

A number of years ago, we were camping at the Gibraltar Range on the NSW border, and on Sunday morning, we decided we go into Glen Innes for church. As we neared the outskirts of town, we drove past a sign telling us to tune into such-and-such FM frequency to get the tourist info. And being good tourists – that’s exactly what we did.

“Welcome to our town. While you’re here, drive up to the top of the hill overlooking our town and see our replica of stone henge...” And then it went on to describe how they’d set these stones up, to honour the Celtic settlers, and how (because they didn’t want to offend any religion), they’d sort of Christianised them a bit by putting a St George’s Cross outline on the inside of it...

Anyway, after church, we went up and had a look at these stones. And as I looked at them, I felt an immense sadness, and the spirit inside me, was grieving.... Why would they do that? How could a town be so naive as to set up pagan stones over itself? And they were proud of it – it was a tourist attraction – come and see what we’ve built.

Inside me I was really disturbed.

Have you ever felt like that? When you’ve seen something (or heard something), and you just know it’s wrong... Others reckon it’s really great – some people are really excited about it, but you can’t share that excitement, because you feel ‘crook in the guts’ about it...

Well, if you’ve ever felt that, then you know something of what Paul felt when he walked the streets of Athens.

When Paul arrived in Athens, he was on his own. He'd been run out of town – run out of Berea, and Timothy and Silas stayed behind to finish up their work, and they were going to catch up a bit later.

And as Paul walked the streets of Athens, looking at the sights, we're told that **his spirit was provoked within him** (Now, the Greek word that we translate as "provoked", usually means "to stir to anger," ... "to be irritated," "incensed"¹) , **as he saw that the city was full of idols**, his spirit was stirred to anger. ... He had this grinding in his guts – these people had fallen for a lie, and he was angered by it... You know, there **is** such a thing as righteous anger....
Ephesians 4:²⁶ **Be angry and do not sin; ...**

Let me ask you something? When your spirit is provoked within you (whether you be provoked to grief, or provoked to anger) When your spirit is provoked within you, for what purpose is that? When the Holy Spirit convicts you of something that's dreadfully wrong – why does He do it? Do you just keep it to yourself?

Well, if the Holy Spirit is convicting you of something in your life, of course it's for you – it's the Holy Spirit, convicting you of sin that you need to confess to God, and repent – turn away from that sin, to be forgiven...

But what about when the Holy Spirit gives you that groaning within, and it's not something **you** need to repent of – it's what's going on **around** you... You're grieving for what others are doing – maybe you're even moved to a righteous anger, like what Paul was...

You know, sometimes we're made to feel guilty if when we see what's going on in the world, we grieve for the situation (or even angry about the situation), and we try to point them away from their sin and towards God's truth – You get accused, “You're judging – you're just being judgmental” ...

Well, you're in good company. You know Lot, who lived in Sodom... Peter describes Lot as ^{2 Peter 2:7.....} ... **righteous Lot**, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked ⁸ (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard);

Did Lot just learn to ‘get on with life’ in Sodom and not let it affect him? No. It was a Godly torment – it grieved him deeply to see the happenings of Sodom... So, did God just give Lot this grief – this distress, to make him feel bad? No....

Who's going to reveal to the world, how God feels about their actions, if God's people won't do it? Lot stood up to **all** the men of Sodom, and said “Don't do this wicked thing” ...

When Jesus was entering Jerusalem just before Passover, He looked down on Jerusalem, and He grieved. He wept... Did Jesus remain silent? No. He went into the temple, and He was angry with what He saw, and He drove them out with a whip. And He preached, for the whole week that led to his death...

And when **you** have **that** grief in your heart, it's not just for you. The Holy Spirit (maybe through the gift of discernment),

is showing you how God feels about His world... What do you do with that? Well, He's not telling you His feelings, just so you can keep it to yourself. Maybe somebody else needs to be warned. Maybe someone you know, is falling for a lie, and they need to be guided to the truth – Maybe someone you know is caught in sin and they don't even recognise it as a sin, and they need someone who loves them enough to cross the barrier of 'live and let live' and to actually tell them that they need to repent.

If the Lord is grieving your spirit over what's going on around you, you have a responsibility before God, **not** to remain silent... - just like Ezekiel.

The Lord said to Ezekiel, "You're like a watchman on the wall. If **I** give you a warning for the people, and you pass it on, well it's on their heads if they don't take notice of it. But if you **don't** pass it on, it's on your headⁱⁱ...

And so Paul's spirit was provoked when he saw all these idols. What did **he** do? – Well, he preached. The answer was to turn **from** these idols, and to turn **to** the living God, so that's what he preached. He reasoned in the synagogue. He reasoned in the marketplace, every day, with those who happened to be there.

And there's two groups of people in Athens, who are particularly mentioned, they were philosophers, of 2 different schools of thought – The Epicureans and the Stoics. And I mention these, because what they believe, is what a lot of people believe today... The world isn't so much different. As Ecclesiastes says, there's nothing new under the sun.

The Epicureans believed that everything happened by chance and death is the end of all, so eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we might die and that's the end of that – we are no more.

