

EDITORIAL: Chewing up anger, 1 bite at a time

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A couple of weeks ago, I wrote a blog about giving up anger for Lent. You're probably familiar with the practice of forgoing favorite "things" during the weeks leading up to Easter. Every year, I know friends who abstain from items they savor—usually, it's chocolate, or coffee, or cheeseburgers, a favorite TV show, stuff like that—beginning Ash Wednesday and extending through Holy Week. This year, the Lenten season spans from Feb. 22 to April 8.

Editor Marv Knox

Unlike many Baptists, particularly those who share my naturally provincial perspective, I have learned to take significant spiritual nourishment by following the church calendar. It not only reminds us to observe Christmas and Easter, but also Advent, Lent and Pentecost, as well as daily and weekly Scripture readings from the lectionary. Baptists' resistance to these faith practices generally stems from our historic adversarial relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. But that's a poor reason; the church calendar transcends denominational differences. Following its rhythms and pondering its nuance can stimulate spiritual exploration and growth. It also symbolizes our solidarity with the church universal and enables us to learn from Christian sisters and brothers who live beyond our Baptist borders.

So, to use an old-timey Baptist word, I felt convicted about my anger as Ash Wednesday approached. That's not to say I wasn't provoked. In the days leading up to Lent, evangelist Franklin Graham acted as if he owns the Lamb's Book of Life, pronouncing his opinion about the salvation—or damnation—of presidential candidates. And then the Southern Baptist Convention announced it wouldn't officially change its name, but its

members could call themselves "Great Commission Baptists." As if they cornered the evangelism market. True to form, I got angry with my fellow Christians whose judgmentalism and arrogance embarrassed me in public, out in front of my non-Baptist, not to mention non-Christian, friends.

But then I felt badly about the sin of my own judgmental anger. Whether or not I agree with other Christians is beside the point. In fact, we may disagree significantly about doctrine, tactics, politics and church practice. But when I nurture anger against them, it's like one part of the body despising another. "And besides, getting angry is hard work" I explained. "It's constricting work. And it resists God's grace, which I treasure more with each passing day."

A friend sent me an email, suggesting I'd bitten off more than I could chew—at least at one time. "I suggest you start with resentment, then work up to disappointment and then hostility. Save anger for the last week in Lent," he wrote. "No sense blowing all your remorse on just one shade of the emotion. Make it a journey through the dark side. You'll feel ever so much better if you space it all out."

My friend offered solid advice, which I've been following, except I took the liberty of reversing part of his order. I backed off anger but focused first on disappointment. It's the coolest of those four emotions, growing as it does out of grief. In my case, the first step toward anger began with disappointment that fellow Christians failed to behave appropriately. I expect more of them, and so disappointment blends sadness with revulsion. Now, I'm working on resentment, which no doubt grows out of jealousy that these badly behaving brothers captured such a bright spotlight while more winsome saints serve in the shadows. Soon, I'll turn my attention toward hostility, saving anger for Holy Week. I'm praying to learn lessons of humility, forbearance and repentance not only for anger, but also for the other actions in my life I despise in others.

My friend's advice provides a helpful template for other Lenten journeys. What's your spiritual struggle? Rather than attempting to defeat it all at once, consider the thoughts and actions that lead up to and enable your sin. Prioritize them, beginning with the most accessible and easiest to overcome. Then work your way up to your primary challenge.

Engage the power of incremental progress. Your journey to Easter will be fuller, richer and more productive.

Marv Knox is editor of the Baptist Standard. Visit his blog at baptiststandard.com.