

Provoking One Another

“Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”
—Hebrews 10:24,25

ORDINARILY, THE WORD “provoke” is used to denote a stirring up to anger or ill will. Here, however, the apostle’s thought is clearly that of an incitement to good, a stimulation of Christian growth in love and good works. The apostle shows that such a provoking is the true objective of Christian association, and the purpose for which the followers of the Master bring themselves together. We cannot exhort one another unless we are associated. We all need the help and encouragement that come from fellowship with those of like precious faith. The apostle shows, furthermore, that fellowship with the brethren, in order that we may mutually exhort one another unto love and good works, becomes increasingly essential as we “see the day approaching.”

Jesus set a perfect example for us in this regard, as always in fellowship with his disciples he sought to provoke them, in a positive manner, toward love and good works. If we are to successfully develop the “mind of Christ,” we too must rejoice in the privilege of assembling, and provoking toward love and good works, among the body of Christ. There is a beautiful spiritual balance displayed in this exhortation. Neither love nor zeal for good works, possessed independent of the other, can make the Christian all that God expects him to be. Indeed, true Christian love cannot exist in the life of a Christian unless it is manifested in good works. Likewise, there cannot be works that are “good” in the Lord’s sight except those which are the outgrowth, the manifestation, of true Christian love.

Our imperfect minds need to be constantly on guard along this line. Those whose natural dispositions enjoy activity and who are most happy when their time is used fully in working for the Lord need to watch lest they find themselves overstressing this phase of the Christian life to the detriment of the proper development of love. On the other hand, those who by nature are more quiet and contemplative should exercise care lest they ignore what the Scriptures say concerning the importance of activity in the Lord’s service.

The subject of love is made so very important in the Word of God that some have stressed it to the exclusion of other things that the Lord requires. To do this is just as injurious to true Christian growth in grace as it is to ignore what the Scriptures say about love and to overstress what they say concerning works and activity. How very glad

we are that the apostle, in pointing out the true objective of our association in Christ, stresses the importance of exhorting one another both to love and to good works.

WHAT IS LOVE?

A proper understanding of what constitutes Christian love is probably the best safeguard against a misuse of Scriptures which urge its development and prominence in the Christian life. Fundamentally, the love which should fill and control the Christian life is the love of God, the love possessed and exemplified by our Heavenly Father in his attitude toward the fallen race. John 3:16 declares that God so loved them that he was stirred to action and works—he “gave.” He gave that which cost him more than anything else he could have given. He gave his only begotten and well beloved Son because he loved the fallen race. On account of his love, he was glad to make this sacrifice, and to provide an opportunity for all who would accept it to return to harmony with him and enjoy everlasting life.

Jesus was of the same disposition as his Father, and the love of God which controlled his life urged him on day by day in a self-sacrificing effort that was wholly on behalf of others. An exhortation encouraging the growth of love is quite incomplete unless we consider the example of the Master’s life of self-sacrifice. The love which filled his heart called for the use of every nerve and sinew of his body in the sacrifice of his perfect humanity in the interests of God’s plan of recovery for his fellow-men. He was doubtless many times weary and ready

to faint, but he was never weary of well doing. He was never fainthearted in his determination to continue using all the strength of his being that others might be blessed.

In Jesus, therefore, we have an example of the perfect blending of true divine love and the good works of God. We cannot, of course, perform all the works that he did, but we can have the spirit which will prompt us to do all we possibly can.

WORKS PROMPTED BY LOVE

In I Corinthians 13, Paul reminds us of the true relationship between love and good works. He mentions a number of items which the Scriptures show should be looked upon as good works, such as speaking “with the tongues of men and of angels,” “the gift of prophecy,” bestowing all one’s “goods to feed the poor,” and giving one’s “body to be burned.” (vss. 1-3) Paul also mentions other important considerations in the Christian life, such as the understanding of mysteries and the possession of mountain-moving faith. The apostle is not discounting the importance of work and knowledge and faith. He shows, rather, that these, in order to be good, must be prompted by love. Work, knowledge, and faith—without love—Paul says, are profitless in making one truly acceptable to God.

Paul’s reference to speaking with the tongues of men and of angels could be understood as applying to the gift of speaking with tongues, with which many were blessed in the Early Church, or it might also properly apply to exceptional ability in expounding the Word of God, such as Apollos possessed. Whether the reference

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(Continued from page 31) is to one or both of these means of serving the Lord, Paul is not condemning the service but is using examples of legitimate Christian work in order to point out its proper relationship to love.

Among the brethren at Corinth there had developed a spirit of sectarianism, which certainly was contrary to the principle of Christian love. In the first chapter of the epistle, the apostle reveals that they were taking sides with respect to leadership. Some were saying, "I am of Paul," while others said, "I [am] of Apollos," and still others stated, "I [am] of Cephas." (I Cor. 1:12) Apollos was noted for his oratory, and it seems quite possible that Paul's reference to speaking with the tongues of men and of angels may have been a timely warning to the brethren at Corinth that oratory alone should not be considered the basis upon which they accept any brother as a leader in their midst.

