



The Round Church at  
**St Andrew the Great**  
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> October 2008  
by Mark Ashton

10p

Acts 12:24-13:52

The truth which divides

**Introduction: The truth which divides**

Back in the 1960s Gene Roddenberry was the president of the American Humanist Society, although we might know him better as the original scriptwriter and producer of Star Trek. Brought up as a Southern Baptist, he became an atheist in his 20s, and the bridge of the Starship Enterprise was his vision of how humanity might be in a world without division, without barriers, and especially without religion: it was a symbolic expression of unity: Chekhov—the Russian, the black woman—Lt Uhuru, even a Vulcan, Spock; and commanded, naturally enough, by the all-white American male, Captain James T. Kirk.

Religion divides people from one another, and today we know that anything that divides is bad, because unity is an unquestionable good. So we would be better off without religion is the unspoken message. And the Christian faith continues to be attacked on those grounds, that it is divisive and causes upset, although now the attacks are rather less subtle and oblique than Star Trek, more like the books of Richard Dawkins for adults or Philip Pullman for children. Our culture longs for unity. We hate division. But it is clear that, from the moment the Christian faith started to spread around the world, it separated human beings from one another. It did cause division.

Well, here, in the Book of Acts, we are reading the first account of that beginning. Let's look at 13:1-4: <sup>1</sup>*In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.* <sup>2</sup>*While they were worshipping the Lord and*

*fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."* <sup>3</sup>*So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.* <sup>4</sup>*The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.* That was the first corporate overseas mission by a local church, brought about by their deliberate decision, rather than persecution driving missionaries out. And here in chapter 13 we have the first, and longest, record of a sermon by Paul, the greatest missionary of the early church.

But first they travel to Cyprus and encounter a 'Jewish sorcerer', which should have been an impossibility, because sorcery was forbidden to the Jews—like a 'Christian witch', or a 'Buddhist vicar'. <sup>6</sup>*They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, <sup>7</sup>who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God.* <sup>8</sup>*But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith.* <sup>9</sup>*Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, <sup>10</sup>"You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? <sup>11</sup>Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun."* Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand.

<sup>12</sup>*When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord* (13:6-12). I've called this point:

### 1. Accept no substitute.

Notice in verse 7, the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, was an intelligent man, but that did not stop him involving himself in the occult. "There are more things in heaven and earth", said Hamlet to Horatio, "than are dreamt of in your philosophy". And it is precisely because there is a real spirit world, behind all the nonsense and mumbo-jumbo of spiritism and the occult, that God had forbidden His people to have any contact with it (Deuteronomy 18:8-14). But that world exercises great fascination on many people. It seems far more real than God, or the Bible. It appeals to our love of power, because it claims to allow us to foresee the future and to control ourselves and our circumstances; and if necessary, other people.

It does not speak of morality. It does not invite us to turn from evil and towards good. And, because people find it real, (in the sense that it exists and has certain powers), they do not ask if it is true, (that is morally and spiritually true). But the spirits behind spiritism—whether séances, or Tarot cards, or horoscopes, or star signs, or Feng Shui, or ancestor reverence, or transcendental meditation, or crystals or even something like Freemasonry—the spirits behind all those things, though real, are not true, they are opposed to the Truth. And so they oppose the gospel of Jesus Christ, as Elymas did here.

Notice verse 9: *Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said . . .* It was not that Paul had a greater power at his disposal than the magician. All magic is about human beings gaining power over supernatural forces, but Christianity is about God's Spirit taking control of human beings. Paul was not wielding a more powerful supernatural force than Elymas. He was controlled by the greater force—the Spirit of the living God. And it quickly appeared who was in darkness.

When men and women stop believing in God. They do not usually start to believe in nothing. They start to believe in anything—even in themselves. If you are not yet a Christian, you might want to ask yourself the question—What do I believe in? It was starting to ask myself that

question 40 years ago that changed my life—What do I believe? And don't let's fall into the proud and ignorant trap of pretending there is no spiritual realm out there. There are more things in heaven and earth, than are dreamt of in the logical positivist's philosophy. Don't fall for it—and accept no substitute for truth.

