

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 drawing on." – Heb. 10:24,25.

THE word "provoke" signifies to arouse or incite, or stimulate to activity. It is generally used in an evil sense, but is applicable, as in our text, to describe an incitement to good works, good thoughts, etc. The tendency of fallen human nature is toward things that are mean, selfish, groveling, and the natural bent is to incite or provoke or encourage similarly mean and unworthy thoughts, actions and words in others, and it has become a proverb that "Evil communications corrupt good manners." Everyone of experience knows this general tendency of evil to beget evil, and to corrupt and to pollute what is nobler and purer than itself; hence we have the Scriptural pronouncement, "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful." Those who neglect this counsel need not be surprised if they are continually falling into temptation, and if the influence upon their own lives results in a measure at least of ungodliness and sin, and disfellowship from those things which are noble and true and pure.

But the "New Creature in Christ Jesus" is one in whom the transforming influences of the Lord's Spirit have already begun – one who has a new heart, a new will, a new disposition. With such, "old things have passed away, and all things have become new"; they have been begotten again – *i.e.*, *re*-begotten – to new hopes, new wishes, new ideas of propriety. Instead of the earthly wisdom and way, with its "bitter envying and strife," which

"descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish," they have now the wisdom that is from above, and a heart (a disposition) to appreciate and pursue its counsels, which are, first purity, then peaceableness, gentleness, meekness, mercy, good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the disposition of this class, in proportion to their attainment of this heavenly wisdom and new nature, will be to "provoke" or incite or encourage one another, and all with whom they come in contact, to similar goodness of thought and word and act, in harmony with the heavenly wisdom which is guiding their own course.

This is laid down in the Scriptures as an unvarying rule: "A bitter fountain cannot send forth sweet water, and a good fountain cannot send forth brackish water." A thistle cannot bear grapes, and a grape-vine cannot bear thistles. It is the Master himself who says, "By their fruits ye shall know them." If, therefore, we desire to prove ourselves, and to judge respecting our progress in mortifying (putting to death) the old nature, and our growth in the new nature, we will judge ourselves by this standard; answering to ourselves the question, – Is my own spirit (disposition) one which delights in sin in its various forms (not necessarily in its grosser forms of murder, theft, etc., but in its more refined forms, falsity, envy, strife, vainglory, slander, evil-speaking, evil surmises, etc.), or is my delight increasingly in righteousness, truth, goodness, gentleness, meekness, patience, love? If the former, we are yet, either wholly or partially, in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity, and have need to go at once to the Great Physician, and to submit ourselves to his radical treatment – the cutting off of sin, the mortifying of such fleshly desires, etc. If the latter be our condition of heart we have cause for rejoicing, yet no cause for pride or boastfulness; for we can say no more than that we only have done our duty, having merely learned, and that imperfectly, the lessons set before us by our great Teacher.

The Apostle is addressing the Church, the consecrated New Creatures in Christ Jesus. This is shown in the text, for he classes himself with these, using the word "us"; it is also shown by the context. He calls the attention of the consecrated to the influence which goes out from each to each, and the consequent importance that the influence shall always be stimulating, or provocative of that which is good. No doubt the Apostle found in his day, as we find now, that many who are consecrated at heart fail to see clearly how this consecration should associate itself with and mark itself [R4076 : page 313] upon our every act and word. Perhaps he saw then, as we see now, that the holy influence of truth, gathered at a meeting of the Lord's people, through their communion of heart with each other and with the Lord, is not infrequently spoiled, dissipated entirely, by inconsiderate or unkind remarks of some of the company, upon dismissal.

Who, of experience, does not know how great a matter a little fire may kindle; how much evil may be started by the fire of the tongue? how many unkind thoughts, evil suspicions, surmises, how much envy, malice, hatred and strife may be started by a mere insinuation? Since the Lord declares, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh," it follows that the hearts and lips, from which emanate these evil influences, are not controlled by the wisdom that cometh from above, though they be in some measure consecrated to the Lord.

It is a great mistake, also, to suppose that because the evil thing is said in a kind and gentle manner, therefore it is a good thing, and evidence of a pure heart, that is full of love; quite to the contrary, we know that the great Adversary is continually presenting himself in garments of light, that he may exercise the greater influence for evil upon those who have made a covenant with the Lord. So, likewise, those who implant evil thoughts, surmises, etc., in a smooth and polished manner, and perhaps with a tear, are the most dangerous foes of peace and fellowship, and

often accomplish the greater harm; because they succeed in planting roots of bitterness and thoughts of evil in hearts which would utterly resent the same evil thoughts and evil surmisings if presented in a coarse, offensive and obtrusive manner.

