



# Barnabas: Early Church leader and model of encouragement

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## Abstract

### **Barnabas: Early Church leader and model of encouragement**

*Acts presents Barnabas, an early church leader, as a model of integrity and character. It loads him with accolades. It calls him a good man (Acts 11:24), a prophet and teacher (Acts 13:1), an apostle (Acts 14:14), and one through whom God worked miracles (Acts 15:12). It recounts the times he faced persecution (Acts 13:45; 14:19) and risked his life for the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 15:26). He believed Saul truly had been converted (Acts 9:27) and saw the potential of John Mark (Acts 12:25) and championed them both at different times (Acts 11:25-26; 15:36-41). 1 Corinthians 9:6 affirms his character by noting he worked while serving congregations in order not to burden them. Acts introduces him as Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, and praises his generous spirit (Acts 4:36). Arguably, Acts portrays no one else – except the Lord Jesus – in such glowing terms. The apostles nicknamed him Barnabas, Son of Encouragement, probably because he earned it!*

*Significantly, a passage relating the character attributes and big heartedness of Barnabas note that the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch (Acts 11:19-26). Because of its textual context, it may well be that the character traits of Barnabas defined the early use of the word Christian.*

*Barnabas played a decisive role in the Early Church. Yet over two millennia, he has slipped into unjustified obscurity behind Paul, Peter, John, and James, the brother of Jesus. This article examines selected stories about him that showcase his contributions to the Early Church and establish his significant leadership role.*

## Opsomming

### Barnabas: leier van Vroeë Kerk en rolmodel vir motivering

*Handelinge beskryf Barnabas as 'n kerkleier, 'n mens met 'n sterk karakter en integriteit. Daar word ook na hom verwys as 'n goeie man (Hand. 11:24), 'n profeet en onderwyser (Hand. 13:1), 'n dissipel (Hand. 14:14), en 'n persoon deur wie God wonderwerke kon verrig (Hand. 15:12). Verder word ook verwys na die kere wat hy vervolging in die gesig gestaar (Hand. 13:45; 14:19), en sy lewe in gevaar gestel het ter wille van die Naam van Jesus Christus (Hand. 15:26). Hy het waarlik geglo dat Saulus bekeerd geraak het (Hand. 9:27), en hy het ook die potensiaal in Johannes (Markus) raakgesien (Hand. 12:25), en het hulle albei lof toegesing op verskillende kere (Hand. 11:25-26 en Hand. 15:36-41). 1 Korintiërs 9:6 belig Barnabas se karakter deur aan te toon dat terwyl hy sendingwerk by verskeie kerke verrig het, hy ook gewerk het, sodat hy nie 'n geldelike las op hulle sou plaas nie. Handelinge stel hom voor as Josef, 'n Leviet van Siprus, en erken sy vrygewige karakter (Hand. 4:36). Handelinge verwys slegs na een ander persoon met soveel lof – Jesus Christus. Die apostels het hom die bynaam, Barnabas, Seun van vertroosting gegee. Hy het hierdie naam heel waarskynlik verdien!*

*Handelinge verwys ook na Barnabas se karaktereienskappe en groothartigheid en noem dat die apostels die eerste keer in Antiochië Christene genoem is (Hand. 11:19-26). As gevolg van die tekstuele konteks van die Skrif, was dit heel waarskynlik dat Barnabas se karaktereienskappe die betekenis van die woord Christen geïnspireer het.*

*Barnabas het 'n belangrike rol gespeel in die ontwikkeling van die Vroeë Kerk. Hy is egter deur die eeue heen oorskadu in belangrikheid deur Paulus, Petrus, Johannes en Jakobus, die broer van Jesus. Hierdie artikel belig opnuut sy merkwaardige karaktereienskappe en sy belangrike bydra tot die Vroeë Kerk.*

## 1. Introduction

This article looks at the life of Barnabas as portrayed in Acts in terms of the leadership his life exhibited in the Early Church. This article employs a literary approach (Hill & Walton, 2000:575). Character development, setting, and conflict are among the literary and structural elements considered.<sup>1</sup> Interpretation of the texts

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1 The elements of a short story include the central idea, character, conflict, point of view, setting, language, and tone (see Lostracco & Wilkerson, 1998). Literary

about Barnabas from Acts comes from seeing the stories both contextually and as part of the whole canon. This article also employs a canonical approach because I favour allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture.<sup>2</sup> The Biblical text portrays character in terms of actions and words. This article includes a brief survey of extra-canonical literature about Barnabas. Stories about him in Acts present workable models on how to use money, deal with the radical and amazing inclusion of new converts, and pastor a large and growing church. One story shows him and his fellow apostle Paul in a less-than-favorable light as leaders who strongly disagree with each other.

Acts presents Barnabas and Peter, John, Paul and James, the brother of Jesus, as the primary Early Church leaders. Yet during the passing of two millennia, Barnabas and James have received less scholarly attention than have Peter, John, and especially Paul. Kollmann (2004:vii) notes that Barnabas unfortunately now resides in “undeserved obscurity” despite the fact that he “played a substantial role in every stage of early Christianity and had a decisive influence on the fate of the church in the first century”. Regarding James, Witherington (Shanks & Witherington, 2003:111) acknowledges that “there has been so much neglect of a figure like James, the brother of Jesus” and believes it is because Petrine Christianity (derived from Peter) became dominant in the West. This article seeks to retrieve Barnabas from “undeserved obscurity” and take a fresh look at his contributions.

