

## Provoked to Pray

Acts 17:16-32

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*"Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new." (Acts 17:16–21, ESV)*

For the last five years we have started the New Year with a week-long focus on prayer. We began 2014's prayer week with a 24 hour Bible reading and prayer event, noon prayer on Thursday, missions prayer on Friday, and a men's prayer meeting on Saturday. This week we continue with the following events:

- Tuesday: Staff prayer summit
- Wednesday: Downtown Prayer at Christ Circle Cathedral
- Thursday: noon prayer in Fishers (I'll talk more about this prayer time later)

We take this much time to pray because 1) we need to prioritize prayer, 2) most of us struggle with prayer, and 3) God moves when his people pray. In other words, we pray because it is important, we need it, and it works!

I believe that there is a direct connection between the blessing and power of God and prayer. A prayerless church is a powerless church. Charles Spurgeon, a pastor who believed in prayer, said this:

*"A prayerless soul is a Christless soul. Prayer is the lisp of the believing infant, the shout of the fighting believer, the requiem of the dying saint falling asleep in Jesus. It is the breath, the watchword, the comfort, the strength, the honour of a Christian."<sup>1</sup>*

So, we need to pray.

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<sup>1</sup> Spurgeon, Charles H. *Morning and Evening: Daily Readings*. Complete and unabridged; New modern edition. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006. (January 2, Morning).

## Looking Back

We need to pray, especially as we anticipate another year of ministry at College Park Church. 2013 was a great year of ministry together, and I think it is helpful to be reminded about some of the things that we experienced together. Let me give you a few highlights to stoke the fires of gratitude in your soul:

- Started the year with a message on “presenting everyone mature in Christ”
- Created three teams to help us grow: discipleship, evangelism, and strategic influence
- Focused on evangelism in the Spring (“Open a door, open my mouth, open a heart”) and planted gospel seeds all summer
- Launched Nehemiah Bible Church in Brookside led by Pastor Cory Johnson
- Learned some theology through THINK|13 with Dr. James Hamilton and a CPI Forum on Sexual Identity in the Fall
- Over 800 people served with a friend through SERVE|13
- Dealt with the issue of anger in LIVE|13 and launched 30 new LIVE small groups
- Trained over 300 people in Counseling and became a regional training center for Biblical Counseling
- Hosted a joint Fresh Encounter service with Traders Point and gave over \$20,000 to our friends at Colonial Hills
- Commissioned our first church planting team to the Caspian and launched DELTA force during REACH|13
- Completed our journey through the book of Exodus
- Gave away \$21,000 in \$100 increments as we studied Extravagant Grace
- Grew morning attendance by almost 9% with an average attendance over 4,000 in the fall
- Welcomed almost 1,000 people in our guest reception room
- Retired over half of our facility debt – from 4.7 million to just over 2 million
- Ended the budget year in the black
- Set a record for the largest Christmas offering in the history of our church with over a million dollars given!

I share all of this with you so that you can rejoice with us about what a marvelous year 2013 really was. We have much for which to be thankful, and we also have a great responsibility. God has been very kind to College Park Church, and the Bible says “to whom much is given...much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

## Provoked to Pray

As we look to 2014, I want to share with you a little taste of where we are headed as a church and what our Elders are going to be discussing at our annual Elder Retreat next weekend. I want for you to think with me about this question: **“What provokes you to pray?”** As we continue to pray this week, I want for you to think with me about what moves us to pray and seek God’s help.

What burden do you carry on your heart? What burns in your soul to do for God? Who needs to be reached with the gospel? What wrong needs to be made right in our culture? And at the end of the service you will have a chance to respond.

What provokes your heart? There have been a few times in my life when I knew that the Lord was provoking my heart about something or someone. I have seen the Lord use those moments to propel into a new season of life and ministry.

Today I want to share with you what has grabbed my heart for our church as we look to 2014 and beyond. I want to show you what has provoked my heart, and I want to ask you to pray for our church and our Elders as we wrestle with our next steps.

### **Provoked in Athens**

Our text today is Acts 17, and it is the story of Paul's ministry in the city of Athens. To set the context, Paul is on his second missionary journey where he is visiting churches that had been planted or looking to start new churches. He is traveling with Silas and Timothy through modern day Syria, Turkey, and Greece. It had been quite a trip.

In Philippi, Paul and Silas were severely beaten and imprisoned because they had ruined the business of a fortune-teller when Paul cast out a demon from a slave girl. After an angel delivered them from jail and the jailer was converted, Paul and Silas traveled to Thessalonica. After they preached in the synagogue for three weeks, another disturbance arose, and Paul and Silas fled in the night to Berea. They received a different reception in Berea as the Jews received Paul's words with "with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11). But when the leaders of Thessalonica heard about this success, they traveled to Berea to try and stir up another controversy. As a result of this new conflict, Paul left Silas and Timothy in Berea and traveled to Athens.

Let's notice a few things about Paul's experience in Athens:

#### **1. A Divine Appointment**

Verse 16 says, "Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens." Paul was alone in this historic city, having been run out of nearly every city in which he had preached the gospel. People were being converted, but there was also an enormous amount of conflict. On this second journey, he had been beaten, imprisoned, falsely accused, and run out of town multiple times. Now he was in Athens.

