

# Barnabas—Son of encouragement

Dick France

*With this issue of Themelios Dick France hands on his responsibility as General Editor to Robert Norris. His successor will be no stranger to TSF in Britain, having recently served on the executive committee there as the representative for Scotland (though he is really a Welshman!). He now works in central London as assistant minister at the City Temple, where he meets many visitors from other parts of the world. As well as gaining experience there of putting his theological training into practice, Dr Norris also has experience of the academic world and the needs of undergraduates, having worked for his PhD at the University of St Andrews in the field of historical theology. We therefore much look forward to his continuing the work begun by our retiring editor.*

*This, therefore, seems an appropriate place to express the thankfulness to God many Themelios readers must feel for Dick France's work over the past three years. Though he is just about to take up new responsibilities as warden of Tyndale House, Cambridge, we are grateful for his willingness to continue with our editorial team as Associate Editor with particular responsibility for the New Testament field. In place of a final editorial he has contributed what follows as the expository article that is intended to be an annual feature in Themelios.*

The Holy Spirit is the *paraklētos*, and we all know how impossible it is to find an adequate word to translate that rich idea. But among its many aspects we must certainly include that of 'encouragement', and it was probably in this sense that the nickname of the Cypriot Levite Joseph was intended—Barnabas, son of *paraklēsis*. For in the part Barnabas played in the early years of the Christian mission this ministry of the Paraclete was seen time and again, as he took the side of the misunderstood and the rejected, and proved to be for them a son of encouragement, or as we might put it, a tower of strength.

It is a gift the church still needs. A church plagued by divisions and suspicion, often more concerned with nit-picking controversy than with fellowship and outreach, needs more Barnabases. Readers of *Themelios*, who aspire to positions of responsibility in the church, would be well advised

to consider the example of Barnabas lest they turn out to be, like too many of the church's leaders past and present, effective sons of *discouragement*.

A full study of Barnabas would need to include the remarkable gift of his family estate which first brings him into the narrative of Acts (4: 36f.), and which may not be entirely unconnected with the fact that he later had to work for his living (1 Cor. 9: 6). But I want to focus on his ministry of encouragement by considering three of the objects of his *paraklēsis*.

## 1. The outsiders

It was one thing for Peter to be forced reluctantly to preach to Cornelius, but a deliberate outreach to Gentiles in Antioch, especially when conducted by non-Palestinian Jewish Christians, was quite another matter, and the Jerusalem establishment was understandably perturbed (Acts 11: 20–22). Barnabas was a good choice as investigator, a Jewish Christian of Diaspora origin (Acts 4: 36) but with Jerusalem connections (Col. 4: 10); but his supreme qualification was his character which, as we shall see, made him a natural ambassador.

'When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad' (11: 23). I love that. Perhaps he too had his doubts back in Jerusalem, but Barnabas was not the man to let prejudice stand up against the grace of God. I suspect Barnabas was often 'glad'. He strikes me as a happy Christian, not a dour dogmatic disciplinarian. He looked at a situation from the positive side, and he saw the grace of God where many would have seen only a disturbing innovation. He was a man who put first things first, and the first thing was the grace of God. And so he encouraged the Gentile mission, and he encouraged his new Gentile brothers. He was a Levite (which had no doubt not escaped those who sent him to check up), but he was also 'a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith' (11: 24). And so 'a large company was added to the Lord', and Barnabas found himself the leader of the most prolific missionary church of the early days. I am sure he continued to be glad!

And then he was selected to lead an evangelistic tour in the neighbouring provinces (13: 1–3). I know it was the Holy Spirit who made the selection,

but I cannot say I am surprised at the choice, given Barnabas' record to date! And on that tour the same question came up, and Barnabas found himself again supporting an active mission to Gentiles, against the fierce opposition of more traditionally oriented Jews—though not in this case Jewish Christians (13: 43ff.). Back home in Antioch, the issue arose again, now as a clear theological contest among the Jewish Christians, and again Barnabas came out as an uncompromising supporter of the Gentile mission (15: 1ff.).

