Nations" (*God*, p. 39).

10. MacGregor, "The Concept of the Wrath of God," p. 103. R. V. G. Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God* (London: Tyndale Press, 1951), p. 26; G. Stählin, "ὀργή," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (hereafter *TDNT*), vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 422, makes the same point.

11. C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 2nd ed. (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1959), pp. 47-50.

of God" was the passion of anger, by the time of Paul it had come to refer to an impersonal process of cause and effect, the inevitable result of sin. Thus, "anger as an attitude of God to men disappears, and His love and mercy become all-embracing. This is, as I believe, the purport of the teaching of Jesus, with its emphasis on limitless forgiveness." Essentially Paul agrees, but he retains the concept of the wrath of God, "which does not appear in the teaching of Jesus, unless we press certain features of the parables in an illegitimate manner." In Paul the wrath of God describes not "the attitude of God to man" but "an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe." "In the long run we cannot think with full consistency of God in terms of the highest human ideals of personality and yet attribute to Him the irrational passion of anger."

Dodd's approach has stimulated considerable debate, and it would be hard to find a recent serious English-language discussion of the wrath of God that does not refer to him. A. T. Hanson, in his substantial monograph on the subject, *The Wrath of the Lamb*,¹² follows broadly in Dodd's footsteps. Dodd and those who follow him are united in affirming that the wrath of God is to be understood purely as *effectus*, as the effects or consequences of sin, rather than *affectus*, as a prior emotion or feeling on God's part.¹³ God is not to be thought of as angry and loving, either at the same time¹⁴ or alternately.¹⁵ We should not speak of "God's displeasure," because displeasure suggests a personal feeling in God.¹⁶ "The wrath of God is wholly impersonal and does not describe an attitude of God but a condition of men."¹⁷ But there is some ambiguity in these writers about the extent of God's involvement in this *effectus*. At times the impression is given, as in Dodd's brief account, that this is purely an inevitable byproduct of sin, not in any way willed by God. R. P. C. Hanson, by contrast, is willing to talk robustly of God punishing, while denying that God's wrath is an *affectus*.¹⁸

How should this approach be assessed? D. E. H. Whiteley wryly ob-

12. A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb* (London: SPCK, 1957).

13. A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, pp. 69, 110, 126, 186, 197, and *passim*; R. P. C. Hanson, *God*, pp. 45-46.

14. A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, p. 197; R. P. C. Hanson, *God*, p. 47.

15. J. S. Stewart, *A Man in Christ*, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1972), p. 220.

16. A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, p. 104.

17. A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, p. 110.

18. R. P. C. Hanson, *God*, pp. 48-52.

serves that “the wrath of God is a matter about which theologians feel deeply, but little precision of thought and language has been attained.” He rightly adds that there is more common ground than is sometimes acknowledged.¹⁹ So it is appropriate to begin by recognizing the positive points in the Dodd approach.

First, it must be recognized that talk of God’s wrath is anthropomorphic or, to be more precise, anthropopathic. While God is rightly described in human terms, we must recognize that these terms are true by analogy rather than univocally.²⁰ But of course, this is not true only of the wrath of God. Talk of God’s love is also anthropopathic, and we must not fall into the error of equating the divine love with human love in all its imperfection and distortion. “The Enlightenment called such ideas [as God’s wrath] ‘the crude anthropopathisms of an uncultured age’ . . . but they are no more anthropopathic than what the Bible says about the fatherly love of God; like this they belong inalienably to the biblical concept of the personal God.”²¹ To concede that talk of God’s wrath is anthropopathic is not, of course, to deny that there is a reality to which it corresponds. What that reality is is precisely the point at dispute.

Second, the wrath of God should not be understood in a crudely literal fashion. The divine wrath is very different from human wrath. It should certainly not be understood as an irrational passion, to use Dodd’s words. As John Stott puts it, God’s wrath against sin

does not mean . . . that he is likely to fly off the handle at the most trivial provocation, still less that he loses his temper for no apparent reason at all. For there is nothing capricious or arbitrary about the holy God. Nor is he ever irascible, malicious, spiteful or vindictive. His anger is neither mysterious nor irrational. It is never unpredictable but always predictable, because it is provoked by evil and by evil alone.²²

Almost every writer on this topic emphasizes the dangers of understanding God’s wrath in terms of human anger.

19. D. E. H. Whiteley, *The Theology of St. Paul* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), pp. 61-62.

20. The issue of analogical language is discussed fully in some of the other chapters of this volume.

21. Stählin, “ὄργη” in *TDNT*, 5:425.

22. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 173.

Third, it can be conceded that there is in the New Testament a tendency to depersonalize the wrath of God. MacGregor softens and qualifies Dodd's position in such a way as to bring out the real case that Dodd has. "God's 'wrath' in the N.T., and particularly in Paul's letters is conceived of in terms less completely personal than is his love."²³ This fact casts doubt on the wisdom of Edwards's sermon. Edwards heightens the affective character of God's wrath by bringing together in concentrated form the strongest elements of the Old Testament teaching, while the New Testament writers seem to move in the opposite direction. The New Testament speaks of God's wrath almost entirely in terms of *effectus* rather than *affectus*.

Finally, it should be recognized that wrath is not fundamental to God in the same way that love is. Isaiah describes God as rising up in wrathful judgment "to do his work, his strange work, and perform his task, his alien task" (Isa. 28:21). Luther picked up this idea, distinguishing between God's wrath as his *opus alienum* (alien work) and his mercy as his *opus proprium* (proper work).²⁴ Karl Barth makes the same distinction between God's wrath and his grace²⁵ as does Emil Brunner between his wrath and his love.²⁶ There are two different points to be noted here. First, God *is* love, yet one could not say that God is wrath. In other words, love is a fundamental and eternal attribute of God, while wrath is no more than an out-working of God's character in response to sin. Before creation God was love, and this love was active within the Trinity; but God's wrath was no more than a potentiality. "Unlike holiness or righteousness, *wrath never forms one of the permanent attributes of the God of Israel.*"²⁷ Wrath is not an attribute of God in the way that his love or holiness is. His wrath is his response to something outside of himself. Second, it is also true that before creation God had no occasion to exercise his mercy. But this does not put wrath and mercy on the same footing. The Old Testament repeatedly af-

23. MacGregor, "The Concept of the Wrath of God," p. 103, cf. pp. 104-5.

24. E.g., A. E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 154-56.

25. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), pp. 204-5.

26. E. Brunner, *The Mediator* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947), pp. 445, 520-21; *Man in Revolt* (London & Redhill: Lutterworth, 1939), p. 163.

