

## PASTORING IN THE AGE OF ANGER

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### I. THE AGE OF ANGER

In his important book, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, Pankaj Mishra recounts the meeting between Timothy McVeigh, who in 1995 ignited a bomb outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people, and Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, the mastermind of the 1993 attack of the World Trade Center, the precursor to the attacks of 9/11. These two men, raised in different countries, in different religions, and with different political ideologies motivating their terrorist acts, found themselves in adjacent cells at the Supermax prison near Florence, Colorado. In the time that they were neighbors, the two formed an unlikely relationship and found that, in spite of their enormously different life experiences, they had a deep connection. In fact, after McVeigh was put to death, Yousef commented, “I never have [known] anyone in my life who has so similar a personality to my own as his.”<sup>2</sup>

Mishra calls their meeting “the most illuminating coincidence of our time.”<sup>3</sup> But what is it that their relationship illuminates? According to Mishra, this story sheds light on the defining feature of the early twenty-first century: we are living in the age of anger, a time of seething rage that is not isolated to one segment of society or to one region of the world but has spread throughout the world and infected every level of society. What connects McVeigh and Yousef, in spite of all of their differences, is a deep anger at the state of the world, an anger that creates a desire to strike out against the people and structures that are the object of their ire and are, in their mind, the cause of their alienation.

Mishra’s book explores the historical movement over the past three hundred years that has brought us to the age of anger and argues that “the unprecedented political, economic, and social disorder that accompanied the rise of the industrial capitalist economy in nineteenth-century Europe, and led to world wars, totalitarian regimes, and genocide in the first half

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<sup>2</sup> Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 285.

<sup>3</sup> Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 284.

of the twentieth century, is now affecting much vaster regions and bigger populations.”<sup>4</sup> Tracing the history of the West, and its relationship to the rest of the world, Mishra argues that the framework of our day can be found in the historical patterns that have plagued the West and now are at work throughout the globe. He makes the startling statement that “forces more complex than in the previous two great wars are at work” in our time.<sup>5</sup> His book traces the ideological connections from Voltaire to Trump, connections that are illuminated by the kinship between McVeigh and Yousef, a kinship that has at its core a common experience of dislocation and alienation that breeds what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*.

As pastors, we are called to lead our flocks through the age of anger, to lead them to resist conformity to the forces at work in our world that are creating this age. To do so, it is critical to understand the dynamics that are creating the age of anger and to counter these dynamics with faithful preaching and discipleship of our flocks. Only by doing so can we be used by the Lord to form our people into a community of peace in a time of rage. It will come as no surprise to any of us that the anger of our era has made its way into the church. Perhaps you, like me, have witnessed this anger within your congregation as members of your flock battle it out on social media, and as people you have known to be gentle, loving followers of Jesus turn on each other with angry rants over mask mandates and political candidates. As pastors, it is important for us to understand the dynamics that are at work globally in order to understand how these are playing out locally, including in our local church fellowship. As pastors, we must ask: How do we shepherd our flock in this volatile time? How can we lead our congregation to grow to maturity in Christ, to be representatives of God’s peaceful rule, and to resist being conformed to the patterns of our angry age? How can we counter the anger of our age that is flooding the church?

The purpose of this essay is to encourage pastors to lead in this challenging time. To do so, I will describe, at a thematic level, Mishra’s argument about how we have come to inhabit the age of anger and then reflect on what it means to pastor in the age of anger. I will conclude the essay with reflections on the need for pastors to reshape our congregational common objects of love, that we might be formed as communities whose hearts are not dedicated to the promises of human ideologies that have created the age of anger, but rather are being formed by the promises of the gospel that lead us to be a people who are shaped to be witness to the peace of God in a world of anger.

