

Paul in Athens: Evangelism in a Post-Christian Culture (Part 1)

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[0 : 00] So again, let me say good morning to you all. Delighted to be back. Our family has been gone for the past couple of weeks. We took a trip to Greece. It was my first time there. It was fantastic. We had an amazing time. Highly recommend. I came back inspired. So we're taking a break from the lectionary for the next few weeks. Just going to own that up front.

But it was my first time, among other things, it was my first time going to Athens. And Athens is a wonderful city. And it's this beautiful blend of the old and the new. And everything in between. But it was my first time getting to actually visit and stand on Mars Hill, on the Areopagus, which for me was deeply meaningful. To see the view of the Acropolis, to actually go up and see the Acropolis, to walk through the Agora, to see all of these ancient sites that I have so long read about and studied, to actually be there was a phenomenal experience.

experience. And, you know, this is the place where the Apostle Paul, in Acts chapter 17, debates with the Athenian intellectuals 2,000 years ago, the Areopagus.

And as I stood there, I thought a lot about our church. And I prayed for our church. And as I was doing that, I was thinking and dreaming about this next season of life that we're entering into together at Church of the Advent.

[1 : 27] We're turning some major corners in the coming year, not the least of which is this move that we're anticipating into a permanent home in the Shaw neighborhood. So I was thinking about all of that and praying. And one of my strongest desires for our church, as I think about that future, is that we would see more conversions.

One of my strongest desires for our church, for our community, what I hope is something that marks our next season of life together, is that we see more people coming to faith in Jesus, and that we see more people coming back to faith if they have left or given up on the church, that we have, that maybe our biggest logistical problem is figuring out how and where and when to do all the baptisms that we need to do.

And that just kind of rose up in me. And I was thinking a lot about the fact that Washington, D.C. is a lot like ancient Athens. I mean, it's a place that was filled with highly intellectual people. It was very religiously, spiritually pluralistic.

It was a center of cultural and political influence during its heyday. And just like Athens, D.C. is a city that is full of people who need Jesus.

The question is, how do we effectively introduce people to Jesus and the good news of the gospel in the culture that we live in today?

[2 : 45] Because evangelism in 2025, in a major metro area, is not like it was 80, 100 years ago, right?

We're in a very different culture. How do you deal with not only skepticism, but mockery and disdain? How do you deal with people who believe that because they are so highly educated or successful or influential, that they don't need God, or that we as a society have outgrown the concept of God?

You know, in some ways, the Apostle Paul faced all of these same challenges, or challenges that were very similar. And so, here's the inspiration part. For the next four weeks, we're going to look together at Acts chapter 17.

And we're going to learn everything we can about Paul's ministry in Athens, which in many ways, I think, has more in common with where we are today than it would have had with things 100 years ago.

I think we have way more in common today with the kinds of challenges that Paul faced. So, I think this is the best example we have in the Bible for how to effectively introduce people in a place like D.C. in 2025 to the gospel and to Jesus.

[4 : 01] And the first thing that we're going to see this morning is this, is that in order to engage the culture with the gospel, we have to first learn how to think theologically about the culture.

We have to learn how to think theologically about the culture. And that means doing three things. It means, first, we have to understand how culture works. Then we have to go where culture is created.

And then finally, we have to remember who culture is for. Let's pray. Our Lord and Heavenly Father, thank you that you are the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, that you are the same God who was with Paul 2,000 years ago.

Nothing about you has changed. You love your people. You lead your church. You empower us to bring your message and your ministry into the world, Lord.

And we know that we are a mixed group this morning. Some of us are fully alive in our faith. Some of us may feel stagnant or full of questions. Some of us may be full of skepticism, or maybe we have never even considered that any of this could be true.

[5 : 10] Wherever we are this morning, Lord, I pray that you would use your word to do your work in us. And we pray this, that you would be glorified. In Jesus' name, amen. So first of all, we need to be able to understand how culture works.

