

Be Provoked**Acts 17:16-21**

Bryn MacPhail / Oct. 17, 2010

You often hear people within the Church expressing an interest in seeing their particular congregation grow.

Such is the case here.

Many of you remember a time when these pews, and the Sunday School classrooms, were filled to capacity each and every Sunday.

We long to return to those days—or, at least, we long to replicate those attendance patterns, don't we?

When a congregation begins to dream about numerical growth, the conversation usually then turns toward analyzing local demographics and then implementing suitable outreach strategies.

Visit any Christian bookstore and you'll see that one of the larger sections will be books that offer formulas for "Church Growth".

Would it surprise you to hear me say that I am not convinced that these conversations about church growth are entirely helpful?

I hope you won't misunderstand me—I am eager to see numerical growth in the number of folks attending services at St. Andrew's—it's

just that I do not think that the formulas being presented by the so-called church growth experts is where our emphasis should be placed.

Where should our emphasis be?

Now, I can hardly call myself an expert in biology, but it seems patently obvious to me that healthy things grow.

If, over the next six months, my young daughter failed to grow in stature, I would bring her to a doctor believing that something is wrong with her health. I would do this because we have come to expect growth to be the indicator of good health.

Bearing this principle in mind, I submit to you that *the emphasis of a congregation should be on buttressing our spiritual health.*

Again, the conviction here is that if we are healthy, we will make wise decisions; if we are healthy, we will engage in the right activities; if we are healthy, we will grow.

Admittedly, the things that contribute to our spiritual health are myriad and varied. Hopefully this sermon series has presented a sampling of the things that mark a healthy church.

Healthy congregations examine the Scriptures daily.

Healthy congregations pray earnestly.

Healthy congregations centre everything on the supremacy of Jesus.

Healthy congregations depend upon the power of the Holy Spirit.

Looking at this morning's message title, it appears that I am commending quite a peculiar track for us. How will "being provoked" contribute to our spiritual health?

A pattern that we observe in the Bible, and learn from experience is that *positive steps are often born from negative experiences*.

We've learned that the search for satisfaction usually emerges from the sea of dissatisfaction.

One example of this principle that comes to mind is a holiday I spent at my mother's family cottage a number of years ago.

It might help you to know that I'm the kind of person who loves sitting on a cottage deck—either to read a book or simply to relax with a cold drink.

And while I very much enjoy relaxing on a cottage deck, I never really liked the deck at the family cottage—it was painted in an awful tone of red, some of the deck boards were splintered, and some even had rusty nails protruding from them.

Now, even though there were things about this deck which bothered me, I did not do anything about it. You see, I was not sufficiently *provoked* to change anything . . . until one particular summer day when I literally fell through the deck.

It was not a long fall, but I remember vividly as I stood there wearing the deck around my waist, thinking, 'That's enough. I'm going to build a new deck.'

That same summer I built a replacement deck for my mother's cottage.

The point is that being dissatisfied can be a good thing if our dissatisfaction sparks an earnest pursuit of something better.

Being provoked by something that displeases us is a good thing when it causes us to respond in a positive and productive way.

We have a track and field team visiting with us today. It has been long time since I participated in a serious athletic competition, but I wonder if the experience of these young people matches my own. The greatest gains I made in sports always came on the heels of a bitter loss.

Because losing has a way of motivating a person, doesn't it?

Losing has a way of provoking us to make the changes necessary for victory.

I used to feel guilty when I recognized how certain aspects of church ministry provoked me. I used to feel badly if something that we were doing, or not doing as a congregation, bothered me. This changed, however, as the result of the apostle Paul's example in Acts, chapter 17.

Paul is in the city of Athens. Once the intellectual center of the ancient world, Athens boasted a rich philosophical tradition inherited from Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

You could have hardly blamed Paul if he was spellbound by the splendour of the city's architecture and the mystique of the intellectual heritage. But he wasn't.

Paul was not impressed by this culturally rich city, but rather, he was provoked by that which was distasteful to his Christian conscience.

Luke explains that **“while Paul was waiting for (his colleagues) at Athens, his spirit was being *provoked* within him as he was beholding the city full of idols”** (17:16).

Paul was a church-planter. And Paul understood that if healthy congregations were to be established he would need to confront those elements that opposed the spiritual health of the community.

