



## Transcriptions

### Long Term Values of Short Term Missions

Ted Ward

**Annotation:** *Student Overseas Missions (SOM) Chapel, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL, May 12, 1988.* Ted Ward explores the life and ministry of Barnabas (Acts 11: 19-26) in order to derive principles for short-term mission service.



Greetings, in the name of Jesus Christ. The passage of Scripture that we read this morning focuses on the person of Barnabas in one of the several points in which the man is identified for us and described in interesting ways in the book of Acts. Whenever I think of short-term missions, and our SOM program is one example of short-term missions, I always think of Barnabas. He's something of the man of our times. There's a lot about Barnabas that we can identify with today. There are even parachurch organizations that use his name as the title in their organization: people of encouragement. We're introduced to him, of course, in Acts chapter 4 as Joseph the Levite from Cyprus, but the church in Jerusalem had their own name for him. And quite apparently their name for him grew out of what was true of his life and spirit and ministry. He was an encourager.

In reference to the very difficult choice that the church of Jerusalem had to make with reference to the convert, Saul, we know Barnabas to be the one who stuck his neck way out. Americans like that. We usually identify with people who are willing to stick their neck out for some kind of an underdog and I think this is one reason that, in our time for our people, Barnabas is an important figure because he *did* stick his neck way out. He encouraged the fellowship of believers in Jerusalem to accept Saul at face value in what he was claiming and what he was declaring about the work that God had done in his life. And I daresay that one of the most encouraging experiences of

Saul's life as a Christian must certainly have been to realize that there was one Christian who was willing to forgive and forget because Saul had been, indeed, something of a menace. And we know that, as a result of the intervention by Barnabas, Saul did take his place in the fellowship and moved around in Jerusalem and got to work witnessing for Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. But apparently not long after, the tensions grew again; this time not so much within the church as among the Grecian Jews, and there was threat upon Saul's life. And the church in Jerusalem, operating in that period after Stephen's stoning, recognized that this really could be a mortal problem and they packed him off to his home town in Tarsus.

I've often wondered what the whole sentiment of the church in Jerusalem was at that time. I've often wondered if, indeed again, Barnabas might not have been saying let's try to help him. Let's try to protect him. Let's keep him here; we need him. We don't know; it's only speculation. We do know that the decision of the Christians in Jerusalem was to send him back home to Tarsus. Out of their lives, out of their experiences, hopefully, to be part of that scattering of the church that went and planted itself in many places in the eastern Mediterranean.

And then, of course, the news gets back to the church in Jerusalem that something has really happened significantly among those that had moved from Jerusalem up to Antioch, and a great work of the Spirit is being done in Antioch. And the reaction of the church in Jerusalem is very interesting. They sent their encourager. As a matter of fact, if you're interested in history and precedents, this really is the first act of mission in the New Testament. It's the first clear-cut example of a church sending out a person to do something on behalf of that church among people who are in a different situation, whose culture is different, and whose circumstances would have required a great deal of adjustment and adaptation. And I noticed that the church in Jerusalem doesn't even send him with a detailed agenda. I love that because sometimes, I think, in our technological times we fret too much about our agenda. We fret too much about what *we're* going to do when we get there. And I noticed that what this man, Barnabas, did when he got there was, if you please, he did what came naturally to him because of what he was in Christ. He, indeed, verified. He was curious. Is this indeed a work of the Spirit? And he found that it was and then he encouraged them.

And then what happens next is so, so very interesting especially if you have a very narrow notion of missions. Because I daresay that whatever the church in Jerusalem might have expected of sending Barnabas up to the church in Antioch, it probably did not include a cross-integration—a crossing of the path with, again, this Saul of Tarsus. And if I read the passage correctly, it's virtually a kind of a next step of action. He verifies. Barnabas discovers that, indeed, the work of Christ is manifest in Antioch. There is an exciting thing going on. He encourages them; and then he has that encourager's spirit to say, it's not simply enough for me to be encouraged and to encourage them, I must bring in another. And what does he do? As it were, he rushes off sideways, and I think there's no reason to believe that that was within his mandate; but he takes it upon himself to go and bring Saul from Tarsus and say literally, you've got to see what God's doing. It'll encourage your heart, too. I daresay that Saul probably needed that because after being run away from Jerusalem, regardless of the dynamics of that situation, regardless of the fears and the threats, it was not in Paul's character to run away from danger. And to be pushed away from danger, as it turned out, I suspect it did not sit altogether well with him. But now to be invited back into a great act of God, the great work at Antioch must have been a great thrill.

