

Do all religions lead to God?

Paul in Athens – Acts 17



Objections to the Christian faith

Reasons that people give for not believing tend to be the same:

- Hasn't science disproved religion?
- Isn't the Bible full of inconsistencies?
- Isn't it all just superstition?

But 2 questions come up the most:

- Why does God allow suffering?
- Don't all religions lead to God?

5 min



Do Christians Muslims and Jews worship the same God?
Are Yahweh and Allah ultimately one and the same?

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4 min



Why does God allow bad things to happen?
A question that never goes away

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So what do we do about other religions?

- Aren't they also as faithful as us?
- Aren't they also trying their best to follow a faith?
- What does God make of them?
- Don't all religions lead to God?



Responses to other religions

Universalist: God will save everyone anyway

- People who believe this use some Bible passages ...
- But tend to overlook Bible passages ...

- Acts 4: There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved (only Jesus)
- John 14: Jesus says: “I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me”
- Romans 10: if you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Responses to other religions

*Another version of universalism:
As long as you believe in some kind of God
and follow some religion, that's fine*

- Our religion is mostly an accident based on where we were born
- All religions lead to the same place –truth in every faith
- As long as people try to live in the light, God only judges us by the light we have had

Problem: Same problem as with universalism



Responses to other religions

***Exclusivist: Jesus is the only truth
– all other faiths are false***

- Responding to the Gospel is the one and only necessary step
- “Through faith alone in Christ alone”
- Other faiths are all false
- Held by many traditional churches - lot of scriptural backing
- Extreme exclusivists will say: even other denominations are suspect

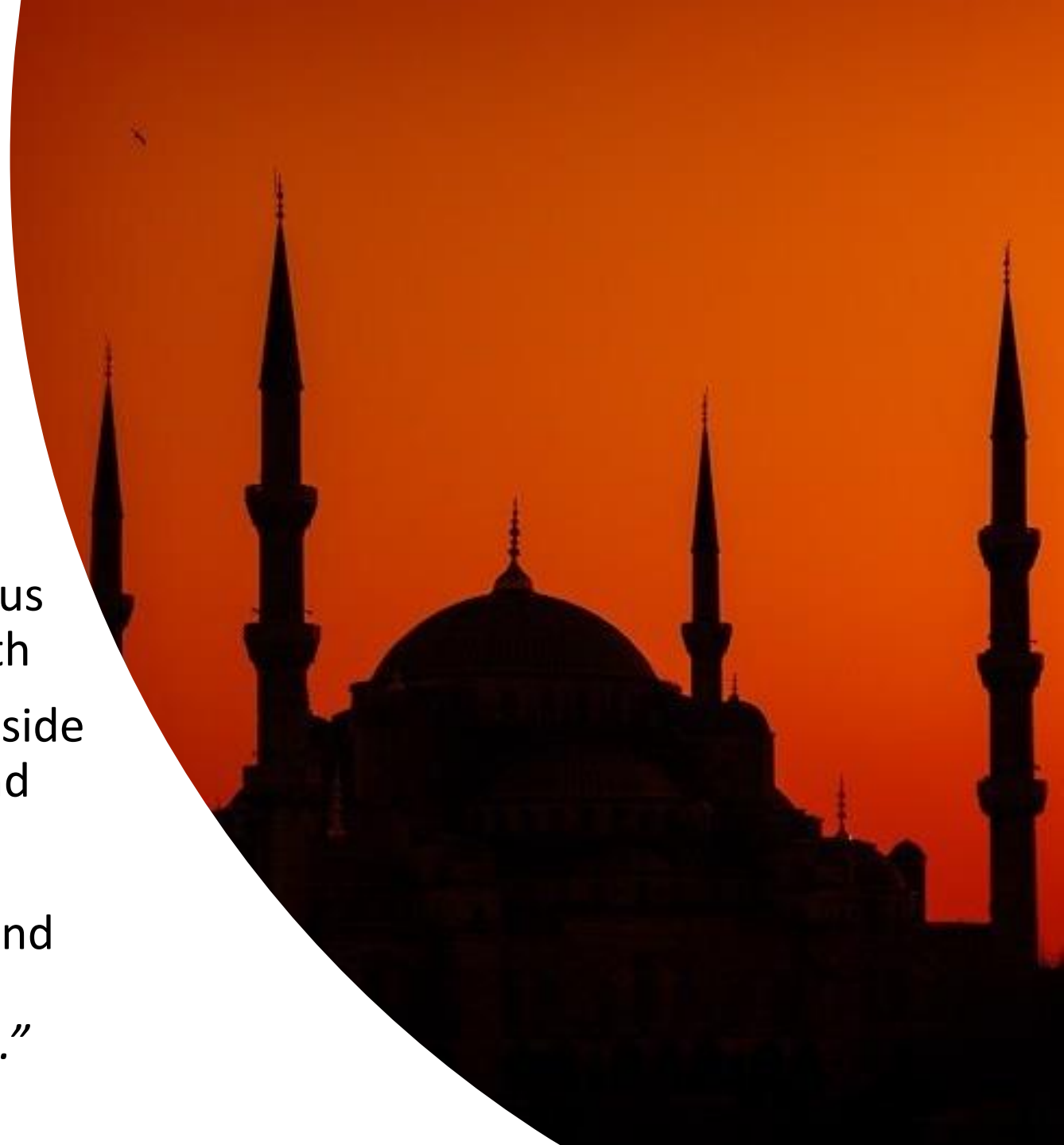
Problem: literally taken it makes God out to be cruel



