

# PROVOKING ONE ANOTHER

by Walton Weaver

Words are often used in the Bible in both a good and a bad sense. This is true of the word “provoke”. The word is often used in the Old Testament to show how Israel provoked God to anger by her idolatrous practices. In anticipation of the time when the Israelites would begin their trip to the promised land which God would give them, Moses said to Israel, “When thou shalt beget children and grandchildren and have grown old in the land, and act corruptly and make a carved image in the form of anything, and do evil in the sight of the Lord your God to provoke Him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you will soon utterly perish from the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess; you will not prolong your days in it, but will be utterly destroyed” (Deut. 4:25-26, NKJV; see also Deut. 31:20).

It happened just as Moses had promised. First during the wilderness wanderings (Num. 14:11, 23; 16:30; Deut. 9:22), and then numerous times after the people had settled in the land (Judges 2:12; 1 Kings 14:15, 22; 15:30). The prophets often describe how God was provoked by the sins of his people (Isa. 1:4; Jer. 8:19; 11:17; 44:8; Ezek. 8:17; Hosea 12:14).

The New Testament also uses this word in a bad sense. But here we find it used especially with reference to our dealings with one another. Love, we are told, “is not easily provoked” (1 Cor. 13:5), or stirred to anger. Again, Paul says, “Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another” (Gal. 5:25). Fathers are instructed, “provoke not your children to wrath” (Eph. 6:4). In Colossians it is simply, “provoke not your children” (Col. 3:21), although the KJV adds the words (in italics) “to anger,” evidently bringing the point over from the parallel passage in Ephesians.

There are only two places in the New Testament where the word “provoke” is used in a good sense when Paul is describing the behavior of Christians: 2 Corinthians 9:2 and Hebrews 10:24. In the first of these passages Paul is commending the brethren in Achaia whose “zeal hath provoked very many” by being “ready a year ago” to participate in the work of helping the needy among the saints in Jerusalem. In the latter passage the writer urges his Jewish readers to “consider one another to provoke unto love and good works.”

“To provoke” is to excite, arouse, or call into action. Christians sometimes need to be incited, stimulated, or aroused to a good thing. Too often we are more inclined to irritate one another rather than to incite or stimulate each other to that which is good..

## Consider One Another

Perhaps one of our greatest weaknesses, and, no doubt, one reason that we fail to provoke one another as we should, is that we do not give the consideration to each other that we ought. Paul prefaces this statement with the words, “consider one another.” If we were first in the habit

of *giving the attention to one another* that this verse enjoins, it would come natural for us “to provoke one another” to the end that Paul charges in this verse. It is the mutual care on the part of the members of the body that is central in Paul’s statement. It is that care and concern for the welfare of the body that will lead the members “to provoke one another unto love and good works.” One serves as the purpose of the other, so that we are not surprised that Wuest translates as follows: “*And let us constantly be giving careful attention to one another for the purpose of stimulating one another to love and good works*” (*Hebrews in the Greek Testament*, p. 182).

Christians often forget that they are “members one of another” (Rom. 12:5). In the passages where Paul discusses the church under the analogy of a human body (Rom. 12 and 1 Cor. 12) Paul is teaching that no individual Christian can function effectively by himself. Man was not meant to be alone. People need people, and we need each other as Christians. Did you hear about the man riding in a cab in Times Square in New York being handed this note: “I’d rather you talk to me than tip me, I’m lonely. Your driver.” How many lonely people do you suppose we have attending our services, and yet no one speaks to them?

## **Unto Love And Good Works**

Paul gives us a specific message that caring Christians need to be sharing with each other. We need to stir each other up, arouse each other—but he wants us to excite and stimulate each other “unto love and good works.” I can’t think of two things that brethren need to be stirred up about more than these, can you? Christians in every local church I know need to be loving more, working more, and provoking more. There is probably more said on the subjects of love and good works than on any other subjects when it comes to instruction given in our New Testaments to Christians.

### *1. Unto Love.*

First, Christians need to be stirred up to *love God more*. But how much is “more”? Jesus answers, “with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37). We should also ask, “more” than what? Again, Jesus answers, “more than these” (probably the fishing boat, gear, etc. used to make their living) in his question to Peter (Jn. 21:15), and more than one’s father or mother (Matt. 10:37). Also more than food and raiment, or whatever has to do with this life (Matt. 6:33).

Second, Christians need to be stirred up to *love each other more*. The law had required that one love his neighbor as himself (Lev. 19:18), and Jesus gives this as the second greatest commandment of the law (Matt. 22:39). But how much “more” should Christians love each other? Peter answers, keep growing in love until you “love one another fervently with a pure heart” (1 Pet. 1:23). Do people grow in love? They most certainly do. Paul prayed for his Philippian brethren “that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by

Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:9-11). Christians can stir each other up to just his kind of love for God and each other.

## 2. *Unto Good Works.*

It is sad but true that most Christians do not realize the real purpose of their salvation. Our salvation is not an end in itself. God has not saved us just so we can be saved. No, he has a marvelous purpose in mind in saving us from our sins. Here is the way Paul describes it: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). God wants his people to be working, and he wants others to see their good works (not just their good moral life) and glorify him in heaven (Matt. 5:16).

But then he also wants us to be *stirring* each other up “unto good works,” or *to the end that we might be doing the good works* he has planned for us. Do brethren need to be aroused to do work in the kingdom? Surely, when one notices that about all that is done in a given community is done by ten percent of those who make up the local church at that place, all must concede that there is a great need for Christians to be stirring each other up unto good works. Who is to do the work of teaching the lost, visiting the sick, cheering up the depressed, comforting troubled hearts, taking care of the needy, encouraging others to faithfulness, and of stirring up each other unto love and good works? The preacher? Yes. The elders? Yes. All the members of the Lord’s church? Yes. If these works are not the works of all the members of the Lord’s church, then why the admonition that we each be arousing one another “unto love and good works”?

## **In The Assemblies**

It is amazing to me that brethren have not seen that this work of provoking one another unto love and good works is one of the purposes of our assembling ourselves together. This is made clear by the admonition that follows the one to provoke one another unto love and good works: “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:25).

Our assemblies are well suited (because they are designed by God himself for that purpose) as a means of encouragement for those who attend and participate in the activities provided (Bible study and worship as God has planned). In addition to admonishing each other in the songs we sing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), we are also often admonished and encouraged in the Bible class studies and in the sermons preached (1 Cor. 14:17; 2 Tim. 2:15; 4:2; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). But as Hebrews 10:24-25 shows, these assemblies provide an excellent place and opportunity for every Christian to “provoke one another unto love and good works,” and no Christian should ever stop attending the assemblies because every Christian needs the kind of “provoking” commanded in Hebrews 10:24, as well as the “exhorting” mentioned in Hebrews 10:25. But, in addition to this, every Christian is commanded to be in these assemblies and to be provoking and exhorting other Christians.

When Christians begin to take seriously what each and every Christian is to be accomplishing in our assemblies the debate over “which assembly” we must attend will end. It is sad when the whole of one’s religion has come to center upon that issue—a question I am sure was not even in the mind of the writer. The word “assembling” does not refer to any particular assembly. Rather, it describes what ought to be the habit of every Christian, i. e., attending the assemblies of the church to provoke one another unto love and good works, and, more generally, to exhort one another in whatever way is needed at a given time.