We are not to be reckless of each other's interests. In our contact with each other, whether a personal contact or a contact by mail or a contact through the columns of this journal, we are to "consider one another." We are to consider what would be helps, and what would be hindrances, what would be encouragements and what would be stumbling-blocks; and we are to do all in our power to assist one another to run with patience the race for the heavenly prize. If we are truly consecrated to the Lord, we can do nothing "against the truth, but [every effort must be] for the truth." (2 Cor. 13:8.) What a burning and shining light every Christian would be if his every act were considered and shaped for the benefit of those with whom he comes in contact! What a blessing it would be in the home! What a blessing it would be in the Church! This brotherly consideration is what the Apostle is urging upon us: "Consider one another to provoke [incite, encourage] to love and to good works." Avoid every word and every act, so far as possible, that might incite to hatred, envy, strife, bitterness (and bad works, corresponding to these feelings), all of which are "of the flesh and of the devil."

The Apostle links this advice with the exhortation to forget not the assembling of ourselves together, as the Lord's **[R4077 : page 313]** people. None of us is so strong in the new nature that he can disregard the fellowship of kindred minds. But even if we did feel sufficiently strong for ourselves, the spirit of love in us should so control that we would delight to meet with "the brethren" for their sakes, if we ourselves received no benefit therefrom. But we are more or less like coals of fire, which, if separated, will tend to cool rapidly, but which, if brought together, will tend to increase in fervency the entire mass. Our

Lord has encouraged his people to seek each other's fellowship for companionship in the study of his Word, and in prayer, pronouncing special blessings upon the meeting of his people together, even if so few as only two or three.

It is true that sometimes isolated ones, who have no fellowship in the Present Truth (except through the WATCH TOWER) are often amongst the most staunch and devoted and self-sacrificing of the Lord's people: but we should not from this infer that the blessing comes from their isolation, but rather, since their separation is unavoidable on their part, we may reasonably suppose that our Lord makes up to them, in his own presence and blessing, that which they lack of fellowship with other members of the Body. But if one had opportunity for assembling with others for worship of the Lord and the study of his Word, and neglected to avail himself of his privilege, we need not expect that for his benefit the Lord would work special miracles of grace. The Lord's miracles may be expected only in times of emergency, to make up for natural deficiency.

Besides, we are to remember that through the WATCH TOWER and the mail the Lord has established a channel of communication amongst his people so that no one needs be without such fellowship and spiritual intercourse. And we call attention to the fact that the terms of our journal are so liberal that the very poorest of the Lord's people may avail themselves of this privilege of communion. If they refuse or neglect to use this grace which the Lord has put within their reach, at a cost of one postal card per year, it is their own fault; they are disregarding the Lord's instruction, through the Apostle, and are neglecting the means open before them for having fellowship with others of like precious faith. If such find themselves growing cold, as a result of neglect of the Lord's arrangements and providences, they have themselves to blame. We do not know how to make the WATCH TOWER terms more reasonable than they are. We exhort all the

poor to accept it, not as a personal gift, but as a part of the *Lord's* provision for his people, to which they are as welcome as to all the features of his grace. Freely we have received, freely we will give the message of his love and mercy.

The Apostle intimates that, as "the Day" draws near there will be the more need for the observance of this instruction respecting the fellowship and communion of the Lord's people with each other. And experience proves this: the great Millennial Day which has already begun, chronologically, has brought with it new activities in mind and body, a greater pressure of business and rush to keep abreast of the times, and a correspondingly greater danger to the Lord's people of being choked with the cares of this life, or with the deceitfulness of riches, or the seeking of riches. We need a counteracting influence to off-set this increasing influence of the world and its affairs upon us; and this counteracting influence is to be sought and to be found by the Lord's people among themselves, – communing one with the other and with the Lord, and exhorting and encouraging one **[R4077 : page 314]** another to steadfastness along the lines of instruction laid down in his Word.

And not only so, but we find that the beginning of this great Millennial Day is a "day of trouble." We find that the latter part of this day of trouble is to be upon the world, and that the Lord promised his Church that, if faithful, they shall be "accounted worthy to escape all those things coming upon the world." But we have found also that the forepart of this day of trouble, which is the time of preparation for the world's trouble, will be a special time of peculiar trouble and trial, testing and sifting upon the Church; for – The judgments of this day "must begin with the house of God." We see this sifting and shaking in progress all about us in the nominal Church, and still more intensely among those who occupy a still higher position and enlightenment through the knowledge of the Present Truth. "The great day of his

wrath [judgment, testing, sifting, first of the Church and afterward the nations] is come, and who shall be able to stand?" We hear the Apostle's exhortation, as he looked down prophetically to our day, saying, "Wherefore, take unto you the whole armor of God, *that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day*, and having done all, to stand. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in exalted positions." – Eph. 6:13,14.

It is "as we see the day *drawing on*" that we are to be the more diligent in assembling ourselves with those of like precious faith; the more earnest in exhorting and provoking to love and to good works, and thus to assist one another in putting on "the whole armor of God" – the graces of character, meekness, patience, gentleness, brotherly kindness, faith, truth, hope – that with these as the divine panoply or armor, protecting us from the assaults of the Adversary in this day, we may be able to stand. The clear intimation is that, unless we have on this armor, we will be unable to stand. And this armor includes more than mere head-knowledge, represented by the helmet; it includes, be it noted, the entire breastplate of righteousness, purity of heart, and it includes the shield of faith, and the sword of the Spirit, and the sandals of consecration.