Responses to other religions

Spread around in between these two positions are the “Inclusivists”:

- Other religions hold some truth but Jesus Christ is the ultimate and complete truth
- Christ may reveal himself to people outside Christianity in ways we don't understand
- An “anonymous Christ” idea
- Everyone gets the opportunity to respond to Christ – even those from long before Christ: *“Christ descended to the dead”*



So take your pick!

- *Universalism*
- *Exclusivism*
- *Inclusivism*

There are variants – and overlaps

Any room full of Christians will have a variety of opinions

And we could easily get hung up on all these ISM's ... (let's not!)





Paul's response to another religion

Paul in Athens

Background

- Paul is on a missionary journey with others
- But right now he's on his own in a new city – Athens
- He is walking the streets – absorbing the culture
- And he comes across these pagan idols to local Gods

Lets read this important passage

...In Athens Acts 17, 16-34



¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market-place day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, 'What is this babbler trying to say?' Others remarked, 'He seems to be advocating foreign gods.'

They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?' ²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.' ²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

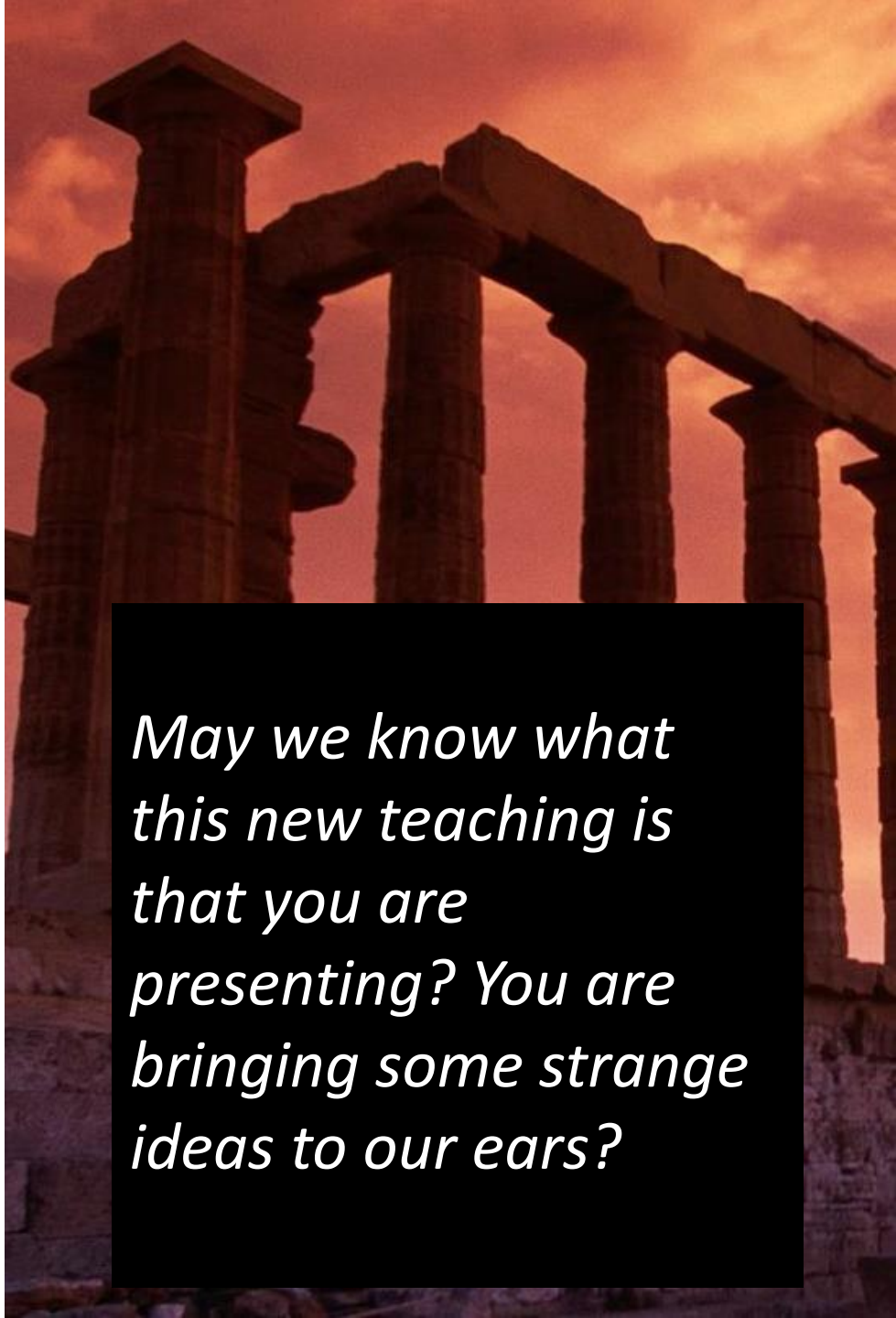
²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.'

²⁴ ‘The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ “For in him we live and move and have our being.”^[b] As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.”^[c] Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by human design and skill. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.’

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject (New International Version)

