



Thank God for Barnabus by Jeff Fountain

It was one of those moments when a familiar passage of scripture bubbles forth with enough new revelation to inspire a month of meetings.

Around the table sat a mixture of mainstream church representatives and leaders of immigrant churches in Holland. We were gathered to identify our common mission in darkest Europe.

The chairman opened the meeting reading from Acts chapter eleven.

After Stephen's stoning, we read from verse nineteen, the early believers were scattered in all directions, and went preaching the gospel ...to Jews only. Apparently, Jesus' last instructions to the disciples to make disciples from all peoples had not yet been taken seriously, even though a good decade had probably passed between the resurrection and chapter eleven. Earlier in the chapter we meet Peter having to justify his visit with uncircumcised pagans to a critical Jerusalem leadership.

But now, around AD 43, we read of Jewish believers from Cyprus and North Africa preaching to Greeks in Antioch, the third city of the empire after Rome and Alexandria. This was a stupendous new step forward. The very first church was now being planted among ethnic Greek people. We have met Hellenists earlier in Acts, but they were Greek-speaking Jews. Just who these bold innovators were who made this missiological breakthrough into the non-Jewish world, we're simply not told. They remain nameless and faceless.

News of this unorthodox endeavour reached the ears of the leadership back at headquarters in Jerusalem. Could this be really kosher? they wondered. Just who had given these maverick evangelists permission to go beyond the Jewish diaspora?

So they sent Barnabas to check it out. When he arrived, he was thrilled to see for himself clear evidence of the Spirit at work among these uncircumcised Gentiles. He encouraged and exhorted the new believers to remain strong in the faith.

Thank God it was Barnabas who went!



Imagine if one or more of those critical traditionalists had insisted on going. Judging from later hassles Paul had, it's likely these new Greek converts would have been forced into the old, legalistic, Judaistic mould. That would have meant a bunch of ritual observations, not to mention the painful, humiliating operation for the menfolk.

Good old Barnabas, however, could recognise when God was doing something new outside the box. He was a man of faith who had learned to expect the surprises of God. He understood how God often worked from the fringes.

Two chapters earlier, he had taken Saul the convert under his wing, when the rest of the Jerusalem leadership had doubted the sincerity of his conversion. Saul had already spent some three years as a desert recluse before visiting Peter and James in Jerusalem for a mere two weeks (Galatians 1:17-18). His rather cool reception there seemed to have set him on a sidetrack back home to Tarsus, where he sewed tents for a few years.

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Once again, Barnabas came to Saul's rescue. Observing the large numbers being won to the Lord in Antioch, he wondered who could best disciple these young non-Jewish converts. Why, Saul of course! A cosmopolitan Jew, a Roman citizen schooled in Latin and Greek, Saul would understand the culture of these new Antiochian 'Christ-ians', as they were being nick-named. And he was just around the corner from Antioch in Tarsus. And besides, he was going to waste stitching animal hides.



What an amazing gift Barnabas had! Firstly, he thought outside the box. Secondly, he recognised the need for solid teaching and mentoring among the new converts. Thirdly, he also had discerned Saul's potential teaching gift, and matched this undeveloped resource with the emerging need.

Who knows? Had Barnabas not been the one sent from Jerusalem, Saul may have spent the rest of his life in Tarsus making tents. And the first missionary team, Barnabas and Saul, would never have been sent off from Antioch to Cyprus. Barnabas' protégé might never have moved into an apostolic authority, so that from Cyprus onwards we read of 'Paul and his companions' (Acts 13:13). And literally billions of believers through the ages may never have had Paul's letters to read.

Yes, thank God for Barnabas! Son of encouragement indeed!

Our chairman now applied the word to the situation at hand in Holland. Just who had given these African evangelists permission to come and plant churches in Holland? What did they think they were doing coming into territory claimed by established churches already for centuries?

Well, he suggested, we too needed to think outside of the box. We too needed to discern the Spirit of God at work in powerful, new, unorthodox ways. We too needed to rejoice with our immigrant brothers and sisters over their dynamic, growing churches, and encourage their work. We too needed to match resources with emerging needs, in the spirit of Barnabas.

Few realise that some of Europe's largest churches today, from London to Kiev, are African-led; that half the church-goers in London are non-whites; that black churches in Amsterdam, Stockholm, Hanover and many other cities are full of life, faith and evangelistic fervour, in stark contrast to many of our traditional congregations.

Over the past week, this word has continued to come back to me to bring wisdom in several other situations I have encountered in Germany, France, Holland and England. Perhaps it speaks to your situation too. Are we facing any out-of-the-box Antioch situations? Any there any Sauls we could be championing?

Or are we suffering from a cautious, conservative 'Jerusalem' mentality?

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