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Anger: Adding Fuel to the Fire of Distress*

By itself, anger isn't the problem. Anger is an emotion common to the human experience. But unresolved anger—expressing our anger in unhealthy and harmful ways—will eat at us from the inside out. In *The Anger Workbook*, Les Carter and Frank Minirth describe five types of anger: three effective, two ineffective. Among the ineffective types are suppressive anger (denying angry feelings and stuffing them deep inside, acting as if they don't exist), open aggression (explosive, intimidating, blaming others directly and openly) and passive aggression (manipulative “through the back door” anger directed at others in more quiet or subtle ways). Each of these methods for dealing with anger not only damages relationships but does ongoing emotional damage to the one harboring the anger.

Carter and Minirth identify two alternative methods for dealing with anger more effectively (see Matthew 18:15-22). *Assertive anger* is accomplished by proactively approaching others and dealing with them directly and honestly about the problem at hand. This method places all the issues on the table in plain view and encourages open dialogue leading to a mutually positive resolution. The second alternative is dropping anger; that is, *overlooking the offense* or simply letting it go. Pastor Dennis Siebert describes well what dropping anger practically looks like from his own experience and compares it with the mental exercise many confuse with forgiveness:

One of the things I encountered in a time of personal bitterness was the difficulty of genuinely forgiving. I knew I was bitter and desired to forgive the individual, praying to forgive them many times. What I found happening was that as soon as something negative happened with the individual, I immediately began to re-experience all the old hurt feelings again.

Then someone helped me see that I was only mentally forgiving the individual—merely a mental exercise without real forgiveness from my heart. What I found helpful in making the transition was to recall how I had been hurt, recalling the specific pain the individual had caused me. I then acknowledged and accepted the pain, choosing to release the individual from an expectation of “repaying” me for the injury. Only then did the bitterness begin to lose its hold on my heart.

Thoughts to Ponder:

- Which of the alternative responses to angry feelings—assertive anger or overlooking the offense—do you find more difficult to put into practice? What makes this so?
- What situations are you facing where one of these methods for resolving anger might be useful?

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* This article is an excerpt from *Preventing Ministry Failure: A ShepherdCare Guide for Pastors, Ministers, and Other Caregivers* (InterVarsity Press, 2007, pp. 115-116)