27. W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (London: S.C.M., 1961), p. 262 (his emphasis). Cf. Peels, *The Vengeance of God*, p. 289: "Wrath is not a permanent 'attribute' of God, but neither is it 'uncharacteristic' of God."

firms God's reluctance to exercise his wrath and his delight in showing mercy.²⁸

There is much that is true in Dodd's thesis. God's wrath is an anthropomorphism not to be taken in a crudely literal fashion. It is not to be put on the same level as the love of God, and the New Testament does tend to speak of it in impersonal terms. But having gladly conceded these points we must point to the serious deficiency in the Dodd thesis: the reduction of the wrath of God to a process of cause and effect, to the inevitable consequences of sin in a moral universe.²⁹ Of course, God's wrath does indeed work in this world primarily in the way that Dodd describes. God's wrath normally operates through means. MacGregor rightly cites James Denney to the effect that "The divine punishment is the divine reaction against sin expressing itself through the whole constitution or system of things under which the sinner lives."³⁰ The problem lies not with what Dodd affirms but with what he denies.

There are various problems with the purely impersonal view of God's wrath. Anselm, because of his belief in divine impassibility, explained God's compassion as follows:

But how are You consistently both merciful and impassible? For, if You are impassible You have no compassion. And if You do not have compassion, You do not have a heart sorrowful out of compassion for the wretched — the very thing which being merciful is. And if You are not merciful, from where do the wretched derive their great consolation? . . . You are merciful according to our experience but not merciful according to Your experience. For when You behold us in our pitiable condition, we feel the effect of Your mercy, but You do not feel any emotion. And so You are merciful because You save us miserable creatures and

28. E.g., Exod. 34:6-7; Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17-18; Ps. 30:5; 86:15; 103:8; 145:8-9; Isa. 54:7-10; Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11; Hos. 11:8-9; Joel 2:13-14; Jon. 4:2; Mic. 7:18-20. Cf. Peels, *The Vengeance of God*, pp. 294-95, on the relation between God's love and his vengeance/wrath: "There is no balance between vengeance and love; the preponderance of God's faithful love is evident in the whole Old Testament. . . . God's heart is not in the vengeance, but he does so when there is no other option."

29. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, pp. 49-50; A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, passim; MacGregor, "The Concept of the Wrath of God," pp. 105-6; Stewart, *A Man in Christ*, pp. 219-20.

30. Denny, cited in MacGregor, "The Concept of the Wrath of God," p. 106.

spare us though we sin against You. And You are not merciful, because You experience no compassion for misery.³¹

In other words, God's compassion is an *effectus*, but not an *affectus*. Such a doctrine of divine impassibility has rightly been rejected by recent theologies that have stressed the suffering of God. How ironical that at the very same time the reverse process has taken place with regard to the wrath of God!

The seriousness of this issue can be seen by a simple example. A. T. Hanson expresses the Dodd view clearly by emphasizing that God's wrath is not an *affectus*, a feeling or emotion, and that God does not have a personal feeling like "displeasure."³² (This is not on the basis that God cannot have any *affectus*, since his thesis is that God's wrath, *unlike* his love, is impersonal.) It follows, therefore, that God views the sexual molestation and murder of a little child without any feeling of displeasure. Is this really the New Testament picture of God's wrath, any more than Anselm's is the New Testament picture of God's compassion? It is not open to Dodd or Hanson to say that God feels displeasure toward the sin but not the sinner. They make no differentiation between those passages which speak of God's wrath against sinners and those which speak of his wrath against sin. To grant that God feels anger or displeasure against sin would be to undermine the whole basis of their exegetical case. If they wished to make the distinction between God's wrath against sin and his wrath against sinners they would have to rebuild their case from scratch.

Dodd's position is not immune from the charge of deism, as was preemptively noted by P. T. Forsyth.³³ A. T. Hanson rejects the charge as follows: "Wrath is part of the natural moral order, and it is no more deistic to conceive of God as allowing the process of the wrath to work impersonally, than it is to conceive of his allowing the process of the laws of nature to work impersonally."³⁴ This is an unfortunate choice of analogy. Of course God works both through "the laws of nature" and through "the natural

31. Anselm, *Proslogion* 8, in *St Anselm of Canterbury*, ed. J. Hopkins and H. Richardson, vol. 1 (London: S.C.M., 1974), pp. 97-98.

32. Cf. nn. 13 and 16, above.

33. P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910), pp. 239-40.

34. A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, pp. 187-88.

moral order.” But just as it is deistic to allow God no further role in creation than setting up impersonal laws of nature that work like clockwork, so it is deistic to conceive of God’s wrath as no more personal than setting up a “natural moral order.” Those, like R. P. C. Hanson, who are willing to speak of God actively punishing are immune from this particular criticism. But for others the aim in talking about impersonal wrath appears to be to dissociate God from wrath and punishment, to portray wrath as a mere by-product of sin, not actually willed by God. Such a position is not free of deistic implications.

Similarly, Dodd in particular is not exempt from the charge of neo-Marcionism. He argues that in the New Testament “anger as an attitude of God to men disappears, and His love and mercy become all-embracing. This is, as I believe, the purport of the teaching of Jesus with its emphasis on limitless forgiveness.”³⁵ Wrath and punishment are the impersonal by-product of the moral order, and God is dissociated from them. This approach is avowedly contrary to the teaching of the Old Testament; it is based upon a particular interpretation of Paul and is supported by a truncated (as we shall argue) appeal to the teaching of Jesus. The similarities to Marcion are striking.

But what of the biblical evidence? Space permits no more than a brief review. First, let us look at the Old Testament. Baird refers to six different words used for the wrath of God a total of 406 times, while Morris extends the list to over twenty words used more than 580 times.³⁶ There is an “indissoluble link between the proclamation of God’s wrath and the whole message of the OT.”³⁷ “Wherever in the Old Testament one finds a reference to the love of God, his wrath is always in the background, either explicitly or implicitly, and we neglect this element to the impoverishment of the Hebrew concept of love.”³⁸ This wrath is God’s displeasure and his venting of it, the opposite of his good pleasure.³⁹ Because of his holiness, righteousness, and justice, God is by nature intolerant of sin and impu-

35. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, p. 50.

36. J. A. Baird, *The Justice of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (London: S.C.M., 1963), p. 46; L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (London: Tyndale, 1965), pp. 149-50.

37. J. Fichtner, “ὀργή,” in *TDNT*, 5:407. Peels likewise notes that “instead of being an element foreign to God’s nature, vengeance is an essential component of the Old Testament revelation of God” (*The Vengeance of God*, p. 292; cf. p. 284).

