

Hebrews

Hebrews 10:24-25 - Why we meet together as Christians

Having established in the previous exposition of **Hebrews 10:24-25** that in both context and the Greek it's not a command to "attend church on Sundays," we're still faced with what "spurring one another on to love and good deeds" means, and the admonition, "let us encourage one another" too.

We know that both are fired up by "and all the more as you see the Day approaching" in **verse 25**, the time when the great gathering of God's people occurs at Jesus' return in power to this planet. So there's a hint of urgency here, but also a wonderful chance to experience and share in what the Holy Spirit is doing in the church to **prepare us** for that "Day."

And what the Spirit was inspiring in the mind of the author of Hebrews was what that preparation looked like. And it very much involved what happens in our own little church group or cell in Christ's body. Hebrews 10:24-25 may not be "commanding" us to meet together, then, but it's certainly explaining **the need to meet together and why**. And the Holy Spirit is behind that too, which explains why we want to meet together in the first place, and how easily it comes to us, even when we share so little in common naturally. The amazing unity, for instance, between sworn enemies, the Jews and Gentiles in Ephesians 2, was witness to that too.

So the Holy Spirit inspires the desire to meet together, but for a clear reason too. And it's not to put on a "full worship service," involving cathedrals, musty church buildings, priests in robes, choirs, hymns, prayer manuals, and a lot of odd rituals and traditions that easily lose their meaning in endless repetition and little relevance to the world we live in. The primary reason given here in Hebrews 10 for preparing us for that great day of Jesus' return is - in the words of the good old King James Bible - to "provoke unto love and to good works," and "exhorting" one another, which has a bit more edge to it than words like "spur" and "encourage" in other translations.

But take into account why these Christians in Hebrews were being talked to in this way. They were being exhorted rather than spurred, because some were losing sight of what the Holy Spirit had them meeting together for. It had led to "exhortation" right off the bat in **Hebrews 2:1** in the phrase, "We must pay more careful attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away."

Some in **verse 3** were even “ignoring” or becoming quite indifferent to the life they’d been called to in honour of Jesus and in preparation for his return. But life was tough for Christians at that time, because instead of Jesus coming in power to rescue them from their enemies, their enemies were making life worse for them. And years had passed since that amazing day of Pentecost, but still no sign of Jesus doing anything to relieve them either.

Disappointment, malaise, discouragement had replaced the excitement and eagerness they’d felt in the early days. Meeting together had likely lost its appeal too, especially when the whole group was feeling miserable and stressed.

But today is no different. For example, as one article I read began: “It’s Sunday morning, and our neighbourhood is alive with activities. One neighbour is backing his boat out of the driveway as his family prepares for a day on the lake. Another sits comfortably on his front porch reading the newspaper. My daughter’s friend calls and asks her to go to a basketball game. At the same time, our family is racing to find a missing pair of shoes so we can get to church on time. Has that ever happened around your house? If so, you may feel as if you’re swimming upstream against a current of apathy. It might even be easy to give in and give up going to church.”

Hebrews 10:24-25 is just as relevant for us today, therefore, as it was originally. So the Holy Spirit has the author of Hebrews put pen to paper to get some “provoking” and “exhorting” going on. But not from the minister, take note. It’s **among the members**. The solution to the malaise is having the members do the provoking and exhorting among each other.

This could get touchy, of course, if members take this to mean they can go around correcting everyone, and judging each other’s motives, and looking to see who is and who isn’t “up to snuff” in their attendance or behaviour.

On the other hand, we have **James 5:16** saying, “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed,” and **verses 19-20**, “if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner away from his error will save him from death, and cover over a multitude of sins.”

It made me wonder that if we’d been doing more of these verses as Christians, would the Christian church be in the divided denominational mess it’s in now? Would Christians have got into all sorts of bizarre customs and thundered off on crusades, or gone to war and killed each other too?

It's not pleasant having one's sins, or aberrations, pointed out, but I think back to those who did that for me, and I'm so glad they stood up to me and took the risk of saying something to me, because they "saved" me from no end of trouble.

With all this as a background, then, we can take a "peek at the Greek" too, starting with the Greek word for "spur" in Hebrews 10:24, or "provoke" in the King James. In Greek it's *paroxusmos*, which we've copied in our English word "paroxysm," meaning a sudden outburst (as in laughter or coughing) or in a sudden worsening of symptoms (as in pain or a fever causing convulsions). It's a strong word, taken from the Greek word *oxus* meaning "a sharp edge." And sometimes I've needed that, where someone with "a sharp edge" to their voice slices through my stupidity to wake me up.

How, for instance, would you react if the driver of the car you were in began to nod off at the wheel? You wouldn't whisper softly or try to be tactful, you'd immediately yell and shake the living daylights into him before you all ended up in the ditch, or worse. Well, it's that kind of urgency behind the Greek word for "provoke." It's meant to be strong enough to switch people from apathy to wide awake awareness. Or from being all wrapped up in their own misery, like those Hebrew Christians, to thinking about others and the good they could be doing still.

