

# THE Apostle Paul AS MASTER TEACHER

*Gospel teachers today can benefit from applying principles of teaching that Paul followed anciently.*

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**I**n latter-day revelation, the Lord has declared, “Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you” (D&C 88:78). Our beloved prophet, President Thomas S. Monson, has reminded us, “We are all teachers. We should ever remember that we not only teach with words; we teach also by who we are and how we live our lives.”<sup>1</sup>

We can learn much about teaching from the life of the Apostle Paul, a disciple of the Master Teacher, Jesus Christ. As any teacher called of God must do, Paul followed the Spirit in his teaching. In addition, during his ministry as “the apostle of the Gentiles” (Romans 11:13), Paul demonstrated how to successfully interact with people in a variety of teaching situations. Consider the following principles of teaching that are illustrated by Paul’s ministry.

## Knowing Your Audience

Paul was a teacher who knew his audience. For instance, he would adjust his approach depending whether he was teaching Jews or Gentiles.

At Antioch of Pisidia, Paul preached at the local synagogue to those who were generally familiar with scriptural stories and the doctrine of a Messiah. He taught them a basic gospel message—an overview of Israelite history and prophecies about the Messiah (see Acts 13:17–35). These ideas would have been comprehended and appreciated only by those who were familiar with Jewish scripture, history, and tradition. The overall reaction to Paul’s teachings was positive (see Acts 13:42–44), and though there was some opposition, he had success (see verses 48–49).

Paul and Barnabas later traveled to Lystra, where the audience was primarily non-Jewish. When Paul healed



a crippled man, the people decided that Barnabas was Jupiter (Zeus) and Paul was Mercury (Hermes) (see Acts 14:12). To keep the people from offering sacrifice to them, Paul taught a basic gospel message, saying, “Ye should turn from these vanities [idols] unto the living God” (Acts 14:15). This was Paul’s primary message to Gentiles, who practiced polytheism (the worship of many gods).

Thus, knowing his audience helped Paul modify his message for each group. He was following the example of the Savior, who, in the words of Elder Neal A. Maxwell, “tailored His tutoring, depending upon the spiritual readiness of His pupils.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Redirecting the Conversation When Necessary**

In his considerable travels, Paul needed to interact with those who agreed with him and those who did not. He demonstrated how to avoid potentially difficult situations by redirecting a discussion in a better direction.