## 2. Barnabas, Son of Encouragement in Acts

Presented as a “lovable character” (Winn, 1960:51), Barnabas is mentioned 24 times in Acts, in chapters 4, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15. Paul’s epistles mention him five times (1 Cor. 9:6; Gal. 2:1, 9, 13; Col. 4:10). Barnabas is introduced as Joseph Barnabas, a Levite and native of Cyprus; he sells a field and gives its proceeds to the apostles (Acts 4:36-37). These details, though meagre, help define him.

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elements also include the plot and structure of various stories, dramatic tension, impact on the reader, and the ordering of events (Elwell & Yarbrough, 2005:174).

2 See the Westminster Confession of Faith, 1:6: “The whole counsel of God ... is either expressly set down in Scripture or by good and necessary consequence *may be deduced from Scripture*” (italics added).

Acts speaks very favourably of Barnabas. Significantly, Acts never presents the older Barnabas as Saul/Paul's subordinate or junior partner, although as their working relationship develops, Paul becomes the more talkative of the two (Acts 14:12). Barnabas is called a prophet and teacher (Acts 13:1), an apostle (Acts 14:14) and one through whom God worked miraculous signs and wonders (Acts 15:12). Barnabas faced persecution (Acts 13:45; 14:19), and risked his life for the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 15:26).

Physical description and behavioral characteristics form part of characterisation (Lostracco & Wilkerson, 1998:12). Acts 14 provides clues to both for Barnabas. On a missionary journey with Paul to Lystra, a miracle takes place – a lame man walks! – and the astonished people call Barnabas Zeus and Paul Hermes, because Paul was the chief speaker (Acts 14:11-13). Something about Barnabas impressed the people to call him Zeus. Perhaps he was a very handsome man – or at least a big man with an impressive appearance. Typically, Zeus statues portray a man broad-chested and fiercely bearded (Wangerin, 2000:796). Busts of Zeus, the supreme ruler of Mount Olympus, depict a middle-aged but physically powerful and muscular man who is both regal and commanding. Perhaps because Barnabas is dubbed Zeus, he is the more imposing figure of the two (Gardner, 1995:76).

Tribal affiliation also defines Joseph Barnabas. Acts introduces him as a Levite. As such, Barnabas performed routine tasks in the temple; he was not of Aaronic or Zadokite lineage, evidently, and therefore probably only served in a supportive role of slaughtering sacrificial animals or guarding the Temple forecourt and singing in the temple (Kollmann, 2004:7). Nevertheless, this lineage detail shows Barnabas held a certain status in the Jewish communities of the first century.

Would Barnabas define himself as a Hebrew or a Hellenist? While his thought patterns are impossible to ascertain, it seems he was a man who, according to Acts, straddled both worlds. When introduced in Acts he probably would call himself a Hebrew. A Hebrew was a Diaspora Jew with strong ties to the motherland. Through Mary, his sister or close relative, he had ties with Jerusalem. Both were wealthy.<sup>3</sup> John Mark was her son and Barnabas' nephew (Acts

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3 Mary, a home-owner, opened her house to believers for prayer despite the possibility of persecution by authorities (Acts 12:12-13). She is among wealthy and leading women mentioned by Luke (Joanna and Susanna: Luke 8:1-3;

12:12; Col. 4:10). Probably over the years as Barnabas saw his ministry developing more internationally with the Greek-speaking Roman world, he arguably came to see himself as a Hellenist. A working definition of Hellenists is that they were Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1; 9:29).<sup>4</sup> As a Hellenist, he likely adopted a broader, more liberal attitude toward the law (Paget, 1994:4).

Location also plays a part in characterisation. Barnabas hailed from Cyprus, the third largest island in the Mediterranean. It had been ruled by Cleopatra. Following the deaths of Anthony and Cleopatra after the Battle of Actium, Octavian placed Cyprus under his direct control in 30 BC and made the island in 22 BC a senatorial province governed by a proconsul who was chosen annually (Kollmann, 2004:4). Cypriots worshipped Aphrodite, Zeus, Isis, and Apollo. In addition to profitable agricultural lands, Cyprus had forestry and copper and silver mining; many Roman ships were built from Cyprus lumber (Kollmann, 2004:5).

Dates and settings likewise contribute to character development for they enhance the narrative's meaning (Lostracco & Wilkerson, 1998:31). For example, c. AD 48 Barnabas, his cousin John Mark, and Saul embark on an evangelisation tour of Asia Minor cities. Acts (following Biblical narrative tradition) designates Barnabas as the initial leader of what has come to be known as Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3; Daniels, 1992:1:610). A third of the way through the chapter, Saul/Paul becomes the more prominent one.<sup>5</sup> Significantly in terms of the later working relationship between the two strong leaders Barnabas and Paul, John Mark leaves them in Pamphylia and returns to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13).