You know what impresses me here about Paul? Despite all of the challenges that he faced and the fact that he is waiting in Athens, look at what he does next: "... *his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.*" (Acts 17:16-17, ESV). He doesn't view his time in Athens as a detour. Instead, he goes right back to the synagogue to

preach the gospel. He didn't waste the wait. Paul's passion for the gospel was not something he could turn on and off.

What's more I'm sure that Paul had learned that God was always at work – surely the experience in the Philippian jail proved that! So I wonder if he walked around the city of Athens looking for what God wanted to do.

It never ceases to amaze me how God is able to use situations and circumstances that might at first seem like a total waste or a detour. I heard a great example of this as it relates to the Christmas Musical. Someone from our church invited a friend to come to the Saturday afternoon program, but they were delayed because an accident on I-65. While they were waiting, a police officer approached them and explained the delay. They said something to the effect of "that's okay, we are on our way to a Christmas program and there's another one later tonight." And much to their surprise, the officer asked if he could attend the program too. They extend the invitation, and the officer came for the final performance on Saturday night.

Nothing happens by accident, right? So instead of Paul saying "Why am I in Athens?" with a negative grumble, he chooses to use the opportunity to share the gospel. On a personal level, some of you are facing situations and circumstances that make you wonder: "What am I doing here?" And I would tell you that is a great question.

Since we completed the Mission Expansion Project, I've been asking myself that very question about our church. I look at where God has us as a ministry right now, the needs of our city, the trajectory of Evangelical Christianity, and I'm asking myself: "Why is College Park Church here?" You see I believe that God has brought all of us together, that it is by divine design, and that it is part of his plan to reach the world.

## **2. A Deep Burden**

The next thing that we see in Acts 17 is what happened to Paul as he walked through the city of Athens. Verse 16 uses a word that grabbed my attention, and it is the reason why I chose this text for this Sunday. It is the word "provoked." Paul saw that the city was full of idols, and his spirit was provoked.

The Greek word here is *paroxunomai*, and it means to be emotionally upset about something. It can also mean a severe emotional concern. Paul uses the word negatively in 1 Corinthians 13:5 when he talks about the opposite of love. He says that love is not irritable. The NIV translates the word as "easily angered." The idea behind the word is that something is creating emotional tension in the heart that is creating an outward response. Something is troubling, bothersome, and deeply concerning.

It might give us even more clarity to think of a word that might be the opposite. We could use words like apathy, indifference, passivity, detachment, or insensitivity. Paul could have walked through the city, seen the idols (an estimated 30,000 by historians), and been unmoved. He could have kept himself detached from the needs of the city or written Athens off as a pagan, worthless community. He could have found excuses as to why this wasn't his problem. Or he could have justified his need for a break in light of what he had experienced in the previous cities.

Thankfully, that did not happen. What Paul saw with his eyes affected his heart. He was troubled by what he saw. He felt a burden in his heart to do something to reach the people of Athens.

Do you know what it is like to feel this kind of burden? I sure hope you do. One of the greatest joys of my life has been allowing my heart to feel the urgency of the call of God to do something. There are few things better than knowing that God is leading you and guiding you to do something for Him that is bigger than yourself.

### **3. Strategic Steps**

A burden is worthless unless it is acted upon. Notice what Paul does. Verse 17 tells us where he goes, and it is not by mistake:

*“So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.” (Acts 17:17, ESV)*

Paul went to where the people were. He went to the synagogue where the spiritually minded people would gather. But he also went to the marketplace where he would find secular people. Paul shared the gospel with both groups of people, and it led to another opportunity to present his views to the Areopagus, the assembly of leaders from the city of Athens.

Verses 22-33 records Paul’s message to these leaders, and it is quite a remarkable moment. In fact, as a result of his presentation two well-know people are converted: Dionysis and Damaris. Additionally, other people are converted as well.

But none of this would have happened without Paul’s strategic decision to visit the synagogue and the marketplace. His burden needed to be matched with specific actions that set up these important conversations.

One of my favorite prayer gatherings during prayer week is when we gather downtown at Christ’s Church. I love this gathering because it is so encouraging when I see our people emerging from their office buildings downtown and gathering to pray. It reminds me that our people are spread all over the city and in very strategic positions for gospel influence.

That was one of the things that amazed me about what happened as we gave away the \$100 bills. I kept receiving email updates as people would post stories on line of how God moved in their hearts, and it was powerful to see the combined impact of our congregation in our community.

The vision for that series was to give us new eyes and to empower us to do something unique.

### **Provoked for Indy**

As I shared with you earlier, I’ve been thinking a lot about what is next for our church and what should provoke our hearts as we think about role in the world, our country and our city. Our church’s history has been marked by reaching the unreached and the underserved (in Brookside). And I want us to think about adding another element to our vision: reaching unchurched people.