## II. WHY SO ANGRY?

According to Mishra, the widespread anger that has come to mark our age is rooted in the complex story of the rise and spread of modern liberalism, which is fundamentally a vision of being human that makes comprehensive promises about how to improve the human condition and

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<sup>4</sup> Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 10.

achieve human flourishing.<sup>6</sup> Mishra argues that the promise of modern liberalism is “the universal commercial society of self-interested individuals that was originally advocated in the eighteenth century by such Enlightenment thinkers as Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Voltaire, and Kant.”<sup>7</sup> Modern liberalism makes promises of equality, economic well-being, and autonomous control over our own lives. However, it turns out that these promises are not easily deliverable to the vast majority of humanity, leading Mishra to ask, “Can the triumphant axioms of individual autonomy and interest-seeking, formulated, sanctified, and promoted by a privileged minority, work for the majority in a crowded and inter-dependent world?”<sup>8</sup> For Mishra, the answer is no, and it is in this answer that we will find the key to understanding the anger of our times.

He goes on to say that the great success of western liberalism is that it has captured the imagination of billions of people, becoming the dominant ideology of the late modern world.<sup>9</sup> On this he writes, “Indeed, we live today in a vast homogenous world market, in which human beings are programmed to maximize their self-interest and aspire to the same things, regardless of their difference of cultural background and individual temperament.”<sup>10</sup> The dominance of modern liberalism, and the market that accompanies it, has spread throughout the world, bringing with it a vision of human thriving that includes promises of freedom, prosperity, and equality. Throughout the twentieth century, as the post-war world was established and global communication grew, billions of people heard the promises of modern liberalism and its vision of human thriving through autonomy and self-determination. As “a whole new universe of possibilities about how human beings could act in and shape history” spread across the earth, more and more people seized on the possibilities, and so more and more people could be disenchanted with the failure of bringing those possibilities into reality.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> By modern liberalism, I am not referring to the liberalism of the Liberal to Conservative policy spectrum in partisan politics. Rather, I am referring to the political philosophy that undergirds that policy spectrum.

<sup>7</sup> Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> This dominance is famously declared by Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama, writing in the days of the collapse of the Soviet Union, declares that humanity has reached the apex of our political thinking with the development of liberalism and the vanquishing of communism as an ideological competitor. While Fukuyama’s thesis has often been misunderstood as saying that history has somehow ceased or that liberalism will reign unimpeded in the world, his argument is more nuanced than this. For Fukuyama, the declaration of the end of history is the declaration that humanity will not develop a better political philosophy than liberalism, but not that there won’t be others that challenge liberalism. What he advocates is in alignment with Mishra’s thesis, namely that western liberalism has become the dominant philosophy in the late modern world, one whose dominance has spread throughout the globe and created a vision for human life in the twenty-first century. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 51.

Mishra asserts that the age of anger is rooted in the gap between the promise of what the universal commercial society of self-interested individuals would accomplish and what, in fact, has been delivered to the vast majority of humans living in the world today. According to Mishra, “More and more people feel the gap between the profligate promises of individual freedom and sovereignty, and the incapacity of their political and economic organizations to realize them.”<sup>12</sup> Anger festers in this gap as millions of humans despair of the great difference between what has been promised and what is experienced. In this gap *ressentiment* grows.

