

ACTS: BUILDING LIKE BARNABAS

By Andrew Wilson
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Acts 11: 19-30

(I understand there are a few Cubs fans with us this morning. We'd like to ask you at this time to please exit the building. Or can you at least curb your enthusiasm while I'm trying to preach up here? We'd all appreciate that...)

Barnabas has always been remembered in the church as the encourager. His friends gave him the nickname Barnabas, which means "Son of encouragement," and his actions confirmed the aptness of the title. Today we're going to see what Barnabas can teach us about encouragement.

Before we dive into Barnabas' story, I want to be clear about the direction we're going. In our culture we put a lot of focus on the need for encouragement. We believe that much of the pathology that we see in our culture is rooted in a lack of self-esteem. The thought is that many of our social and psychological problems would subside if people received more encouragement at an early age.

The problem with this diagnosis isn't that it's completely wrong; it's that it's shallow and incomplete. Of course we need encouragement. As George Adams wisely points out, "Encouragement is the oxygen of the soul." The challenge comes in knowing *how* to encourage people. How can parents encourage their kids without spoiling them? How do teachers and mentors encourage their students without overwhelming them, or dulling their sense of curiosity? How do coaches and counselors encourage their charges without making them feel incompetent, or instilling in them sense of entitlement?

So the question today isn't whether God has called us to be encouragers. The question is: What it means to be an encourager. What are great encouragers like? What, exactly, do they do for the people they serve?

We first meet Barnabas in the fourth chapter of Acts. A Jew from the island of Cyprus, Barnabas is part of the very first church in Jerusalem. The congregation there decides they want to abolish private property in their fellowship and to share their worldly goods in common. As the world's first Christian hippie, Barnabas is eager to cooperate. He happily sells a piece of land that he owns in Cyprus and gives the money to the Apostles.

Knowing what we do about communes, and their tendency to fall apart, we wonder if Barnabas is being smart with his assets. But we shouldn't question his motives. Barnabas is eager to do whatever it takes to encourage the Spirit's work.

Barnabas is mentioned next in the ninth chapter of Acts, where we see him encouraging new leadership. Saul of Tarsus was fully committed to terrorizing Christians and wiping out the church. He had been making murderous threats against Jesus followers and was actively involved in rounding them up. But

then Saul suddenly has this overwhelming encounter with the living Christ. He's knocked to the ground and struck blind. He's filled with the Holy Spirit and utterly changed from the inside out. (Lee talked about Saul's conversion two weeks ago.)

Sometime later, the Spirit directs Saul to meet with the church in Jerusalem. Saul's problem is that the disciples there don't trust him as far as they can throw him. They don't believe the story of his conversion. They remember his role in the stoning of their friend Stephen. Many suspect that Saul is working for the Jewish authorities as a spy.

Barnabas, however, isn't so sure. He's not so quick to judge. He sees something in Saul, or hears something in his story, that draws him in. He goes to Saul by himself and conducts a face-to-face investigation. And on the basis of that very personal and very risky encounter, Barnabas decides that Saul is the real deal.

Barnabas knows he's at risk when he stands up to defend Saul. He knows that many will suspect him of going over to the dark side. He doesn't have anything to gain, personally, from his alliance with a former terrorist. But Barnabas decides to throw caution to the wind and listen to his heart. And amazingly, by the time Barnabas finishes his testimony, all of his friends are won over. Saul, known today as Paul, is received by the Jerusalem fellowship, and his credibility as a missionary to the Gentiles is established.

Think what a gift Barnabas has given to the church! Think how differently things might have turned out for the whole Church through the ages if Barnabas hadn't listened to the Spirit, and he hadn't taken the risk of being rejected because of his alliance with Paul!

Barnabas' effectiveness as an encourager is demonstrated most dramatically in the story we just read in the eleventh chapter of Acts. Luke reports that certain unnamed disciples from Cyprus and Cyrene have gone to Antioch to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles – or in other words to people with no direct connection to Judaism. The Gentile world, it turned out, was hungry for the Good News. Hundreds of people in Antioch give their lives to Christ and are baptized, and the first Gentile church is born.