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Mary: Acts 12:12-17; prominent women in Thessalonica and Berea: Acts 17:4, 12; Arlandson, 2004:155).

- 4 Hellenists may have interpreted the Torah less rigidly than did Aramaic-speaking Jewish believers in Jerusalem (Achteimeier, 1985:382). Hellenisation shaped the social consciousness of the day throughout the Mediterranean world. It fostered the spread of the Greek language, commerce, and the founding of cities. Military expansion, slavery, taxation, and ghettos within the cities were part of Hellenisation (see Elwell & Yarbrough, 2005:197-198.)
- 5 Prominence shifts back and forth, however, from here on in Acts. The order, Paul and Barnabas, appears three times in Acts 13 (v. 42, 46, 50), and the order, Barnabas and Paul, appears twice in Acts 15 (v. 12, 25). The tradition in Biblical narrative is that the most important figure is named first.

In c. AD 52, Paul asks Barnabas to accompany him on a visit to the churches they had established during their earlier missionary journey. Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them. Paul and Barnabas quarrel strongly over John Mark and separate; Barnabas and John Mark sail for Cyprus and Paul and Silas go overland to Derbe on what became known as Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 15:39-40). From Acts 16 on, the text focuses on Paul, and Barnabas drops out of Biblical record in Acts.

In the Biblical text, names likewise play an important role in defining character. Barnabas' Biblical name is Joseph. He is a Levite, a member of the priestly class, from Cyprus. Acts (4:36-37) introduces him in the context of giving and sharing, and indeed that was his life. The multiple entries in Acts show his generosity and unselfishness. He was a "people person," a natural minister and effective leader.

His nickname, *Barnabas Son of Encouragement* (Acts 4:36), presents scholars with interesting possibilities. The *bar* could come from the Aramaic for *son*; the name could really mean son of prophecy (*bar nebuah*) or could refer to a heathen deity, Nabu. Scholars agree that *Son of Encouragement* is an inaccurate etymology of Barnabas and should be seen rather as an endearment speaking of his character (Kollmann, 2004:13; Barnabas, 1995:75). Although no explanation accompanies his nickname, the apostles probably gave it to him because he earned it!<sup>6</sup> Barnabas' name also encompasses the ideas of refreshment and prophecy, exhortation and consolation (Bruce, 1954:109).

## 2.1 A canonical definition of encouragement

What is a canonical definition of encouragement? Proverbs offers two verbal insights: "An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up" (Prov. 12:25); and, "A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver" (Prov. 25:11). The New Testament broadens the definition by linking encouragement to a trait and gift of the Holy Spirit. The word "encouragement" (*paraklesis*) occurs 29 times in the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> It means "one

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6 That the apostles changed Joseph's name to Barnabas shows their authority as well as the social conventions of the day in the church (Wall, 2002:97).

7 The word describing Barnabas is kin to *paraclete*, a word describing the Holy Spirit. It means "called to the side of" and carries the implication of one who is called alongside to help in various ways including being a legal assistant or advocate (Morris, 1986:263).

who comes alongside,” and carries the connotations of comforter and consoler. Acts 9:31 speaks of “the comfort of the Holy Spirit” and Romans 12:8 lists it as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Barnabas’ words, actions, and life combined human kindness and God’s blessings; quite likely, his nickname reflected what God was doing in him and through him. Since it was *given* to him by the apostles, it shows how he consistently related to others.

### 3. Extra-canonical traditions about Barnabas’ life

Stories not included in the canon surround the lives of Barnabas and other Biblical characters. One legend says Barnabas studied with Gamaliel in Jerusalem and knew a younger student, Saul (Kollmann, 2004:6; Van Deun, 1993:188). According to early Christian tradition recorded by Clement of Alexandria, Barnabas knew Jesus. He became a follower of Jesus because he witnessed the healing of the lame man (John 5:2-9) and other miracles. Barnabas was one of the 70 sent out by Jesus to evangelise (Luke 10:1-24; Jeffreys, 1995:26-28; Eusebius, 1986:98). This probably means he was about the same age as Jesus.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps he numbered among the internationals who experienced Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11). Although Tertullian names Barnabas as the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews (Richardson, 2000:151), the argument is not strong (Long, 1997:1).<sup>9</sup> According to Christian tradition, Barnabas was the first bishop of Milan (Eusebius, 1986:98). His death, however, is shrouded in mystery. One tradition maintains he was martyred in Salamis in AD 55 and that John Mark brought news of his death to Paul in Ephesus (Van Deun, 1993:533-55). Another tradition says he was martyred in AD 61 in Syria; he was stoned to death and burned (Jeffreys, 1995:26-28). His feast day is June 11. This extra-canonical information helps to develop a portrait of Barnabas; it

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8 Based on the Codex Bezae, there is some discussion that Barnabas may have been the Joseph who was proposed, along with Matthias, to replace Judas as an apostle (Acts 1:23-26); perhaps the nominee’s name was really Joseph Barnabas rather than Joseph Barsabbas (Read-Heimerdinger, 1998:41). Yet the consensus of scholarly debate refutes this, primarily because Joseph Barnabas was a Levite whose nickname was Son of Encouragement and Joseph Barsabbas, while not distinguished by tribe is distinguished by his nickname, Justus (Acts 1:23; Kollmann, 2004:13).