The reason I bring Barnabas front and center today is because in the last twenty years we've had the re-emergence—and I insist on calling it the re-emergence—of short-term missions. You see I call it re-emergence because I think we just have to study in the Acts here the characters of the first

short-term experiences in missions. You see, it was after this, after that period of time when Saul joined Barnabas in ministering within the church at Antioch—and they ministered at least a year in teaching—it was after that that the Holy Spirit moves in. And then we see the whole picture of what God intends to do in mission because it's after that that God moves in and says to the church of Antioch, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul to a work that I've called them for." And the first sending-out at the request of the Holy Spirit directly documented in Scripture comes from the church not of Jerusalem, but from the church at Antioch. But it comes as a consequence or as the end phase of this year of ministry which must necessarily be seen as a kind of short-term experience. Indeed, what church sent Saul to Antioch? Saul was invited into Antioch by a person, a human being, a man of God who saw the value in bringing that particular experience into the life of a new convert; a person who was growing in faith; a person who had great ministry potential.

I've been in the thick of this argument about the value of short-term missions across its twenty years because it really did re-emerge, in the '60s largely as a kind of Christian reaction to what was going on in Kennedy's Peace Corps. And that was in the 60s. And Christians said, shouldn't we do that, too? Shouldn't we get some of the values of sending Christian people overseas to do the work of Christ, even as our government is sending people over to do the work of helps in other domains, in other facets of life? And, true to form, since human beings tend to traditionalize anything that they institutionalize, there was a kind of reaction among many, not all, but many missionary organizations and missionaries on the field who said, what in the world would we do with *them*? It took *us* three years to learn the language up to the point of being sure we were saying, 'Hi, how are you?' and not 'Drop dead.' What are you going to do with a six-week wonder? Not much; not much. Not much value. And look at the cost. Now I daresay that the same sorts of things could have been said about Saul when Barnabas got it into his bright head to bring [Saul] onboard. What are you going to do with that six-week wonder? But, as a matter of fact, in the Spirit of God and in the strength of the Holy Spirit in the work of Christ, there flowered a ministry that was significant in the development of the church at Antioch. Who planned it? It emerged. It emerged from the ongoing activity of God's work in that place.

If you read the Scripture with some of the sensitivities that I have learned in my experiences of life and career, you're observant of a tremendous interplay between the work of God in the reconciliation of human beings to himself, and the manifestation of sin that I have come to believe is one of the most pervasive, persistent, and pernicious of all the manifestations of sin that affects humankind: racism and its attendant cultural barriers.

It is extremely important for us, in this time, to recognize that God has sensitized whole societies to this issue of racism and cultural variability. And yet, within the church, we find interesting rationalizations for the way things are, instead of accepting the wholeness of God's reconciling work. In Matthew, chapter 24, our Lord warns that our first task in reconciliation is not a sacramental act in the temple, but is a reconciliation with our brother (Matthew 5:24).

Our first task, it seems to me, as Christians in the reaching out that is involved in true global ministry of the church is to face up to ourselves; to recognize in ourselves some of the narrowness that has been created by our own habits, our own expectations, our own culture, and to come to grips with those in such a way that we take them to the altar and place ourselves at God's command as ministers of reconciliation. We live in a badly fragmented world. Even within our own society, we deal in times when racism and cultural variability has isolated sector from sector, group from group, person from person. And even within the church schismatic behaviors of all sorts are even rationalized by those who study these things through the eyes of questionable sociology; using

sociology only to understand the nature of fallen man without bringing the nature of fallen man against the value system of the kingdom of God. I refer specifically to the issue of the homogeneous unit principle, so-called.

