

Teaching Plan
EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Date: January 14, 2018
Lesson Title: "The Unknown Known"
Lesson Passage: Acts 17:22-34

ABOUT THIS LESSON

Paul was not inclined to take a holiday from his main business, preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. As he waited for Silas and Timothy (and perhaps Luke) to join him in Athens, he visited the Jewish synagogue, reasoning with the Jews and God-fearers there. He also met with God-fearing Gentiles in the marketplace. In both places he could use the Old Testament scriptures as a beginning point for his message. But, in an encounter with sophisticated Hellenists in Athens, he clothed the gospel in quite different language.

TEACHING/LEARNING GOALS

- (1) Describe the audience to whom Paul delivered his Areopagus message.
- (2) Name one thing you learned about Christian witnessing from this Bible passage.

BEGINNING THE LESSON

Begin with this: In 1989, Timothy Keller, a Presbyterian pastor in Virginia, started a new ministry in New York City, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, with an attendance of 50 people. Today, Redeemer Presbyterian attracts an audience of 5,000 each Sunday. One reason for its success is that Keller recognized that the young professionals in Manhattan, most of them single adults, were quite different from the congregations who attended the more traditional, family-oriented churches in Virginia and other southern states. So he adapted his preaching and pastoral ministry to the needs and interests of his highly urbanized audiences. Then make this point: The apostle Paul employed a similar strategy more than 2,000 years ago, when he faced an audience of Greek philosophers in Athens. There, he realized that his message must be quite different from the sermons he was accustomed to delivering in Jewish synagogues.

TEACHING PROCEDURES

1. Describe the SETTING in which Paul spoke to the Athenian philosophers (ACTS 17:18-21): (1) Four centuries earlier, Athens had been the intellectual center of the Western world. The Areopagus (v. 19) was "the hill of Ares," named for the Greek god of war, equivalent to the Roman god, Mars (thus, "Mars Hill" in v. 22 in the KJV). The "city council" that met there also was called the Areopagus. This council was responsible for examining the teachings of traveling lecturers who came to the city. (2) The "Epicurean and Stoic teachers" (v. 18) belonged to the two most influential schools of philosophy at the time. Basking in the former intellectual glory of Athens, they loved speculation,

argument, and discussion. A historian says, "They played with ideas as children play with toys." (3) Verse 18 reveals their attitude toward Paul. The word "babblers" (in the KJV) meant, literally, "seed-picker" (an insult applied to persons who went about picking up odds and ends of knowledge like little birds pecking at seeds).

2. Describe Paul's APPROACH (17:22-23): (1) He began with a point of commonality between him and his hearers, rather than focusing on their differences. "Ye are too superstitious" (v. 22, KJV) can also be rendered, "You are very religious" (*Good News Bible*); but the meaning probably was, "you are very interested in the gods." (2) He next referred to a shrine he had found in the city, one bearing the inscription, "To an unknown God." Then he told them that the god whom they worshiped, without knowing him, was the true God, whom he had come to proclaim. APPLICATION: *Even people who claim not to be "religious" sometimes stand in awe of the mystery of life when, for example, they witness the birth of a baby, experience the death of a loved one, or ponder the beauty of a starlit sky. They are worshipping at the altar of an "unknown God," a God whose name they do not know, and they need someone to introduce them to the God of the Bible.*

3. Outline Paul's MESSAGE (17:24-31): (1) Their gods were too small (vv. 24-25). They were wasting their capacity for worship on gods and idols that could be contained in shrines (*see also v. 29*). The true God is Maker and Master of the universe. (2) All humanity springs from a common origin (v. 26). (The Athenians divided humans into two groups: "Greeks" and "barbarians." This was similar to the way *racial, political and social differences are emphasized today.*) (3) God is not far away from any of us. Paul used two quotations from Greek poets: [a] "For in him we live, and move, and have our being" and [b] "we are also his offspring," (v. 28). (4) We can know God through Christ. (Note "that man whom he has appointed" and the reference to Christ's resurrection in v. 31). Though God is Creator and Sustainer of all men, Christ is "the Way." *Note, also, the emphasis on the necessity of repentance in v. 30.*

CLOSING THE LESSON

Call attention to the evangelistic principles that Paul exhibited on this occasion: (1) It is not enough to be "religious" (the Athenians were religious, in a broad sense); repentance and faith in Christ are required. (2) When witnessing to others, we should start where they are, remembering that they do not necessarily share our beliefs. (One of the rules practiced by Timothy Keller, referred to earlier, is to be courteous and respectful even when talking with skeptics who reject Christian beliefs, since this is more likely to win a hearing than impassioned debate.) (3) Christian witnesses should try to use language and thought forms that are familiar to the listener, since many people in this generation are strangers to our "language of Zion."