There is no doubt then that the acceptance of Gentile Christianity owed a lot to the vision of Barnabas, who 'saw the grace of God and was glad'. It was a major hurdle, and it took 'a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith' to clear it. That particular hurdle is long since forgotten, but there are still barriers to the progress of the gospel and to real Christian fellowship—racial barriers, cultural barriers, class barriers. Christianity still faces the threat of self-isolation in respectable traditional circles, and it may need a Barnabas to drag the rest of us over the hurdles behind which we shelter today.

## 2. The suspect

In the fight for the Gentile mission, Barnabas could rely on the support of his most famous protégé, Saul of Tarsus. For Saul knew from his own experience the difference between Barnabas' openness to the grace of God and the attitude of the Jerusalem church leaders. 'When he had come to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple' (Acts 9: 26).

I can't say that I blame them. Such a dramatic *volte-face* is hardly natural, and we all tend to expect things to be natural and predictable. Unfortunately, where God is at work they are not, and it can be very uncomfortable to come to terms with God's way of doing things. Unlike Barnabas later at Antioch, they saw the grace of God, and were—suspicious!

It has been the fate of those who undergo radical conversions ever since. The converted Muslim too often has to face not only the hostility of his Muslim family, but also the cold shoulder of the church which ought to be welcoming him. And it is not so very different for the converted pop star or gang leader in the West. 'But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them' that his story was true and that his subsequent behaviour had proved it (Acts 9: 27). So Saul, who could so easily have been left out in the cold to found his own little sect, was brought into the

family. Thank God for Barnabas, who was ready to see the grace of God and to take it at its face value. We still need him in many Christian situations today.

It was Barnabas again who brought Saul in where the action was, to help him in leading the Gentile mission at Antioch (Acts 11: 25f.). Today we might call it an internship, training on the job. Together they 'met with the church, and taught a large company of people', and the foundations were laid for that pastoral and teaching ministry from which were to come in due time the Pauline letters. We owe it, under God, to the vision and encouragement of Barnabas.

I do not think Barnabas was surprised at the way his partnership with Saul eventually worked out: 'Barnabas and Saul' (Acts 13: 7) soon became 'Paul and his company' (13: 13). It was what Barnabas had in mind when he introduced Saul to the Jerusalem church, and later sent for this gifted convert to be his assistant. He had a God-given gift for spotting talent, and I am sure that as Paul forged ahead and took the lead, he 'saw the grace of God and was glad'.

The Lycaonian pagans had the situation well weighed up when they identified Barnabas with Zeus, the *éminence grise*, and Paul with Hermes 'because he was the chief speaker', the whizz-kid of the team (Acts 14: 12)!

So Christianity found its St Paul. It could so easily have been otherwise, when the abrasive young Pharisee met with the very natural suspicion of the Jerusalem worthies. Paul must often have thanked God for the gloriously unselfish *paraklēsis* of Barnabas, not just at the start but right on until he was well and truly launched into his ministry. Sons of encouragement do not leave the job half done.

## 3. The failure

Another talent spotted by Barnabas was John Mark, his relative from Jerusalem whom Barnabas took, like Saul before him, to join the team ministry in Antioch (Acts 12: 25), and a man who later proved his worth as Paul's right-hand man (Col. 4: 10; 2 Tim. 4: 11). But before that time came, Mark's prospects looked no better than did those of Saul when the Jerusalem church didn't want to know him. He dropped out of the first evangelistic tour from Antioch (Acts 13: 13; 15: 38). The many suggested reasons for his 'desertion' should be treated as what they are—guesses. But whatever the reason, it was enough to make Paul write him off as a failure, and that could have been the end of Mark's career as a Christian missionary. Predict-

ably, it was Barnabas, the son of encouragement, who took the side of the underdog, and was sufficiently convinced of the grace of God in the life of John Mark to indulge in the most un-Barnabas-like attitude of a 'sharp contention' (the Greek is *paroxysm!*) with Paul, bringing about the end of a partnership which had meant so much to them both (Acts 15: 36-40).

There is much we do not know about the background to this episode, as well as about its sequel so far as Barnabas and Mark are concerned. It is possible that there was some misunderstanding between Barnabas and Paul as to the nature of Mark's proposed involvement; if the Greek tenses are pressed, Barnabas proposed to give Mark a limited second chance (to 'take him along' in the aorist, a single action, verse 37), while Paul objected to someone with Mark's record as a permanent member of the team (to 'take him with them' in the present, a continuing state of affairs, verse 38). But the point is that Barnabas found Paul's attitude too hard; he was for encouragement rather than for rejection. And again events were to prove his faith well founded.

