



How Do I Provoke in a GOOD Way?

Acts 15:39: (NASB) *And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him....*



The world is full of provoking and it is NOT A GOOD THING. First, there is the provoking that takes place among children by way of demeaning and bullying those who seem weaker or different. Then there is provoking on an adult social level as those on various sides of issues regarding personal freedoms and beliefs poke and prod one another. And let's not forget the provoking on a political level as those on opposite sides of the aisle name-call and cast aspersions at one another. Basically, provoking stinks! Now that we have proclaimed that provoking is a problem, there is a verse in the Bible that tells us to provoke one another in a good way. How does that work? What are we supposed to say or do and how are we supposed to do it? Can there be a positive place and purpose for provoking?

Throughout the podcast, we will be asking WHAT should we provoke, why, to whom should we direct it and how should we do it.

One of the first lessons about provoking is that it has to do with emotions and feelings.

A brief observation on provoking that could have gone badly but turned into positive provoking: We will look at the conference in Jerusalem when the brotherhood came together over the issues of Jewish vs. Gentile understandings and interpretations of Christianity.

Often, we provoke by proclaiming our stance as absolute truth: Acts 15:1-2: (NASB) They could not understand how something that was with them for thousands of years could suddenly go away. They had a legitimate position. **This immovable stance is often met with a similarly immovable and opposing stance:** ²*And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them....* **We usually leave it here and fight, but that never solves anything! Not so in this case:** *...the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. They decided to discuss the matter and figure it out together. All sides were allowed to engage in the provocative conflict:* Acts 15:6-8: (NASB) ⁶*The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.* ⁷*After there had been much debate...* **Once all are heard, and presumably once all are exercised by listening, apostleship speaks:** *...Peter stood up and said to them, Brethren...the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.* ⁸*And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; Peter goes back to the basic principle that the Gentiles have God's Spirit which means they are saved and are a part of things.*

Apostleship was followed up with more apostleship and lots of evidence: Acts 15:12

There was progress! Opposing sides found common ground and moved forward:

Acts 15:22-23: They were at odds in the beginning, drawing lines in the sand, but at the end they were able to come together because they were willing to listen to the other side. The key is *they heard the facts* of the matter. Upon arriving, the letter was read and accepted with rejoicing. Provoking worked positively!

Provoking Principle: Listening provokes communication, which provokes understanding, which provokes unified action.

While listening, communicating and understanding can change adversaries into allies, this is only one example. What happens when the provoking is between two individuals who are deeply committed to their points of view and do not see ample evidence to change?

If we want to learn to provoke positively, we have to utilize the power of positively spoken words.

Our next provoking example turns out differently and takes place shortly after the previous example with two of the key individuals who were at that pivotal meeting we just described: Acts 15:36-40: This would have been a significant dissension, because the rigors of a missionary journey cannot be taken lightly. Paul simply believed the young John Mark could not do it and Barnabas (John Mark's uncle) believed he could. What do you do? How do you find common ground? (Remember they had just helped a group come to a dramatic compromise just days before this.)



Provoke: Strongs #3948 incitement (to good), or dispute (in anger)

The work for the gospel still went on. Both Paul and Barnabas served the Lord and accomplished much, even though it was a sad departure. They did not stop the work because of the dispute.

This provoking was proper and appropriate as these two mighty men of faith were both clear in their opinions and perceived needs. The key was that while they separated, they did not attach importance to this particular decision beyond its true scope. It did not translate into a divisive action that would last their lifetime. They agreed to do things differently.

Paul responds two times later in life to John Mark. Let's take a look at the first response: Colossians 4:10-11: This meant he was in close communication with Mark because he mentioned him by name to the Colossians in his letter. He tells them Mark proves to be an encouragement. He was *not* an outcast in the eyes of the Apostle Paul. You can disagree and go separate ways but not be disagreeable to one another. **2 Timothy 4:11:** The apostle is near the end of his days and *he asks for Mark!* This shows the dissension was not over the person, but over the perceived ability in one specific area. The brothers did not allow that perception of his ability to affect their relationship or the gospel.

Provoking Principle: Serious disagreements are acceptable as long as we are thoroughly convicted to keep the issue the issue and NOT centralize and escalate it beyond its true scope.

The only other use of this particular word for provoke is a positive one in Hebrews: Hebrews 10:24: (KJV) *And let us consider <2657> one another to provoke <3948> unto love and to good works:*

Consider: Strongs #2657 to observe fully

Let us observe fully and understand each other so we can incite our brothers and sisters to good. We believe Apostle Paul wrote the book of Hebrews to help the Hebrew Christians understand the centrality of Jesus to the whole plan of God. He provokes them through the entire book of Hebrews in a positive, powerful and inspiring way. Paul is clear in his explanation -the blood of bulls and goats in the past sacrifices do not take away sin; *Jesus does.* Let's unify and encourage, for you, the Hebrew Christians, are now in the Holy (of the Tabernacle) as the priesthood and are certainly worthy brethren. We are honoring God together through following Jesus.

Provoking Principle: Spiritual and scriptural enlightenment can transform our provoking from an antagonizing habit to an embracing response.

**When we provoke we often exasperate and that's not good!
How do we keep from exasperating God?**

The third chapter of Hebrews talks about exasperating God. It uses an entirely different word for provoking, is only used within this chapter, and is only used in regard to exasperating God. This tells us that we should really pay attention here as the one thing we should NEVER want is to exasperate and provoke our Creator!

