

PUTTING ANGER IN ITS PLACE

A Marriage Enrichment Seminar

by

Karen & Ron Flowers

*Directors, Department of Family
Ministries, General Conference*

with

Harold and Nelma Drake

*Marriage Enrichment Facilitators, NAD
1997*

Theme: Anger is a God-given emotion. With proper management under the control and guidance of the Holy Spirit, our anger can help us grow in marital intimacy.

How to Use These Resources: These resources are designed for a marriage enrichment program of 1-2 hours in length. The materials may be adapted for use with support groups and presentations to audiences of youth and singles. Along with the **Presentation Module** the following components are supplied to support the seminar.

Presentation Helps:

[#1 An Angry Episode: David and Michal](#)

[#2 Anger and Intimacy](#) (camera-ready master for an overhead transparency)

Handouts:

[#1 Guidelines](#)

[#2 An Angry Episode: Reflections](#)

[#3 When Anger Flares](#)

Reprinted Article: [The Walls of Anger](#) may be used as additional resource material for presenters and/or distributed to participants as follow-up reading.

Helpful Hints: The presentation will be most effective if shared by one or more husband-wife teams as presenters. Appropriate preparation for this seminar by presenters should include familiarization with the topic of anger through study and/or consultation with a qualified mental health professional. Awareness and prior processing of one's own anger issues are an important prerequisite. Also, recognition of the limitations of the enrichment seminar environment and the extent of one's expertise in working with anger issues are also essential. Responsible leadership includes adherence to the seminar guidelines, sharing one's own personal material with discretion, maintaining individual and group confidentiality, and advocating follow-up with professionals for interested individuals or couples. A listing of professional counselors for your area should be made available for distribution.

Suggested Seminar Outline:

Welcome and Distribution of [Handout #1 Guidelines](#)

Dramatic Presentation: [Handout #2 An Angry Episode: David and Michal Reflections](#)
Presentation module
Leader couple dialogue
Participants' exercise and dialogue
Closing

Welcome and Guidelines:

After a welcome and general introduction to the program, distribute and read with the group [Handout #1 Guidelines](#).

Dramatic Presentation:

See [Presentation Helps #1 An Angry Episode: David and Michael](#)

Reflections on 2 Sam. 6:12-23:

Following the dramatic presentation *An Angry Episode*, read the Scripture passage from 2 Sam. 6:12-23. Then allow for a brief reflection and response to the biblical episode and the drama. [Handout #2 An Angry Episode: Reflections](#) includes several questions which may be distributed for couples or small groups to consider. As an alternate approach, discuss one or more of these questions with the group as a whole. Without extensive comments, proceed with the presentation module, using your own adaptation of the material that follows.

PRESENTATION MODULE

Introduction

Anger in the homes of God's people is a reality common to all, yet one which is hard to acknowledge. It is often a carefully guarded secret; in public we put our best selves forward. In times of greatest stress, when our anger does escape our best attempts at concealment, it is typical for us to call it by another name to justify its presence.

One woman at a seminar on anger blurted out, "Good Christians don't get angry, and this whole discussion *irritates* me!" A cartoon we once saw showed a ruffled pastor responding to a church member's query as to whether he was angry. "Good Christians do not get angry," he stoutly affirmed. "They may get vexed in their spirits, but *they do not get angry!*" Though called by any other name, the emotion is the same. Scripture, as we have seen, however, candidly shows that God's people experience anger as a part of their human makeup and as an inevitable part of their relationships.

Anger Is Inevitable in Intimate Relationships

It is not unusual for individuals living in close relationship to each other to experience some friction and anger (See [Presentation Helps #2 Anger and Intimacy](#)). For example, one of the presenting causes of anger in our marriages is often our differentness. Ironically, characteristics we found attractive in each other in the beginning may cause friction later on. When we come to marriage, we each bring our own suitcase. On our wedding day these are deposited side by side.

Marriage is the process of bringing these two suitcases together into one—not his or hers, but theirs. That can be challenging, causing anger to appear. (*Illustration: Bring two actual suitcases*)

packed with items which symbolize him and her. Items may be displayed piece by piece showing their different interests, characteristics, etc. that they bring to their relationship.)

If we are able to process and resolve our anger, we can progress toward deeper intimacy. If not, we may be propelled further away from each other in the direction opposite from the intimacy we seek. If unresolved, anger will likely be destructive to relationships. At best, it short-circuits our energy for growth and leads to persistent low-level hostility. At worst, anger can become violent and abusive. The good news is that we can come to understand our emotion of anger, bring it under the discipline of the Holy Spirit, learn to appreciate it, and harness its energy for the good of our relationships.