By the way, to orient you and give you some sense of the scope of the mission: Antioch is located about 300 miles north of Jerusalem just over the southern border of modern-day Turkey. The Antioch mission is strategically-important for world-evangelism because, with a population of several hundred thousand, it's the third largest city in the Roman Empire.

The Apostles begin to hear stories about the work of the Spirit in Antioch. No one, not even Peter, is quite sure what a Gentile church is supposed to look like. After all, Antioch for them is completely uncharted territory. They've all grown up in Israel. Are these new Gentile believers bound by the Law of Moses? Should the males in the Antioch church be circumcised? And what about the manifestations of spiritual gifts like prophecy or speaking in tongues? Would the poorly-trained babes-in-Christ in Antioch be able to handle those gifts? Weren't they at risk of being led astray by them, or of falling victim to spiritual pride?

The Apostles realize they need to send someone to the great city to assess the situation. They need a representative they can trust, and they choose Barnabas. One of Barnabas' obvious strengths is that he's steeped in the Apostle's teachings. But there's another reason why the Apostles lean on Barnabas. As a Hellenist – in other words, as a Jew who was raised outside of Israel – Barnabas understands the Gentile mindset. He has some idea of what life is like for Jews living in a Roman metropolis like Antioch. So the Apostles are confident that Barnabas will offer wise counsel about the new church.

Barnabas is energized by what he finds in Antioch. The evangelists who had preceded him have laid a solid foundation and Barnabas immediately begins to build on it. True to his name, Barnabas gives his new friends all the encouragement he can. They respond with joy, and the church continues to experience dramatic growth.

Not surprisingly, Barnabas soon gets in over his head. He needs the help of a heavyweight, preferably someone who also understands what it means to live as a Christian in a multicultural community. He turns to Saul – again, the man we know as Paul. At this point Paul is living in Tarsus, another great city about 100 miles to the northwest of Antioch. Barnabas makes the journey to Tarsus and successfully recruits him to be his companion in ministry.

Luke doesn't say much about the nature of Barnabas and Paul's relationship. We think of Paul as this super-human evangelist who's always surrounded by adoring subordinates. But when Barnabas and Paul are together in Antioch it's clear that Barnabas is essentially Paul's mentor.

Paul serves under Barnabas for about a year in Antioch. As we might expect, the church there continues to grow. At the end of that year the Holy Spirit sends both of them on a missionary journey – the first of three for Paul. When they begin that adventure, it's Barnabas and not Paul who's in charge. It's really only after Paul begins to perform miracles during that first preaching tour that Paul emerges as the leader of the mission to the Gentiles.

Again, think of the difference that Barnabas has made because of his willingness, first to mentor Paul, and then to support Paul as the key leaders of the Church's missions efforts. Think how differently events might have unfolded if Barnabas been turned away from Paul by feelings of envy?

That's a lot of history to take in, but it's history with a purpose. Luke is illustrating the actions and qualities of character that make Barnabas an effective encourager.

First let's think about what is motivating Barnabas. Let's recognize that his aim, from the very start, is not to make a great name for himself. Rather, it's to walk in obedience and build up the people under his charge. Remember: it wasn't Barnabas' idea to move to Antioch and become a celebrated evangelist and preacher. The Apostles, by the Spirit's leading, commissioned and sent him. Remember too: Barnabas didn't have to recruit the most stupendously gifted man in the history of the church to assist him in ministry. There were plenty of other leaders available to him besides Paul. He could have chosen a

younger, less experienced, and less talented person to be his protégé. But Barnabas obviously wasn't worried about the likelihood that he would eventually be overshadowed by Paul. He wasn't thinking about himself at all. He was thinking only about what was best for The First Church of Antioch.