Two forms of the same word:

Provoke: Strongs #3893; to embitter alongside, i.e. (figuratively) to exasperate

Provoke: Strongs #3894; irritation

Up to this point in Hebrews, Paul had been carefully laying out the case for Jesus as the absolute centerpiece of God's plan by way of prophecy, Jesus' position in relation to angels and examples of other Jewish Christians.

He now compares Jesus' faithfulness with that of Moses: Hebrews 3:1-19: Moses was incredibly faithful to what he was given to do but Jesus did greater things. *He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses.* Paul had avoided provoking negatively by continually honoring what the Jewish Christians honored. He provoked unto love and good works.

Now Paul reminds them that the Jewish Christians' heritage came from a place of exasperating God: ...⁵Now Moses was faithful in all his house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; ⁶but Christ was faithful as a Son over his house—



whose house we are, **How Not to exasperate God: if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.** (Hold fast to what you know.)

What was God so irritated about? The Israelites were released from Egypt and saw all the miracles God did for them, yet they constantly complained. Paul is using this as an example. They had the real-life experience of deliverance. God gave them freedom. Their penalty was wandering in the wilderness for forty years, dying there and never making it to the Promised Land.

Paul just painted an incredibly familiar word picture for them - they all KNEW this story! They understood how they suffered consequences for their lack of belief and Paul is encouraging them not to fall into that.

- How not to exasperate God: *Hold fast to your confidence.*
- How not to exasperate God: *Encourage one another day after day.*
- How not to exasperate God: *Appreciate God's gift, hold fast to it and encourage one another.*
- How not to exasperate God: *Do not let go of your belief.*

There is a seemingly more common, less intense level of provoking - most often used in a negative sense but still having the possibility of a positive bent. As with all other kinds of provoking the default seems to be to tear down, but there is hope for something good if we pay close attention. Focus on the most important thing.

Colossians 3:18-21: Fathers, do not exasperate your children. This is not about “hurting their feelings” or a tug of war for control. It is about being so hard on them that they lose heart. Do not dwell on their faults, beat them down and cause them to give up. Train them, praise them, discipline them, coach them, be an example to them. Give them the grace to grow, like God gives us!

Provoking Principle: Pushing, prodding and poking, done with love, wisdom and godliness produces children with the life experience of being challenged, failure as a stepping stone and an inherent ability to cope.

It has almost gone the opposite direction in our society. You can actually exasperate children by being too easy on them and not teaching them to succeed in life.

This next provoking example is provoking for good! Paul is focusing on Christians helping Christians: **2 Corinthians 9:1-7:** (NASB) ¹For it is superfluous for me to write to you about this ministry to the saints; ²for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the Macedonians, namely, that Achaia has been prepared since last year, and your zeal has **stirred up <2042>** most of them.

Paul is telling them that their zeal and generosity stimulated the brethren. The effect was a positive provoking. Paul is positively provoking those who were positively provoking others!

Is Paul playing on their egos? ³But I have sent the brethren, in order that our boasting about you may not be made empty in this case, so that, as I was saying, you may be prepared; ⁴otherwise if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to speak of you—will be put to shame by this confidence. **Could Paul be prodding them to act in a certain way by exerting peer pressure?** ⁵So I thought it necessary to urge the brethren that they would go on ahead to you and arrange beforehand your previously promised bountiful gift, so that the same would be ready as a bountiful gift and not affected by covetousness. No, Paul is praising their previous actions, their present promise of action and the godly attitude that fueled both, as their generosity was contagious. They were being an example of Christlikeness. ⁶Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Provoking Principle: Provoking and stretching others towards godly actions comes when we remind them of the good we already know to be present and vibrant in their lives.

As with most things in this world, there is provoking we simply should avoid going to at all costs. Our frail human form can be easily angered and in such a state we can easily seek to



pick a fight or incite others to join our unbalanced cause and show those other people “what for!” As Christians, we need to run from this with all our energy.

What should we provoke and *why*? To love and good works and giving to one another. *Who* should we provoke? Make sure we provoke those around us in a positive way. *How* should we provoke? With goodness and looking at their best welfare.

Remember not exasperating God? Here is the result upon those who did the exasperating: Romans 10:18-20: Previously we talked about the Exodus and how the Israelites wandered in the wilderness because of their lack of faith. Why would God enrage anybody? He offered the spiritual call to Israel as a nation and they rejected it. So, the call went out to the Gentiles. That was a dramatic cause for jealousy from the Jews. They could not understand why God gave the Gentiles favor. The Jews lost their opportunity. They provoked God by rejecting His son.

Provoking Principle: Our provoking arrogance towards God will not hurt Him, but its consequence inevitably provokes *us* to anger.

The Jews ended up provoking themselves to anger and jealousy because of their anger and jealousy toward Jesus. When we provoke negatively it will come back and hurt us deeply.

Romans 11:11-14: The feeling of being left out can help draw them back as a nation. Prophetically, Israel is still God’s chosen nation. They are back in Israel because God overruled them getting there.

Provoking Principle: Wisdom can take that which is already over the top and attempt to redirect its passion towards that which is good. Not easy, not common and not advisable for most!

For us, we should focus on *provoking unto love and good works*.

The last father/children example was “stimulating to anger” - this is “to anger alongside - enrage:” Ephesians 6:1-4: A father’s job is to bring his children up in discipline and the instruction of the Lord, but not to enrage his children.

Provoking Principle: There is never any excuse to provoke your children with anything but godliness and goodness.

We have the power to provoke in a positive way. Set a standard to *provoke unto love and good works*, showing others how it is done. This can change your life and those around you!

*So, how do I provoke in a GOOD way?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!*