An Emotion with a Good Purpose

Anger is an important part of our God-given human emotional package. While all our feeling capacities have been altered by sin, it is the purpose of the gospel to bring about a restoration, a healing of our emotions, so that they fulfill God's intentions for them. As a passionate expression of a self-centered heart, uncontrolled by God's Spirit, anger is destructive to individuals and to relationships. Scripture condemns such angry attitudes and behaviors (Ps. 37:8; Gal. 5:19-21). These belong to the "old man" which Christians are called to "put off" (Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8). Anger is an emotion of an individual in Christ (Eph. 4:22-27). The apostle indicates that believers are to be angry, yet not sin (vs. 26). Anger and sin can and should be separated. Ellen G. White supports the concept of anger as appropriate for Christians:

It is true there is an indignation that is justifiable, even in the followers of Christ. When they see that God is dishonored, and His service brought into disrepute, when they see the innocent oppressed, a righteous indignation stirs the soul. Such anger, born of sensitive morals, is not a sin. But those who at any supposed provocation feel at liberty to indulge anger or resentment are opening their heart to Satan. Bitterness and animosity must be banished from the soul if we would be in harmony with heaven. (The Desire of Ages, p. 310 Emphasis supplied)
As we unfold the pertinent Scriptures and this supporting thought by Ellen G. White, we discover that anger has at least these important purposes:

- **Anger defends God's name and cause.** Jesus was angry at the attitude and behavior shown toward the worship of God (Matt. 21:12; Mar. 11:5; John 2:14-17; Compare Ex. 32:19).
- **Anger opposes all injustice and oppression of the innocent.** Jesus was angry at the attitude and behavior shown toward the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:1-5). All human beings, ourselves included, are valuable to God. Mistreatment of innocent human beings should arouse anger in us (Compare Neh. 5:6; 2 Sam. 12:5).
- **Anger signals the need for attention in some part of our life or our relationships.** Anger serves as an early warning system. A number of Christian authors have considered this feature of anger:

Sometimes people signal us to warn or alert us to something we are not fully aware of at that moment. Those signals are for our own benefit. We learn to listen to them. But one of the signals of life that we don't always listen to is anger. *It is a message system telling us that something is not right. We may be hurt, needs may be unmet, our rights have been violated, or we have recognized an injustice. Anger tells us that there is something in our life that needs to be addressed.* (Oliver & Wright, 1992, p. 22 Emphasis supplied)

Anger will never be sinful if we learn to make it the servant of our love and use it creatively to promote the growth and enrichment of our relationship. . . . Two analogies may be helpful:

1. Anger is like the smoke-alarm signal in your home. It warns you when there is danger and enables you to take appropriate action.

2. Anger is like the squeak in the motor of your car, which tells you that something needs to be fixed. Attend to it, and the car will run better than ever. Ignore or avoid it, and you may end up with a breakdown on a lonely road on some dark and stormy night. (Mace, 1982, p. 80)

• **Anger limits the acceptance of abuse.** Abuse is an extraordinary expression of injustice and oppression, the exploitation of an individual in an intimate, trusting relationship. The emotion of anger (along with the underlying emotions of fear and hurt) generated in the abused individual are reliable warning indicators of the violation. Anger stimulates action to limit the abuse and secure self-protection. The Psalmist experienced anger at his mistreatment, gave voice to his distress, sought help, and called out for a redress of the wrong done to him (Ps. 4:1-8; compare Ps. 7:1, 6, 10; 35:1, 2, 4, 17, 23, 24; Luke 18:3-8).

When Anger Harms Relationships

Anger patterns among couples typically take the form of *venting, suppressing, or processing* (Mace, 1982). By their nature the first two of these are more harmful than helpful to the relationship.

• **Vented anger.** Vented anger takes the form of verbal outbursts that range from raised tones of voice, crying, and screaming, to shouting, cursing, hurling insults and other vocal means of releasing anger. Vented anger can be physical—stomping about, hitting or kicking things, throwing objects, slamming doors, or otherwise acting out the anger energy in physical ways. Often it has the effect of shutting down responses from opposition and creating distance from others. Vented anger may soon dissipate after the verbal or physical outburst. However, such anger creates alienation in relationships. It is the form of anger most commonly condemned by Christians, due to its obviousness and its dramatic effects.

• **Suppressed anger.** Suppressed anger is the emotion pushed down inside an individual. There may be outright denial of the feeling, an attempt to seek peace at any price, or an attitude of "Let's just forget it." Other manifestations of suppressed anger include: putting up a sweet phony front to camouflage the anger ("Just as you wish, dear"); silence to punish; criticism, nagging, or passive-aggressive behavior. Suppressed anger is stored and will appear forcefully, perhaps with only the slightest provocation, after building up over time. Research indicates that suppressed anger has detrimental effects upon health, including greater incidence of heart disease, cancer, accidents, suicide and earlier age of death (Oliver & Wright, 1992). Not readily identifiable, suppressed anger is often thought to be acceptable. It leads, however, to low-key hostility in relationships.