Barnabas' example of leadership provides a stark contrast to so many prominent leaders in our culture. There's no need to dwell on our ghastly presidential election, but let's recognize why Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton are the two least popular candidates in our nation's history. Fundamentally, it's because, for each of them, the election is about *them*. It's not about "Making America Great." It's not about being "Stronger Together." It's so clearly about winning, and wielding god-like powers, and being worshipped and adored by their embittered constituents.

If we want to be good encouragers, we have to put aside our ego and focus on those we've been called to serve. We have to make it about them, and not us. More than that, we have to be willing to recruit and empower people to work with us who are likely to shine brighter than we do. We have to be willing to serve in the shadows, and even miss out on some well-deserved recognition, so that others can rise up.

I love the way that Ajith Fernando makes the point. He writes:

[O]ur task is to be faithful to what God calls us to do. If that does not put our name forward on earth, that should not bother us, for our aim in life is not to get our name in the papers, but to hear the Master say, "Well done." It is the prospect of this reward that thrills the true Christian.

- *The NIV Application Commentary on Acts*, page 354

Another outstanding quality displayed by Barnabas is tolerance. When Barnabas gets to Antioch he doesn't find a mature body of believers who sing from a hymnbook, conduct yearly retreats, and gather every Thursday night in small groups. Everyone in the church is new to faith. Their theological knowledge is razor thin. Some of them are rooted in a system of ethics that celebrates dishonesty and unrestrained sexuality. Others are still dabbling in paganism.

Only a person of great patience and tolerance could have served the Antioch Church. But Barnabas is just such a person. Luke describes him as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith" (Acts 11: 24). Luke reports that when Barnabas arrives in Antioch and he sees "what the grace of God had done," he's "glad" and he encourages the new believers "to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts" (Acts 11: 23).

Barnabas exemplifies the tolerance and forbearance that's required of us if we want to be effective encouragers. He doesn't point out all the ways that the new church falls short. He doesn't become exasperated, and threaten to return to Jerusalem if they don't grow up. Where most people would have seen only immaturity, Barnabas sees sincerity and authenticity. His new friends, in his mind, are like teenagers who have fallen madly in love with Jesus. They just need someone to show them how to love.

Our culture is obsessed with tolerance. We condemn all forms of intolerance, except the intolerance of those who try to impose their values on others. Don't say anything that might be interpreted as a challenge to someone's right to self-expression. That's the unstated rule that governs polite conversation in our society. You can talk about Dodger baseball, your grandkids' accomplishments, even Hilary and Trump. Just don't try to convince me that what's true for you is also true for me.

Sadly, many Christians are steeped in this postmodern notion of tolerance. They adopt an admirably unjudgmental attitude towards others, including those who "have a history" or are "rough around the edges." They accept them, as they should, regardless of where they've been or what they've done. But when it comes to encouraging people in the things of the Spirit, they leave that to the church professionals. Many of them personally believe in Christ and the power of his grace. They've experienced the joy, peace and freedom of knowing Christ. Yet it has never crossed their minds to talk about such things. To them it just seems horribly *judgmental* to speak of Jesus as the world's one and only Savior. It seems outrageously *intolerant* to tell another person that she's going to die in her sins if she doesn't turn from them and receive new life in Christ.

It's important for us to understand the ideology that keeps Christians from talking about God and the things of the spirit. A good society, according to this postmodern vision, is radically inclusive. It's one where the highest value is the freedom of personal expression. Restrictions are called for, but only for the purpose of protecting the individual and his or her personal liberty.

Under this kind of social arrangement, toleration becomes all-important. People who are intolerant need to be silenced. No one can be permitted to sow doubt in people's minds about the fundamental values that the system is founded on. Society must be arranged so that personal freedoms are maximized. Everyone must allow others to do as they please as long as they aren't inhibiting others from fulfilling their dreams.