In the negative sense, *paroxusmos* was used to describe "the sharp disagreement" between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:39, that was so bristly that the two of them went their separate ways. But in Hebrews 10 the word was used in the positive sense, to jolt people's minds back to what God had called them for, like an electric shock restoring a heart back to its normal rhythm. And the Holy Spirit gives us the courage and discernment to do that for each other.

It can be done tactfully too, of course,, as in **Hebrews 6:9-10** - "But, beloved, **we are convinced of better things concerning you....**though we are speaking in this way. For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward his name." Nicely said, but with enough sting in it to get the point across. It takes wisdom and timing, yes, both of which God supplies in buckets full, but when a person's spurting blood and their life is draining from them, you act quickly and decisively. I remember the time a former Irish terrorist stormed out in the middle of my sermon from the front row, his steel heeled cowboy boots clattering on the wooden floor, and I knew I had to nip this quickly in the bud for his sake before he really blew apart. So we had it out that evening, face to face, and he recovered wonderfully.

Courage and love working together for the sake of others, clearly the work of the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit is preparing us as a family to serve the world effectively and powerfully when Jesus returns. But now in our little groups of Christians together is our learning and practicing laboratory.

That part seems to have slipped the minds of those in **1 Corinthians 11**, however, because in taking bread and wine to remember Jesus' death and the new covenant he'd opened up in the church, they were "eating and drinking without recognizing the body of the Lord," **verse 29**. In context the "body of the Lord" was the church, because the issue Paul was confronting in this chapter was the rich scoffing off their "Lord's supper" meal and not even waiting for the poorer members to show up.

The result was a "weak and sick" group of people, some of whom had "fallen asleep" (verse 30). They'd drifted away, in other words, just like the Christians in Hebrews were in danger of doing - **and for the same reason too**, that they weren't looking out for each other (verse 33).

In Stephen's words in Acts 7:51, that would be called "resisting the Spirit," because the new covenant - that Jesus' blood had gifted the church with - was meant to create visible, selfless, "one anothering" love in the church, mentioned at least 59 times in the New Testament. It's the one easily recognizable sign Jesus gave that we are his disciples, that we're able to share the same love for one another that he has for us (John 13:34-35).

So, when the author of Hebrews talks of "encouraging one another" in **Hebrews 10:25**, it's in this context of the Holy Spirit creating a lovely (and loving) family in each little "cell" of Christ's body. And encouragement has a lot to do with that, because it is a powerful force for good, not only in making each of us feel valued and appreciated, but also in protecting us from "the deceitfulness of sin."

That second part was made clear in **Hebrews 3:13**, where the author of Hebrews mentions "encouraging one another daily....so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness."

There's a "sharp edge" attached to that word "encourage" too, just as there is in the word "provoke" in Hebrews 10:24. It's more than being nice to each other, or telling each other how valuable and appreciated we are; it's also got some teeth in it, to protect each other from our worst enemy, which is how sin can creep up on us, twist our thinking into bitterness or license to do what we like, so that God's plan for us means nothing anymore.

It's not surprising, then, that the King James uses the word "exhort" in Hebrews 3:13, rather than "encourage," which fits the intent and context of the verse much better. A "peek at the Greek" supports that too. "Encourage" or "exhort" in verse 13 is rooted in the Greek word *parakaleo*, which contains a strong hint of counselling in it. It's like telling someone, "We need to talk," because it's time for a "one on one" and a serious chat.

This is what should have been done in **1 Corinthians 5**, when it was obvious to the entire church that one of their members was totally out to lunch in thinking it was OK to have sex with "his father's wife," **verse 1**. Did anybody take the silly man aside and "tell him straight" that he needed to get a grip on himself or they'd put him out of their group until he did (verse 2)? Were any of them "filled with grief," as Paul phrased it in **verse 2**, that their brother was swimming in very dangerous waters?

No; none of them were. They were actually "proud" of what was happening (verse 2). How on earth could a church get that way, though, where instead of jolting the man awake out of love and concern for him, they were almost encouraging him to carry on?

But there we have a perfect example of what "the deceitfulness of sin" can do. It's deadly in its twisting our thinking. But that's why Jesus provided his church with the Holy Spirit, to combat this happening. But notice in **whom** the Holy Spirit is working - because **Paul was really tough with the members** of the Corinthians church for not jolting the man awake. This is something the Holy Spirit inspires in the membership too, therefore, so we're all involved in protecting each other, because it can work wonders in stopping a person getting sucked in by an obvious sin - just as James said in James 5:16, 19-20 (quoted back on page 2).

And guess what? The same Greek word *parakaleo* is used in **Hebrews 10:25**. So again, the King James nailed it when using the word "exhort" rather than "encourage" in that verse too. It's got the same sharp edge in it, because that is what's needed at all times in the churches to combat the deceitfulness of sin, which in the case of those Hebrew Christians had some of them reverting back to their old Jewish customs.

So Hebrews 10:24-25 is making it very clear **why we meet together as Christians**. We're being prepared by the Holy Spirit for that great gathering of Jesus' family when he returns, but in the most practical and necessary ways. Yes, we become a lovable, loving family, but that love is also being expressed in the courage to face a brother or sister who is obviously drifting off track.