It is in our time to deal as ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ and not to leave simply to those who are missionaries or those who are ethnic ministers in urban centers, but to recognize that all of us face a task of reconciliation as we attempt, through the grace of God, to help Christians reconcile themselves with those who are culturally and racially different. You see, this is important in the short-term task because short-term people are taking a desperate chance. They are placing themselves at risk. They are running the risk of discovering things about themselves that they will need to change. God bless them. God strengthen them. God encourage them as they do this. And may they be an encouragement to the rest of us to seek out comparable opportunities; to put ourselves in situations where the judgments of the values of the kingdom of God will work their work to purge our hearts of those things which our culture has taught us that are not pleasing to our heavenly Father.

I refer specifically to the probability that well prepared and well trained people such as those who have presented themselves for the rigorous activities that have been involved here in the SOM training and preparation. A training that is not completed but is well underway; entered into willingly and eagerly by this group that you see before you today. They will become stronger for this experience and their strength will work to the strength of the church in North America. I get a little weary of people saying, shouldn't we be more concerned about our own situation at home? As I see it, through short-term missions especially, we *are* being concerned about our own situation at home because our own situation at home, at one of its greatest points of need, is in reference to our cultural narrowness. And there's no way better to blow it open than to engage in a period of that kind of risk that is involved in the SOM.

You see, I think that we are dealing here with long-term values that should not be seen in terms of what will they contribute to their situations overseas in those periods of time this summer. That's the short-term values. But, as a matter of fact, one of our problems is we tend to see ourselves as the benefactors and others as those whom we will benefit. And we are always seeing ourselves as North Americans in terms of we have a lot we're going to give to them. One of the things that will be testified in the fall of this next academic year as these people return and share with us is that every one of them, in one way or another, will say something about, 'I have learned more. I have had this experience mean more to me, I suspect, than I was able to contribute to others.' Is that selfish? Indeed, it is not selfish. Indeed, it is the norm for that affiliative body that is the church. We need each other. And we need the kinds of experiences that are made possible by being ministers, as Barnabas was—ministers of encouragement, ministers of simple affiliation, involvement with others for mutual support, exemplifying the gospel, being part of God's reconciling work. You see this is what is involved in SOM. Yes, it is an acting out of the Great Commission in a small scale. It is an acting out of that first and most crucial piece of the Great Commission in Matthew 28, the 'go'. The 'go' that precedes all the rest.

I'll never lose this image from my mind of disciples watching Jesus go into heaven and then being rebuked by an angel who said, "What are you standing here for gazing into heaven?" Gazing at heavens, whether astrologically or whether just eschatologically, can be the wrong focus. The angel says you have a ministry. Your last command of your Lord was 'go'. And to 'go,' you must turn around. You must move out. And it's in that moving out, even if it is only in the whole of a life for one summer that represents that threshold that we all must face at some point in life, that says, I

am willing to move outward from where I am most comfortable. I am willing to move away from those things that I particularly take comfort in and take my courage and my strength in and my satisfactions. And I am willing to move into that unknown where I must find ways that my trust in Jesus Christ becomes practical. That's the exciting part, but it also has tremendous values to those among whom they will minister.

Even if no individual soul is won to Christ, there will be that encouragement of the believers that will strengthen the church; that will result in God's longer term of things in bringing strength, vitality to the church which then, in turn, moves out more confidently so that the Antioch experience will be continued. And also in this experience we have an opportunity to act out that thing that was so characteristic of our Lord—being willing to relate to the needs of others in terms of their agenda.

I'm always upset when I find short-termers going out with a long list of things that they've just got to do. And if I don't do all these things, they're going to be really disappointed and frustrated and feel like a failure. I think that's very, very unfortunate. The really important thing is to *be* there, and to be there in an attitude of response, even as our Lord; and as people brought their situations to him, he dealt with them. These people will go out representing us well. These people will go out responsible to the Lord Jesus Christ. They will need our prayers. They will need our continued support.

I trust that it is possible for every one of us to see the value for this community of faith right here—right here in Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. We are beneficiaries of their summer experience. They will bring back that which can encourage our hearts, too. And as we become part with them in the experience that they will engage in this summer, we can enjoy some of those encouragements. And we can find ourselves vicariously engaged in an experience of ministry that may have for every one of *us* a long-term effect as we follow in their footsteps and commit ourselves in times ahead to take those steps of faith that put us at risk among people who are different; and allow the ministry of the Holy Spirit to work within us—to transform us making us more fit for the ministry of reconciliation.

May Jesus Christ be praised.