*Ressentiment* is a concept explored by Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morality*.<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche’s discussion of *ressentiment* is found in his famous analysis of the victory of the slave morality.<sup>14</sup> For Nietzsche, the victory of slave morality is the great tragedy of human history due to its dampening of the human spirit and human development. Rather than a victory of the aristocratic morality, which would celebrate human strength, the slave morality, exemplified by the call of Jesus for humans to surrender, forms humans to be weak. But this call to be weak reveals a deep contradiction in the human soul: we long to be strong, we long to have control, and so the call to surrender that is embodied in the Christian ethic has been, according to Nietzsche, a destructive force within history, as it destroys the human soul and leaves it filled with *ressentiment*, a deep-seeded sense of jealousy, weakness, and a longing for power. For Nietzsche, the tragedy of the slave morality is that it creates *ressentiment*, a sense of indignity and disgrace in the human soul, “a whole tremulous realm of subterranean revenge, inexhaustible and insatiable in outbursts.”<sup>15</sup> *Ressentiment*, though connected to the feeling of resentment, goes beyond it. Resentment is an emotional response to a momentary slight or indignation. It is the response to injustice that a person feels or a jealousy that is felt in response to a particular circumstance of another person’s success. But, as an emotion, resentment fades as the indignation is either addressed or recedes into the background and so no longer has control over the person who felt slighted. But *ressentiment* goes deeper. It is a way of being formed, a settled attitude that becomes a state of being in an individual or in a group. *Ressentiment* is the formation of the human soul whose life has been dominated by a sense of losing and of being oppressed. It becomes that condition of a person whose life is driven by a deep indignation at the real and perceived inequalities of life.

Mishra, taking up this theme of *ressentiment*, is less concerned with Nietzsche’s particular project of moving humanity “beyond good and evil,” but instead utilizes the notion of *ressentiment* in the twenty-first century to describe the forces working on our world today. For Mishra, *ressentiment* forms in the gap between promise and reality because the gap creates the

<sup>12</sup> Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 51.

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality* (London: Penguin Classics, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> See *The Genealogy of Morality*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 9.

conditions in which this interminable sense of dislocation, estrangement, and alienation do their formative work on a human soul—and on a human society. *Ressentiment* grows in people who view themselves as “wholly dispensable in a society where economic growth enriched only a minority and democracy appeared to be a game rigged by the powerful.”<sup>16</sup> As history has progressed through the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, with the rise of global communications and commerce, the spread of western ideology via the growth of multinational corporations, and the exporting of entertainment, the sense of *ressentiment* has spread. First identified as a force burning in the souls of a few revolutionaries seeking to overturn the authoritarian monarchies of the late nineteenth century, *ressentiment* has now become a global phenomenon, and technology has created more and more opportunity for the spread of the western liberal vision of humanity, the accompanying mimetic desire<sup>17</sup> that shapes the human heart, and the *ressentiment* that takes root in broad segments of society whose mimetic desires have not been satisfied.

### III. EVERYONE IS LOSING

As we have seen, Mishra has argued that *ressentiment* has become endemic across the globe and at all levels of society as a palpable sense of loss has taken hold across wide segments of the population, fueling anger, violence, and social media rants, revealing a perception of standing on unstable ground as “they” win but “we” lose. This notion of others winning while we are losing brings us to Mishra’s conclusion about the driving dynamic of our age: in the early twenty-first century, in a way that has never been the case in human history, *everyone* feels like they are losing.

This widespread sense of loss is inevitable once *ressentiment* has taken root in society. *Ressentiment* operates in our soul by shaping the way we see others and interpret the world around us. The formation of *ressentiment* in our souls and in our society means that we must find those who are responsible for our losing. “They” are the winners who are causing our losing, who are standing between us and the promises of self-determination and success that we have been given, and so “they” are threatening us. This creates a societal blame game in which everyone feels like losers and blames others for their loss. But the problem is that the others are people who themselves feel like they are losing and are themselves filled with *ressentiment* at others who are perceived to be winning.

We see this dynamic at work in American society today. White, mid-western working-class people, who have lost the security that came with steady employment, pensions, stable towns, and unions, blame the liberal elites, who, in the mind of these workers, are the “winners” who are stealing the promises of prosperity and security. At the same time, liberal coastal elites feel that they are losing the promise of liberal democracy to Red State Republicans, who, in the mind of the elites, insist on denying the freedoms

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<sup>16</sup> Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> I will explore the notion of mimetic desire below.

of others by imposing their dated morality on society, so standing in the way of individual liberty. African Americans, who have had the experience of being losers in the promise of liberal democracy for centuries, blame the structures of America that favor historically white, privileged people, a stance that causes a reaction from working-class whites who don't feel privileged in any way precisely because they themselves feel like losers, as noted above. *Ressentiment* creates a vicious cycle of blame and a desire for protection from losing that individuals and groups feel today, fueling the passions around a political culture that feels like a zero-sum game in which the future of "our" society is at stake. Everyone feels like they are losing. Everyone blames others. *Everyone* is angry.