9 On the whole, scholars support the old view of Origen about Hebrews. Origen reportedly said that “who wrote the epistle is known to God alone” (Kollmann, 2004:53-4).

complements the insights in the Biblical text that portray Barnabas as a fine man and significant leader of the Early Church.

#### **4. Barnabas in extra-canonical literature**

Five books bearing his name or about him confirm the significance of Barnabas in Early Church tradition. The five are the *Acts of Barnabas* by John Mark, the *Acta Bartholomaei et Barnabae*, the *Laudatio Barnabae* by Alexander Monachus, the *Gospel of Barnabas*, and the *Epistle of Barnabas*. The *Acts of Barnabas* were composed under the fake authorship of John Mark probably toward the end of the 5th century; this volume ends with Barnabas' death via martyrdom in Salamis; his ashes were buried with a copy of the Gospel of Matthew (Schneemelcher, 1989:465). The *Acta Bartholomaei et Barnabae* are not apostolic works but instead are combined traditions about Bartholomew and Barnabas (Schneemelcher, 1989:466-7).

In the *Laudatio Barnabae* of Alexander Monachus, a sixth century monk, details of Barnabas' early life emerge. Taught by Gamaliel, he became a follower of Jesus. Among his first converts is Mary, his kinswoman and John Mark's mother. Barnabas accompanies Jesus during his travels in Galilee and Jesus chooses him as one of the Seventy. Barnabas attempts to convert Saul, whom he knew because of their association under Gamaliel, but these attempts fail, and Saul continues persecuting the church (Kollmann, 2004:58; Van Deun, 1983:83-122).

The *Gospel of Barnabas* may well become a very important document in this century because of its Muslim influence and implications. It attacks and denies Jesus' death and resurrection, ending with the view that Judas Iscariot was Jesus' substitute on the cross and that Paul was deceived when he preached that Jesus was the Son of God (Sox, 1994:2, 20-21).<sup>10</sup>

The *Epistle of Barnabas* cannot be taken as written by Barnabas; it stands alone in Early Church literature because of its "uncompromising antagonism of Judaism" and because its writer is unconnected with the apostles (Lightfoot, 1981:503-504). The writer of the *Epistle of Barnabas* takes passages from Daniel and ties them

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10 Significantly, the *Gospel of Barnabas* is well known among Muslim polemicists in Pakistan, India, Indonesia, and Egypt (Sox, 1994:1-2).



to the Roman emperors of his day but stops short of suggesting an overthrow of the government.

Two other books also mention this leading apostle, Barnabas. The *Acts of Peter*, a non-canonical book dated to c. AD 260 also gives credence to Barnabas' status. For example, the sorcerer Simon came to Rome and caused confusion among the brethren because of the absence of the church leaders: "Paul was not at Rome, nor were Timothy and Barnabas, since they had been sent by Paul to Macedonia" (Schneemelcher, 1989:290).

The *Clement Romance*, one of the Pseudo Clementine documents, presents evidence that Barnabas preached to a multitude in Rome about the Son of God who had appeared in the land of Judaea and "promises eternal life to everyone who will hear, provided that he fashions his doings according to the will of God the Father, by whom he has been sent" (Schneemelcher, 1989:505). Barnabas, a Hebrew, was part of the circle of disciples of this Son of God, according to the *Clement Romance*, and Barnabas spoke "without circumlocution what he had heard from the Son of God or had seen of him" (Schneemelcher, 1989:506). According to the story, when Barnabas faced an angry mob, Clement defended him because he sensed he was a sincere messenger of God. He and Barnabas became friends almost immediately because they were men of like character. Clement eventually sailed to Caesarea Stratonis, the largest city in Palestine, and met Peter and Barnabas there (Schneemelcher, 1989:506-8). Clement attested to the significance Barnabas' words had on his conversion.

## 5. Barnabas and money (Acts 4:37)

Acts provides more authoritative, consistent, and credible information about Barnabas than do extra-canonical literature. Luke, the writer of Acts,<sup>11</sup> introduces Barnabas during a time of economic stress and church growth. There were 3 000 new converts at Pentecost (Acts 2:41) and more later. If these 3 000-plus represent only men, then quite possibly the Early Church faced the wonderful problem of what to do with perhaps 14 000 new believers. Arguably, Barnabas saw the church at its best – a whole body of believers united in heart and soul (Packer, 1966:43). The text records no

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11 By general agreement throughout the centuries, Luke is considered the writer of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles (Matthews, 2000:15). This article does not tackle questions of authorship and treats Luke as the author.

selfishness, no want, no division. This church expected the Holy Spirit to work in power within the community (Acts 3:1-10).

