

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

“A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.” Thus wrote the American-born Reformed theologian H. Richard Niebuhr in 1938 in his book *The Kingdom of God in America* (p. 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 nearly eighty years later in much of our culture today, we can see how this message has had a receptive audience. They love the “*God is love*” (1 John 4:8) message, which must imply, so they think, that God is indeed a “God without wrath.” Surely the beloved John 3:16 supports this implication: “*For God sooo loved the world*” And the next verse, too: “*For God did not come into the world to condemn the world ...*” Surely that implies that God is a “God without wrath.”

But all this just goes to show how little most people, including perhaps we, understand this much-quoted verse from John.

Truly “*God is love.*” So, can a God of love also be a God of wrath?

To get a handle on that, consider the second part of Niebuhr’s critique. “God ... brought men without sin ...”. Modern culture likes that assessment, too. Oh, it may be okay for long-time churchgoers to admit they’re sinners. They’re used to that confession at the beginning of a service. Twenty years ago already, an ELCA pastor wrote, “but 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*). It’s a turn off, he says.

But what of us? Are we really confessing our sins at the beginning of the service, or is it merely *pro forma*, done just because it’s there, but without much thought? Do we Christians come to church actually thinking that “our sinfulness” is “in any way 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 we are sinners—“*for all have sinned*” (Romans 3:23). The law tells us that, 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, the law instructs about our sin. St. Paul says, “*if it had not been for the*

law, I would not have known sin” (Romans 7:7). And the law does more. St. Paul teaches us in our Epistle that *“the law brings wrath.”* Indeed, because of sin, our 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).

Are we so focused on the *“for God so loved,”* that we forget what comes right before this verse? That Moses had to fashion a fiery serpent out of bronze and place it on a pole to be lifted up? Why? Because our loving God was wrathful with the Israelites, with their unbelief, with their complaints and grumblings (Numbers 21:4-9).

Repent! For not just the Israelites of old, but modern Christians, too, are to *“put to death ... what is earthly in [us]: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness. This is idolatry.”* And St. Paul says, *“On account of these the wrath of God is coming”* (Colossians 3:3-5).

Yes, our God of love is also a God of wrath, and He indeed judges with righteousness and equity (Psalm 98:9), for not everyone will enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus says, *“unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”*; again, *“unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”* Not all enter; the unbelieving do not. Scripture condemns the unbelieving: *“Whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God”* (John 3:18).

So how then is our God a God of love? He is wrathful over men’s sins. Everyone will not be in heaven; He condemns the unbelieving. What kind of love is that?

Our text tells us. The love of God is manifested in Christ Jesus our Lord and in His ministrations expressed most touchingly on His cross. Jesus said, *“The Son of man must be lifted up”*; Jesus had to *“be killed”* (Matthew 16:21)—crucified.

Yes, the cross is in John 3:16. It’s not what you thought, or at least, not what I thought when I first memorized it. It’s not what most of the world thinks when they hear it. It’s not: *“For God sooo loved the world,”* meaning that God had so much love for us. That is surely true, but that’s not what the “so” of this verse means. God’s love for us expressed here is not about an abstract feeling and its quantity, but about concrete action. God’s love for you is put into action—and He loved the world in this way: He gave His only Son. He gave Him to be lifted up.

Yes, just like Moses put that bronze serpent on the pole, so the Son of Man descended from heaven to be lifted up on the pole of a cross, there to suffer, there to die, there to take upon Himself the punishment for the sins of the world, there to be Himself the recipient of God’s wrath for us, that we, like the Israelites of old, might look to Him and be saved. That we might look to Him and believe in Him

and be the recipients not of the punishment we deserve because of our sins, but the love we do not deserve but is given to us freely by His grace.

This is our God of love, the One who sent His Son down from His side into our flesh, the One who sent Him down that He might be lifted up on a cross. That's what John 3:16 means, and that's what John means in his first epistle, too, when he says, "*God is love.*" Anyone, who cares to read farther than this 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 the cross (1 John 4:9-10).

"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." As a theologian of the cross, 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 from 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*"—in the abstract. No Christ. The love of God period. But the answer Paul gives is that none of these things, not death nor life, etc., "*will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

And so we are comforted, for we are sinners, doomed to God's eternal wrath, apart from His love. But God loved us in this way: He sent His only Son unto us, unto the cross, that whoever looks to Him should not perish, that whoever is united with Him in that rebirth of water and the Spirit that unites believers to Jesus in His death and resurrection, that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life. There's the God of Love, the One that saves and comforts.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.