Paul was faithful in exhorting the brethren at Corinth to be motivated by love in their good works, and thus he warned them not to be overly influenced by a brilliant display of good works in the form of great ability to present the Word. Paul's warning, however, should not be construed as discouraging the use of all the ability one may possess in sounding forth the praises of God. None in our day is able to speak with such eloquence that it can be said he speaks with the "tongues of men and of angels." Nevertheless, there is no question that God would have all of us use our tongues as efficiently as we possibly can to make known the glad tidings of the kingdom and to exhort one another. We will find, of course, that at

best, our efforts, comparatively speaking, will be those of lisping, stammering tongues. Yet, God can bless even such feeble efforts when they are prompted by love.

FEEDING THE POOR

Paul says that though we bestow all our goods to feed the poor and have not love, it profits us nothing. On the other hand, Paul knew that true love should prompt every follower of Christ to bestow his goods to feed the poor, not literally, but in the spiritual sense of sacrifice. The sacrifice of earthly treasures is one of the conditions of the narrow way. Where true love exists, this sacrifice will be kept upon the altar until it is wholly consumed. Jesus explained to the rich young ruler that in order to lay up treasure in heaven it was essential that he bestow his goods to feed the poor and take up his cross and follow the Master. Paul would know of this requirement of the narrow way. Thus, in his lesson on the subject of Christian love, he points out the relationship between love and sacrifice—that one prompts the other, and that any display of interest in the poor that is not prompted by love and directed by the Holy Spirit is not acceptable to God.

In II Corinthians 6:10, Paul speaks of us as Christian workers together, “As poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.” While few of the Lord’s people are of the wealthy class, the reference here is not so much to one’s temporal poverty as to the fact that they have made themselves “poor” by sacrificing their all in response to the Lord’s invitation to

follow in his footsteps. Jesus, though he was rich, for our sakes he became poor, laying aside the glory and the riches he had with the Father. His course of sacrifice resulted in poverty as a human being. (II Cor. 8:9) He said that while the birds of the air have nests and the foxes have holes, "the Son of man hath not where to lay his head."—Matt. 8:20

"Yet making many rich," adds the apostle, concerning those who through sacrifice have made themselves poor according to the standards of this world. How very true this is concerning Jesus, who became so very poor. He laid aside the heavenly riches in order to take the sinner's place and to lay down his earthly life in sacrifice. Becoming poor, he has made us rich, spiritually speaking. Indeed, the riches of God's grace which have filled the lives of all the Master's followers have reached us because he became poor. Had he not made himself poor on our behalf, we would not be enjoying any of the riches of his grace today.

We do not have the abundance of riches to sacrifice that were possessed by the Master. Indeed, most of us possess very little of time, strength, and substance that can be devoted directly to divine service. Yet, if we are filled with the same spirit of love that prompted Jesus to lay aside his heavenly riches and to sacrifice all that the earth held for him as a perfect man, God will bless our offering of love and use it to the enrichment of others. It is impossible for a Christian, prompted by love and guided in his sacrifice by the truths of God's Word, to lay down his life in the service of God and not have that sacrifice enrich the lives of others.

“POSSESSING ALL THINGS”

If we accept the Master's invitation to bestow all our goods to enrich others, we will be among those described by the apostle as “having nothing.” At the same time, however, it will be our blessed privilege to possess “all things.” The “all things” here referred to are spiritual possessions, which become ours in proportion to our sacrifice of earthly interests. The Lord's favors to us through Christ, such as his promises of grace to help in time of need, the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit, the encouragement of his exceeding great and precious promises, our privileges of association with his people, and the honor of being coworkers with him, all constitute a part of our present riches in Christ. They are some of the “all things” which are ours to enjoy if, by the influence of love, we are sacrificing earthly advantages in order that these spiritual blessings may, indeed, be our blessed portion.

In addition to these present riches, there are also the treasures that are being laid up in heaven by those who are sacrificing the things of this earth. How fully it will be true, when we receive our heavenly inheritance, that we possess all things. According to the exceeding great and precious promises, the faithful followers of the Master will be heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ. When we enter into that inheritance, all things indeed will be ours, even to a position in the immediate divine family of our Heavenly Father, the Creator. Words are wholly inadequate to describe, even if our minds could grasp, the grandeur, the riches, and the glory of such an inheritance.—II Pet. 1:4; Rom. 8:16,17; Eph. 1:18

THE ALTAR OF SACRIFICE

In showing further the proper relationship between love and good works, Paul says that though we might give our bodies to be burned in literal sacrifice, and have not love, it profits us nothing. (I Cor. 13:3) It is understandable that one might give his body in sacrifice for some reason other than that of love. Indeed, throughout the Middle Ages millions were burned at the stake and otherwise cruelly put to death. Yet, we can hardly suppose that all of them were prompted thus to forfeit their lives by the true spirit of love. The spirit of martyrdom, the viewpoint which makes one proud that he is persecuted, oftentimes leads even those who do not profess to be Christians into making great sacrifices. In some cases, the impetus to sacrifice one's life has come from the myth of "glorious death" for king and country, or for personal pride or some other reason. It is equally true that not all those of ages past who were martyred "gave" their lives, but were in fact not able to successfully defend their innocence against the powers of the day.