The Early Church at this time lacked a formal, rigid ecclesiastical structure. Acts says the apostles continued preaching with great power; and outsiders looked on the new community with favor (Acts 2:40, 47). Significantly, this church had no needy persons (Acts 2:44; 4:34), for from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them and brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet (Acts 4:32-34). In this orderly, idyllic setting, Luke signals out one man who shares with abandonment and abundance, and yet with an attitude of humility: "Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement) sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet" (Acts 4:37). Calvin (1965:130) believes Barnabas may have sold the only piece of land which he possessed, and is therefore signaled out by Luke as surpassing all the others in the Early Church for generosity.<sup>12</sup> First impressions set the tone in a reader's mind.

Luke introduces this future church expositor as one whose humbleness and generosity stand in sharp contrast to a subsequent example: the conniving attitude of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11; Blaiklock, 1961:68). The story's dramatic tension highlights their lie. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was not in holding back part of the money but in pretending they had handed over the whole amount (Packer, 1966:43). In contrast, Barnabas' gesture of planned giving indicates not only his ethics regarding finances but also the genuineness of his faith and character (Maclaren, 1944:175).

Evidently the sale of the field and the donation of its proceeds put Joseph Barnabas in an immediate leadership position, even though he is not part of the original Twelve disciples nor a member of the Seven Greek-speaking servants of the widows who dealt with the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1-2, 5). The Seven all bear Greek names and Nicolas from Antioch was a convert to Judaism (Acts 6:5b). Quite likely cosmopolitan Barnabas, because of his big-

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12 However, there is no way of knowing if this was his only field or if he had others. It is not a renunciation of wealth for a lifetime. Indeed, other indications throughout the epistles point to the fact that Barnabas enjoyed financial independence. Luke emphasises instead the qualities of openness and humility that accompany the gift.

hearted temperament, felt camaraderie with these men who were full of the spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3).

The text gives no indication that Barnabas' gift was a response to a call from church leadership for money. Unlike other New Testament situations (1 Cor. 16:1, 3), there seems to have been no pressing need for a financial contribution. Instead, Barnabas' gesture sparkles with spontaneity and joy. In a public presentation, Barnabas gives the gift for the use of the community. Perhaps the gift represented a conviction of sin, for Pentateuchal regulations prohibited the Levites from holding property (Bruce, 1954:109). The Levites were to be dedicated to the land and Israel's well being rather than to stewardship or cultivation of the land (Deut. 12:12; Josh. 14:3-4; Wall, 2002:97). Additionally, the fact that Barnabas is a Levite indicates how the new faith is creeping into the very heart of the old system (Maclaren, 1944:175). Dramatic tension increases.

It is possible that Barnabas' gift represented a considerable amount. Perhaps his field came from the rich fruit-growing lands of Cyprus (Neil, 1973:94); if so, his land probably was worth more than a stony field in Palestine. Along with Mary (the mother of John Mark), Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus (John 12:1-5; 19:39-41), Barnabas is quite possibly the first giver of financial standing in the new church. Unlike Ananias and Sapphira, he gives without a backward glance; he leaves himself no options. Although probably a person of more financial standing than were the apostles, he puts his money at their feet – a gesture showing he sees rank in the kingdom as different from status in society. Arguably, he considered the gift of the proceeds of the sale as a way to serve God in a monetary fashion; his action of giving, as do other episodes about him recorded in Acts, show his total commitment to Jesus Christ; his action, here and elsewhere, is both positive and generous – and marks him as a leader (Willimon, 1988:53).

This single act of abandoned generosity unquestionably earned him lifelong favor and standing in the community. It probably led to his easy acceptance shortly thereafter (Acts 9:27) as a mediator between Saul and the apostles of the Jerusalem church (Wall, 2002:97). Significantly by his action, he acknowledges the authority of the apostles and submits to it.

Barnabas leads by example. His action shows a disciple of Jesus at his best (Packer, 1966:43). Barnabas' generosity shows he believes in the work of the kingdom. The setting is one in which believers shared a keen sense of responsibility for the welfare of each other –

even to the point of giving all they had (Barclay, 1976a:43). It also shows a trust in God that Ananias and Sapphira lacked. Unexpectedly because of his action and Luke's treatment of it, Barnabas becomes a Biblical model of good stewardship (see Rodin, 2000:14). His decision to give obviously was influenced by his relationship with God (see Hoge, 1994:205). Significantly, Barnabas' action did not represent looking for praise, yet Luke ends up writing in such a way that he is praised. Evidently that's what happens to encouragers: they receive unexpected praise and walk into positions of leadership.

## **6. Barnabas seeks out others**

One of the hallmarks of Barnabas, the Early Church leader and constant encourager, is that he repeatedly seeks out and champions others; often these others are believers in Jesus (both individuals and groups) who for whatever reason are running a bit against the current of mainstream thought and action. Instead of ostracising individuals and groups, Barnabas not only seeks them out but also listens to them and welcomes them warmly. He champions them when others exclude them. Barnabas adds openness to his earlier attribute of financial generosity by introducing the very suspect Saul to the apostles, and presenting Saul as one with the credential of boldness (Crowe, 1979:68). Barnabas believes in family loyalty, for he seeks out John Mark and puts his professional reputation on line by defending his ward against Paul's strong denunciations.