38. Baird, *The Justice of God*, p. 46.

39. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 259.

rity.⁴⁰ God's wrath against sin is portrayed in the Old Testament both as *affectus* and as *effectus*.⁴¹ "If God enacts punishing judgment, he does not do that 'emotionlessly.' He is then very angry concerning sin, injustice and blasphemy. God's vengeance is not an impersonal, cold disciplinary action but it is a retribution in which the heat . . . of God's deep indignation is sometimes evident."⁴² "While disaster is regarded as the inevitable result of man's sin, it is so in the view of the Old Testament, not by some inexorable law of an impersonal Nature, but because a holy God wills to pour out the vials of His wrath upon those who commit sin. Indeed, it is largely because wrath is so fully personal in the Old Testament that mercy becomes so fully personal, for mercy is the action of the same God who was angry, allowing His wrath to be turned away."⁴³ The anger of God signifies his emphatically personal character.⁴⁴

What of the New Testament? Dodd claims that in the teaching of Jesus "anger as an attitude of God to men disappears, and His love and mercy become all-embracing." The wrath of God, he states, "does not appear in the teaching of Jesus, unless we press certain features of the parables in an illegitimate manner."⁴⁵ A rather different conclusion is reached by Baird. He finds in the New Testament "the entirety of the Old Testament view of judgment," including the wrath of God. In the New Testament teaching on judgment, and especially in the teaching of Jesus as found in the Synoptics, he finds the full Old Testament teaching with an emphasis on "God's condemnation and wrath." "The Synoptics record Jesus saying well over twice as much about the wrath of God as he ever did about his love."⁴⁶ Why such different conclusions? A major difference is that Baird works from the whole sweep of Jesus' teaching on judgment and wrath while Dodd ap-

40. Baird, *The Justice of God*, p. 49. Peels judicially comments: "The moral motivation for God's wrath is not immediately evident in a few of the older texts, but the central thought is certainly that this wrath is a reaction to the misdeeds of mankind" (*The Vengeance of God*, p. 289).

41. Whiteley, *The Theology of St. Paul*, p. 64; Fichtner, "ὀργή," in *TDNT*, 5:397, 407. A. T. Hanson argues, however, that in parts of the O.T. material, such as Chronicles, a view emerges of wrath as an impersonal and inevitable process (*The Wrath of the Lamb*, pp. 21-26).

42. Peels, *The Vengeance of God*, pp. 289-90.

43. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, p. 152.

44. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 258.

45. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, p. 50.

46. Baird, *The Justice of God*, pp. 59-60, 72.

pears to look solely at the use of the *word* wrath, a procedure criticized by James Barr in his *The Semantics of Biblical Language*.⁴⁷ It is true that Jesus does not in the Synoptics⁴⁸ use the word “wrath” in relation to God except at Luke 21:23 (“There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people”), where it is possible to deny that the wrath referred to is God’s. But there are many passages where he clearly expresses the divine hostility to all that is evil, though without using the actual term “wrath.”⁴⁹ Baird warns against a crudely anthropomorphic interpretation of God’s wrath but rightly concludes that to grasp Jesus’ meaning the concept must not be “depersonalized.”⁵⁰

What of the parables? In the parable of the unmerciful servant, the master in anger hands him over to the jailers to be tortured (Matt. 18:34). In the parable of the wedding feast, the master is angry at the excuses made by the invited guests (Luke 14:21). In the Matthaean version the guests killed the servants who brought the invitations, and the king is so enraged that he sends his army to destroy them (Matt. 22:7). Is it legitimate to deduce the wrath of God from these parables? Dodd, followed by A. T. Hanson, claims that we can no more conclude from this parable that God is angry than we can conclude from another parable that he is an unjust judge.⁵¹ But the comparison is not fair, since the point of these parables seems to be that God does act like the angry lord, while he is explicitly contrasted with the unjust judge.⁵²

What of Paul? The impersonal character of his talk about God’s wrath should be acknowledged, but not exaggerated. In the first chapter of Romans Paul three times states of the depraved that God “gave them over” to various sins (vv. 24, 26, 28). “The thrice-repeated *παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεός* is surely so emphatic as to suggest that a deliberate, positive

47. J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961). Geoffrey Grogan, in his chapter in this volume, notes that it is nowhere clearly stated in the Synoptic Gospels that God loves human beings, but that it would be rash to deduce from this that the authors did not believe in God’s love for humanity.

48. John 3:36 refers to God’s wrath, but it is far from certain that John is attributing these words to Jesus.

49. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, p. 181, lists many.

50. Baird, *The Justice of God*, pp. 71-72.

51. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, p. 50; A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, p. 121.

52. Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God*, pp. 28-29; Baird, *The Justice of God*, pp. 63-71, maintains that the Synoptic parables clearly portray God’s wrath.

act of God is meant.”⁵³ Again, Romans 3:5 speaks of God bringing wrath upon us, which suggests an active role on God’s part. Romans 12:19 refers to God’s wrath in impersonal terms, but Paul proceeds to state that vengeance is God’s and he will repay, quoting Deuteronomy 32:35, the text for Edwards’s infamous sermon! In 1 Corinthians 10:22 he refers to God’s jealousy, a passage of which A. T. Hanson disapproves, stating that here “Paul is not at his most profound with respect to the wrath.”⁵⁴ Finally, if one looks at a passage like 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9, with its vivid portrayal of Christ coming in judgment at the Parousia, it is hard to talk of God’s wrath in purely impersonal terms. In short, while much of Paul’s talk about God’s wrath is relatively impersonal, the evidence of his writings as a whole is that he did not wish to eliminate the concept of wrath as *affectus*. Stählin’s conclusion is fair: “In most NT passages ὀργή is in fact the divine work, destiny or judgment of wrath” but “the idea of an actual attitude of God cannot be disputed in respect of many NT verses, any more than this is possible in respect of [love and mercy].” “As in the OT . . . so in the NT ὀργή is both God’s displeasure at evil, His passionate resistance to every will which is set against Him, and also His judicial attack thereon.”⁵⁵

If this conclusion is at least plausible for the teaching of Paul, it is much clearer in Hebrews. The author (3:10-11; cf. 4:3) quotes from Psalm 95:10-11 the statement that God was displeased or angry (προσώχθισα) with Israel and swore against them in his anger (ὀργῆ). This is the one place in the New Testament where God is unequivocally the subject of a verb meaning “to be angry.”⁵⁶ Later passages, such as 10:31 (“It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”) and 12:29 (“Our God is a consuming fire”), reinforce the impression that for the author of Hebrews God’s wrath was no impersonal process of cause and effect.

Finally, there are places where judgment of sin in this age is portrayed as the direct act of God (Acts 5:1-11; 12:23; 1 Cor. 11:30; Rev. 2:22-23). The case that God’s wrath is *purely* an impersonal process of cause and effect, the inevitable consequence of sin in a moral universe, can be maintained only with considerable difficulty. It necessitates rejection of the clear

53. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), p. 120.