In the succeeding verse the Apostle mentions the possibility of wilful sin among the Lord's people, and what it would imply – the Second Death (the sorer punishment than the first death, in that it would be without hope) – "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his power."

While wilful sin has always been the same, it would not be unreasonable to infer from the Apostle's words that the temptations and dangers of "this evil day" in which we live will specially tend to trial along this line. Let it be clearly noticed that

the Apostle is not speaking of sins of ignorance nor of accidental missteps by being overtaken in a fault, whose sin is not unto death, and from which the transgressors may be restored in a spirit of meekness. He is referring directly to full, complete sin – the sin upon which the full penalty is justly and properly to be recompensed.

At first thought, many may be inclined to say, "Well, I am in no danger of that sin, for I am sure that I would not commit sin wilfully, intentionally, designedly." But let us notice, dear friends, that there is a way in which sin may come upon us without being at the time a wilful sin, but which later might become wilful sin: for instance, any transgression committed, either in total ignorance or with only a partial acquiescence of our wills, might become a full, wilful, deliberate sin afterward, if we afterward came to a clear knowledge of the truth respecting the subject, and failed to repent of it to the Lord, and to undo so far as was in our power the wrong toward our fellow-creatures. To consent to a sin clearly and fully understood, simply because at the time of its committal we were in ignorance, and to refuse to make amends for it, and thus to endorse the sin intelligently, would appear to make it a *will-full* sin.

With this view of the matter, the children of God cannot afford to sanction in their minds even the slightest injustice or untruth towards each other, or towards anyone. The essence of this thought is found in our Lord's command: "If thou comest to the altar [if we have anything to offer to the Lord, either of service or of worship or of thanks], and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee [that someone has been wronged by you, either in word or thought or act] leave there thy gift before the altar [do not think that it will be acceptable to God while in your heart or outwardly you are practising injustice toward others]; first go and be reconciled to thy brother [make amends to him, apologies, explanations in full, of whatever wrong you have done him] and

then come and offer thy gift [assured that in such an attitude of heart the Lord Almighty will be pleased to accept your gift]."

In describing those who sin wilfully, the Apostle uses very strong, figurative language, declaring that, inasmuch as they are in heart-sympathy with sin, and not in opposition to it, they are the opponents of the Son of God, who was so out of sympathy with sin in its every form that he laid down his life to redeem us from its power and curse. The Apostle declares that such wilful sinners may be esteemed as the enemies of Christ, who really trample him and his goodness and love under their feet, figuratively, disdain his mercy and favor as well as his instruction in righteousness. He says that, inasmuch as they were once sanctified, as a result of their faith in the precious blood and its cleansing from sin, their turning now into harmony with sin would imply that they now disesteem the precious blood of Christ which redeemed us to God, counting it a non-sacred thing – common – and do despite to the spirit of divine favor which had held out to them freedom from the yoke of sin, and ultimately release from its penalty, death; and the attainment, as the Lord's people, of the crown of life eternal.

While holding up before the Church the dangers of sin, and the danger of falling away from steadfastness for Christ and to the principles of his righteousness, the Apostle encourages us to continue our fight against sin and its influence in ourselves and in others, "perfecting holiness in the reverence of the Lord." Accordingly he calls our minds back to our first love and first zeal – "the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of affliction; partly whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches **[R4078 : page 315]** and afflictions, and partly whilst ye became companions of them that were so used." He would thus encourage the Lord's people to continue the good fight – to continue to wage warfare against the world, the flesh and the devil, and the spirit of these, especially each within himself, in the battlefield of his own soul. And he urges that faith in the Lord and the rewards which he shall grant by and by, when he shall be

glorified in his saints, is very necessary to our endurance of hardness as good soldiers in the fight against evil, both within and without, saying, "Cast not away, therefore, your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward" – "forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhort one another; and so much the more as ye see the day approaching."

And this reminds us of the words of the Lord, through the prophet Malachi (3:15-17): In the time when the proud are happy, and they that work wickedness are established in power and influence, and they that tempt God seem to be blessed – "then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another [sympathizing with and encouraging one another, so much the more]: and the Lord hearkened and heard it; and a book of remembrance was written before him of them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name; and they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him." But while all should seek to provoke to love and to good works and to happy looks, we well know that the majority do the reverse. Hence, we suggest that the Lord's *peculiar* people may be so controlled by the Word and its spirit that they will be incited to good works, good deeds and good looks even by the most unfavorable conditions. Consider Stephen, confronted by those who afterward took his life: not only had he courage to preach to them, but his heart was so *provoked to love and good* works that his face shone with an angelic beauty. (Acts 6:15.) And the same grace abounding enabled him to pray for his murderers. (Acts 7:60.) Nothing could provoke such a spirit-filled saint to evil. Let us follow the example of such close followers of our Lord's footsteps.