The references in Acts show Barnabas, a "people person," believed in people. He believed the Lord could work with very unlikely candidates like a blood-thirsty persecutor and even with the uncircumcised gentiles. Barnabas changes the course of history because he befriends Saul. Twice he seeks out Saul. Another time he journeys to Antioch in Syria to see what's happening in a gentile/Jewish congregation of believers. Each time Barnabas does these things his actions serve as a model of leadership, personal courage, and sound theology. Although a significant church leader, he ends up seeming to take a lesser position of vocal importance – and not seeming to mind it at all.<sup>13</sup> Even in taking a second seat (perhaps especially so), his sterling character shows.

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13 The Biblical text frequently presents others who introduce those who subsequently take a more prominent position in the Biblical text, at least in terms of space. For example, the baby Moses was surrounded by three deliverers: his sister, his mother, and a princess of Egypt (Exod. 2:1-0; Branch, 2006:258).

## 6.1 Barnabas seeks out Saul – the first time (Acts 9:27)

An established leader spots those with leadership abilities coming up in the ranks.<sup>14</sup> Barnabas does this. He befriends Saul. Acts (7:58; 8:1-3) introduces Saul as one who hates the church and persecutes the new believers. He obtains letters from the high priest in Jerusalem to officials of Damascus synagogues authorising him to bind new believers and bring them to Jerusalem. On the way to Damascus, he has a “blinding” experience with the risen Lord Jesus, becomes a believer himself, and starts preaching that Jesus is the Son of God in the Damascus synagogues (Acts 9:1-20)! Saul preaches so boldly that the Jews in Damascus want to kill him, so he leaves Damascus and comes to Jerusalem (Acts 9:21-26). The disciples in Jerusalem face him fearfully, not believing he really is a disciple (Acts 9:26). Luke writes: “But Barnabas took Saul and brought him to the apostles. Barnabas told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus” (Acts 9:27).<sup>15</sup>

This significant verse merits scrutiny. Barnabas goes to Saul; he seeks him out. By this action, Barnabas puts himself and his reputation among the believing community on the line. More than that, Barnabas exhibits personal courage: he risks his life. Barnabas listens to Saul. Barnabas believes Saul. Barnabas, here an encourager with a keen sense of ethics, backs up his encouragement with action. Barnabas’ ethical attitude of listening, believing, testing what he heard Saul say and then acting with words and deeds is consistent in the texts about him. Barnabas gives Saul a favorable introduction to the apostles (Daniels, 1992:1:610). Barnabas’ gesture expresses leadership in action.

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Moses grew to become known as the great lawgiver and Israel’s greatest prophet. Similarly, Andrew brought his brother Peter to Jesus (John 1:40-42), and Peter ended up being the more prominent of the two.

14 Canonical examples include Solomon and Jeroboam (1 Kings 11:26-40); Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 19:16; 2 Kings 2:1-18); and Jesus’ calling his disciples (John 1:35-50).

15 Barnabas believed that Saul, the former hot-headed persecutor of the church, had suddenly, amazingly, become its most eloquent advocate. Saul at this time in his life could well be called a loose canon and a lone ranger. He certainly acted independently. Later he kept a theological independence and even a physical distance from the Jerusalem church (Gal. 1:1-18).

Barnabas' action is magnanimous (Longenecker, 1981:378). It changed the course of history, too. Saul became a mighty apostle, the one who fashioned the church as we know it for the last 2 000 years. The New Testament credits thirteen books to him. By going to Saul, Barnabas acts like a modern-day coach who assists people to get from where they are after conversion to a new phase of their life *in Christ*, as Paul would come to say (Col. 1:14, 17, 19). Barnabas' action shows he views the Holy Spirit's work as big, creative, and open to new ways of doing things in the world. For example, Isaiah 43:19 ("See, I am doing a new thing!") clearly holds true in terms of the life of Jesus, the work of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), and the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Saul the persecutor (Acts 9) and in the lives of those born outside the covenant, the gentiles (Acts 10). Leaders like Barnabas share a big vision about God's big plans for the gospel and God's big plans for individual lives.

## **7. How to deal with new converts (Acts 11:22-23)**

Throughout the Biblical text, God's choice of a leader is backed up by recognition by people.<sup>16</sup> The next story in Acts about Barnabas, his being sent by the Jerusalem Council to Antioch, re-affirms this Biblical principle. In this story, Acts shows that cosmopolitan Barnabas' open attitude and encouragement extend to all who are new creatures in Christ Jesus, be they Jews or gentiles.

In the first chapters of Acts, the church is confined to the Jews. Then Philip the evangelist goes to Samaria and shares the messianic news and meets an Ethiopian eunuch who requests water baptism (Acts 8). Then the apostle Peter, who is in Joppa, receives a revelation in a vision that the gentiles also can be cleansed (Acts 10:1-16). The Holy Spirit then falls on those gentiles listening to Peter in the house of a Roman, Cornelius (Acts 10:17-47). Simultaneously, the Holy Spirit is working in Antioch, a city on the Orontes

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16 Canonical examples abound. God sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to lead his people out of Egypt (Mic. 6:4). God promised Joshua that he would be with him as he was with Moses (Josh. 1:5). In the time of the Judges, God sent deliverers like Ehud and Gideon (Judg. 3:15; 6:14). Deborah, a prophetess who clearly has the backing of the tribes, serves as a leader in Israel (Judg. 4-5). Matthew presents Jesus as God's choice of King of Israel (Branch, 2004:385-388). Paul lists himself and Barnabas as leaders within the context of discussions with the acknowledged leaders of the Jerusalem Council, James, Peter, and John (Gal. 2:9). Paul states so beautifully a truth about Jesus: "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal. 4:4-5).