Paul and his party cross back to the mainland and move inland, and the opportunity arose to preach in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. I've called this:

### 2. Don't stop short of Jesus Christ.

Because Paul summarised the history of Israel in seven verses: <sup>17</sup>*"The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power he led them out of that country, <sup>18</sup>he endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert, <sup>19</sup>he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. <sup>20</sup>All this took about 450 years. After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. <sup>21</sup>Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. <sup>22</sup>After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.' <sup>23</sup>From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Saviour Jesus, as he promised"* (12:17-23).

I believe the Reduced Shakespeare Company can do all of Shakespeare's plays in 90 minutes (and some, who may have suffered in English Literature classes at school, may still think that is too long), but Paul has compressed the 39 books of the Old Testament, all the law and the prophets, into about 30 seconds! Because they all point—all the salvation history (i.e. the good things God has done for the Jews)—and all the scriptures point to one Person. [Figure 1]

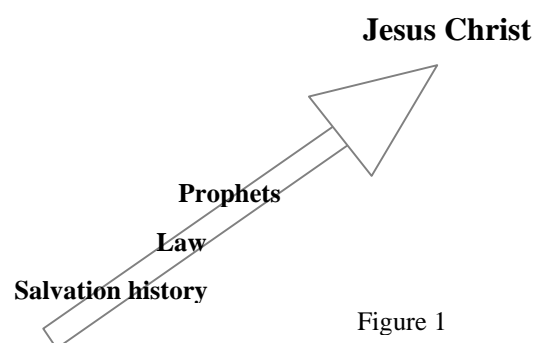


Figure 1

True, they had not recognised Him and had even crucified Him, but they were still fitting exactly into what the Old Testament had said about God's people: <sup>27</sup>*"The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath."* <sup>28</sup>*"Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed."* <sup>29</sup>*"When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb."* <sup>30</sup>*"But God raised him from the dead,"* <sup>31</sup>*and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people."* <sup>32</sup>*"We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers"* <sup>33</sup>*he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus"* (13:27-33). The Jews proved Robert Browning wrong, when he wrote, 'We needs must love the highest when we see it'. The Jews crucified it.

But when God raised Jesus from the dead, He proved the pattern that had run the whole way through Jewish history: God would not be defeated by His people's sin. They kept rebelling and suffering the consequences of their rebellion, but through all the weakness and disasters, all the failure and the tragedy, all the sin and suffering, God was not defeated. He was working His purpose out in His own way. And the resurrection of Jesus from the dead after His Jewish contemporaries had crucified Him was the crowning proof of that. It held the whole Old Testament together. No wonder Paul so emphasised the resurrection here with those three Old Testament quotations in verses 33, 34 and 35, and used them to reach the climax of his sermon: <sup>38</sup>*"Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you."* <sup>39</sup>*"Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses"* (13:38-39).

This was where the whole Old Testament was heading—so don't ruin it says Paul. Look at verses 40-41: <sup>40</sup>*"Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you:"* <sup>41</sup>*"Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you."* Don't stop short of Jesus Christ. [Figure 2]

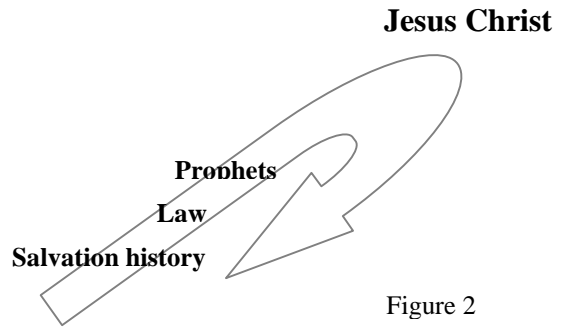


Figure 2

What a tragedy to come all that way and then balk at the final step, the last piece of the jigsaw, the wonderful experience that God has always meant for His people: *"Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you"* (13:38)! Notice the expression Luke used at the end of verse 43: *When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.* They just needed to continue. Jesus fitted all they had learnt throughout their history. He was its consummation—He was its climax. Don't stop short, or there will be unthinkable consequences: you will lose it all.