Nevertheless, there is a true Christian sense in which one may give his body to be burned. This viewpoint of Christian sacrifice is beautifully illustrated in the typical sacrifices of the Tabernacle, where the bodies of animals were burned. In Romans 12:1, Paul writes, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."

Offering our bodies in sacrificial service is one of the essentials of the narrow way. Having offered

ourselves in consecration to God, having entered into a covenant with him by sacrifice, we are no longer privileged to view these terms of our consecration as incidentals. They are on the “must” list, as it were. If we do not offer up our body as a living sacrifice—that is, if we do not lay down our life in the service of the Lord and his truth, we cannot hope to receive the new divine body and nature promised. This sacrifice of ourselves, in addition to the sacrifice of our possessions, is included in the “good works” to which the apostle says we should provoke one another.

Even so, love must be the motive behind our sacrifice. If we are serving the Lord to be seen and known of men or to be merely viewed as zealous by the brethren, our sacrifice will not be pleasing to God. There is a reward in accomplishment, especially from the viewpoint of the flesh. If the sacrifices we make for the Truth and for the brethren are made in order that we might see outstanding present results of our efforts, certainly our good works are not prompted by the proper motive. The good works of the Lord are owned and blessed of him only when they are actuated by love, the same kind of love that prompted him to give his Son that we might live. Sometimes, of course, we are made to rejoice by seeing the good that results from our labors, but this joy should be considered merely as a bonus of divine grace. If our works are prompted by love, we will continue our labor of love faithfully unto death, even though the Lord may not permit us the great joy of seeing significant present results.

ELEMENTS OF LOVE

Further reminding us of the futility of all Christian effort in the absence of love, the Apostle Paul, in I Corinthians 13, identifies some of the characteristics of love and some of the things it will enable the Christian to do and to keep him from doing.

Love “suffereth long,” says the apostle. (vs. 4) If we should find ourselves becoming fretful under trial, or inclined to rebel against the providences of the Lord which are not pleasing to the flesh, we may well question the degree of love that fills our hearts, for love suffereth long. Remembering the terms of our consecration—that we agreed to give up all that we are and have and hope to be—we will not feel rebellious when our earthly blessings, whether of health, of friends, or of worldly goods, are, in the Lord’s providence, put upon the altar of sacrifice. If our consecration was prompted by love, and if love continues to fill our hearts and lives, we will take joyfully the spoiling of our goods, rejoicing in every evidence that our sacrifice is being consumed to the glory of God.

Love “is kind,” adds the apostle. No matter how extenuating the circumstances of life may be, regardless of how bitterly our enemies may assail us or how maliciously they ridicule us, if love fills our hearts, we will not be unkind. There are no exceptions to this—no circumstances whatever under which a Christian may justifiably be unkind.

A Christian has no right to hide behind the excuse of righteous indignation and thus permit himself to be unkind. If it becomes necessary for us to express admonition against wrongdoers, it should be done

in kindness. To whatever extent we are unkind in our dealings with others, it means that we are just that much lacking in Christian love. How important, then, that love control our lives as workers for the Lord. How much more effective will be our witness for the Truth if our words are kind and manifest a genuine and understanding sympathy for those to whom we minister. How tragic, then, the condition would be of any who may be overstimulated in their zeal to work for the Lord and yet lack the kindness of love. Truly, love and good works must go together.

Love “envieth not,” Paul continues. To envy those who may enjoy advantages which we do not possess would be evidence of a lack of love. The spirit of unselfishness which prompted our consecration—our agreement to give up all in the service of the Lord—is quite incompatible with envy. True love, rather, would prompt one to give what he had to others that they might be enriched, instead of enviously desiring that which does not belong to him. Whether the blessings enjoyed by others are those of material wealth or comfort, special privileges of service for the Lord, or other valued opportunities they may have in connection with the Truth, love will cause us to rejoice with them, rather than to envy their advantages. Any service we might render for the Lord while our hearts are envious of the privileges of others could not possibly be acceptable to him. Thus again, we see that love and good works are, from the divine standpoint, inseparable.

