

Barnabas



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What to do while your wife has her annual doctor appointment? On every table in the reception area are magazines with cover photos of actors and the famous and attention-grabbing headlines. Our society is captivated by the exploits and scandals of famous people. Sadly, most of those stories have no real significance or positive value. But selling such popular magazines has little to do with moral values or meaningful lifestyles.

Joseph, aka Barnabas, would never appear in the headlines. His nickname means “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36) and he is a Levite (priestly family) from Cyprus who sold some property and donated the money to the Jerusalem church. At that point the Jerusalem church was struggling and the religious authorities were focusing on what they believed was a bunch of dangerous Jesus followers. Not much going on at that point, unless you factor in God. Have you ever considered that God may do more through the living of ordinary people than through the powerful and wealthy?

A study of the New Testament reveals the magnitude of Paul’s writings that comprise a theological foundation for the Christian faith in our day, plus the amazing scope of Paul’s church planting across the Roman Empire. Before Saul took the more neutral name Paul he was actively preaching the good news of Jesus Christ to Jew and Gentile alike for three years (Galatians 1:18).

Saul managed to alienate almost everyone in Roman and Jewish power positions. The Gentiles saw him as a Jewish radical and the Jews saw him as a turncoat from the true faith. Furthermore, the Jews saw Saul as a threat to their safety and inclusion in Damascus society and were “watching the (city) gates by day and night so they might kill him (Acts 9:24). But Saul’s (Paul’s) disciples had experienced a dynamic new faith in Christ and

they determined to get their spiritual mentor out of Damascus. So “his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the (city) wall, lowering him in a basket” (9:25). Such an “opening” would have been a commercial delivery portal. We owe a great deal to those faithful brave souls.

Paul was an impressive character, respected among the Jews as a Pharisee dedicated to living and teaching God’s law, and respected among the Gentiles as a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-39). But those distinctions did not guarantee Paul either acceptance or authority. When he arrived in Jerusalem the Christian community “were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple” (9:26). They knew Paul’s past, that he had led a ruthless destruction of the Jesus followers with the endorsement of the Jewish Council (Acts 7:54-59; 8:1-3).

What Paul needed was someone who would affirm his reputation as a true convert to faith in Christ and testify to his ministry in Damascus. Paul needed a champion, a voice that would be heard above the fear and uncertainty that loomed over the church in Jerusalem. That voice of affirmation and truth was Barnabas, who “took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road to Damascus Paul had seen the risen Lord who spoke to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus (9:27).

Thank God for those who have been the Barnabas of the church through the years, the men and women who reach beyond the familiar and safe lines to show us the possibilities of God’s grace beyond our limited vision and safety barriers. Barnabas risked his own reputation and standing in the Jerusalem church, and, in that risk, enabled Paul to become the voice of the gospel across the Roman Empire. Acts 11:26 records that Antioch was the first place where the Jesus followers were first called “Christians” (“those of Christ” in Greek).

Antioch marks a clear expansion of the gospel into the world at large. The earliest days of the church were attached to the synagogues in various communities because the first followers of Jesus were Jewish. But God’s plan was not to confine his grace to one particular ethnic group, but instead to reach all the world. Judaism was God’s witness to the world for generations, but not the ultimate spiritual goal. Although the church in Antioch had strong Jewish roots, it had interesting variety as well: Simon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (a member of Herod’s court), and Lucius Cyrene of Cyrenaica. This remarkable church, “while worshiping the Lord and fasting,” listened when the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (13:2). This is a major break from tradition as the Antioch church laid hands on Barnabas and Paul and sent them into the world. Obviously there is more here than a human strategy!

We moderns know much about organization, business strategy, financing and projecting returns, but what about the magnitude of God’s grace? The gospel is about changing the human heart, healing brokenness and spiritual life. Barnabas is a “son of encouragement,” a person who sees through God’s eyes beyond the challenges.

We do not see ourselves as ones who will launch an entirely new missionary movement. But does our text not tell us about one person who saw God’s possibilities in another person? You are called to make a difference where you are ... and that difference may produce amazing consequences far beyond your “Damascus.” Importance can be a dangerously limiting word. When you accept God’s love and risk loving God back, the result is possibilities: to encourage others, to help them discover God’s grace and to share the joys of the new life in Christ. You can be a “Barnabas.”

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.