We see in verse 16, it says, While Paul was waiting for his friends in Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

As Paul walked the streets, everywhere he looked, he would see statues and temples devoted to or representing various gods and goddesses that were worshiped by the Athenians.

And of course, no matter where you are in the city, one of the things that struck me is that almost anywhere in the city you are, you can look up and see the Acropolis. It's on this mountain that overlooks the city, and they actually purposely don't build buildings very high so that everyone everywhere can always see the Acropolis.

And of course, in the ancient world, this was a sacred site where sacred rituals were performed. So everywhere you were, you would see that, and it was dominated by the Parthenon, which is this grand temple devoted to the patron deity of the city, Athena.

[6 : 32] In fact, you know, the Greek name of the city isn't Athens, and it annoys some Athenians that we call it Athens. The name of the city is actually Athena. So it's named after the goddess.

And, you know, for tourists like us being there, these are cool and fun and interesting and beautiful places, and we take pictures in front of them, and we came back with tons of selfies in front of temples and statues.

But here's the thing. Paul had a very different reaction when he saw these things. It says his spirit was provoked within him. It's a very strong word. He was deeply disturbed might be a way to understand that.

So why did he react so differently? Well, Paul knows that these are more than mere statues. This is more than just marble or something to take pictures of.

These things represent ideals and values that were worshipped and revered as gods by the Athenians. These were the ultimate things in the Athenian culture.

[7 : 32] So when you see a statue of Athena, what you're really seeing is a culture that worships human reason and nationalistic pride. When you see a statue of Zeus, you are seeing a culture that worships power and dominance and control.

When you see a statue of Aphrodite, you see a culture that worships beauty and sex. When you see a statue of Demeter, you see a culture that worships individualism and autonomy. When you see a statue of Hephaestus, you see a culture that worships technology and workaholicism, right? So we don't have marble statues and temples quite the way you would find in a place like ancient Athens.

But the point we need to understand is those same idols are alive and well in a place like Washington, D.C. And they hold every bit as much spiritual power over people here as they did there 2,000 years ago.

They're harder to spot. But they're alive and well. And they have just as much power. And here's the thing. If you listen to some of the things we talked about, you know, beauty, sex, you know, power,

creativity, technology, work, these are all more or less good things.

[8 : 58] These are things that God created. These are things that belong in our lives and in the world. The problem, though, is that people tend to take things like that and turn them into ultimate things.

Take something that's good and make it so good, so important, so central to everything that you can't imagine life without it, that you would do anything to have it. And any time we do that, any time we take something and elevate it to that status where it's more important than anything, including God, we're making that thing into an idol.

And we can do that in our personal lives with the way we live our lives and what we prioritize.

Different families have different idols that sometimes sit at the core of the family.

You can have local and regional expressions of this. But what we need to understand in the focus this morning is some idols take on so much power. They capture so many hearts and imaginations that they actually sit at the very center of culture itself.

They become cultural idols. And this gives us a crucial insight into how culture works. You know, the word culture comes from a couple of words.

[10 : 10] Cultus, which implies religious worship. And koler, which means to plow or to till, you know, what we make out of the world. So you kind of hold those things together and you start to get an idea of how it works.

You have certain things, values or ideals, that sit at the very center that people love and they worship. And then the culture is everything that grows up around whatever it is that sits at the center.

It's all the things that we make that reflect the things at the center. So our values, our beliefs, our behaviors, our artistic expressions, our politics, our entire way of imagining the world, our way of life.

It all grows up around whatever's at the center. So in the words of Henry Van Til, culture is religion externalized. Culture is religion externalized.

So, you know, a lot of people make the mistake of thinking that culture is spiritually neutral and religion is one compartment within culture. Right?

[11 : 17] You have the kind of religious people or the religious aspects of culture. Other people think, well, you know, certain cultures are more religious, more prone to religion. Other cultures are not.

Other cultures are secular. Right? What we see here is that both of those are actually distortions. If we want to think theologically about culture, we need to recognize that culture itself is the externalization of religious devotion.