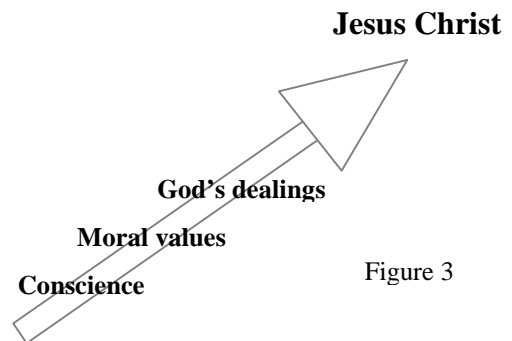


Figure 3

I want to suggest that it is like that for some of us. [Figure 3] We realise God has dealt with us in many ways—He has given us a sense of right and wrong; he's given us an intimation of His own existence; we have been aware of many undeserved blessings in our lives, and it all points us on: to Jesus, because perhaps we still do not know what it is to have our sins forgiven and for there to be no longer any barrier at all between us and God. Jesus offers you that: <sup>38</sup>*"Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you."* <sup>39</sup>*"Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses"* (13:38-39). Don't blow it says Paul!

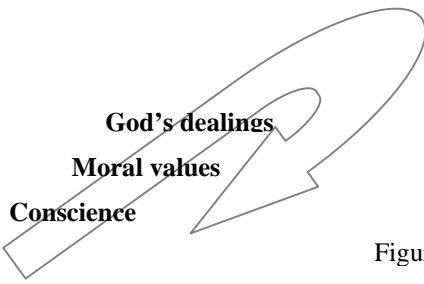


Figure 4

[Figure 4] Morality (trying to live a good life rather than a bad one), like hygiene and cleanliness, is necessary and wholesome. It is good. But, like hygiene and cleanliness, it is not life. An awareness of God, an upright life, self-discipline, sincerity, moral endeavour: they are great things. But they are not a living relationship with God through Jesus. They point us to Him. But don't stop with them when Jesus offers you everything. Don't let them cause us to despise Him, to scorn what only He can offer us:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves  
 By each let this be heard,  
 Some do it with a bitter look,  
 Some with a flattering word,  
 The coward does it with a kiss,  
 The brave man with a sword!  
 (Oscar Wilde)

I'm not sure the Jews were brave, but I am sure some of us kill off Jesus, as it were, with a flattering, patronising word; a superficial hypocritical kiss; or even a bitter, envious, scornful look at religious enthusiasm—"the happy clappies", "the God squad" "the Jesus-ites" who just take Him a bit too seriously. Oh, don't stop knowing Jesus for yourself and what he alone can bring to a human being!

I've called our final point:

**3. God at work**

**vv 44-52**

We occasionally encounter a sign saying something like [Figure 5]



Figure 5

And it is not usually to be attributed to some feminist road engineer's sense of humour. It is because there are men working, whom we can't yet see, but we're about to come upon them around a



Figure 6

bend in the road, or whatever. So, we need to be warned. Well, life should have a 'God at work' sign over it, [Figure 6] because we cannot yet see Him, but we need to be warned that He is active, we are coming upon Him.

We see sharp divisions between people opening up at this end of this chapter. *<sup>44</sup>On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. <sup>45</sup>When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. <sup>46</sup>Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. <sup>47</sup>For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." <sup>48</sup>When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. <sup>49</sup>The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. <sup>50</sup>But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. <sup>51</sup>So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. <sup>52</sup>And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit (13:44-52).*

Well, it may have brought joy to the disciples' hearts, but it would not have brought joy to Gene Roddenberry and his vision of the bridge of the Starship Enterprise, would it? But this is not just a case of human religious or ethnic tensions bubbling up to the surface and spoiling life yet again. Did you notice a refrain in these verses? *On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord (13:44). Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles" (13:46). <sup>48</sup>When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. <sup>49</sup>The word of the Lord spread through the whole*

**region** (13:48-49). Perhaps you recall 12:24 where our reading started?: ***But the word of God continued to increase and spread.*** And that strange way 13:12 ended: ***When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.*** (You'd expect amazement at the power of the Lord, the blinding of his pet occult guru, not at the teaching about the Lord).

You see, in Acts, all the men and women who appear on its pages are merely part players. There is, as it were, a hidden hero. We cannot see God. But we experience His activity through His Word at work in His world. And that Word divides people from one another. It is the agent of division. It will be in your college this term, in your family, in this building now: we are divided by what attitude we take to God's Word—the speaking God. The Bible invites us to tremble at it, to be humble before a creator God who having made us, now addresses us, speaks to us in His Word. Do we try to sit over it and judge it? ***But the word of God continued to increase and spread*** (12:24). ***The word of the Lord spread through the whole region*** (13:49). This is going to be the story of the Acts of the apostles: the invisible God at work in His world by His Spirit and through His word. And it's still happening today. May we respond!

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*