



Transcriptions

A Christian Response to Missions: Barnabas

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Annotation: *Houghton College Missions Conference, Houghton, NY, November 2, 1973* Reflecting on the life of Barnabas recorded in the book of Acts, Ted Ward describes three phases of his response as a missionary along with the tasks pertinent to each phase.



But, let's look tonight at Barnabas. I suppose that we could sub-title the presentation tonight "Missions according to St. Barnabas." And we wouldn't be far off because here we're going to talk tonight about Joseph, this Levite from the island of Cyprus off in the Mediterranean. Some of us that have travelled in the Near East know something about Cyprus. This fellow was from that island. He was a Levite. He was a Jewish fellow and part of the dispersed Jewish people; and he shows up first in Acts 4. We're going to look at three phases of this man's response as a missionary.

The first phase I think we'll start with is in Acts 4:36 when we're first introduced to Barnabas and, interestingly, we're introduced to him by even another name. We're introduced to him by the name of Joseph, Levite, of Cyprian birth who was called also Barnabas by the apostles, which translated means "son of encouragement," son of encouragement. Well now, there's a guy I can identify with. That's something that all of us can kind of shoot for—the encouraging of one another. Now that's not too hard, is it? Have you tried to encourage a missionary this week? You've had some here that need some encouragement. Don't we all.

This fellow owned a tract of land and then he sold it; brought the money and laid it at the Apostle's feet. That's where it begins. That's where it began for Barnabas. He sold out in this world and he began building a tremendous treasure in the other world. A little tidbit here, stuck in here just before we get into this black picture of Ananias and Sapphira, who also had some property; and here just used as a little background in contrast to Ananias and Sapphira, that little bit of data about this man, Barnabas. Let's turn over to Acts 9, when we pick up a more healthy chunk. We begin to see something of this man as an independent individual; again here used to contrast and to parallel, and to dramatize the kind of a side-character in the story of the conversion of Saul. And we find that in phase one, after selling out, after cashing in on this world's economy, and putting his stake with the cause of Jesus Christ as a young Christian, the next thing we find in phase one is what I'm going to call, task one of phase one—*befriending the people of God*; specifically befriending a man who needed a friend. A man who was in really bad trouble; a man who was being chased; a man who was being hunted. A new convert who was in great trouble and needed encouragement. He needed a friend and our friend, Barnabas, shows up. You know who it was who needed a friend that night? Just listen. Pick it up with me will you please about 9:22 to get the whole background: "But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ. When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him." He was a traitor. He had betrayed them and they were going to do him in. "But their plot became known to Saul and they also were watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death but his disciples took him by night and led him down through an opening in the wall lowering him in a basket. When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was really a disciple. But Barnabas took hold of him . . ." Took hold of him, took hold of him. Have you ever taken a hold of someone and said, you need a friend. Let me hold your arm; you need a friend. "Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he'd seen the Lord on the road and that he'd talked to him and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. He was with them moving about freely in Jerusalem speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord." And the story immediately switches back to Saul, who is named Paul. And little Barnabas slips from the scene again.

We pick up in Acts 11 another chunk and increasingly become aware that Barnabas is a character we're going to have to reckon with. Acts 11:19: "So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen, made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch speaking the Word to no one except the Jews alone. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch." Remember where our friend was from? Cyprus. "He began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus and the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord." Missionary outreach. When the news about them reached the ears of the church of Jerusalem and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch to join these of his countrymen also from Cyprus up there working in Antioch of Syria up north of the Holy Land. And when he had come and witnessed to the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with a resolute heart to remain true to the Lord.

Task two, phase one: *encouraging new converts*. Phase one, in the life of Barnabas, was the phase of apprenticeship that began with befriending a man of God who needed a friend. And it moves on in 23, here, "to the encouragement of new converts in this place, Antioch." But let's read on, verse 24: "for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and the faith and considerable numbers were brought to the Lord and he left for Tarsus to look for Saul." Fantastic.