It reflects whatever sits at the center of people's hearts, minds, desires, and imaginations. What that means is that all cultures, even ones that externally, that outwardly look secular, all cultures are, in fact, spiritual.

They have a spiritual core. And that's composed of the values and ideals that are most revered by the people in that society. So these days, we don't have the statues and temples like Athens did, but we have just as many idols.

And the question we need to then ask is, how do we identify them? And in order to do that, we have to go to the second piece of what we're looking at today.

[12 : 27] The second point, which is this. We not only have to understand how culture works, but we have to go where culture is created. Verse 17, 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. That's what eventually leads to the invitation for Paul to go to Mars Hill. Two things I want you to see here about Paul's approach.

Number one, look where Paul goes. First, he goes to the religious centers, the synagogues. This is something he did in every city he visited. And this is how we might have gone about evangelism in the 1950s.

You can safely assume that most people you're talking to in our society know about the Bible, care to some extent about the Bible. People, to some extent, feel burdened about their sin, or at least think they should feel burdened about their sin.

And they generally think it's good to have a relationship with God. So Paul would go into places like this, and he would use Scripture and the Old Testament. He would try to show them how Jesus fulfilled all of the Old Testament prophecies, and how Jesus made reconciliation with God possible, and how he had accomplished salvation.

[13:46] So he's arguing from the Scriptures. But Paul also goes to the marketplace. He goes to the Agora. And we have a very different scene in the Agora.

Very different. You know, on our trip again, we got to walk through the ruins of the Agora. We got to see all of the different buildings, the kind of ruins of the buildings. And you start to learn about how these spaces functioned and how they were used.

And it's very clear that in ancient Athens, the Agora was the center of cultural activity for the city. It was the center of cultural activity. It was the center for the arts, for philosophy, for all different kinds of media.

Imagine today, imagine all of the peer-reviewed journals, all of the TED Talkers, all of the social media influencers, all of the op-ed columnists, all of the artists, all of the retailers, all of the architects.

Imagine all of the social and community leaders, all of the politically influential people. Imagine all of those people concentrated together in one place.

[14:54] That's the Agora. Here's the point. In order to reach a culture, in order to be able to understand and identify the core idols of that culture, you have to be willing to go where culture is created.

Not just the religious centers, but also all of the secular institutions that have a formative impact on life and the way people imagine things ought to be.

I spoke briefly with a Greek woman in a shop. It came up that I was a priest, and she made an interesting comment about the church.

She said, you know, in Greece, everywhere you look, you see little Greek Orthodox churches. They build them everywhere. And one of my favorite things about being there is just all of the beautiful churches.

You know, you're on a boat in the middle of the ocean, and you see a rock jutting up out of the water, and on top of it will be a little church. They're everywhere. And she said, you know, their churches are everywhere, but her perception of the church is that despite the fact that they're everywhere, she perceived the church as being almost entirely disconnected and disengaged from her everyday life.

[16:04] She said, you know, from her perspective, it seemed completely irrelevant, even though they are culturally religious. And, you know, it got me thinking about the church in our culture.

You know, historically, some churches and denominations have had that kind of relationship with culture. Their posture toward culture has been to sort of stand against culture, to build a separate Christian subculture.

Other churches have obviously, and denominations have gone in the other direction. They have, instead of standing against culture, they have pretty much become like culture.

They've taken on the values and ideals of the surrounding culture, trying to blend in, trying to stay relevant. So they've become indistinguishable, you know. And what we see consistently throughout Scripture is God calling His people to the hardest way of all, which is not to stand against culture, not to blend in and become like culture, but to be in and for the culture.

To be in and for the culture. And that means Christians are called to go into the agora. We're called not just to hang out in the religious centers. We're called to go and to be present and to live life and to build relationships in the agora, which means we need Christians in every sector of society, everywhere that culture is created.