Here, Mishra makes an important observation: much of the literature on the anger that is animating our world locates this anger in human difference, in the fact that diverse groups have different values, values that are in conflict with one another and are causing the rage that is consuming our age. Hence, the solution is in diversity training, by which people are guided in coming to understand their own biases and to understand the viewpoints of others in order that these differences might be bridged and society find common ground. But Mishra rejects this interpretation. For him, the pervasive *ressentiment* of our age arises, not because of our difference, but because of our similarity. The spread of modern liberalism has formed humanity to desire the same things, to have a shared vision of "the good life." It is because of this common vision that *ressentiment* festers so broadly. Mishra writes, "We come closer to understanding *ressentiment* today when we recognize that it arises out of an intensely competitive human desire for convergence and resemblance rather than religious, cultural, theological, and ideological difference."<sup>18</sup> In other words, the age of anger is so widespread because billions of humans have the same basic vision of the good life, but only a few are perceived to have achieved it. "They" are privileged over against "us" in the quest for and attainment of the promises we have all been given but have not achieved.

As such, Mishra stresses the connection between *ressentiment* and mimetic desire. Mimetic desire describes that the way that our hearts are shaped by the longing to have what others have, a notion made famous by René Girard, but which Nietzsche had already identified in his time.<sup>19</sup> This mimetic desire shapes a world in which "people [are] desiring and trying to possess the same objects."<sup>20</sup> In making this connection, Mishra highlights that "*ressentiment* [is] the defining feature of a world where mimetic desire . . . endlessly proliferates, and where the modern promise of equality collides with massive disparities of power, education, status, and

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<sup>18</sup> Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 50.

<sup>19</sup> See especially René Girard, "Generative Scapegoating," in Robert G. Hammerton-Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 122.

<sup>20</sup> Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 73.

property ownership.”<sup>21</sup> Mimetic desire is the dominant mode of formation in the modern world as the very few who have received the promises of modern liberalism shape the tastes and desires of massive numbers of people whose hearts long for what they have. These forces, which have been present throughout history, now have a global ecosystem in which they can thrive through communications technology, social media, education, and commercialization. *Ressentiment*, and the mimetic desire that accompanies it, are not new to human history, but have spread across the globe in ways never previously possible, creating dynamics that have seeded our age with such anger.

To use a phrase that Mishra doesn't use but that is apropos to his analysis and will bridge us to our reflections on pastoring in the age of anger, modern liberalism creates a set of “common objects of love” and shapes humans to set their hearts on those objects. The clashes that we are experiencing in our world are so widespread and the anger so endemic, not because humanity has competing common objects of love, but because liberalism has successfully shaped the human heart to have the same common objects. Thus, unquenched mimetic desire breeds *ressentiment*, from which flows the anger of our time.

#### IV. COMMON OBJECTS OF LOVE

As noted in my introduction, the age of anger has not stopped at the church door. Social media has become the site of many a battle between Christian soldiers who are marching as to war against each other. As pastors, we are called to shepherd our flocks in these difficult days, to grasp how our people, and our own souls, are shaped by the forces that have created the age of anger. We are called to be intentional in our pastoral work to preach and to disciple so that our congregations might be freed from the dynamics of the age of anger. It is critical to understand the degree to which our congregants have been formed by promises that do not arise from the gospel and to determine the degree to which this formation is shaping them to be participants in the age of anger. Is the anger of our age infecting our congregations because the people entrusted to our care feel like they are losing and are afraid of that loss? Have our churches been formed by the age of anger because we have bought into the promises of the modern world, promises that are at odds with the call to follow Jesus?