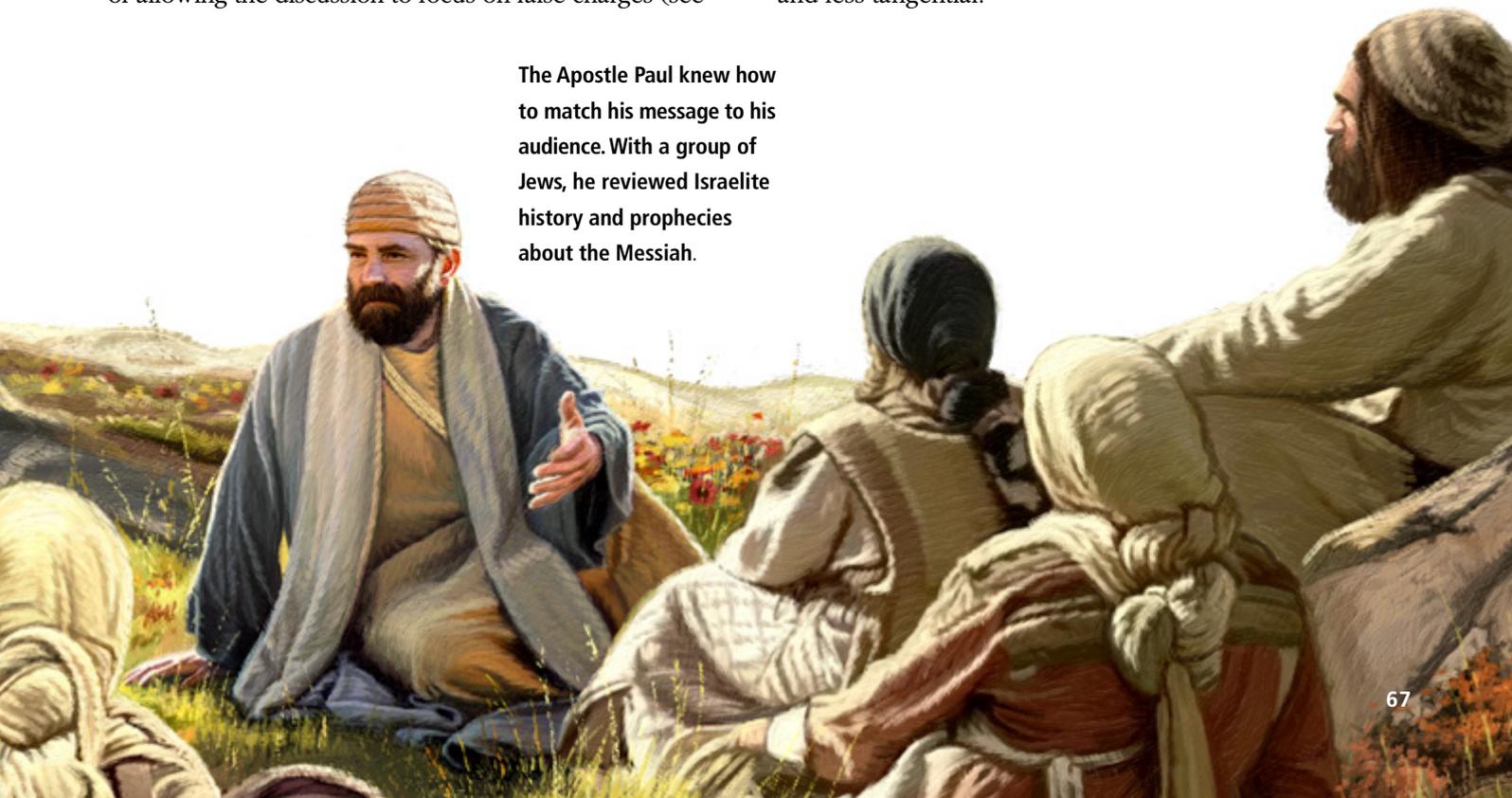
When Paul was in Jerusalem for the last time, he was taken before the Sanhedrin (see Acts 22:30). He understood that his life was in danger and that the Roman officials would likely take action against him if the Sanhedrin could make the accusations sound like a political offense. Instead of allowing the discussion to focus on false charges (see

Acts 21:27–30), Paul moved it toward religious differences between Pharisees and Sadducees and was then moved to a safer location (see Acts 23:6–10).

Paul employed a similar strategy during his defense before the Roman governor Felix. He was called dangerous and was accused of trying to desecrate the temple in Jerusalem (see Acts 24:6). A riot could have ensued, but Paul explained that he came to Jerusalem “to bring alms to my nation” (verse 17) and said, “Touching the resurrection of the dead I am called in question by you this day” (verse 21). Paul knew if Felix thought the dispute was about Jewish religious issues, he would not take it seriously. Felix told a centurion “to let [Paul] have liberty, and that he should forbid none of his acquaintance to minister or come unto him” (verse 23).

Gospel teachers can follow Paul’s example and find ways to creatively redirect the conversation to better achieve their teaching objectives. While most gospel teachers will not find themselves in the tricky predicaments that Paul faced, they can nevertheless apply this principle in their teaching by listening to people and actively seeking for ways to relate their comments to gospel principles that are more relevant or applicable and less tangential.