[17:24] And that's why when people ask about our mission and our ministries and various things, even though I'm super excited to be able to start something like Alpha and do programmatic evangelism and all of that, even though I'm super excited about our mercy ministry and the community partnerships that we're going to be able to form to advance the social vision of the church on the ground in meaningful ways, I'm super excited about all of that.

But forever and always, the front line of mission for our church will be you in the places that you live and work. It will be you in the agora, because this is where most all of you hang out and spend almost all of your time.

So you will always be the front lines, the cutting edge of the ministry of the church. So this is where Paul goes. This is where we're called to go. Number two, look at Paul's approach that he takes. Like I said, the agora is not like the religious centers. It's a place where no one cares what the Bible, if you pull out the Old Testament and start to show, they're like, what are you even talking about? We see from their response that they don't even, they misunderstand the concepts that Paul is using.

When he's preaching Jesus in the resurrection, commentators say they actually misunderstand him, and they think that he's talking about two gods. There's some God named Jesus, and there's some God named resurrection.

[18:40] So they completely, they don't even have the scaffolding to make sense of what he's saying, right? So you don't just whip out the scripture and say, see, it says it right here, therefore. Very different approach required, right?

No one cares about sin. Everybody believes something different. So where do you start? Well, Paul takes a different approach. We're going to look much more in depth next week at that, so please come back. But for now, I want to point something out, a shorter point, and that's simply this. Notice that Paul is not simply belting out the gospel from a street corner. He doesn't just go and set up on a corner in the aggro. Now, I have known people who came to faith from street corner preachers, so I'm not denigrating that.

But what we need to understand is this. Paul is engaging in a back-and-forth discourse with people. It says he's reasoning and conversing.

Those words actually convey a back-and-forth discourse. The word translated reason is actually the word from which we get the word dialogue. He is dialoguing with people.

[19:44] In order to do that, he has to be willing to deal with some mockery. He has to be willing to make himself vulnerable to being critiqued and accused. Some people just, they call him a babbler.

They write him off immediately. He's a babbler. The point, though, is this, that before Paul can share the gospel with these people in a way that's actually going to be meaningful and relevant for them, he has to understand how they think, what they feel, what is their worldview, what are their assumptions about life.

And the only way to do that is to be willing to listen. Right? So the point is that we need to be willing to learn how to listen, to learn how to understand the view of people who disagree with us.

And that is arguably far more important than anything that we have to say that we have read in a book or memorized. Learning how to listen is vitally important.

There's a vast difference between true communication and simply hurling words at one another. Between talking with someone and talking at someone.

[20:57] Regrettably, I think that many of us think that we're doing the former and we actually sometimes are doing the latter. Right? This isn't just true in debates about religion and the gospel.

By the way, it's true in friendships. It's true when you're dating people. It's true in marriage. We tend to focus, I do the same thing, on what we are planning to say next as soon as the other person is done talking.

Right? They're like, meh, meh, meh, meh, meh. And I'm formulating. And that's human nature.

Because we think that that's the thing that matters most. We tend to focus on that.

And what that means is that we don't actually listen to what the other person is saying. And we assume we think we know what they're saying. But in fact, we may be way off base. When we talk about things like Jesus or the resurrection or grace or justice, how can we be sure that we are all on the same page and that we are using these words in the same way?

Because those are all words that have lots of different definitions in our culture. How do we know that we're all on the same page? The only way is through discourse. I hear you saying this. By that, do you mean this? Is this what you're saying? I want to be clear on what you're saying.

[22:12] No, in fact, that's not what I'm saying. Let me say it again. Oh, now I understand. That's discourse. It's hard, but it's necessary. A great deal of unnecessary, exhausting conflict results from people talking past one another without really understanding one another.

A great deal of unnecessary conflict, exhausting conflict, irreconcilable conflict comes because people were never willing to have the conversation. They simply assume they know what the other person thinks.