To explore this, I want to interact with Oliver O'Donovan's book *Common Objects of Love*.<sup>22</sup> In this book, O'Donovan engages with the question of how commitments of love form a community. O'Donovan borrowed this notion from Augustine,<sup>23</sup> who defined a people as “a gathered multitude of rational beings united by agreeing to share the things they love.”<sup>24</sup> As such, a people becomes a “we,” a community of shared

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<sup>21</sup> Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Augustine adapted it from Cicero.

<sup>24</sup> O'Donovan, *Common Objects*, 25.

purpose, by agreeing to love certain common objects that shape the way this community understands the world and their place in the world. The common objects of love take on a value of “transcendental representation,” a phrase that O’Donovan borrows from the historian Erich Voegelin and uses to discuss the representational value of the things that a society holds in common. For instance, O’Donovan writes, “What is holy in ancient Israel—the Sabbath, the temple, the land—at once organizes and structures the people as a political society and discloses the universal divine purpose for the world.”<sup>25</sup> The common objects of love are the “representative objects, representative persons, representative histories, and representative ideas [that] constitute the central core of the society’s common way of seeing the world and living in it.”<sup>26</sup>

In O’Donovan’s description of common objects of love, we find a connection between a community’s tradition and its identity. No community can long endure without tradition. Tradition is what provides continuity with the commitments of the society and is the process through which the common objects are passed on through time, forming the necessary foundation for the continuance of a society. For O’Donovan, “the essential thing about tradition is that it creates social continuity.”<sup>27</sup> Without a recognized and agreed-upon tradition, it is impossible for a community to have shape, to have a sense of what makes us “us.” From this, it is clear that the common objects of love, having identified the transcendental representatives that shape the tradition, also form the shared identity of a community. O’Donovan observes that “common objects of love generate common self-understanding.”<sup>28</sup> Who are “we”? What unites us as a social community? The common objects of love perform this function and set social groupings apart from one another. These objects are language, practices, moral customs, symbols, a shared historical narrative. All of these, along with myriad other things and ideas, give a community its identity and so its understanding of itself and its place in the world. In the same way that Sabbath, the temple, and land are shared objects for Israel that organize her life together and shape her understanding of her place in the world, so it is with all societies whose identity is formed around the complex interplay between representative objects and tradition.

I believe that O’Donovan’s vision of the common objects of love gives us insight into pastoring in the age of anger, as we bring his understanding of the shaping of a societal identity into conversation with Mishra’s narrative of the genesis and growth of the age of anger. As we have seen, Mishra has argued that the age of anger has arisen as a result of the promises that modern liberalism has made and so grows in the gap that has been created between promises and reality. As pastors, shepherding our people in the age of anger places us in a critical interpretive position. As church congregations

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<sup>25</sup> O’Donovan, *Common Objects*, 31.

<sup>26</sup> O’Donovan, *Common Objects*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> O’Donovan, *Common Objects*, 32.

<sup>28</sup> O’Donovan, *Common Objects*, 28.

are divided by politics, as this division creates anger in our congregations and toward other followers of Christ, as the political affiliation of others becomes a way of deciphering another person's salvation ("you can't be a follower of Christ and vote for \_\_\_\_"), we must do the hard pastoral work of engaging with this anger, explicating for our congregations where it comes from and what we must do to be freed from it and so be formed as communities of love rather than anger.