River in Cappadocia, a city known as luxurious and corrupt (Acts 10:19-21; Maclaren, 1944:324). The text says a great number of Jews and Greeks believed and turned to the Lord (Acts 10:21).

The Jerusalem Council sends Barnabas to Antioch to see what is happening. The Council's intent probably is not hostile; it is more likely one of inquiry (Maclaren, 1944:324). Barnabas with this assignment (possibly given because he is already an international person and can fund his own trip) begins his career as a missionary (Wagner, 2000:252).

When Barnabas arrives in Antioch, he displays the same characteristics he had exhibited in the money incident. He acts openly. He listens to people. He makes ethical decisions. The text says he "saw the evidence and grace of God and was glad" (Acts 10:23). Calvin (1965:330) thinks Barnabas' joy undisputedly shows his sincere godliness. Typical of a man of honorable character, Barnabas' mind looks at the facts: these people – uncircumcised gentiles! – really are new converts! Barnabas sees that they were in possession, like himself and other Jewish converts to this radical new faith, of the visible and audible effects of the Holy Spirit's gifts (Maclaren, 1944:325).

The text indicates he carried no pre-conceived agenda. Evidently he widened his own theories about God's actions to suit the new facts and circumstances (Maclaren, 1944:324). Bruce (1954:240) puts it this way: Barnabas' "generous spirit was filled with joy at what he found" in Antioch. Then, true to character, he responds ethically and broadly and "encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts" (Acts 10:23). Barnabas leads the Antioch disciples in being steadfast in heart to the Lord.

The text indicates Barnabas encourages the gentile believers in Antioch in three ways. First, he recognises God's grace in others' lives. Barnabas, instead of criticising a new work, has the maturity and discernment to recognise God's good work and to encourage that work instead of putting a damper on it by judging it. Second, because Barnabas is focused, he helps others be focused. His focus, as he tells the Antioch believers, is "to remain true to the Lord" (Acts 11:23). Barnabas has a purpose of heart; in other words, he knows God has sent him to Antioch. He helps them have "purpose of heart," too, and to focus on God's will, God's kingdom, and God's purposes for this congregation in Antioch. Third, Barnabas is useable because he is available to God. Luke (11:24) calls him a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith. Throughout

Acts, God empowers people beyond their natural abilities. This happens with Barnabas. The result of God's empowerment is blessing and increase. The text says, "And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord" (Acts 11:24). Significantly, the name *Joseph* carries with it the ideas of God's increase.

Then Luke gives a surprising editorial comment about this man we can assume was his friend and brother in the Lord. Luke (Acts 11:24) writes that Barnabas "was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith". This is a significant statement. The only other time Luke uses "good" about a person other than Jesus is in connection with Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:50; Barrett, 1994:553). "Full of the Holy Spirit" can mean that the Lord worked miracles through Barnabas; a later text bears this out (Acts 15:12). Barnabas quite likely had what is called the gift of faith.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the character of Barnabas as the leader of the church overflowed to the believers in Antioch. Perhaps this spurred the Antioch community to nickname their neighbors *Christians*. Luke (Acts 11:26b) says, "The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch". However, given the context, it could very well be that the name (or nickname) *Christian* came into being because of Barnabas, this Christ-like man.<sup>18</sup> Certainly it was his broad-mindedness and generous nature that led to the strengthening of the believers and a great extension of the work of the Holy Spirit (Erdman, 1929:94).

## **8. Barnabas seeks out Saul – the second time (Acts 11:25-26)**

The Antioch church expands. The work is more than one leader, Barnabas, can do. Barnabas seeks Saul yet a second time. Barnabas leaves Antioch, goes to Tarsus, and brings back Saul

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17 Paul writes that faith is one of the manifestations of the Spirit given to a person for the common good; other manifestations are the message of wisdom, the message of knowledge, and the gifts of healing, miraculous power, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in different kinds of tongues, and interpretation of tongues (1 Cor. 12:7-10).

18 However, scholars speculate the new name also could be a derision, an insulting nickname and designation (Longenecker, 1981:402). A canonical precedent for a possible insulting appositive as an alien is "Ruth the Moabitess" (Ruth 1:22; 2:6, 21; 4:5; Roop, 2002:39-40, 48, 270-271). "Troubler of Israel" is an appositive Ahab and Elijah exchange (1 Kings 18:17-18).



(Acts 11:25-26). Barnabas' action shows his humility and discernment. The text indicates Barnabas' overriding concerns were the needs of the people and the success of the gospel. Yet he must have realised that Saul's skill in debate and his incredible mind might overshadow his own qualities. However, the possibility of sinking into second place didn't seem to matter to Barnabas (Erdman, 1929:95).