54. A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, pp. 77-78.

55. Stählin, “ὀργή,” in *TDNT*, 5:424-25. Paul is explicitly included in this judgment.

56. A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, pp. 132-33.

teaching of the Old Testament, dubious interpretation of some passages of the teaching of Jesus and Paul, and the rejection of other New Testament passages. This neo-Marcionite procedure (rejection of the Old Testament teaching and selective use of Jesus and Paul) yields no more than a silence about the affective side of God's wrath. No passage in either Testament is alleged that *denies* the personal and affective nature of God's wrath. The case rests simply on an argument from the (alleged and highly contestable) silence of Jesus and Paul.

The fourth way in which God's wrath is muted is that found in the majority of Western evangelical churches today. The wrath of God is not denied and is indeed given formal recognition. But in practice it is neglected. In preaching and teaching it is ignored, largely or totally. "Those who still believe in the wrath of God . . . say little about it. . . . The fact is that the subject of divine wrath has become taboo in modern society, and Christians by and large have accepted the taboo and conditioned themselves never to raise the matter."⁵⁷ This is a very serious matter, for, as Brunner comments, "a theology which uses the language of Christianity can be tested by its attitude towards the Biblical doctrine of the wrath of God, whether it means what the words of Scripture say. Where the idea of the wrath of God is ignored there also will there be no understanding of the central conception of the Gospel: the uniqueness of the revelation in the Mediator."⁵⁸ More simply, "only he who knows the greatness of wrath will be mastered by the greatness of mercy."⁵⁹

As Hanson notes, "the contemporary rejection by Christians of the biblical doctrine of the wrath of God is a typical example of our allowing secular, non-Christian ideas to creep into our understanding of the Christian faith in such a way as to distort it."⁶⁰ But why does the idea of God's wrath arouse so much displeasure today? There are at least three ways in which it offends against the Enlightenment mind-set. First, if there is any room for God in a "world come of age" it is for a God whose purpose is to serve humanity. A genuinely theocentric concept of God is intolerable, because "modern man, through the influence of the thought of the Enlightenment, is so accustomed to think that God's function is to stand surety

57. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), p. 164.

58. Brunner, *The Mediator*, p. 152. For a similar idea, cf. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), pp. 393-94.

59. Stählin, "ὀργή" in *TDNT*, 5:425.

60. R. P. C. Hanson, *God*, p. 38.

for human purposes.”⁶¹ Second, it follows from this that any “God” who wishes to be accepted today must be a tolerant God who respects human rights.⁶² Finally, the sentimentality of the Enlightenment has given birth to a sentimental view of God and his love,⁶³ one that suits carol services at Christmas but does not cohere either with Scripture or with empirical reality. Such a proclamation of God gives birth to benevolent, skeptical apathy. By contrast, the response to proclamation of the wrath of God is more likely to be very different, either hostility or conviction of sin (John 16:8-11). Christians are, of course, not exempt from these pressures, and sentimental, anthropocentric views of God are to be found in almost every sector of the modern Western church. Why has the biblical doctrine of the wrath of God not been more effective in correcting these trends? One reason may be the fear that it is incompatible with God’s love, a misconception that this essay will seek to dispel.

II. THE WRATH OF GOD AND ITS RELATION TO OTHER DOCTRINES

The conclusion thus far is that God’s wrath is to be understood neither as purely impersonal nor in crudely anthropomorphic terms. So to what does “the wrath of God” refer? It is God’s personal, vigorous opposition both to evil and to evil people. This is a steady, unrelenting antagonism that arises from God’s very nature, his holiness. It is God’s revulsion to evil and all that opposes him, his displeasure at it and the venting of that displeasure. It is his passionate resistance to every will that is set against him.⁶⁴

These “definitions” raise an issue that is often ignored. What is the ob-

61. Brunner, *The Mediator*, pp. 467-68.

62. R. P. C. Hanson, *God*, pp. 37-38; Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, pp. 108-9. It must of course be acknowledged that belief in the wrath of God in the past has often gone hand in hand with cruel and inhumane human behavior, whether in war or in penal systems. But those wishing to blame the latter practice on the former belief would do well to consider the inhumane cruelties of atheistic regimes in the twentieth century.

63. Brunner, *The Mediator*, p. 464.

64. These “definitions” are drawn from Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, p. 180; idem, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1967), p. 191; Stählin, “ὄργη,” in *TDNT*, 5:425; Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 173; W. Temple, *Christus Veritas* (London: Macmillan, 1924), p. 259.

ject of God's wrath? Is God angry with evil or with evil people? In the New Testament both are true. Often God's wrath is referred to without precisely specifying the object of that wrath (e.g., Matt. 3:7; Luke 3:7; Rom. 4:15; Rev. 14:19; 15:1, 7). In one place the object of God's wrath is evil (Rom. 1:18), although even here the perpetrators are mentioned. Where an object is mentioned it is usually evildoers (e.g., Luke 21:23; John 3:36; Rom. 2:5, 8; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; 1 Thess. 2:16). Thus a comprehensive verdict would be to say that God's wrath is directed primarily against evildoers because of the evil that they do.

Where does this leave the modern cliché that "God hates the sin but loves the sinner"? Like most clichés it is a half-truth. There are two ways in which it could be taken. The first, which is undoubtedly the way that most people take it in the modern liberal West, is as a comment about the wrath of God. God's displeasure is against sin but not against the sinner. Apart from the fact that this reverses the emphasis of the New Testament, there are problems with it. As William Temple observes, "that is a shallow psychology which regards the sin as something merely separate from the sinner, which he can lay aside like a suit of clothes. My sin is the wrong direction of my will; and my will is just myself as far as I am active. If God hates the sin, what He hates is not an accretion attached to my real self; it is myself, as that self now exists."⁶⁵ It is incoherent to say that God is displeased with child molestation but feels no displeasure toward child molesters. In what sense, then, is the cliché true? It is to be understood not as limiting the objects of God's displeasure to sinful *actions* but as affirming God's grace. God loves sinners, not in the sense that he does not hate them along with their sin, but in the sense that he seeks their salvation in Christ. While his attitude to sinners as sinners is antagonism and wrath, his good will toward them actively seeks their conversion and forgiveness.⁶⁶

But does the Bible ever talk of God actually hating people?⁶⁷ Mostly it speaks of God hating evil deeds (e.g., Deut. 12:31; Prov. 6:16-19; Isa. 61:8; Amos 6:8; Rev. 2:6), but there are seven passages that speak of his hatred for people. First, there is the repeated statement that God loved Jacob but