This post-modern concept of tolerance is very different from the one embraced by Barnabas and by most mature Jesus followers. As we've seen, Barnabas exercises a high degree of tolerance, but he shows no reluctance in speaking of his faith, and in urging the new believers to submit to the Lord in every area of their lives. How does that work? How can we challenge people to change without judging them? How can we motivate people to grow and mature in Christ without condemning the people they've been and the life they've been leading?

Christians understand that we're all sinners before God – that we all stand in need of his grace. It's our awareness of sin that keeps us from looking down on others, and that enables us to empathize with people of all walks of life. It's our awareness of our own brokenness that keeps us from treating others with contempt. We try to live by the teachings of Jesus, who warned us to remove the plank from our own eye before attempting to remove the speck from another person's eye.

Christians also understand that, while tolerance is important, it isn't the highest value. It's a virtue that needs to be balanced against other virtues. We need to be tolerant of people, even to the point of

repeatedly forgiving their sins against us. But we also need to acknowledge that God is utterly intolerant of sin. We need to remind ourselves every day that God is a consuming fire. We need to warn those under our care that God is going to burn away everything in our lives that isn't pure, and that isn't infused with his Spirit and his life.

Barnabas is a great encourager because he has a clear vision of what God wants to accomplish. He seeks to move his church away from death and towards life – away from sin and rebellion and towards obedience – away from selfishness and corruption and towards himself. Do we have the same clear vision for the people under our charge? As parents and teachers, as coaches and counsellors, as deacons and elders, do we understand what we're trying to accomplish? Are we trying to make disciples of Jesus, who will grow up to make more disciples of Jesus? Or are we just helping people to create their own vision of personal fulfillment?

Barnabas displays an interesting mix of characteristics. He's both tolerant and demanding. He supports and accepts people regardless of how mixed up or messed up they may be. Yet his standard for the church is complete obedience leading to holiness. These two approaches to encouragement, to some people, seem incongruous. They think that the strategy of loving and accepting people and the strategy of pushing for excellence with cancel each other out. But experience suggests otherwise.

Think about how these dynamics play out in the raising of children. Parents who are supportive but who have low expectations typically raise kids who are unmotivated or who struggle with feelings of worthlessness. On the other hand, parents who are authoritarian – parents who are demanding but unsupportive of their kids – typically raise kids who are rebels. The ideal is to be both supportive and demanding. It's to strike that uneasy and uncertain balance between loving and accepting our kids as they are, and prodding and challenging them to be people of character.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, understood these dynamics as well as anyone. There's a famous story about Wesley and his friend, William Wilberforce, that beautifully illustrates encouragement that's both loving and demanding.

For years Wilberforce pushed Britain's Parliament to abolish slavery. Discouraged, he was about to give up. His elderly friend Wesley heard about Wilberforce's troubles. From his deathbed Wesley called for pen and paper, and with a trembling hand, he wrote these words:

Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them stronger than God?
[B]e not weary of well-doing! Go on, in the name of God, and in the power of his might, till even American slavery shall vanish away before it.

John Wesley died six days later. But Wilberforce fought on for forty-five more years. In 1833, three days before his own death, Wilberforce saw slavery abolished in Britain.

We all need people like Wesley in our life – people who help us to keep our problems in their proper perspective. We all need a Barnabas who understands our strengths and passions, and can help us to focus our hearts on the right things. That’s not only true when we’re young and inexperienced. It’s also true when we’re older, and our confidence has been shaken, and we’ve stopped growing in our work, our emotional life, our relationships with others, or our relationship with God.

Who are the people that look to you for encouragement? What might you do today to express faith in them? How might you inspire them to seek the things of God, and become more like his Son Jesus?

Lord Jesus, you are the great encourager. You are the one who takes away our sin, and lifts us up from the ashes of our failure.

Help us to be effective encouragers. We seek your guidance and inspiration as parents and teachers, as coaches and counselors. Help us to forget about ourselves, and put the focus on those under our care. Teach us how to be supportive and demanding. May others see you alive in us and be inspired with visions of your goodness and grace. Amen.