**The Apostle Paul knew how to match his message to his audience. With a group of Jews, he reviewed Israelite history and prophecies about the Messiah.**



### Communicating with Those You Teach

Paul demonstrated how to speak so that people from different backgrounds could understand him. As “an Hebrew of the Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5), Paul was from a Jewish family, was trained in Jerusalem, and knew Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages of the Jewish people. But Paul grew up in Tarsus, which was a major Gentile city in the Roman Empire. As a Roman citizen and resident of Tarsus, Paul also knew Greek, the international language of the Roman Empire during his day. Because Paul possessed these multilingual skills, he was able to speak to others in a language they could understand and therefore establish better relationships of trust and understanding. (See Acts 21:27–22:3 for an example of Paul’s facility with different languages.)

While teachers today may not be required to learn a foreign language, they can apply this principle. For example, teachers of youth can make the effort to know what kinds of activities, topics, or learning methods are of interest to those they teach, and they can find ways to connect with their students by knowing how to communicate with them in ways they will understand and respond to.

### Seeking for Common Ground

After arriving in Athens, Paul was impressed with the people’s devotion to their religion. Some of the local philosophers took Paul to the Areopagus (Mars Hill) to hear more of his “new doctrine” (Acts 17:19). Paul declared, “Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are [most religious]” (Acts 17:22; see footnote *a*).

The Apostle told them he observed their frequent objects of worship, including an altar with the inscription “To the unknown god”—concerning which Paul proclaimed, “Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you” (Acts 17:23). Paul’s description of the true God, however, highlighted similarities rather than differences and was inclusive. God “made the world and all things therein” (verse 24), including “all nations” (verse 26), so that everyone could “feel after him, and find him” (verse 27).

Paul reassured them that God was “not far from every one of us” (Acts 17:27). Paul’s teaching strategy demonstrated his ability to find common ground with people of various backgrounds to facilitate understanding. Instead of just citing the Hebrew scriptures, Paul quoted Greek writers with whom the Gentile crowd would have been familiar: “For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own



poets have said, For we are also his offspring” (verse 28).

The first reaction of the crowd was mixed, but in the end some people believed Paul’s message (see Acts 17:34).

This applies to us today in simple ways. For example, a teacher once found a very simple way to connect with a student named Patrick who was struggling in his class. The teacher noticed that although Patrick did not pay attention, he was always excited about soccer. Although the teacher was not particularly interested in soccer, he expressed an interest in watching Patrick demonstrate his soccer skills. Later Patrick loaned the teacher some soccer movies. Simply seeking common ground helped a friendship develop and improved Patrick’s experience in learning the gospel.<sup>3</sup>

### Reaching Out to Those Who Struggle

While teaching excellent students is often easier and more enjoyable, striving to reach out to those who struggle makes the difference between a good teacher and a master teacher.

Paul taught people to show compassion toward those who struggled. For instance, Paul told the leaders of the Corinthian Saints to discipline a person who had committed serious moral transgressions (see 1 Corinthians 5:1–8) but then later counseled them to make sure they forgave

and encouraged him so he would not be overcome with sorrow (see 2 Corinthians 2:6–7; see also Galatians 6:1).