65. Temple, *Christus Veritas*, p. 258.

66. Temple, *Christus Veritas*, pp. 258-59.

67. This is related to the issue of God's enmity toward sinners. Cf. Brunner, *The Mediator*, pp. 515-22; Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, pp. 220-25.

hated Esau (Mal. 1:2-3; Rom. 9:13). We should beware of reading too much into this given the question of the extent to which it is individuals or nations that are in mind, and the question of whether "hate" here is to be understood as in the injunction to hate one's own relatives and one's own life (Luke 14:26; cf. Matt. 10:37). Second, it is thrice stated that God hates evildoers (Psalm 5:5; 11:5; Prov. 6:16-19). Finally, God twice states that he hates Israel (Jer. 12:8; Hos. 9:15). Clearly these last affirmations do not preclude God's love for Israel, as is proclaimed especially by Hosea. Perhaps we would remain closest to the emphasis of the Bible if we spoke of God's hatred of sin and his wrath against sinners, though we cannot exclude talk of God's wrath against sin or his hatred of sinners. A new slogan might be "God hates the sin and is angry with the sinner."

Two of the leading theologians of the church have tackled the question of God's love and hate. Augustine, in discussing the atonement, warns against the idea that God did not begin to love us until Christ died for us. He wrestles with the tension between the fact that Christ's death flows from God's love for us (Rom. 5:8) and the fact that God hates evildoers (Ps. 5:5). He reaches the paradox that God both hated and loved us. He hated us for our sin and loved us for that which sin had not ruined and which is capable of being healed.⁶⁸ Thomas Aquinas also tackles Psalm 5:5. He maintains that "God loves sinners as being real things of nature," as created. But "in so far as they are sinners they are unreal and deficient" and as such God "holds them in hatred."⁶⁹ Again, wrestling with Malachi 1:2-3, Thomas notes that "God loves all men and all creatures as well, inasmuch as he wills some good to all." But at the same time, "in that he does not will to some the blessing of eternal life he is said to hold them in hate or to reprobate them."⁷⁰

The wrath of God relates to a number of other themes, some of which can be mentioned briefly in passing. The first theme is the question of the moral order and the exercise of moral judgment. Jonathan Sacks laments the situation that prevails in our society, a situation that is not unrelated to the rejection of the wrath of God. In our society, he maintains, the word "judgmental" is used "to rule out in advance the offering of moral judge-

68. Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 110.6, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (hereafter NPNF)(reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 7:411.

69. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.20.2, ad 4, in vol. 5 (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 63.

70. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.23.3, ad 1 (vol. 5, p. 117).

ment.” He gives the recent example of a church leader who was lambasted for daring to criticize adultery. Adultery is acceptable; judgment is not. A worthy and biblical reticence in passing judgment on individuals has been confused with an unwillingness to make moral judgments, to distinguish between what is morally good and what is evil. “So morality becomes a matter of taste and choice, and *de gustibus non est disputandum*: there is no point in asking an expert which to prefer.”⁷¹ S. T. Davis argues that the wrath of God rescues us from just such a moral relativism by showing us that right and wrong are objectively real and pointing us to the moral significance of our deeds.⁷²

The second theme is the fear of God. Together with the demise of the wrath of God there is the rejection of fear as a valid motive.⁷³ This is another of those dangerous half-truths. Augustine rightly observed that the person who fears hell fears burning, not sin.⁷⁴ The mainstream Christian tradition has always recognized that true obedience is motivated not by fear but by love. It is not a reluctant, fearful, slavish obedience that God seeks but a joyful, free response of love. But the mainstream Christian tradition has not been so naive as to imagine that this dispenses with the need for fear. Augustine, whose grasp of human psychology was profound, came to recognize that the free response of love is often preceded by the constraints of coercion. Children need initially to be disciplined at least in part by fear. But if the process of discipline is successful the values being conveyed are internalized. That which initially is done in order to avoid parental disapproval or punishment is done freely and willingly. The motivation of fear is not invalid (as is so often implied today) but insufficient. Jesus had no qualms about telling his disciples to “fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell” (Luke 12:5).⁷⁵ Lac-

71. J. Sacks, *Faith in the Future* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995), pp. 37-39.

72. S. T. Davis, “Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant,” *Modern Theology* 6 (1989-90): 184-85.

73. The rejection of the fear of God is another example of neo-Marcionism. Tertullian attacks the Marcionites for their boast that they did not fear their God (*Against Marcion* 1.27).

74. Augustine, *Letters* 145.4, in NPNF, 1:496. The index to Augustine in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, Series Latina, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris, 1844-64), 46:635-36, gives many similar passages, as well as passages that affirm the positive role of fear.

75. Baird, *The Justice of God*, pp. 61-62, tackles the difficulty that some have today in accepting this. Wayne Grudem’s comment that “we should feel no fear of God’s wrath as Christians” (*Systematic Theology* [Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], p. 206) is not the whole truth.

tantius notes that there is no true religion or piety without some fear of God and that without the wrath of God there is no fear of God.⁷⁶ “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10), and while the term “fear” here embraces much more than the fear of God’s anger, it does not exclude it.

A third theme is the doctrine of hell. It is very popular today to portray hell as locked on the inside only.⁷⁷ God’s role in condemning people to hell is simply reluctantly and sorrowfully to consent to the choice that they have made. Again we have here a half-truth. The mainstream Christian tradition has always acknowledged that God’s “No” to the unrepentant at the Last Judgment is in response to their “No” to him in this life. Again, the Bible testifies to God’s reluctance in executing judgment (e.g., Ezek. 33:11; 2 Pet. 3:9). But there is another side to the picture that should not be suppressed. It is not enough to say that God’s punishment is simply the sinner punishing himself.⁷⁸ God’s role in judgment is not merely passive. The final judgment involves God’s wrath as well as his sorrow (e.g., Rom. 2:5, 8; 1 Thess 1:10). While it remains true that those who are lost have excluded themselves from heaven, it is also true that God actively excludes those who at least at one level wish to be included (e.g., Matt. 22:11-13). Jesus emphasized not the difficulty of escaping from God’s grace but the need to strive for it: “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to” (Luke 13:24). He stressed not the perpetuity of the opportunity to enter but the great danger of ignoring it until too late (e.g., Matt. 25:1-13; Luke 16:26).