Failure and restoration form a common theme in the biblical history. We have the treasure of the gospel in clay pots, to show that it is God's power, not ours, that is at work (2 Cor. 4: 7). Pots get broken, and even apostles can fail. At such a time the wounded conscience needs not an unbending rigorism, but *paraklēsis*. How many potential Marks, I wonder, have been lost through a failure of the church to understand a failure, real or imagined? Many of us are too apt to break the bruised reed. Thank God that Barnabas was not so clumsy.

'A good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.' I think we have seen plenty of grounds for that description of Barnabas. And as a man full of the Holy Spirit he displayed many gifts, but pre-eminent among them was the gift of *paraklēsis*, a gift which could well take its place beside 'helps' in 1 Corinthians 12: 28 as a gift of the Holy Spirit, the *paraklētōs*.

But Paul thought he was too soft. This is clear not only in the *paroxysm* over Barnabas' desire to give Mark a second chance, but also in an incident which happened in the early days of the multiracial church in Antioch (Gal. 2: 11-14). Barnabas, in the august company of Peter himself, gave in to pressure from the Jerusalem church to withdraw from table-fellowship with Gentile believers. No doubt, judging by Barnabas' record as a whole, it was a temporary lapse—it is so inconsistent with Bar-

nabas' 'liberal' attitude to the Gentile mission elsewhere. I wonder, though, whether it is entirely untypical of the man. Barnabas was always one to see the best in people, never one for hasty condemnations. Where Paul would take up the cudgels without delay, Barnabas would not quickly accuse Peter of denying the faith, and so he was more easily led into the compromising position, from which it took the doctrinal sensitivity and the forthright rebuke of Paul to extract him.

Was this softness? Barnabas was not soft in his campaign with Paul for the acceptance of Gentiles (Acts 13: 46, 'spoke out boldly'; 15: 2, 'no small dissension'; 15: 12; *etc.*). He was not one to knuckle under to the attitude of his superiors when he championed Paul in Jerusalem, and he was prepared to break up with Paul rather than abandon his advocacy of Mark. Barnabas could be very firm when he saw an issue clear in front of him. But at the centre of his campaigns were *people* rather than debating-points—the outsiders, the suspect, the failure. For them he would fight, even against Paul himself. He would fight for acceptance, for understanding, for a second chance. This is not softness, but generosity, a generosity which perhaps led him to go along with Peter further than he should have done, because he was too generous to question Peter's motives.

Be that as it may, it seems to me that in Barnabas, the son of encouragement, we have an important counterpart to Paul the tireless fighter for truth. If Barnabas could be over-generous, Paul, at least in the case of the dispute over Mark, could be over-rigorous, and the Christian pastor has lessons to learn from them both. We need to be as firm and as alert to doctrinal threats as Paul, but too often that Pauline firmness can degenerate into a hard, censorious attitude, which makes no allowances for *people*, and where that is the case we need to remember the 'softness' of Barnabas. If his softness (or generosity, as I would rather call it) could lead him on one occasion into an unworthy compromise, it could also rescue Mark from his record of failure. The true pastor must weigh carefully the relative claims of the rigorism of Paul and the generosity of Barnabas.

I think I would have liked to meet and work with Barnabas. I am sure he would have made me feel that I had a contribution to make. He would have brought out the best in me. But Paul? I am not so sure!

Have you noticed how often Barnabas was used as a liaison man? Sent to investigate the Gentile mission in Antioch, sent to Jerusalem with the famine relief (11: 30), sent on the first evangelistic

tour, sent to represent Antioch at the council (15:2), sent by the council to communicate its findings (15:22, 24, 30). I imagine his character had a lot to do with the choice. He could get on with people. Firm and forthright when occasion required it, he was also loving and understanding. People would listen to a man like Barnabas.

We owe more to Barnabas than we often realize,

Barnabas the son of encouragement. Where would Christianity have been without his marvellous gift for spotting and encouraging talent, for seeing the grace of God (and being glad!)? To him, under God, we owe the Gentile mission, and Mark, and even Paul.

Thank God for Barnabas; and let him teach us to encourage one another.

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