You know a few Epicureans, don't you??? Of course they don't call themselves "Epicureans", but that's what they believe. There is no god with a purpose. When I die it's all over. There is no existence past death, so I might as well enjoy myself now....

I've seen a couple of grey nomads around over the last few years, and they had a big sticker on their caravan – "On a SKI" holiday "Spending the Kids Inheritance" ...

Eat, drink and be merry, because tomorrow we die, and that's that...

The other group were the Stoics. And the stoics believed in self sufficiency. It was their duty to do good things, in order to bring about the harmony of nature. They believed *there was a divine rational ordering principle that was in all things and beingsⁱⁱⁱ*. To them, all nature (including themselves) are what made up god. God was in everything and god was everything, so they themselves are part of what forms god. And so they believed they were in control of their own destiny.

Anyway, these two groups, heard Paul speaking in the market place and to put it simply, they were pretty disparaging about him. They thought he was just talking rot – that he'd just been picking up little bits of philosophy from here and there, and mixing it all up, and spitting it out again – trying to look wise, but talking about stuff he didn't even understand.... And yet

there were others there who realised “What this bloke’s talking about, is something different – he’s talking about new gods...”

And so, to sort out what Paul was actually teaching, they took him, and they brought him to the Areopagus. Now, from what I can make of it, you weren’t allowed open slather, and to say whatever you wanted to, on the streets of Athens^{iv} – it was a university town, after all... And the Areopagus is where they decided whether you were allowed to teach or not.

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus (a gathering of some of the most educated people in Athens), and Paul said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’

OK, Paul wants to tell them about Jesus – he wants to tell them the gospel, but he has to begin where **they’re** at, and take them **to** Jesus. And that’s how Paul usually worked. When Paul met with the Jews at the synagogue, he began where the Jews were at – they believed the Scriptures – they believed in God – in one god, and they were waiting for the messiah, so for the Jews, that’s where he’d begin – he’d begin with the Scriptures, and prove to them that Jesus was the messiah...

But now he was amongst the Greeks. And so rather than quoting the Scriptures, he actually quoted their poets. And the

Greeks believed in a **multitude** of Gods... They were **religious**, but they were religiously wrong... So Paul started where **they** were at. And he'd seen this alter for this "unknown god", and he knew, "There's my starting point".

There's quite a comical story behind the existence of this alter...

About 500 years earlier, a pestilence had befallen the city and people were dying, so they came to the conclusion that they must have upset one of the gods - but which one? -there's so many of them. (It's very confusing, being a polytheist)

And a chap by the name of Epimenides, came up with a cunning plan. "Let's get a flock of sheep and let them loose at one end of town. And as they go through the town, the alter at which they lay down at, will be the god to whom we will sacrifice them. (He must be the god we've upset)"

And the towns folk all feel, "What a marvellous idea. What a brilliant man."

But of course, you can guess what happened, they ran **all** the way through town, past **all** the alters,, and out the other side of town, they lay down under a shady tree for a camp... You can just imagine it, can't you....

So, what was their conclusion? Not that the cunning plan was a dismal failure (No No No)... There must be another god. There must be a god we don't know about. We must've upset that god. So, they built a new alter to the "unknown god", and sacrificed the sheep on that. And that's the alter which Paul mentions.

Alright, you're all very religious, but you admit that there's a god who you don't know ... Let me tell you about that God...

The God who you don't know, is the God who made all of the world, and everything in it. He is Lord of heaven and earth. He doesn't live in temples made by man. Nor is He served by human hands – He doesn't need that. After all, **God Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything...**

In the mid-80's, ACDC released a song– “Who made who?”

And really, that's the best way I can summarise Paul's message to the Areopagus – “Who made who?” “**You made your gods....** But there is a God who made **you.**”...

Idolatry is something that God hates – that's why the Spirit in Paul was angered when he saw all the idols.

Idolatry is when someone makes a god of their own design – a god in their own image. And even today, modern day idolatry does exactly that. There are many people who have said to me something along the lines of, “I believe in God, but and I like to think that God is like.....” And then they'll give me a description of their god.

It's **not** an image of God based on fact. It's **not** an image of God based on revelation. ... It is entirely a god of their own imagination. And it's a god that looks very much like themselves.... It's idolatry.

And then Paul tells them, how this God who made **them**, is the God who reveals Himself to humanity. God determines the **time period** in which we live. God determines the **place** in which we live, and he does this with a very specific purpose – so that we would seek God, and perhaps, that we would feel our way toward Him, and find Him...

Have you ever considered this?

- It's not by chance that you were born on your birthday.
- It's not by chance that you were born this side of BC/AD
- It's not by chance that you were born in this century or last century, or in a particular year, month or day – it was done so that you would seek God
- It's not by chance, that you were born into the family that you were.
- It's not by chance that you live where you live – it was done so that you would seek God.

And I find this to be one of the most encouraging bits of Scripture... You being you – God put you where you are – it's not by chance – And He did it, so that you would seek Him...

