

Sunday School Lesson

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like to imagine Paul — the Apostle to the Gentiles — responding to the challenge of this intellectual, pagan environment.

Other scholars hesitate to accept these words as being directly from the lips of Paul. Here is the argument of one such person:

"There is no reason to suppose that this is a report of what Paul said. First, the habit of Greek and Roman historians

was to put speeches of their own composition into the mouths of their characters. To have reproduced the actual words, even if they were available, would have seemed bad style, as destroying the unity of expression of a work. Nearly all the characters in Acts talk in one style. Secondly, in all probability there was no such thing at Athens as an altar dedicated to an unknown God. Paul might have seen either an altar with no inscription, or an altar inscribed 'To unknown gods' — set up by someone who . . . did not know the name of the deity to

whom he ought to pay homage: but it is extremely unlikely that Paul can have seen an altar with this inscription."

Usually in this sort of disagreement the truth lies between the two extremes. At the very least, we can say that the arguments credited to Paul were the kinds of arguments Luke had heard Paul present to gentile audiences.

Again, the main point to recognize here is that Christians can use the language and thought forms of non-Christians in explaining the gospel to them. Paul's speech began with a

reference to an altar to an unknown God. Thus he appealed to the Athenians' concern for worship.

The God Paul preached to them was indeed unknown to them. But the concept of God as creator of the world would have been understood by the Stoics, and the statement that God lacks nothing and is independent of men would have found sympathetic ears among those familiar with Epicurean philosophy. (See Acts 17:18a.)

The Gospel for Our Day

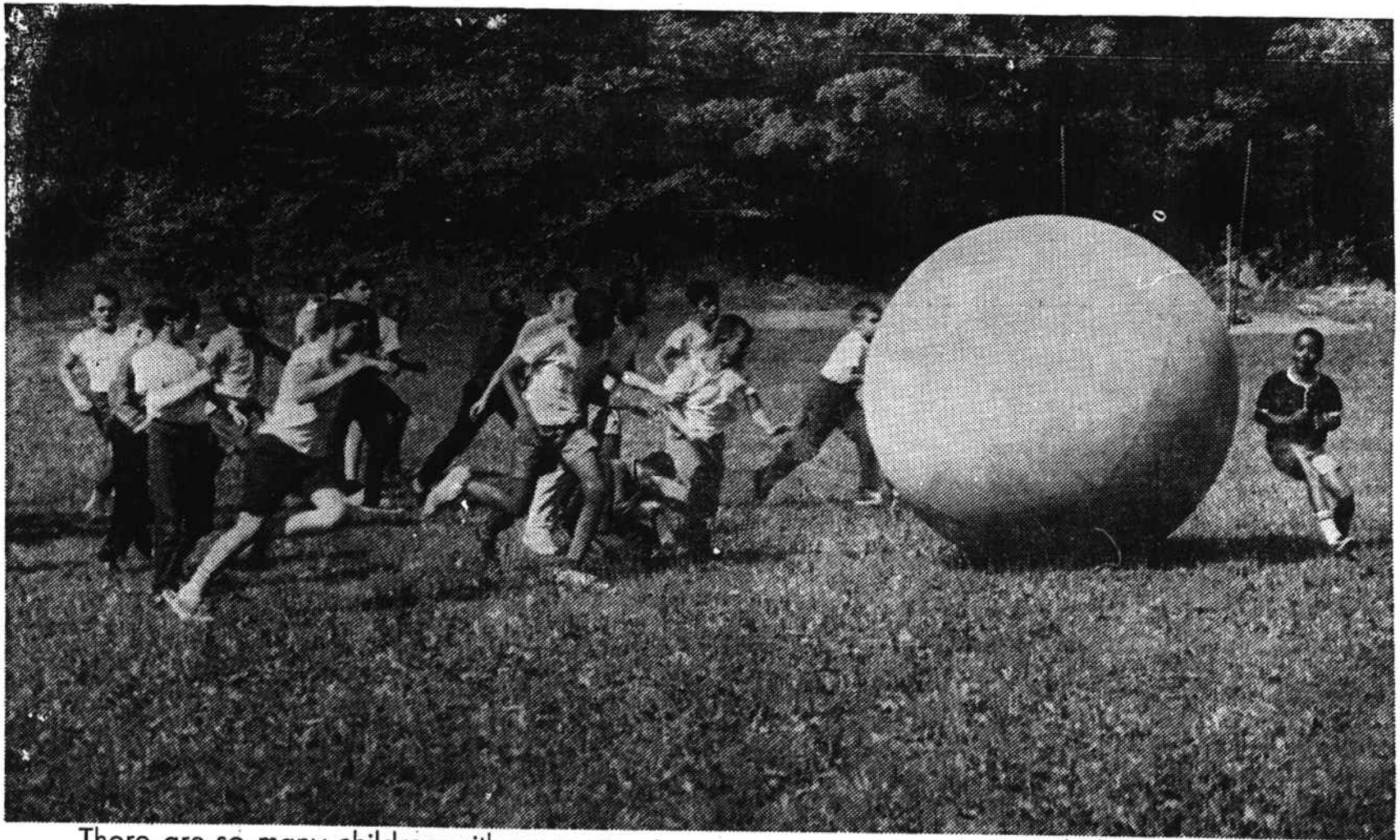
We have seen that communicating the gospel to their au-

dience in words they could understand was a prime concern of the New Testament writers. Let us translate this concern to our times. Here is how one writer put it:

"Again and again we come back to the basic fact that we are no longer in a Christendom in which we may take the Christian faith for granted, but in a worldwide pluralism where Christianity is a minority. This situation has important consequences for the work of the church. . . . Simply saying over again what the church has be-

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