

Living In A Post-Christian Nation Discussion Notes – July 5, 2026

1. If someone followed you around for a week and mapped out everything competing for your time, attention, and energy, what would show up most? What would they say you are most devoted to?

Paul arrives in Athens as a traveler in transit; waiting, alone, not on a planned mission. What strikes him is not the architecture or the culture but the idols. His spirit is provoked with a deep, sharp grief, the same kind of grief God carries over a world chasing everything but him. This sermon argues that America has quietly become Athens: a post-Christian culture where the majority no longer identifies with the faith that once shaped it. The call is fourfold- see the idols clearly (starting with your own), feel genuine grief over lost people rather than mere cultural frustration, speak the gospel the way Paul did on Mars Hill by starting where people are and finding their altars, and do it daily in the ordinary marketplace of your life. The hopeful close: for the first time in a generation, the slide may have stopped, and something is stirring among young people who are fed up with the artificial and reaching for something real. The question is whether the church will be in the marketplace to meet them.

Read Acts 17:16

"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." (ESV)

Paul was not in Athens on assignment. He was killing time, waiting for Silas and Timothy to catch up after being smuggled out of Berea. But what he saw in that layover stopped him. The word translated "provoked" is *paroxysmos* in Greek - a sharp, cutting agitation, the same word the Greek Old Testament uses for God's own response to Israel's idolatry. This was not Paul being politically irritated or culturally offended. He was feeling what God feels: a grief rooted in love for people who were reaching for gods that could not hold them. The provocation began with seeing and really looking at the city around him. That act of attention is what set everything else in motion.

2. Paul's spirit was provoked because he truly saw what was around him. What does it look like to see the culture around you rather than just react to it? And what is the difference between grieving what God grieves and simply being offended by what offends you?

Read 1 Peter 3:13-15

"Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect." (ESV)

Peter writes to scattered believers living as social outsiders under Roman rule. His instruction is not to retreat or retaliate, but to be prepared and to have thought through what you believe and why so that when someone asks, you can answer. The manner matters as much as the content: gentleness and respect are the posture that makes the message credible. Peter assumes people will ask, not because the church is running a campaign, but because a life of hope in hard circumstances is visible and interesting.

3. Peter says to "always be prepared"; to have a ready, thoughtful answer for the hope you carry. What would it look like for you to be more prepared for those conversations? Is there someone in your life right now who seems to be asking questions, even indirectly?

Read Colossians 4:5-6

"Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." (ESV)

Paul writes this from prison, which makes the instruction more striking. "Walk in wisdom toward outsiders" means every interaction with someone outside the faith is a stewardship moment. "Making the best use of the time" carries urgency. Speech "seasoned with salt" is language for conversation that is flavorful, interesting, and memorable rather than bland or scripted. The final phrase, "so that you may know how you ought to answer each person", implies that there is no single script. The conversation with your neighbor looks different from the one with your coworker, and both require paying attention to who the person actually is.

4. Think about two or three people in your life who don't follow Jesus. How would the conversation need to look different with each of them?

Read Acts 17:22-23

"So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.'" (ESV)

The Areopagus was the civic and intellectual center of Athens. It was a council that held authority over matters of religion, education, and public morality. Paul had been invited to explain this new teaching he was spreading around the agora. Rather than open with condemnation, he opens with observation. He had clearly been walking, watching, and paying attention. The altar to the unknown god was an Athenian hedge bet. A city that worshipped every god it knew still wanted to cover the one it might have missed. Paul takes that unnamed hunger and gives it a name. He does not start where he wishes Athens were. He starts where Athens actually is, and he builds a bridge from their altar to the living God.

The sermon ended with this: the slide has stopped, and something is stirring - particularly among young men who are fed up with the artificial and reaching for something real. That is the unknown-god altar all over again.

5. What would it look like for you specifically to be the person in the marketplace who meets them there? What is one concrete step you can take this week?

Prayer Points

- For eyes to truly see the people around us the way Paul saw Athens - with grief rooted in love rather than cultural frustration.
- For courage to speak the gospel in the ordinary places of daily life: the break room, the sideline, the group chat, the cul-de-sac.
- For the church to be faithful and present in the marketplace as God stirs something new in this generation.