The man, Saul, had an independent reputation at this time. He was still even being called Saul. The text, here, testifies to that. He hadn't even really begun to be his Christian name yet. And Barnabas was living at a moment of great triumph encouraging this new church at Antioch and being of great help and he broke away from that, and went to get Saul. Part of the apprenticeship period, task three, was *going out to bring in a friend to help*. Now he didn't sit there and pray that the Holy Spirit would somehow call Saul to come miraculously to Antioch and join them, he went after him. Never fear to try to bring someone by the arm and say, "God's using me, God will use you; come join the work." Missionary recruitment's an exciting thing. You never have to worry that somehow you're going to bring the wrong person. The Holy Spirit's in it. And here's old Barnabas saying, Saul's a great man of God, let's bring him into this; let's get him involved. And when he found him, in verse 26, he brought him to Antioch and came for about an entire year. They met with the church and taught considerable numbers. The disciples were first called Christians there at Antioch. Task four: *teaching in the church*.

"At this time, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch and one of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world and this took place in the reign of Claudius. And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders." [Acts 11: 27-30]

Task five: *servicing as a messenger for God*. Not a very exalted task, not a very exciting task, but somebody had to do it and somebody who was reliable. But what a beautiful task of encouragement. Really our first case of the involvement of contributions of goods traveling across national lines. A pattern in missions. Fascinating. However, notice what direction the money was flowing. It was flowing from the mission field back to the parent church because the needs were greater back in the parent church.

We, as Americans, I think have a distorted view of this notion partly because America is so filthy rich and we keep giving and giving and giving and giving. And we should because God has richly provided and we should be in the sharing business. But it's fascinating to watch as missions grow up in other nations how this needing of needs goes both ways. It'll go this way one year and it'll go back this way the next year. It's a beautiful picture. It's the kind of thing that was going on here and this particular man, our man Barnabas, has the role of carrying that happy burden.

Over in the thirteenth chapter, we really pick up a summary of this whole first phase in Barnabas' development. "Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers, prophets and teachers . . ." in this missionary church at Antioch. "Barnabas and Simeon, who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch" and almost as an afterthought Luke says, "and Saul." But look who he named first, our boy Barnabas.

But what was he doing? He had been for a year now teaching and serving as a prophet of God in that church. The missionary during a commitment, apprenticeship, phase one, finds himself commonly, ordinarily, and I believe scripturally at work as a prophet and teacher of God. Now the prophet here is the one, I think in the biblical sense of prophet, who speaks out for God, "Thus sayeth the Lord." Not the fortuneteller, not the futuresayer, but the man who says, "Thus sayeth the

Lord.” And this really is the kind of summary of phase one and the tasks, and again to remind you, were first: befriending a man of God, encouraging new converts, bringing in a friend to share in the work, teaching, serving as a messenger.

Now some people today have the happy opportunity of becoming involved in short-term missions. And I believe that I have seen case after case of people in the short-term mission operation doing essentially these five things and experiencing in a short-term assignment, a phase one, an apprenticeship, the beginning of the involvement with the church, encouraging the saints. Not necessarily witnessing on the street corner, but encouraging and teaching in the church, holding up the hands of the Christians, encouraging new converts, bringing in friends to help, and generally being useful among the assembly. And you know what? It certainly was a marvelous phase one for Barnabas, and I think it’s a marvelous phase one for some of us today.

Phase two begins quite promptly there in the next verse, “While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said. . .” Now enter the Holy Spirit. You say, well how come the Holy Spirit wasn’t involved in phase one? He was, but here’s where the Holy Spirit does that special work that identifies and calls out from the church those that will be ordained and will have the hands of the church laid on them for support and for development and for careers in missions. Notice Barnabas’ career as a missionary didn’t begin here, but his call is distinctly confirmed here. Would that we could understand that it is the role of the church operating in body to ordain and send out missionaries. *The scriptural pattern.* It is not the place of the individual to present himself and say, friends, you’ve got to support me because God has called me. This is something that God doesn’t provide to us as a secret that somehow we have to go and communicate to others. The Holy Spirit works in the hearts of many. And you will find that if, in fact, the Holy Spirit is calling you, that the Holy Spirit is also at the same time informing other people within that body of Christians that will send you out so when you say, I’ve been feeling lately that the Spirit God wants me to work. You will find out that many people that you talk to will say, I thought so, I thought so. I begin to wonder about that myself. The Spirit of God has been telling me something about you and your role and your function in missions and that’s the beautiful thing. Sometimes people say to me, Oh, I hate to raise money; I hate to tell people I need money to be a missionary. Man, don’t, don’t do it that way. Seek out the people the Holy Spirit has also been talking to about you and about your role. Recognize the function of the church. Notice the pattern here. While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, while they were ministering. Don’t attempt to start being a missionary by saying, hey, I want to do something. Be doing it and then this process begins.