In other words, the fact that Paul was provoked by a city submerged in idolatry, is a good thing. Moreover, the manner in which Paul responds to his own agitation provides us with an example worthy of emulation.

Being provoked, being agitated, as you likely know, does not always lead to an appropriate response.

Take, for instance, the simple example of seeing a piece of trash on the ground.

Noticing garbage that has been left behind never fails to provoke my spirit. But do you know what? I have to be honest—I do not always pick up the litter. Sometimes I see the litter and am sufficiently stirred to go pick it up. On other occasions, however, I see the litter, and am provoked by it, but I do nothing.

One response to being provoked then, is indifference.

Because you and I so often see litter on the ground, we run the risk of being accustomed to this sight. We've picked up litter so many times, but it doesn't seem to eliminate the problem.

This can happen within the local church. There was a time when we confronted gossip; there was a time when we confronted uncooperative spirits; there was a time when we were willing to confront spiritual lethargy, but as the shortcomings persisted we became used to them and grew indifferent.

No doubt the apostle Paul had seen his share of pagan worship and idolatry in his day. And yet, there is no sense that Paul was going to shrug it off and say, 'You can't change the way these people think and act. It's not worth my time.'

No matter how familiar the dysfunctions of society were to Paul, he never ceased in his efforts to bring the person and work of Jesus Christ to bear on the situation. When Paul was provoked, he did not respond with *indifference*.

A second possible response to being provoked is *hostility*.

The examples of this response are many. A driver is provoked by being cut off by another driver and responds by rolling down his window and shouting harsh words while making impolite hand gestures.

A husband provokes a wife with a single comment about how the dinner was prepared and an all-out argument ensues.

Could it ever be said of a local congregation, that certain members respond to being provoked with hostility?

A decision is rendered that you disagree with. A hymn is chosen that you dislike. The sermon that is preached is too long. The décor of the church building is not to your liking. There is insufficient outreach taking place. The children's programming lacks volunteers. How do you respond?

Some lash out with hostility—spreading criticism to all who will listen. Others respond by shrugging with indifference—convinced that there is no hope for change. But thankfully, there are others that respond like the apostle Paul.

Paul was provoked to the core at the sight of the idols in Athens. He was immensely bothered by what he witnessed there.

And yet, if you read the entire chapter you see that there is not even a hint of hostility in his response to the people of Athens. Paul is deeply offended by the presence of idols, and yet he refuses to lash out.

Nor does Paul retreat with indifference. He doesn't say to himself, 'I'm going to keep a low profile and when Silas and Timothy arrive, we'll move on to a more Christian-friendly city.'

No, Paul responds to being provoked by immersing himself in Christian service.

Refusing indifference, and avoiding hostility, Paul enters the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing gentiles concerning Jesus Christ, risen from the dead (17:17).

Not only in the synagogue, but Paul also went daily to the market place to speak with any who were there.

Indeed, it was good that Paul was provoked by that which was not God-honouring. And it was good that Paul responded so positively to the agitation of his spirit.

As I mentioned before, I know what it is like to be provoked with regard to the state of ministry within a local congregation. But thanks to Paul, I now realize this is not a bad thing—being provoked can actually begin a process that leads to improving the health of a congregation.

Undoubtedly, you will observe and experience things in this life which will provoke you.

Undoubtedly, you will observe and experience things that are contrary to Scripture and are dishonouring to God.

I don't think we can avoid this. What remains within our control, however, is how you respond.

The challenge for you, and for me, is to *turn our agitation into productive Christian service*.

We must not give in to the temptation to lash out in a hostile manner, and we must resist the temptation to merely shrug our shoulders with indifference.

Complaining is easy, but complaining fails to bring about positive change.

Doing nothing is easy, but the status quo remains.

The Bible presents us with a better way. Being provoked is often accompanied by an opportunity to contribute to positive change.

May I ask you this morning:

Is something provoking your spirit today?

Is there something about your personal situation that you wish was different?

Is there something going on that isn't quite right?

Do you see something that contradicts God's will and dishonours Him?

Be provoked.

But, be provoked to make a difference.

Be provoked to make a contribution.

Be provoked to follow Jesus more sincerely. Amen.