DEEPER DIVE: Paul - A Life of Faithful Witness in a Foreign City

When Paul arrived in Athens, he was not arriving somewhere unfamiliar to the educated world of his day. Athens was the intellectual and cultural capital of the ancient Mediterranean. It was home to Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, the birthplace of democracy, and still the most prestigious philosophical center in the Roman Empire even though its political power had faded. By the time Paul walked its streets

around AD 50-51, Athens had been a Roman province for roughly 150 years, but Rome had largely left it alone out of reverence for its legacy. The city was saturated with temples, statues, altars, and philosophical schools. Ancient writers noted there were more gods in Athens than people. Paul himself was uniquely equipped for this moment: a Jewish Pharisee educated in Tarsus (a major Greek university city), trained in rhetoric, familiar with Greek literature, and carrying a message he was willing to take anywhere. What he does in Athens is the most sophisticated act of gospel contextualization in the New Testament, and studying it closely reveals both the depth of the culture he engaged and the precision of his approach.

Read Acts 17:16-21

"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." (ESV)

The two philosophical schools Paul encountered represent the dominant intellectual options of his day. The Epicureans believed the gods existed but took no interest in human affairs; the goal of life was to pursue pleasure (in the sense of peace and freedom from anxiety) and avoid pain. The Stoics believed a divine reason - logos - permeated and sustained all things, and that virtue, not pleasure, was the highest good. Both systems were sophisticated, morally serious, and deeply embedded in Athenian culture. The Agora where Paul reasoned daily was not merely a marketplace in the modern sense - it was the civic and commercial center of the city, the place where philosophy, politics, business, art, and religion all happened together in one open public square. When Paul called it a "marketplace," he meant something closer to what we would call the center of public life. The Areopagus - also called Mars Hill - was the ancient council that governed matters of religion and public morality. Being brought before it was not an arrest; it was an invitation to make his case before Athens' most serious intellectual audience.

Read Acts 17:22-31

"So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.' Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'" (ESV)

The altar to the unknown god was real. Ancient historians reference such altars in Athens, a hedge bet by a city that wanted to cover every divine base. Paul's move is to take that unnamed hunger and give it a face. Notice what he does not do: he does not quote the Hebrew Scriptures, which his audience has never read. Instead he quotes two Greek poets - "in him we live and move and have our being" comes from Epimenides of Crete, and "for we are indeed his offspring" comes from Aratus of Cilicia, a Stoic poet. Paul had clearly studied their literature. His argument moves from common ground outward: the Stoics already believed in a divine logos sustaining all things - Paul says that's closer than you think, but the one who sustains you is also the one who will judge you. He saves the most offensive claim - resurrection - for last, and he lands it as a historical fact, not a theological abstraction. This is not a dumbed-down gospel. It is the full gospel, delivered in the intellectual register of the audience, without a single concession on the core.

Read Acts 17:32-34

"Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them." (ESV)

The three responses Paul receives are the three responses the gospel always gets: rejection, delay, and faith. The mockery over resurrection was entirely predictable - the Greeks had no category for a bodily resurrection and largely viewed the body as a prison the soul was freed from at death. The Epicureans and Stoics in the room would have found the idea philosophically ridiculous. And yet some believed. Dionysius the Areopagite was a member of the council itself - one of the intellectual elite of the most intellectual city in the world. Damaris is named alongside him, which is significant given that Athenian women of standing did not typically appear in such public settings; her presence and identification by name suggests she was notable. The early church historian Eusebius identifies Dionysius as the first bishop of the church at Athens. Paul's "modest" results by human metrics planted seeds that lasted. He did not stay long in Athens, and the city does not appear again in Acts - but something began there in a layover, with no team, no strategy, and no guarantee of a hearing.

Deeper Dive Discussion Questions

1. Paul quoted Greek poets and engaged the philosophical schools of Athens on their own terms without compromising the core of the gospel. What would that kind of cultural fluency look like in your context today - knowing enough about the ideas, values, and longings of the people around you to speak to them from where they already are?
2. The three responses to Paul's message in Athens were mockery, curiosity, and belief. When you share your faith or even just live it openly, which of those responses do you fear most? Which have you actually experienced?
3. Paul's entire Athens encounter was unplanned - a layover, waiting on his team, alone. He engaged the agora daily with "those who happened to be there." What does it look like to treat the unplanned, in-between moments of your week as the actual mission field rather than a distraction from it?