Paul's reaction

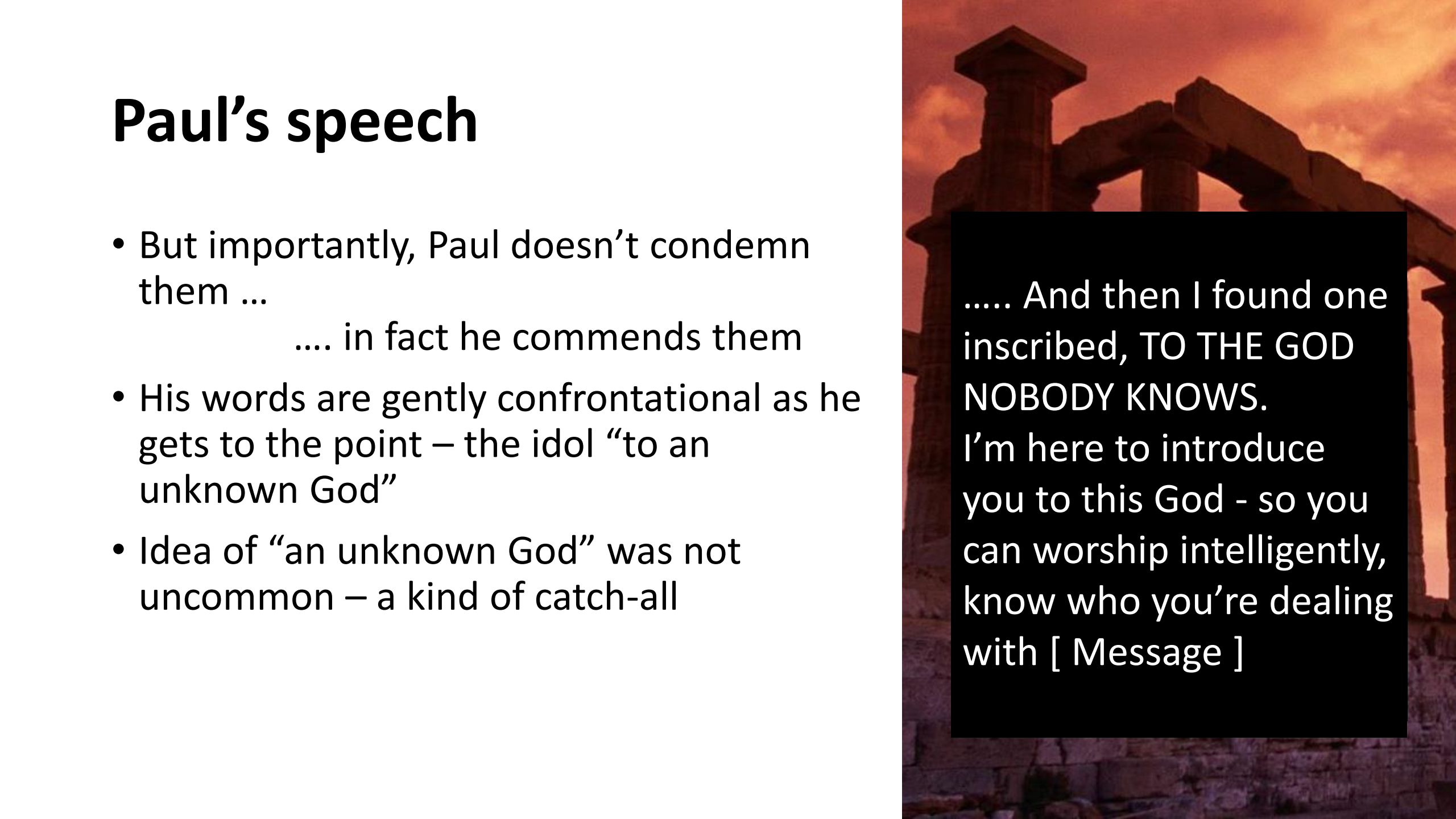
- Indignation
- Idols dedicated to Gods who in fact are not Gods at all
- So he starts a conversation with the local debating society
- And that happens today right!
- ... and they say "Paul come and explain your ideas"



May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears?