The Holy Spirit has set apart from me, Barnabas and Saul (interesting who’s named first and who’s still got his old name here) set apart from me, Barnabas and Saul, his helper, for the work to which I have called them. Who called them? The Holy Spirit called them. Who did the Holy Spirit announce this to? He announced it to the church. Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. Who sent them? The church. The Holy Spirit calls, the church sends.

Now then you say, well that’s just a little proof text, but you show me anything in the Scripture that suggests anything to the contrary. I believe this is a pattern ordained by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit calls and informs the church of that call and the church sends. And sending here implies support. So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, working through the church as we saw in the previous verse, “They went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they

reached Salamis they began to proclaim the Word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper.” Very interesting. I thought this church sent out two of them and here they show up with an extra guy. Barnabas is still doing it; he’s bringing along another guy to help. Didn’t the church ordain John Mark, too? I don’t know. But Barnabas said, we need you. We ought to share this with you. We don’t want you to be left out. By the way, this ultimately became quite an issue of tension between Barnabas and Saul, the most significant of their conflicts. They had several. And they were people; they here human; they were normal, and they had their differences. And it’s a little hard for me to decide who was right and who was wrong in some of those. And, of course, very, very easy for us to side with Paul because he had this grandeur about him. But I’m not sure Paul would want us to do that. Were he here tonight he’d say, come on, let’s look at Barnabas’ side of this, too, fellows. I think he’d say that to us.

But phase two clearly begins with a special call at the request of the Holy Spirit in which the church sent them out. They go through Seleucia, Paphos, Perga in Pamphylia, Pisidian Antioch and then came that climactic, dramatic moment in 13:46 when Paul, who now has this Christian name clearly identified, during this period in these travels through Turkey. And by the way whenever you think of the travels of Paul remember that the bulk of the travels of Paul were in Turkey with also some travels in Greece. And if you want to reckon it in terms of the modern map its far better off to try and use the old biblical names than trying to find Asia Minor on the map. This is the modern contemporary country of Turkey and, so help me, the roads are the same that they were in Paul’s day. And many of these trails can be walked today and it is possible to find these cities. Most of them still exist. And it is possible to do what Paul did to go either by donkey or horse or, in some cases, walking and get some, as I was suggesting this morning, some of the sense of weariness involved in this particular itinerant ministry. It is possible today.

There is a there is a remarkable book that I read as a young person that kind of turned me on to all this and made one of my life ambitions to somehow get to Turkey, to hike. And it’s called, “In the Steps of St. Paul” or something like that and may be in your library here. But it was written back in the ‘20s by a fellow who had the same ambition to try to walk some of these trails and to get the experience with Paul. And I have had that fulfilled and I thank God for it.

This traumatic moment in verse 46 where Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, “It was necessary that the Word of God should be spoken to you; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.” I wonder seriously if Paul checked that back with his sending church. I absolutely doubt, if there is such a thing as an absolute doubt, that he did. Paul functioned in what I call “field autonomy.” And Paul and Barnabas, on this moment, committed themselves to a change in tactics and procedure, a change in target and apparently didn’t even check it back with the home church.

I suspect there’s something to be said here about the need for leaving reasonable autonomy and reasonable leaving of the Holy Spirit to the missionary on the field. I know of boards and I know of denominations that have asked their missionaries to sign pledges about this or that or the other because the home church got antsy about something, or the home denomination began to hear rumors of something, and I wonder if poor old Paul and Barnabas that day had gotten in the mail—and that one of the blessings they had was that the mail service was poor—had gotten a letter from their home church asking them to sign a pledge that they never witness to Gentiles. What would they have done? Thank God they didn’t get such a letter. Now many of today’s missionaries

get such letters from antsy home churches and it's a dastardly thing; basically unbiblical. The men called out by God and supported, the men and women on the field need to be given reasonable field autonomy. To recognize the leading of God and to even move across such important barriers as this fundamental clash between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile converts whom they didn't really understand and didn't know what to do with.