Right? Now, let me be clear. I'm not saying that discourse and dialogue should replace proclamation. There is a time and a place where Christians must be willing to declare what God has revealed.

However, we are much more effective in our proclamation when we're able to understand and articulate the views of people who disagree with us. These days, honestly, most of what I read is stuff that I disagree with.

But it's for this reason. I'm trying to understand the perspective of the other side, so to speak, on whatever the given issue might be. So, in order to think theologically about culture, number one, we need to understand how culture works.

[23 : 29] Number two, we need to go where culture is created. The good news is you're already there, most of you. You're already doing it. You're already present in those places. Now, as we are present in those places, as we are having these conversations, the third thing that we need to bear in mind is this.

It's crucial that we always remember who culture is ultimately for. Luke summarizes Paul's message in verse 18. Quote, he was preaching Jesus in the resurrection.

Now, I said some of the people misunderstood the meaning of that. Let's talk about what it truly means. Scripture says that everything in creation, everything, was made by and for Jesus Christ. Colossians 1.16, For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.

All things were created through him and for him. Culture is meant to be centered around and bring glory to Jesus Christ.

[24 : 35] That is the entire point of culture. Our original God-given purpose, in fact, was to create culture that glorifies him. Everything that we make out of the world that God has made is meant to reflect and glorify him.

Long ago, human beings rejected that purpose. We rejected that kind of relationship with God. We chose to worship ourselves and other things in place of God.

And because that is true of human beings, it started to become true about the culture that we create. So every culture is now a mixed bag.

There are some things in that culture that reflect still the goodness and the truth and the beauty of God. And then there are other things in that culture that reflect the idols that have captured the hearts and imaginations of that society.

And so every culture is mixed. It's all blended together. And this is why Paul gets so disturbed when he sees the idols that have taken hold of the Athenian hearts, minds, and imaginations.

[25 : 52] Imagine rounding a corner and seeing your toddler playing with a rattlesnake. You know, we have a cabin in West Virginia. And reportedly, the world's largest timber rattler nest is about a quarter mile from our cabin.

Never confirmed it, but apparently the croc hunter went there before he met his end. Anyway. So this is a scenario that I have sometimes thought about. What would happen if I came outside and there was a rattlesnake, right?

Imagine your toddler playing with a rattlesnake. They don't know the danger because, hey, it has a rattle. And I have a rattle inside. And it's just like my toy. And this is so fun. But you know better. You know that steak is terrifying and dangerous. And that that child is in mortal danger. You would be deeply disturbed. That's what Paul is feeling. He's like, you don't know what you're messing around with.

You don't know the danger that you're in. When you go and you worship at these temples and you eat food and you sacrifice to these gods and goddesses, you have no idea. You are playing with your own demise.

[26 : 56] You have no idea. You think it's about fun. You think it's about food. You think it's about sex. You think it's about celebration. You have no idea the danger that you're in. He's deeply disturbed. Idols are dangerous.

And they lead to disaster. And Paul knows this. And he's not. So he's not burdened because he just wants his religion to spread. He's burdened because he loves these people. And he sees these things through God's eyes.

In a culture built around idols, you will find fallenness and brokenness and disaster.

In a culture built around the idols of honor and family, you're going to find honor killings, stonings, shunning, people becoming outcasts.

In a culture built around the idols of greed and wealth, you're also going to find vast economic disparities, wealth gaps, injustice.

[28 : 05] In a culture built around the idol of radical individualism, you're going to see people living disconnected, isolated lives. There's going to be no social fabric that calls people to be part of something bigger than themselves, that calls people to think beyond their own needs or preferences.

You build a culture around idols and you will always find brokenness and disaster in its wake. And so our job as Christians is to go into the agora.

But it's not just to go and to be present and to learn like amateur anthropologists. Our goal is to go into the agora to understand the idols at the heart of that culture so that we can expose them and so that we can confront them for the empty promises that they represent.