The final theme is the cross. Belief in the wrath of God has, as its correlate, belief in the work of Christ in dealing with that wrath. A. T. Hanson explicitly rejects the idea that God’s wrath is an *affectus* on the grounds that this leads to theories of propitiation.⁷⁹ Dodd’s interpretation of the wrath of God is closely linked with his rejection of the concept of propitia-

76. Lactantius, *A Treatise on the Anger of God* 6, 8, 11.

77. An influential example is C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (1946; Glasgow: Collins, 1972). For a full discussion of these issues, cf. J. L. Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

78. As A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, p. 198; Stewart, *A Man in Christ*, p. 219.

79. A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, pp. 192-94. His brother speculates that contemporary reluctance to consider any doctrine of God’s wrath “is caused by a reaction away from the distorted and unjustified doctrine that Christ appeased God’s wrath” (R. P. C. Hanson, *God*, p. 47).

tion.⁸⁰ Those who recognize God's wrath as *affectus* have been more willing to say that Christ on the cross bore in our place the wrath that was our due.⁸¹

III. THE WRATH OF GOD AND THE LOVE OF GOD

The time has come to turn to our central concern, the relation between the wrath of God and the love of God. In the popular imagination they are simply opposed to one another. Yet, as has often been observed, "the opposite of love is not wrath but indifference."⁸² It is the thesis of this essay that God's wrath should be seen as an aspect of his love, as a consequence of his love. As Barth puts it, if we truly love God, "we must love Him also in His anger, condemnation and punishments, or rather we must see, feel and appreciate His love to us even in His anger, condemnation and punishment."⁸³ In seeking to do this we will need to explore the ways in which God's wrath both expresses his love and can be contrasted with it — though it might be happier to contrast wrath with *mercy*, seeing both as expressions of God's love.

First we should note that there is no true love without wrath. The Old Testament teaching on the wrath of God has been summarized thus: "the wrath of YHWH is a personal quality, without which YHWH would cease to be fully righteous and His love would degenerate into sentimentality."⁸⁴ Anders Nygren likewise accuses the Marcionite view of love, which is separated from the idea of judgment, of sentimental-

80. E.g., C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935), pp. 82-95. Among the very many responses, cf. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, pp. 144-213.

81. E.g., Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, pp. 396-99; idem, *Credo* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), pp. 46-47; Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, p. 243; Stählin, "ὀργή," in *TDNT*, 5:445-46. A related issue is the revelation of the wrath of God in the event of the cross. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, pp. 398-99; Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 1:109-11; Stählin, "ὀργή," in *TDNT*, 5:425, 431-32. I would hold that God's wrath is revealed *supremely*, but not *solely*, in the cross.

82. Whiteley, *The Theology of St. Paul*, p. 63. Whiteley claims to be quoting A. G. Hebert, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (London: Faber & Faber, 1947), p. 251, where we read that "the opposite of love is not hate [*sic*]; it is indifference."

83. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 394.

84. S. Erlandsson, "The Wrath of YHWH," *Tyndale Bulletin* 23 (1972): 116.

ity.⁸⁵ “Only that love which pronounces judgment on all that is not love is in the truest sense restoring and saving love.”⁸⁶ Paul’s injunction that love be sincere is followed by the command to hate what is evil (Rom. 12:9). A husband who did not respond to his wife’s infidelity with a jealous anger would thereby demonstrate his lack of care for her.

Failure to hate evil implies a deficiency in love.⁸⁷ C. E. B. Cranfield illustrates this with a well-chosen modern example. He asks whether God could be the good and loving God if he did not react to human evil with wrath. “For indignation against wickedness is surely an essential element of human goodness in a world in which moral evil is always present. A man who knows, for example, about the injustice and cruelty of *apartheid* and is not angry at such wickedness cannot be a thoroughly good man; for his lack of wrath means a failure to care for his fellow man, a failure to love.” He goes on to warn against building too much on the human analogy, for “even the very highest and purest human wrath can at the best afford but a distorted and twisted reflection of the wrath of God,”⁸⁸ a point that is amply illustrated by the history of the anti-*apartheid* movement. But the basic point, that lack of wrath against wickedness is a lack of caring which is a lack of love, is indisputable. “Absolute love implies absolute purity and absolute holiness: an intense burning light. . . . Unless God detests sin and evil with great loathing, He cannot be a God of Love.”⁸⁹

Indeed, P. T. Forsyth daringly states that “the love of God is not more real than the wrath of God.”⁹⁰ But while this is a bold way of summarizing the point made in the previous paragraph, Forsyth was well aware that it needs qualification. Brunner insists that the wrath of God is a reality not to be denied or explained away. “But the wrath of God is not the ultimate re-

85. A. Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (London: SPCK; New York: Macmillan, 1932-39), II/1: 110f.

86. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, I:75.

87. Lactantius notes that to love life means to hate death, to love the good means to hate the wicked (*A Treatise on the Anger of God* 5). It should, however, be noted that Lactantius’s concept of love does not appear to advance beyond the concept of loving that which is worthy of love.

88. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 1:109. Cf. R. W. Dale’s comment that “it is partly because sin does not provoke our own wrath, that we do not believe that sin provokes the wrath of God” (cited in Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 109).

89. D. C. K. Watson, *My God Is Real* (London: Falcon, 1970), p. 39.

90. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, p. 242.

ality; it is the divine reality which corresponds to sin. But it is not the essential reality of God. In Himself God is love." In the cross we see "the reality of wrath, which is yet in some way a subordinate reality, and the far more overwhelming reality of the love of God." The love of God is in fact fully understood only in the light of the cross. If God's love is seen simply as a general truth it either loses its holiness or becomes limited by it.⁹¹

The fallacy of those who deny the wrath of God lies in the attempt to reduce God purely to love. As Brunner notes, "the Nature of God cannot be exhaustively stated in one single word." In particular, the holiness of God must not be suppressed.⁹² P. T. Forsyth has made this point forcefully with his talk of "the holy love of God."⁹³ Our starting point should be "the supreme holiness of God's love, rather than its pity, sympathy, or affection," this being "the watershed between the Gospel and the theological liberalism which makes religion no more than the crown of humanity."⁹⁴ "If we spoke less about God's love and more about His holiness, more about His judgment, we should say much more when we did speak of His love."⁹⁵

Here we come to an issue that divides. Should we think of God's love and his holiness, his mercy and his wrath, as attributes that somehow need to be reconciled to one another? Barth emphatically rejects any such idea. He quotes with disapproval from Bernard's sixth sermon on the Song of Songs in which he describes mercy and judgment as the two feet of God. Bernard warns his monks not to neglect either foot. They must temper sorrow for sin with the thought of mercy, so as to avoid despair; they must temper contemplation of God's mercy with remembrance of his judgment, so as to avoid lukewarm negligence.⁹⁶ Barth objects to the "fatal idea that we can really 'kiss' God's righteousness in abstraction from His mercy."⁹⁷ Forsyth also objects to the idea that there is a "strife of attributes" in God

91. Brunner, *The Mediator*, pp. 519-21. Cf. Nygren's comment that love without judgment "is reduced to a general altruism" (*Agape and Eros*, II/1:111).