From there on, their travels went through Iconium and we find that Barnabas is tracked on through Iconium and Lycaonia, Lystra, and Derbe, and Pisidia, and Pamphylia, and Perga, and Attalia, and Antioch. Finally, weary, weary, weary of feet, they return in verses 14:27 and 28, to the church that sent them. When they arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. Here's why I doubt that they ever had permission to do it because when they came back they reported that that's what had happened. They spent a long time with the disciples; a long time with the disciples. Thus, endeth phase two: *a missionary career*.

There begins something else in the life of Barnabas that illustrates something very important about the missionary career and that is that it is not a stable career that occurs in one place at the long end of a pipeline. Very rarely do I run into a missionary who is a "career missionary" at latitude such and such, altitude so and so. As I deal with missionaries, I find people that have been moved about, back and forth to the U.S. and, by the way, one of the funny things within the sub-culture of missionaries is that they always have a tough time trying to explain to folks back home why they're back. Because it's somehow some kind of a black mark that God has pulled them back to stateside. I know some missionary execs, for example, that kind of apologize about not being on the field anymore. Look, these are missionaries who entered phase three: *missionary statesmanship*. And that's exactly what happens when Barnabas comes back. He becomes really a kind of first missionary statesman. Let's read in 15:1-2: "Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, 'Unless you be circumcised, according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with the, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders concerning this issue."

Now, here is the first clear-cut need for missionary statesmanship. An issue has split the church and they are beginning to get an international communication from Jerusalem in Judea clear up into Antioch and Syria that says, hey, you guys, you got to remember that you got to do it this way. And Paul and Barnabas say, Oh, no, no, *no*. And they say, well, that what they say; that's what they tell us down in Jerusalem. And Paul and Barnabas say to the church, send some folks down. And the church says, alright, we'll send you down. You go down there and you carry on some discussion. So they go down, but en route, all the beautiful confidence of Paul and Barnabas—something else. "Being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren." Fantastic. Son of encouragement. Barnabas, son of encouragement. May we all be called Barnabas.

"When they arrive at Jerusalem they were received by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them." And then debate began; and it was quite a debate. But after the debate was over, we find that there was a resolution and the first episode of missionary statesmanship came to a happy conclusion. And the fifteenth chapter of the 22nd verse:

“Then it seemed good to the apostles and elders, with the whole church,” there at Jerusalem, “to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, and they sent this letter by them.” And it’s a beautiful little letter and, if you have a modern translation that uses some contemporary language, it probably also sets that letter in an italics and shows that it is a little letter and it’s a beautiful letter of apology. It’s a letter of apology to a mission church. It’s a letter of apology from the home church in Jerusalem. It’s a letter of apology that says we were wrong. We sent people up to you and they told you some things that we hadn’t really authorized them to say. But it messed you up and we’re sorry. “It seemed good to us,” in verses 25-26, “having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

And this beautiful little letter talks about the issue that arose because, in verse 24, “we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction, have stirred you with their words and unsettled your souls.” So we’re sending along some men from our church to communicate directly an apology and to get a better understanding from you to us and back and forth. And I believe that this is one of the first cases, if not the first case, of what’s commonly called today “travel to the mission field,” possibly by a layman to get a better understanding and to communicate. Never knock it when people from your church who’ve got enough money to do it, decide to take a tour of the mission field and drop in and visit. I think there’s a precedent for it.

Now would that they could go along with letters like this from the church. Would that they could be carriers of real messages, not just tourists. We need, in this modern world, to enrich the flow of communication between churches in various parts of the world; between the body of Christ, in this place and where we are. One of the reasons, I believe, that modern missions have become somewhat anemic in the United States is because we have used a technocratic approach. We’ve de-personalized missions; we’ve made systems; we’ve made structures; we’ve made big complicated mechanisms, and we’ve taken some of the warmth and direct personal involvement out of it. Now thank God many of the mission boards know that you’ve got to keep that personal touch. But the biblical pattern here is for real live people to be shared back and forth, back and forth—both directions. Has your church ever invited a church leader from another nation to come to your church? Has your church ever invited missionaries on the field to bring back with them—provided funds for them to do it—a convert to come back and tell you and encourage your hearts? It’s quite possible. You say, well, the language problems. Look, they had language problems then, that didn’t stop them. You don’t hear the Bible talking about language problems. The only significant language problem ever encountered by the church is the one at Pentecost and the Holy Spirit showed his ability on that day. Don’t be bamboozled by language.