Mishra's analysis of the age of anger, and O'Donovan's conception of common objects of love, give us a plan for the pastoral work we are called to do in this time.<sup>29</sup> As pastors, it is vital that we make clear to our congregation the common objects of love that we as followers of Jesus are called to share. Additionally, we must clarify that the promises that we have received as followers of Christ are not the same promises that the world around us has received. The ideals that Mishra highlights as the prominent ideals of modern liberalism, the common objects of love that have spread across the globe—objects such as autonomy and self-determination—are not coequal with the common objects of love that the church is called to share. They are, in fact, are often contradictory to the call to follow Christ. As such, the common objects of modern liberalism have created a vision of what to expect from life that is at odds with the vision contained in the common objects of Christianity which form the church into a society that is called to live among, but not be conformed to, the broader society. O'Donovan's assertion that "community...arise[s] out of the love of good things, things that are agreed upon as the common objects we agree to share," forces us to the vitally important pastoral work of communal identity formation, a work that will call us to counter the existing communal identity formation, and the promises therein, fueling the age of anger.

To follow Jesus is not to be given the promise of individual freedom and autonomy. Christ doesn't promise us a greater degree of control over our lives, but instead promises us the loss of control as we are called to lay down our lives for Him. Because of this, the church is called to embody the contrast between the promises that have created the age of anger and the call to follow Jesus. Modern liberalism tells us that we will flourish as self-interested, autonomous individuals who have entered into a social contract in order to protect our self-interest and exercise our independent rule over our lives. It declares that human freedom lies in pursuing our own self-determined ends. The gospel's vision of humanity declares something else, that we are created to be a self-surrendered, dependent community who live under the rule of YHWH, who has covenanted with us to guide, protect, and provide for us. It declares that human freedom lies in being

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<sup>29</sup> The lectures that became the basis for O'Donovan's book, the Stob Lectures at Calvin College, were written during the time of the 9/11 attacks. Mishra states that these attacks were the main wake-up call to the Western world that there was an anger that was growing and was now no longer "out there," contained in failed states, but was an anger that would have repercussions on and in the seemingly secure and advanced Western societies. Timothy McVeigh could be viewed as an outlier, but following 9/11, the societal distress that has grown since that time has become undeniable, even as politicians continue to deny it.

dependent on YHWH as he reigns as Lord of our lives. These two visions of what it means to be human reveal different common objects of love. As the church, the common objects of love that shape our identity puts us at odds with the affections, desires, and strivings of modern liberalism.

When the church is freed from the common objects of love that are desired by the society to which we are sent as ambassadors, we will also be freed from the *ressentiment* that has arisen throughout our world and is rooted in a sense of dislocation from the world's common objects and the mimetic desire to attain those objects. As the church, we are called to be strangers and aliens, which means that we are called to be estranged from the world's common objects of love. As such, our calling is to be dislocated, to be alienated. But, contrary to the alienation fueling the age of anger, our alienation does not create anger in us, but rather forms in us the joy of being free from the desires of the world that we might be free to truly love the world. It is only as those who don't share the common objects of love of the world that we can truly be formed as those who love the world. For Mishra, the mimetic desire created by modern liberalism creates the *ressentiment* that powers the age of anger; as followers of Jesus, it is our difference that makes us able to love the world, to be formed as those who are freed by our love for Christ, who is our Common Object. The church's status as dislocated operates in the opposite direction of the world's sense of dislocation. The world, shaped by shared common objects of love, creates a competition for those objects and a deep anger at the inability to attain them. The church, however, formed by our common love for Christ, is alienated from the mimetic desire of the age of anger and so free to pursue reconciliation with and for the world out of a genuine love for the world.

#### V. A BRIEF CONCLUSION

As pastors, it is our calling to shepherd our congregations through the age of anger. To do so, we must courageously expound for our people the forces that are shaping them, the passions of our age that demand their heart and that have the potential for sowing greater anger and discord in our congregations. We must disciple our people to direct their hearts toward our Common Object of Love, toward Christ Jesus, who forms us as a community and gives us our true identity. And we must call our people to embrace the promises that He has given them. These promises are not those of autonomy, self-determination, or prosperity, but rather are promises of true life that come through surrender and suffering. As we do this, may ours be communities that are freed from the passions of the age of anger and are filled with the Spirit of love, through whom we can bear witness to the peace of Christ that rules in our hearts.