And we are called to create and to build culture that reflects and glorifies Christ. We are called to do those things, expose the idols for what they are, and to build and create culture that reflects and glorifies the goodness, the truth, and the beauty of Jesus Christ.

The idols are different, however, depending on where you live and work. The challenges are different depending on where you are, depending on what corner of the agora you find yourself in.

[29 : 21] There will be different temples, different idols, different challenges, different dynamics.

And so everybody, it takes everybody in the church, it takes all of us doing this work wherever God has put us.

And chances are, wherever you live and work, you are probably uniquely equipped because you know the world there to expose the idols, to imagine what a Christ-centered culture might look like. You're uniquely equipped to do that. You simply have to begin thinking theologically about the culture and understanding why God has put you there. I'll give you one example of the kind of thing I'm talking about.

There's a wonderful woman named Sheba Phillips who is a leader in business and entrepreneurship. And she has been incredibly successful at building successful companies, large and small, Fortune 50 companies.

And she devotes a lot of her time to discipling entrepreneurs, people who want to start businesses. And she is burdened by the fact that very few people who would identify as entrepreneurs ever actually get disciplined around what it means to be a Christian entrepreneur.

[30 : 32] And I recently heard her speak about her work, and she has found that there is a unique challenge faced by entrepreneurs when it comes to their vision. She says a lot of entrepreneurs, apart from Christ, if they don't know the Lord, if they're not following Jesus, what often happens is that their vision becomes their God.

Right? And maybe in some cases that makes them more successful for a time. But she says what happens is their vision becomes their God. And what that means is they're willing to give anything, sacrifice anything, do anything that's necessary in service of that vision.

It becomes the God. And so as a result, they can sometimes take reckless risks that lead to disaster. You know, they can burn themselves out.

They can destroy the relationships that they have with the people around them because it's all in service of the vision. And she says, apart from Christ, the outcomes that entrepreneurs experience become spiritually, emotionally destructive to them.

Not just when they fail, but also if and when they succeed. Because it's everything to them. It's become of ultimate importance. And so success and failure, either one, can destroy, can lead to disaster.

[31 : 55] So here's what she does to help entrepreneurs see these realities. She helps them understand that Jesus isn't just here to enable our vision.

Jesus is the vision. Jesus is the point. Jesus is the aim. And she says, whatever your company you're trying to build, your ultimate aim should not be your own vision.

It should be asking the question, how is what I'm doing or how is what I'm building ultimately serving and glorifying him? Ultimately, that should be our aim. And she talks about how that sort of transforms the culture of entrepreneurship.

It helps people better discern how and when they should take risks. It helps people keep things in priority and not abandon their spouses and their children seeking the God of their vision, right? It insulates and protects them from the danger both of their failures and their successes. Because Jesus is the center, not their vision. Now, that's just one example of what it might look like to go into a specific subculture, confront some of the idols in that culture, and then build a new culture in that space around the goodness, truth, and beauty of Jesus.

[33 : 13] The question is, what does this look like in your world? What does this look like in your family? What does this look like in your neighborhood? What does this look like in your place of work, in your field, in your career?

What are the core idols being glorified in the culture that you operate in? What would it look like for you to reimagine that culture centered around and bringing glory to Christ instead of those idols? How would you operate differently? How would that change the choices that you make? How would that reshuffle your priorities? That is your homework for this week.

And we're going to pick this up again next week. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for the fact that you are always and forever at work.

Ultimately, this doesn't hinge on us. And that is tremendously comforting. But at the same time, Lord, I pray and ask that you would help us understand the role that we're invited to play in this.

[34 : 26] Lord, and for those of us who may not know what we believe this morning, for those of us who maybe remain skeptical about you or these things that we've talked about, Lord, I pray that you would be working in their hearts.

Lord, even as we sit here in these moments, we pray ultimately for our church to be a place where people can come and experience and know the love and the truth of Jesus.

Lord, that is our desire. It's one of the main reasons we believe that we're here. And we pray that in the power of your spirit, it would be so. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.