Paul's speech

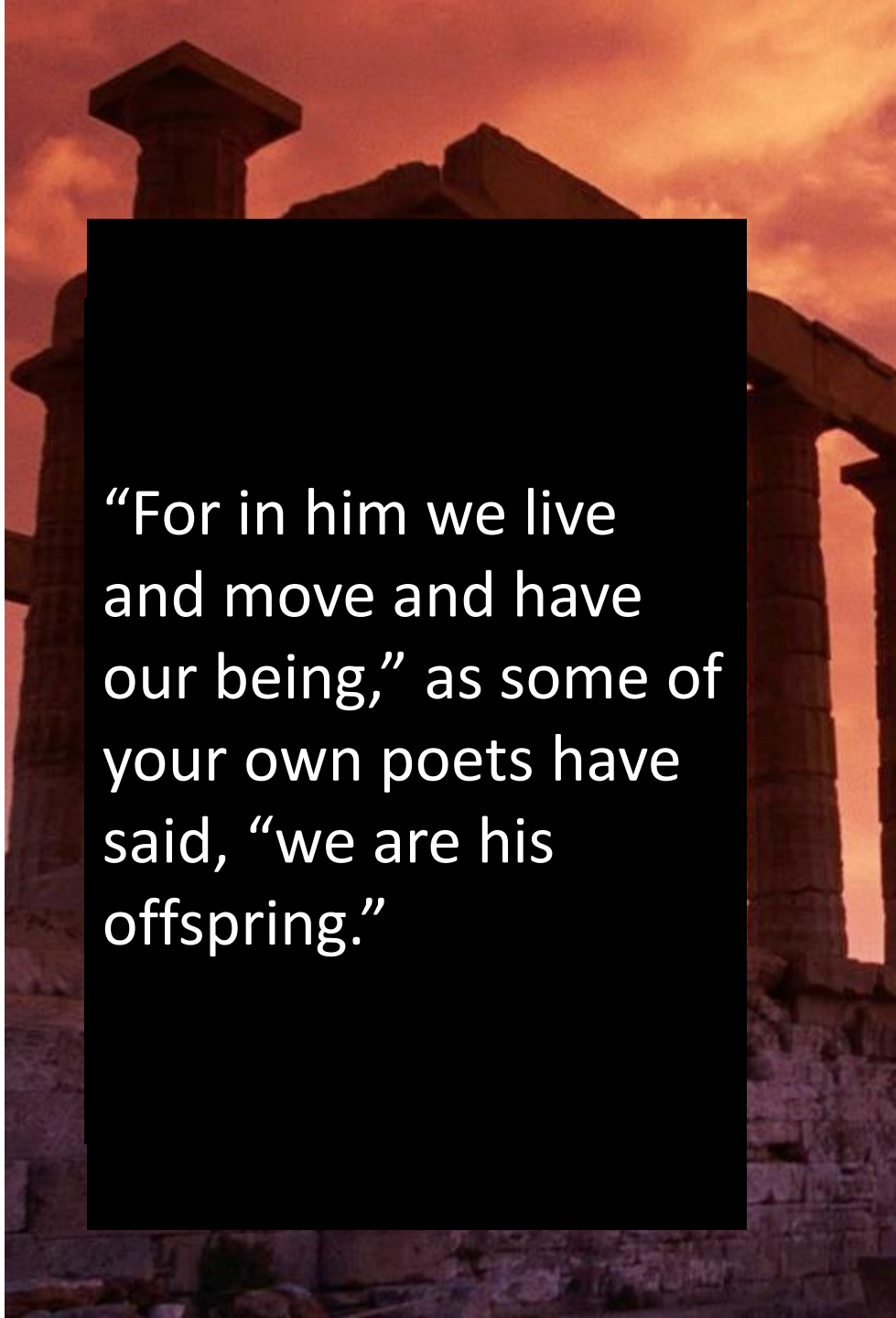
- But importantly, Paul doesn't condemn them ...
.... in fact he commends them
- His words are gently confrontational as he gets to the point – the idol “to an unknown God”
- Idea of “an unknown God” was not uncommon – a kind of catch-all