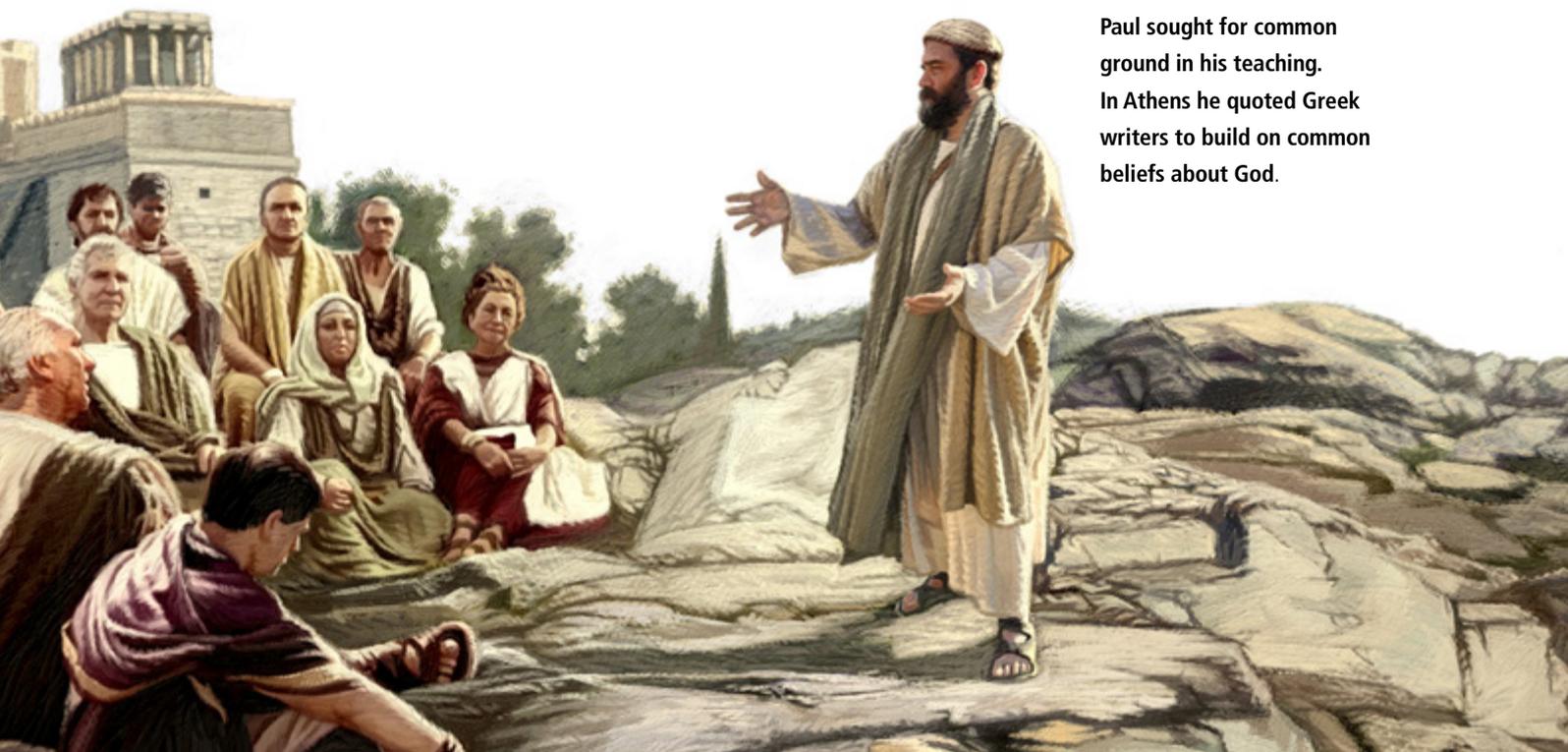
### Conclusion

Not only was Paul a gospel scholar, but he was also a talented and empathetic teacher. We can follow his teaching strategies to teach by example, know our audiences, redirect conversations when necessary, communicate effectively with those we teach, seek for common ground, and reach out to those who struggle.

Paul urged his converts to “walk worthy of the Lord . . . , being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10). As he helped others progress toward this goal, Paul found success as well as challenges. Even a master teacher like Paul was not able to reach all the people he taught, but he never gave up. Paul wrote to Timothy that servants of the Lord should be “apt to teach” (2 Timothy 2:24). Paul provided a model of this by his words and actions. ■

### NOTES

1. Thomas S. Monson, “Examples of Great Teachers,” *Ensign*, June 2007, 112.
2. Neal A. Maxwell, “Irony: The Crust on the Bread of Adversity,” *Ensign*, May 1989, 63.
3. See Chad H. Webb, “Deepening Conversion” (Church Educational System satellite broadcast, Aug. 7, 2007 [transcript]), 2.



**Paul sought for common ground in his teaching. In Athens he quoted Greek writers to build on common beliefs about God.**