92. Brunner, *The Mediator*, pp. 281-82.

93. E.g., Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, pp. 78-80; idem, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907), pp. 316-19, 348-54; idem, *The Justification of God* (London: Duckworth, 1916), pp. 131-32, 194-95. Temple, *Christus Veritas*, p. 257, urges that any consideration of the atonement should start with God's "holy love."

94. P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909), p. 6.

95. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, p. 73.

96. *Sermon 6.6-9*, in Bernard, *Song of Songs I* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1971), pp. 35-37.

97. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 380f.

between justice and mercy, stressing by contrast that God's attributes are not somehow entities separable from him.⁹⁸ R. P. C. Hanson equally rejects the idea, accusing it of "an unpleasant suggestion that God suffers from schizophrenia, and is not quite in control of himself."⁹⁹ His brother, A. T. Hanson, acknowledges that such thinking is found in the Old Testament,¹⁰⁰ but sees it as overcome by the recognition that God's wrath is not his attitude or feeling.

Others defend the concept. Stott takes issue with Forsyth, pointing to passages in both Old and New Testaments that acknowledge a "duality" in God and citing Brunner especially.¹⁰¹ Brunner speaks freely of the duality in God.¹⁰² It is in the cross above all that God makes both his holiness and his love known simultaneously.¹⁰³ "The objective aspect of the Atonement . . . consists in the combination of inflexible righteousness, with its penalties, and transcendent love." "The love of God breaks through the wrath of God."¹⁰⁴ There is a "dualism" of holiness and love.

Only where this dualism exists, only where God is known as One who "outside Christ" is really angry, but "in Christ" is "pure love," is faith real decision and the Atonement a real turning point. Therefore the dualism of holiness and love, of revelation and concealment, of mercy and wrath cannot be dissolved, changed into one synthetic conception, without at the same time destroying the seriousness of the Biblical knowledge of God, the reality and the mystery of revelation and atonement. . . . Here arises the "dialectic" of all genuine Christian theology, which simply aims at expressing in terms of thought the indissoluble nature of this dualism.¹⁰⁵

In fact the concerns of Forsyth and those of Stott and Brunner are not necessarily incompatible. In God's innermost being, his attributes are perfectly united. There is no love of God that is not holy and no holiness of God that is not loving. There is nowhere where God is love but not light,

98. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, pp. 117-18.

99. R. P. C. Hanson, *God*, pp. 45-46.

100. A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, pp. 18-20, 38, etc.

101. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, pp. 129-32.

102. Cf. nn. 91 and 92 above.

103. Brunner, *The Mediator*, pp. 450, 470.

104. Brunner, *The Mediator*, p. 520.

105. Brunner, *The Mediator*, p. 519; cf. pp. 467-68.

and nowhere where he is light but not love. Likewise, God's love and his justice are united in his essential nature.¹⁰⁶ But the holy, loving God acts differently toward us in different circumstances. In his holy, loving wrath he judges us for our sins. In his holy, loving mercy he forgives our sins. It is mistaken to divide the attributes by suggesting that wrath is the manifestation of holiness or justice, but not of love. It is equally mistaken to suggest that mercy is the manifestation of love, but not of holiness or justice. But there is a clear duality in God's dealings with humanity. In salvation history, in Christ, and in Scripture we see God acting both in wrath and judgment and in mercy and forgiveness. Clearly these two differ and are in some sense contrary to one another. Yet both originate from the one holy, loving God.

Thomas Aquinas asks whether justice and mercy are found in all of God's works. He concludes that "in every one of God's works justice and mercy are found." But he also concedes that "some works are associated with justice and some with mercy when the one more forcibly appears than the other. Yet mercy appears even in the damnation of the reprobate, for though not completely relaxed the penalty is sometimes softened, and is lighter than deserved. And justice appears even in the justification of the sinner, when fault is forgiven because of the love which God himself in mercy bestows."¹⁰⁷ It is in line with this principle to understand Romans 3:25-26 as at least in part referring to the way in which God's justice is maintained in the justification of the unjust.¹⁰⁸ *The cross involves the harmonization in historical outworking of attributes that are united in the eternal nature of God.*

But while both wrath and mercy have their origins in the holy love of God, how do they relate together "where the rubber hits the road"? How

106. Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell*, pp. 117-19, argues that both should be viewed as aspects of God's goodness. He also argues there that God's love is fundamental and that his justice and holiness are to be subordinated to it. E. TeSelle puts forward the Augustinian alternative that "justice stands in a sense *above* love, as referee or judge of its propriety" ("Justice, Love, Peace," in *Augustine Today*, ed. R. J. Neuhaus [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], pp. 88-90). There is no need to enter that debate here.

107. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.21.4 (vol. 5, pp. 81-85). The point at issue is not the correctness of Thomas's doctrine of justification but the principle that justice and mercy are found in every work of God.

108. As Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 1:211-14.

does God's wrath cohere with his love? R. P. C. Hanson rejects the idea that "God is somehow loving and angry at the same time," on the grounds that wrath is not an attitude or characteristic of God.¹⁰⁹ J. S. Stewart likewise rejects the idea that God's wrath means that he "for the time lays aside His love and acts like a man who has lost his temper."¹¹⁰ And yet the matter is not so simply resolved. Paul tells us that while we were still sinners (and therefore under the wrath of God) God showed his love for us in Christ's death (Rom. 5:8). The juxtaposition of love and wrath is clear. As Stott puts it, God's wrath is free from personal vindictiveness and "he is sustained simultaneously with undiminished love for the offender."¹¹¹ It is also clear that wrath and mercy conflict and alternate in our experience. One who is by nature a child of wrath (Eph. 2:3) encounters the mercy of God and is saved from the coming wrath (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10). In this sense, for the converted sinner wrath and mercy are two distinct and non-overlapping experiences. Again, the Old Testament speaks of the mercy of God restraining and limiting his wrath.¹¹²

A question needs to be asked at this stage. It has been argued that God's wrath against sinners is matched by his love for them and that these two come together supremely in the cross. But to affirm that God loves the object of his wrath falls short of saying that his wrath toward that person expresses his love *for that person*. It has indeed been argued that God's love necessitates his wrath. But this has been argued from his love for righteousness rather than his love for the object of his wrath. Can it be argued that his wrath against a particular sinner is demanded by his love for that particular sinner? In answering that question, we have to distinguish between God's wrath here and now, where it can lead to repentance, and God's wrath in the final judgment, where there is no further opportunity for repentance. In the case of living human beings, wrath plays its subsidiary role in God's dealings with them, as does the law in the Lutheran dialectic of law and gospel.¹¹³ The wrath of God serves to show us the seriousness of our sin and as such is a part of God's loving dealings with us. The situation is clearly different where the opportunity for repentance has ceased. It is less obvious how God's wrath against those who are finally lost

109. R. P. C. Hanson, *God*, p. 47.

110. Stewart, *A Man in Christ*, p. 218.

111. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 106.

112. Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God*, p. 23. Cf. n. 28 above.

113. Law and wrath are linked in Rom. 4:14-15.

is an expression of his love toward them in particular. Thomas Aquinas saw such love expressed as leniency in punishment.¹¹⁴ Those who see the final destiny of the lost as extinction¹¹⁵ can see that as an expression of God's loving mercy.

There is no dichotomy in God's being between his mercy and his wrath, but there is a clear dichotomy between them in the way that they encounter us. Bernard was justified therefore in describing mercy and judgment as the two feet of God. They are feet that are united in the single person of their owner but that we encounter to some extent separately. The lesson that Bernard draws from this — that sorrow for sin be tempered by remembrance of God's mercy to avoid despair; that contemplation of God's mercy be tempered with remembrance of his judgment to avoid lukewarm negligence — is in harmony with the balance of the teaching of the Bible.

One further way of holding together wrath and love needs to be considered. There is a surprising consensus of opinion that God's wrath is the obverse, converse, or reverse side of his love. Wrath is but love spurned.¹¹⁶ As Brunner puts it, "the wrath of God under which the idolatrous, sinfully perverted man stands is simply the divine love, which has become a force opposed to him who has turned against God. The wrath of God is the love of God, in the form in which the man who has turned away from God and turned against God, experiences it, as indeed, thanks to the holiness of God, he must and ought to experience it."¹¹⁷

How true is this? As with so many other such sayings, it is partly true.

114. Cf. n. 107 above.

115. Cf. N. M. de S. Cameron, ed., *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), the papers from the 1991 Edinburgh Conference in Christian Dogmatics. If this view is accepted, it can be said that God's wrath is not eternal (contrary to Lactantius, *A Treatise on the Anger of God* 21) but that it has eternal consequences. Stählin, "ὀργή," in *TDNT*, 5:433-34, wrestles with this issue. Those who hold to eternal torment need to consider Jonathan Edwards's sermon on Rev. 18:20, in which he explains how the righteous forever rejoice without pity in the torments of the lost (*Select Works*, 2:245-65). Edwards clearly knew what he was talking about because the editors describe this as "the substance of two posthumous discourses"!

116. Baird, *The Justice of God*, p. 72; R. P. C. Hanson, *God*, pp. 42, 47-48; Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, I:74-75; Stewart, *A Man in Christ*, pp. 220-21; Stählin, "ὀργή," in *TDNT*, 5:425, 428; J. W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), p. 69. It is not being suggested that all of these writers mean the same thing by this language.

117. Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, p. 187.

Judgment is according to one's response to the love of God in Jesus Christ (John 3:16-21, 36). But why is this? It might appear that God's judgment is no more than the macabre revenge of a jilted suitor. If wrath is nothing more than rejected love, God is open to the following charge: "Why does he get so angry, then, when we just want to be left alone?"¹¹⁸ But there is more to the story than simply jilted love. We are God's creatures and owe him our love and obedience. We are sinful people who have been "bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:20). We are not autonomous beings receiving overtures of love from a neo-Marcionite God who has no more claims upon us than the romantic affections of a stranger. The love that is being spurned is the love of Creator for creature, of the One who has redeemed us at great cost. To reject such love is to turn one's back upon one's only hope and to consign oneself to wrath and judgment.

Some of the authors whom we have considered seem to feel that it is impossible for love and anger to coexist. Far more profound is P. T. Forsyth: "True love is quite capable of being angry, and must be angry and even sharp with its beloved children." "For He can be really angry only with those He loves."¹¹⁹ Although A. T. Hanson insists that in the biblical teaching on God's wrath the idea of discipline is *almost* totally absent,¹²⁰ there may be some value in considering the disciplining of a child as an analogy. Suppose a child willfully and maliciously hurts another child. In what way is the disciplining of that child an expression of love? It expresses the parent's love for righteousness and detestation of cruelty. It expresses love for the victim in the form of concern for what has been done. It expresses love for the perpetrator in that it is intended as discipline. Finally, it expresses love for society in the disciplining of the child. Those who let undisciplined children loose on society show not love but lack of concern for their children and even greater lack of concern for their future victims in the rest of society.

The social implications apply also to God's wrath, which must not be understood in purely individual terms. "The love of God is not just good affections, but it can be expressed as wrath and jealousy," notes H. G. L. Peels. He continues to observe that a ruler would not be showing love for

118. Posed by Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell*, p. 107.

119. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, pp. 105, 243; cf. pp. 118-19. Cf. Amos 3:2: "You only have I chosen . . . therefore I will punish you."

120. A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, pp. 39, 180. He sees exceptions in Ps. 6:1 and 1 Cor. 10:13.

his people if he were to allow an enemy to run roughshod over them.¹²¹ Lactantius also emphasizes that the wrath of God is needed to maintain good order in society,¹²² which is incumbent upon God if he is loving. Paul, of course, teaches that God's wrath functions in part through the organs of law and order (Rom. 13:4-5).¹²³ The claim that God's wrath is an expression of love is wider than the claim that it expresses love for its victim. It is also an expression of God's love for other human beings. There may be situations, such as with God's wrath against the impenitent in the final judgment, where wrath expresses love without expressing love for its object.

The love of God and the wrath of God are not ultimately in contradiction, but there is a tension between them. "The proclamation concerning the living God ultimately and finally defies a logical systematization."¹²⁴ This does not prevent us from exploring the correlation between God's wrath and his love, but it does warn us against imagining that we have completed the task.

121. Peels, *The Vengeance of God*, p. 293.

122. Lactantius, *A Treatise on the Anger of God* 17-18, 21, 23.

123. Cf. Stählin, "ὀργή," in *TDNT*, 5:440-41 on this passage. This implies a divine mandate for the penal activities of the state (which is not, of course, to deny that this mandate can be abused). The modern trend, therefore, of treating corporal punishment as no different from the violence of the offender or capital punishment as no different from murder is profoundly mistaken. If corporal punishment is just "hitting" and capital punishment is mere "killing," then it follows that fining offenders is mere "theft" and imprisoning them is just "kidnapping." The argument concerned is anarchistic in force and undermines all authority of the state to punish. The rejection of *this* argument against corporal and capital punishment does not, of course, imply that there are not other more coherent arguments to be considered.

124. Peels, *The Vengeance of God*, p. 294.