..... And then I found one inscribed, TO THE GOD NOBODY KNOWS. I'm here to introduce you to this God - so you can worship intelligently, know who you're dealing with [Message]

Paul commends their fumbling around to find the unknown God

- Even though they have idols Paul commends their honest searching
- The “unknown God” idols is a door opener
- Finds points of agreement with these people of another faith
 - God makes himself known in creation
- And then – a masterstroke – he quotes their own literature: if we are God’s children, God can’t be made of silver or wood



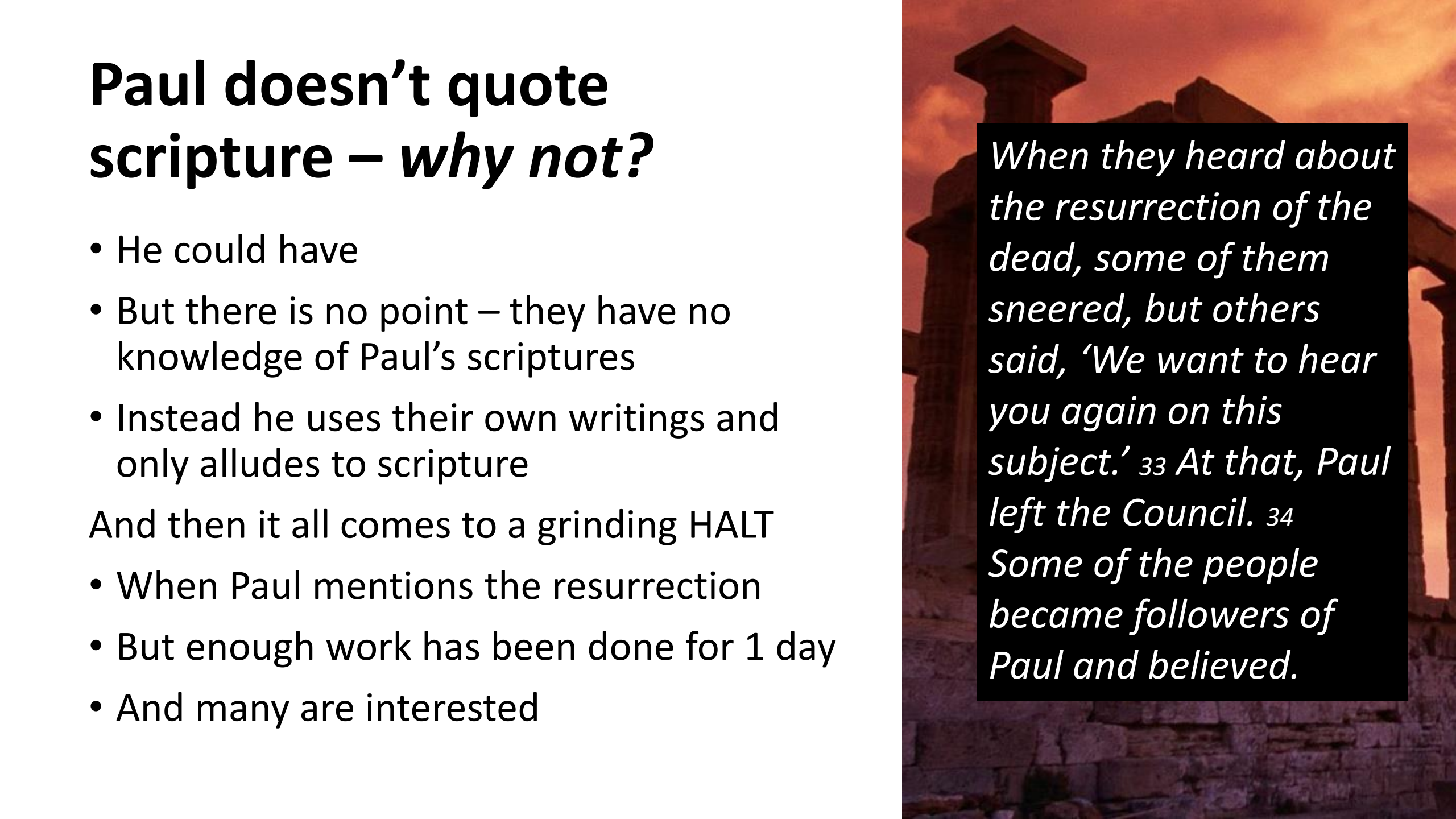
“For in him we live and move and have our being,” as some of your own poets have said, “we are his offspring.”

Paul doesn't quote scripture – *why not?*

- He could have
- But there is no point – they have no knowledge of Paul's scriptures
- Instead he uses their own writings and only alludes to scripture

And then it all comes to a grinding HALT

- When Paul mentions the resurrection
- But enough work has been done for 1 day
- And many are interested



When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject.' ³³ At that, Paul left the Council. ³⁴ Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed.

So what does Paul's speech mean for us?

What can WE learn?

Paul changed the question from:

- *What does God make of other faiths?*

to

- *How do I approach people of another faith?*

Would agree, the second question is the question for us

So what can we learn?



1. Not up to you (or me) to decide who's IN and who's OUT

- We just don't know
- Even in the Bible God seems to hear prayers and even anoint people who don't believe
- More importantly, Jesus had a habit of including the very people EVERYONE else excluded
- And there are accounts across scripture of God choosing mercy instead of judgement ...

So what's our role?... to BE the good news and SPEAK the good news



2. The Christian faith is distinctive

- Whatever you think about other religions ..
 - This is different eg
 - **Jesus**
 - Other faiths strive to reach God
Our faith says the exact opposite
 - “Suffering servant” idea is radically different
 - **The Bible**
 - Many events in the New Testament were public, historical, testable the holy books of other faiths are generally not
- And lastly (and simply!)



3. In order to be interesting ... you have to be interested

- Despite being grieved Paul shares the gospel with a **generous spirit**
- Seeks points of contact with a culture **he respects**
- He even **learns** the best of their culture

What about us?

- We are often full of our own message / our own bubble, but understand nothing of why people around us think the way they do – ***their faith***
- InterestING depends on interestED
- People around us need to know we appreciate their view – as much as we may disagree



So where did we get to?

1. Not up to you to decide who is In and who is Out – our role is to bring Good News
2. The Christian faith is distinctive
3. In order to be interesting - you must be interested