My heart is provoked about this for two reasons: 1) large churches need to work hard to keep an external focus and 2) the need in our community is bigger than what you might think. That why I have summarized our idea with this tag line: **mobilization for multiplication.**

### **Mobilization**

The vision is to mobilize our congregation for greater ministry, to help us not think like consumers but to think like missionaries. The vision is to call us to do even more to reach our neighbors and to impact our community.

Something can easily happen to a large church as the spread of our congregation grows wider and wider. We can become too much of a destination, a place that people begin to treat as if they were consumers.

We began to study where our people live, and it was remarkable how far away people live from the church. What's more our research, external and internal to the church, showed us that if someone lives more than twenty minutes from church, it has a huge impact on their inclination to invite their neighbors to church. But it also impacts their involvement. I was stunned to see the difference between the demographics of our church and the location of our small groups.

From where I sit as the Lead Pastor, I can see a path where our church becomes more like a cruise-ship instead of a battleship. So our pastors and Elders have started talking a lot about mobilization in light of the needs within our own church. We've started shifting our focus toward what it mean to make disciples, 1:1 discipleship, leadership development, and helping raise up the next generation of leaders.

For those of you who were here last week, you saw some of the fruit of that as Dustin, Bob, and Jeff shared God's word with you as a congregation. I went home a very happy pastor last Sunday. I felt like we had not only heard the Word, but we also are on the right path in terms of raising up leaders.

I'm provoked to provoke you to not be content with simply receiving the Word, enjoying the good fellowship of people you know, and feel comfortable in church. I want you to think and pray with me about what your role might be in mobilizing our church for the Great Commission in our city.

### **Multiplication**

As we look to 2014 and beyond, I'm not only provoked about us as a church but also about the needs of our community. The metro area of Indianapolis needs to the gospel; it needs the transforming message that comes from relationship with Jesus.

Last year was a difficult year for our city. Did you know how many people were killed in our city? 141 – the highest number since 2006. One of the reasons why I want more of you to consider

helping Nehemiah Bible Church is because our city needs more gospel-preaching, theologically driven, urban churches. Please see me personally if this is of interest to you.

But the needs isn't just about crime. There are over a million people in our city who would consider themselves "unchurched." 60% of the city of population of Indianapolis are unaffiliated with a Christian church (and that is using the term "Christian" very broadly). What's more, Indy has the fewest number of church plants per capita than any other major metropolitan city.

Now this might surprise you because it often seems as if Indy is a fairly Christian community with lots of churches. An illustration of this helped my thinking and it provoked me. I have two images. The first is what rush hour looks like on a Monday morning, and the second is what traffic looks like on Sunday "rush hour." Our city needs more churches. The metro area needs more gospel witness.

### **Methodology**

So what is our plan? This weekend our Elders will be discussing a proposal to launch College Park Church campuses or outposts in two areas of our city in next 2-3 years. Our dream would be to bring College Park closer to where our people are so that they can be mobilized for greater ministry and evangelism.

Our vision is to be a multi-campus church (same vision, Eldership, core values, teaching, music and programming) so that we can reach our city and grow even more in the fullness of Christ. We are praying about how to expand our ministry footing through multiple campuses so that we can reach more people and help our church to continually be focused on mobilization.

That is one of the reasons why we have focused on retiring our debt as fast as possible. I would love to be able to use the money that we are presently paying on our mortgage (about \$500,000 / year) and apply that investment toward establishing new campuses. I'm praying that we'll be able to fully retire our debt in 2014 and have additional money available to consider launching a new campus in 2015.

This week Thursday we are going to have a prayer meeting in Fishers. The reason for this prayer gathering is because we are leaning toward planting our first campus or outpost in the Fishers area. It is an area that is exploding with growth, and we have a number of people from our church who drive from Fishers every Sunday. So if you live in that area of the city, I'd love to have you join us in prayer on Thursday to seek God's will. We need to know if this is what God wants us to do. And I'm asking all of you to add this to your prayer list, especially as our Elders meet this weekend for our annual retreat. We need to know God's heart and mind as we look to the next few years of ministry at College Park Church.

### **Provoked to Pray?**

What I'm sharing with you today is not just a vision or a program; this is a deep burden on my heart. My soul is provoked. I want to see our church reach unreached people groups, help

underserved people, and reach unchurched people in our city. I'm burdened about mobilization for multiplication.

What is on your heart today? Where has God placed you in our city, in your neighborhood, in your field of employment? Who in your family needs to come back to Christ? What do you see that provokes you heart to pray? What mission has God laid on your heart?

You see, being provoked is not just about what our church needs to do; it is about what you need to do.

God has placed you on this earth and in this city and in your neighborhood and in your job for a reason. What do you see? What is on your heart?

Our staff is going to meet at some point this week to pray, and we would love to join you in prayer for the burden on your heart. You have heard my burden this morning; we'd like to know yours.

As we close the service today I'd like to invite you to come and write down the name of someone or the name of some burden on your heart as it relates to where God has placed you. Coming forward is simply a way to acknowledge the burden, and then our staff is going to pray for each burden by name this week.

When Paul went to Athens, his heart was provoked as he saw the idols in the city. My question for you is simply this: What provokes you to pray?

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