[A note about rage. While this seminar is designed to help couples with normal ranges of anger, it is important to note that for some, the anger being vented or suppressed in their relationships may transcend normal ranges. Their anger response seems to far surpass that which could in any way be construed as appropriate to the circumstances. Rage, as this intense anger is called, has complex characteristics beyond the scope of this seminar. Bussert (1986) suggests that the cultural socialization of males often deprives them of normal feeling responses. "The so-called heart emotions such as sadness, hurt, disappointment, regret, feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability, are all channeled into and given expression in one single emotion—explosive anger" (pp. 44, 45). Oliver and Wright (1992) point out that explosive rage and fury exhibited by both men and women *in adulthood is related to overcontrol as well as denial and repression of anger in one's family during childhood. Seminar leaders should suggest professional follow-up to individuals or couples whose expressions of anger involve rage.*]

How to Be Angry Without Sinning

While anger is our enemy when it is vented and suppressed, it can become our friend when it is

processed. Processing anger involves several steps:

- **Acknowledge the emotion.** Growing couples who take a positive approach to anger give each other permission to be angry and to report this anger immediately without a sense of guilt, as easily as they report being hungry or tired. Part of their agreement is to *never* attack, blame, put down, or belittle each other for acknowledging the feeling. While they realize that the anger may reside in only one of them, they make a commitment to work on it and resolve it together when it gets expressed in the relationship.

- **Share in a non-problem time.** Look at the situation as objectively as possible, allowing first for sufficient time to pass so that the heat of the emotion is not likely to pose a barrier to its resolution. Patience with each other is important, since within couples there is frequently a difference in how speedily they each can address an anger issue.

- **Explore the primary emotions.** What processing anger does is to say in effect—"We got angry with each other, and we need to find out exactly why. Anger is a secondary emotion, usually triggered off by one or more underlying primary emotions. Let's try to explore our anger to get back to the primary emotions—fear, frustration, lowered self-esteem, hurt feelings, etc.—that produced the anger in the first place. Then let's see how we can help each other work through those deeper feelings." (Mace, 1982, p. 80).

Many of us are not accustomed to analyzing our anger. So often it arises so quickly that we do not discern its components. This step attempts to carefully identify the feelings that gave rise to the anger. (*Illustration: Draw the outline of an iceberg on a chalkboard or an overhead transparency, with the larger portion underwater. Write "Anger" above the waterline as the secondary emotion. Then ask participants to suggest the primary emotions—fear, hurt, frustration, etc.—which are under the waterline, beneath the anger. Save the lowest portion of the diagram for "low self-worth."*)

"By getting behind the anger to the hurt feeling that has triggered it, a couple can learn something important about their relationship and clear it up. This is one of the most valuable ways in which relationships grow" (Mace & Mace, 1953, p. 58).

- **Listen for feelings.** Listen for feelings and accept one another, even though the feelings expressed may be difficult to hear. Talk together about the deeper feelings, what they mean and how they could be resolved. (*Illustration: Draw the outline of an inflated balloon. Show the balloon full of "FEELINGS," with "facts" in small letters nearly lost at the bottom of the feelings. Show how, as the partner listens for feelings and endeavors to reflect these feelings unconditionally, it is like opening a hole in the balloon and allowing the inflated "feelings" of the other to drain out. Simultaneously, the "facts" grow larger and the one who has been angry is better able to get facts and feelings into perspective.*)

- **Give affirmation.** At the foundation of much of our anger are perceived attacks on our personal worth (*Review the iceberg diagram showing low self-worth at the bottom*). Anger is a healthy defense for the person who has a secure sense of personal worth rooted in creation and redemption. But sin has so warped us that many of us struggle to accept ourselves as valuable and we harbor the internal conviction that we are worthless human beings. Anger then becomes for us a desperate means of protecting ourselves, of guarding from the discovery of others the awful truth we believe about ourselves.

Jesus can bring healing to our damaged emotions. The answer to our inner sense of worthlessness can only be found in Him who created us and redeemed us and bestowed inestimable worth upon us, not for who we are or anything we have done, but because of who He is and what He has done. By our positive attitude toward each other in times of anger, by our commitment to work through the anger, and hear the hurting heart of our partner, we can be Christ's instruments to get that message of His love and value through to our partner in a

practical way.

Leader Couple Dialogue

(Talk together in front of the group for a few moments about the way you have confronted anger in your marriage. Show that you have not always done so in a positive way, but are learning to use anger more constructively in your marriage. This dialogue between you as spouses will help to model for the couples the process you have been describing and give them an example of how they are to proceed with the exercise which follows.)

Participant's Exercise and Dialogue

Distribute [Handout #3 When Anger Flares](#). Invite couples to take 10 minutes to fill out the worksheet and a final 10 minutes to share their responses with each other.

Closing

Affirm couples for their attention and hard work together. Encourage them to continue discussing together the concepts they have learned. Pray to close.

References

Bussert, J. M. K. (1986). *Battered women: From a theology of suffering to an ethic of empowerment*. New York: Lutheran Church in America.

Mace, D. (1982). *Love & anger in marriage*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Mace, D., & Mace, V. (1953). *In the presence of God*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.

Oliver, G. J., & Wright, H. N. (1992). *When anger hit home*. Chicago: Moody Press.

White, E. G. (1940). *The desire of ages*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association.