And if we **get** this – if we actually understand this, wow, what a confidence it gives us to share the Gospel with those around us... Do you know the biggest reason why Christians fail to share their faith??? It's because of the belief that those around us aren't interested – that they're not looking for God...

Well, not everybody is looking for God every minute or every hour or every day... But God has designed their life, so they **will** seek Him. And **perhaps**, feel around, and find Him.

God's done His bit – He's lined everything up... but then

there's what we do – Perhaps, we might reach out for Him and find Him.

Why??? Why **does** God want us to find Him? Why **should** we reach out and find God???

Well, there's a reason, and then there's judgment... And please don't get the two confused.

Some people come to faith in God because they're afraid of judgment, but that's not a very good reason to be seeking God.... That's like a parent saying, "You **will** love me, or else I'm going to give you a jolly good flogging...." What sort of love would that be??? And too often, we get the **reason** for loving God, confused with the **consequences** of **not** getting right **with** God...

Why **should** we believe in Jesus Christ as our saviour? Why **should** we bow our knee before Jesus as Lord? Why **should** we put off our pride, and come to God??? ... Because He is The Lord... Because we are His offspring... Because in Him, we live and move and have our being.... Because without Him, we are incomplete... That's why... God is Love, and He wants to bring us **into** that love – that's the reason.

The **consequence** of rejecting God, is judgment. But the reason to come to God, is because He is Lord... Do you see the difference???

Paul said to them, "He's put up with your idolatry long enough. He's put up with your unbelief long enough." God's

been overlooking it, but now he commands **all people everywhere** to repent...

What does that mean? What does it mean to repent?

To repent, means to turn around, and change direction. To repent means to change your mind about who Jesus is, and to believe in Him; it means to yield to Jesus as Lord; **and** repentance has a very practical side to it as well – to turn from the practice of sin, and begin practicing righteousness...

And repentance is **critical** for salvation. Without repentance, there is no salvation. Some people will tell you that repentance is just believing in Jesus, and that's all you have to do – just believe in Jesus – just believe that He saved you on the cross, and you don't have to do anything else... Let me say, "That's a very shallow and **incorrect** definition of repentance." Biblical repentance is **very** much a **doing** word. Biblical repentance includes a concerted and demonstrated change in our behaviour.

Jesus said something, that will probably shock you: On judgment day, there will be those who believe in Jesus, who go to hell. Jesus said, Matthew 7:²¹ **"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers**

of lawlessness.'

Who are they? Who's Jesus talking about? Well, it's pretty clear, He's talking about people who believe in Him – they even call Him “Lord”... In their eyes, they've done mighty **works** for Jesus...

Why don't they get into the Kingdom of Heaven? Belief without obedience – it's as simple as that. They had a change of mind, without a change of heart and actions...

Why are there so many hypocrites in church??? (I get asked that all the time)... I'll tell you why – It's because us preachers don't always preach the full meaning of repentance... We spend too much time lulling our congregations into a false sense of assurance, instead of preaching about the narrow road – the hard road that lead to life – a road that very few people will find... And yep, there are a lot of unrepentant hypocrites on the wide road that leads to destruction...

The day of judgment is coming. It's a day that is fixed. I don't know when it is. Neither do you... But it's a date that God's marked on **His** calendar...

And the Lord Jesus – the one who rose from the dead – is going to be our judge.

So, what happened, when Paul gave that message? Well, some of them mocked him. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, well that was enough for them – they couldn't believe that... But some of them believed.

And those same 2 groups, are probably in this room, right now. That's the gospel message. The Lord is calling you to believe. He's calling you to repent. He's calling you to repentance in the true sense of its meaning... - to give up all that you are – to give up all that you have – to turn your back on your old, sinful way of living, and to follow Jesus, because He is risen from the dead and He is Lord...

And some of you will scoff. You'll be very polite about it, because you don't want to offend anybody, but on the inside "Nah, can't believe that!"...

Or maybe you might believe, but not be willing to repent "The cost is too high"... I'll stick with the easy-believism method – I'll just believe – I don't have to make any concerted effort to be obedient to God...

But some of you, are repenting even now, because the Lord has cut to the heart of the matter, and you know, "Jesus is Lord". I don't need to know anything else – I'll follow Him.

God now commands all people, everywhere, to repent....
Have you?

ⁱ Kittel, G., Bromiley, G.W. & Friedrich, G. eds., 1964-. *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*.

ⁱⁱ Ezekiel 33:1-9 (ESV)

Ezekiel Is Israel's Watchman

33 The word of the LORD came to me: ²“Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and

make him their watchman,³ and if he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people,⁴ then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head.⁵ He heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life.⁶ But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand.

⁷ "So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.⁸ If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand.⁹ But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

ⁱⁱⁱ Witherington Ben III, *The Acts of the apostles*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids. 1998. P.514

^{iv} Socrates had been sentenced to death 500 years earlier: *"He was, nevertheless, found guilty of both corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens and of impiety ("not believing in the gods of the state"), and subsequently sentenced to death by drinking a mixture containing poison hemlock."* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socrates#Trial_and_death