Love “vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly.” (vss. 4,5) Those who are puffed up with pride are almost certain to attempt

a display of their greatness, to vaunt themselves before the brethren and before their fellowmen. It is not love that causes one to do this, but selfishness—the selfish desire to be seen and honored and praised of men. Love, on the contrary, leads to the opposite course.

Of Jesus, who was wholly motivated by love, it is said that he “made himself of no reputation.” (Phil. 2:7) True love will do this. It will lead in the direction of meekness, humility, self-effacement, taking a back seat, rather than seeking prominence. When one in an unseemly manner vaunts himself through pride of heart, it proves that his service for God is not being rendered because of love, but because of his ambition to shine before men. When such is true, one’s works, no matter how great or imposing, are, nevertheless, not good as viewed by God.

Love “seeketh not her own.” (I Cor. 13:5) The only “rights” that really belong to a consecrated Christian are those represented in his privilege of sacrifice. We have the right, by divine authority and through the merit of Christ, to lay down our lives in God’s service. We have the right, if we are faithful in the use of our privileges of sacrifice, to receive the divine promise of glory, honor, and immortality. If, in our daily sacrifices to the Lord, we find our earthly rights being trampled upon, we should view this as an evidence that God is accepting our sacrifice. Having made a full consecration of all that we have to the Lord, it is our privilege to fulfill our consecration vows. (Ps. 50:5) It is the Lord who decides the circumstances that may constitute the altar upon which our sacrifice is consumed. Love prompts to sacrifice that which is our own.

Hence it could not, at the same time, prompt us to hold back from the altar that which we have agreed to place in God's hands.

Love "is not easily provoked." (I Cor. 13:5) The *Emphatic Diaglott* translation of this statement is better. It says that "love is not provoked to anger." The word "easily" is not in the original text. Paul wants us to understand that love cannot be provoked to anger at all. If a Christian becomes angry under provocation, it is an evidence that love is not in full control in his life. It is true, of course, that the Bible speaks of God as being angry with the wicked, and we are admonished not to let the sun go down on our wrath. However, the anger Paul speaks of here, which is not provoked by love, is not the proper indignation which God and all those in harmony with him of necessity feel toward unrighteousness. It is, rather, a display of temper, which gives vent to unkind looks and words and deeds, which do not edify but malign and injure. This type of anger is no part of good works, but wherever manifested by the Christian, it discredits the Truth of which he is an ambassador.

Love "thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity." (vss. 5,6) This means that one whose heart is filled with love does not accredit wrong motives to the actions of others. He, rather, will in every way possible construe what might on the surface appear to be evil as though it were good, attributing at least a good motive to that which seems to be wrong on the part of others. This does not mean that love compromises with evil or condones sin. It does mean, however, that one who is controlled by love, knowing that the Lord covers unwilling imperfections

with the robe of Christ's righteousness, will not expose the faults of the brethren.

Love "rejoiceth in the truth." (vs. 6) If love fills our hearts, we will always rejoice in the Truth and in the knowledge that others are being blessed by the Truth. We will rejoice in truthfulness and will find ourselves out of harmony with all forms of deception, compromise, and unrighteousness.

Love "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things." (vs. 7) If we are zealous in the good works of the Lord, there will be many hard experiences to bear. If love is not prompting our efforts, we will become discouraged—weary in well doing. However, with love urging us on in the way of sacrifice, we will be able to endure all things which, in the Lord's providence, he sees needful for our development as "new creatures" in Christ Jesus. (II Cor. 5:17) Love will enable us to believe all his precious promises and attribute the best of motives to the efforts of others. Love will enable us always to have a hopeful outlook, not only with respect to our present experiences in the narrow way, but also in the fulfillment of the promises of God concerning our heavenly inheritance.

Love "never faileth." (I Cor. 13:8) It cannot fail. If we fail in any of our Christian efforts, it is because we are lacking in love. God is love. All his blessed designs on behalf of the followers of Christ and the entire world are expressions of his love. If we are wholly under the control of divine love, it means that we are living near to God—that our viewpoint is the same as his. It means that his interest in mankind is our interest, that his interest in the body of Christ is our interest, and that what we do

in his service is done because we want to be like him and want his spirit to be our spirit. Our position in life may be such that we can do very little directly in God's service. Yet, if we have his spirit of love we will do what we can, earnestly praying, meanwhile, for greater opportunities of showing forth his praises, serving the brethren, and doing good unto all men.

How appropriate, in keeping with God's Word, that each of us, as fellow members of the body of Christ, uses every opportunity that is ours to exhort and provoke one another both to love and to good works. No matter how long we may have been in the Christian way—no matter how faithful we may have been—we still need the encouragement and the incentive that come from exhortation by the brethren. May this desire continue to incite us, in harmony with the divine arrangement, to the privileges of association, of assembling, of cooperation, of partnership, with one another and, through Christ, with the Heavenly Father himself. ■