

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

In 1938, American-born Reformed theologian H. Richard Niebuhr wrote: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross” (*The Kingdom of God in America*, 193). It was part of his critique of liberal Protestant Christianity in America. Let me repeat it: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.”

Now eighty-five years later in much of our culture today — if they believe in god at all — this is their god: a god of love without wrath. Even they know the popular John 3:16, and they suggest it supports their contention: “*For God SO loved the world*” And the next verse does, too: “*For God did not come into the world to condemn the world ...*” Surely this implies that God is a “God without wrath.”

But all this just goes to show how many people little understand this oft-quoted verse from John. And don’t misunderstand me. Truly “*God is love*” (1 John 4:8). The question is: can the God of love also be a God of wrath? Can He curse as well as bless (Gen. 12:3)?

To get a handle on that, consider the second part of Niebuhr’s critique: “God ... brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment” Modern culture likes that assessment, too. Certainly the false teacher Joyce Meyer believes and teaches she is without sin. Meyer was obviously brought up in The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod as she explicitly rejects the confession that begins our services. She once famously proclaimed: “All I was ever taught to say was, ‘I’m a poor, miserable sinner.’ I am not poor. I am not miserable. And I am not a sinner” (https://youtu.be/NhDBwJVQv_o).

Similarly with regard to judgment. An ELCA pastor wrote some years back: “starting the service with confession and forgiveness says to the guests: ‘You are sinners!’ For years,” he says, “some people have stayed away from church, fearing such condemnation. Finally, having the courage to come, they hear from the start how bad they are — that they cannot worship until they confess their failures and shortcomings.” (Timothy Wright, *A Community of Joy: How to Create Contemporary Worship*). They want “a Kingdom without judgment.” Therefore, we should get rid of confession. It’s a turn off, he says.

And what of us? Are we really confessing our sins at the beginning of the service, or are we just going through the motions? Do we Christians come to church actually thinking that “our sinfulness” “justly deserve[s] [God’s] temporal and eternal punishment,” or rather that our sins are “smaller or less detestable in comparison with the sins of others”? If so, then we are “not recognizing [our] sinfulness at all,” wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and we are acting as if we are “men

without sin.” But Scripture bears witness that “*all have sinned*” (Rom. 3:23). Again St. Paul says: “*death spread to all men because all sinned*” (Rom. 5:12). If we say otherwise, “*the truth is not in us*” (1 John 1:8). The law tells us this, and our “sin is of necessity the worst, the most grievous, the most reprehensible” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, quoted by Dale Meyer, *Concordia Journal*, Winter/Spring 2017).

Yes, we confess, the law instructs us about our sin. “The Law was given to people for three reasons . . .,” we confess in the Formula of Concord, and the second reason is “(2) that people may be led to the knowledge of their sins by the Law” (Epitome, VI:1). That echoes St. Paul: “*if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin*” (Romans 7:7). Moreover, “*the law brings wrath,*” St. Paul teaches in our Epistle. Yes, because of the law, we understand that the God of love is also a God of wrath who punishes sin. Consider the evangelist John just a few verses after our Gospel: “*whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*” (John 3:36).

Often people are so focused on the “*for God so loved,*” that they forget what comes right before that verse . . . that Moses had to fashion a fiery serpent out of bronze and place it on a pole to be lifted up. And why? In order to save the Israelites . . . because our loving God was wrathful with them, with their unbelief, with their complaints and grumblings (Numbers 21:4-9).

Repent! For not just the Israelites of old, but also modern Christians are to “*put to death . . . what is earthly in [us]: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness. This is idolatry.*” Daily we need to put to death this “*sin which clings so closely*” to us . . . by daily contrition and repentance drown the old Adam in us. “*On account of these the wrath of God is coming*” (Colossians 3:3-5).

Of course the God of love is also a God of wrath, for He judges with righteousness and equity (Psalm 98:9), for not everyone will enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus says, “*unless one is born [from above],*” that is, by the action of God Himself in the waters of Holy Baptism, what Jesus says is birth by “*water and the Spirit,*” “*he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” There is a judgment with the God who is love. The judgment is: the unbelieving do not enter the kingdom. “*Whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God*” (John 3:18).

How then is a wrathful God a God of love? Our text tells us. The love of God is manifested in Christ Jesus our Lord, whom “*God put forward as a propitiation by his blood*” (Rom. 3:25). That is, Jesus not only bore our sins, but He bore God’s wrath because of our sins and God’s righteous judgment for them. This is what the cross is all about. It’s why Jesus said, “*The Son of man must be lifted up*”; “*it is necessary*” for our salvation — just like the serpent was lifted up on the pole. But unlike the serpent made of bronze, Jesus, the living, breathing Son of Man, was

lifted up unto death. Suffering at the hands of “*the elders and chief priests and scribes,*” He was killed (Matthew 16:21).

Which brings us back to John 3:16, for it turns out that this Son of Man is also the “*only Son*” of God. He is the Word of God in the flesh, whom God not only gave into the world, but He gave His Son to be “*lifted up from the earth*” that He might cast down the prince of this world in Christ, that He might judge the world in Christ (John 12:32), that He might cover our sins, forgive our lawless deeds, and account us righteous in Christ.

This is what John 3:16 means, and it’s what John means in his first epistle when he says, “*God is love.*” Anyone who cares to read farther than that sound bite would learn that: “*In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him*” — there’s the incarnation. And John continues, “*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins*” — there’s atonement on the cross (1 John 4:9-10). There is God’s wrath placed on Christ for our sake.

“A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.” Niebuhr called this liberal Protestant view, “naïvely optimistic.” I’ll just call it what it is: plain wrong, and contrary to Scripture. Worse than that, this view takes away every comfort that we might receive from our Gospel today, for what good is God’s love if we have no sin, if God is indifferent to sin, if God is uninterested in rebirth by water and the Spirit, if He is apathetic about faith? What good is the love of God in Christ? Then Christ becomes beside the point.

Then that comforting answer at the end of Romans 8 to the question: “*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*” becomes Christ-less. Then it becomes “*I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God*” period, apart from Christ. But Jesus already taught us: apart from Christ God’s wrath remains. In Christ, however, believing in Him, we do not perish but have eternal life. That’s why Paul’s answer is that nothing can “*separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

And so we are comforted. God’s eternal wrath upon sinners was assuaged by His only Son, the world justified by His cross, believers saved by His grace. “*God is love.*” And our judgment? “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Rom. 8:1), who are baptized into Him, born of water and the Spirit, who believe in Him. For believers the judgment is righteousness, salvation, and eternal life in the kingdom of heaven.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.