Barnabas offers the younger man a job: co-pastoring the dynamic Antioch disciples. Saul accepts. The young church is growing – and grows even more under their joint leadership. Barnabas and Saul met with the church for a year and taught great numbers (Acts 11:26). It must have been a glorious and fruitful time for both congregation and teachers. Quite likely, this time shaped much of Saul/Paul's theology, especially that in 1 Thessalonians (Kollmann, 2004:50-1).<sup>19</sup>

Barnabas' action of seeking Saul and bringing him to Antioch probably ties in with the Biblical concept of forgiveness. The church in Antioch sprang up because the Jews were scattered (Acts 11:19). Who scattered them? The Biblical text points to Saul. The Biblical text says he tried to destroy the young church and dragged off men and women and put them in prison (Acts 7:54-8:3). Chrysostom (1989:129) describes Saul as "terrible" when he is first presented in Acts.

Within Acts' context, it is possible that those who fled Saul's onslaught in Jerusalem settled far north in Antioch and discussed their new faith with their new neighbors. Perhaps Saul instigated the confiscation of the properties of these early, spontaneous evangelists; perhaps he ordered the deaths of some believers. Saul, when he scattered the church, abused others; he admits this and calls himself a violent man (1 Tim. 1:13).<sup>20</sup>

In seeking Saul, Barnabas leads the Antioch disciples in new ways. He realises several things and was putting into practice Jesus'

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19 It is thought that 1 Thessalonians may well be Paul's first letter (especially if a later date for Galatians is allowed) (Arnold, 2002:405, 265).

20 An abuser is one who invades, trespasses, and violates the freedom and healthy boundaries of another (Wuellner, 2001:64). A root of violence is jealousy (Ochs, 2004:6).

teaching on forgiveness (Luke 11:4).<sup>21</sup> First, Saul needed to ask forgiveness and share his conversion experience; second, the new believers needed to practice forgiveness by forgiving their former oppressor.

It would seem the Antioch believers also made a choice to forgive (Wuellner, 2001:63). Forgiveness can be an ethical adventure. It is also enlightened self-interest, because forgiveness frees the one wronged from the tyranny of being tied by unforgiveness to the guilty party. The believers in Antioch must forgive Saul for the destruction he caused in their lives years before. Evidently the adventure of forgiveness for Saul and the Antioch disciples was successful, for the text indicates growth and harmony prevailed (Acts 11:26). Furthermore, the text indicates a Christ-like spirit likewise dominated, because the disciples of Jesus were first called Christians in Antioch. Barnabas clearly gave both Saul and the new Antioch converts room to grow. He gave them the freedom of second chances. Leading in a big-hearted way, Barnabas consistently encouraged others to remain true to the Lord with all their heart; one way to do this was by forgiving mistakes.

## **9. How to pastor a large and growing church (Acts 11:25-30)**

Acts 11:25-30 offers a number of insights on leading a large, diverse, and growing church. First, get another pastor. Barnabas brought in a capable reinforcement, Saul. Together they organised a heavy routine of teaching the faith. Together they got those new converts rooted and grounded in sound doctrine. Together they and the congregation welcomed, encouraged, and taught new members.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the new church of gentiles and Jews grew.<sup>23</sup> Barnabas and Saul welcomed visiting prophets. Barnabas and Saul believed and acted quickly upon the prophetic word Agabus delivered. They decided to help their fellow believers in Jerusalem

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21 The essence of forgiveness is knowing you are forgiven yourself (Jeffress, 2003:7-9).

22 Church growth is defined as a conscious effort to increase membership (Lim, 2004:125). It is hoped that people, once they are in church, will take advantage of programs for their spiritual growth.

23 Studies indicate church growth seems to be the result of concentrated effort and planning and takes place in an optimistic climate. Internal spiritual growth of the members shows itself in external numerical growth (Cummings, 1983:323).

with a monetary gift to prepare for the upcoming famine. The Antioch disciples immediately sent their gift to the elders in Jerusalem by dispatching Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:30).

From the Acts sketch, Barnabas and Saul had what modern missiologists call an educational model of a church (Hill, 2001:31).<sup>24</sup> An educational model emphasises teaching. Barnabas and Saul gave teaching on what it meant to be a disciple in the Roman world, and what it meant to function as an individual in a church. Barnabas and Saul taught the heritage of the new faith from existing Scriptures.<sup>25</sup>

Barnabas and Saul as co-leaders pastored a large and growing church by adapting to meet the local cultural needs (Nyberg, 1999:24); this congregation mixed Jewish and gentile converts. The cosmopolitan Antioch congregation contained those of Cypriot and Libyan background (Walls, 2004:4). They began talking about Jesus in a new way – with little stress on the term *Messiah*. Jesus was presented as Lord, *Kyrios*, in a way more Hellenistic than Jewish (Walls, 2004:4). Ignatius (1989:63) sees this dynamic church as a fulfillment of Isaiah 62:2 and 12, namely that this combination of people is both righteous and holy.

The text indicates Antioch was a lively, growing, excited church whose members constantly sought each other out and wanted to learn more. They talked about the Christ so much so that they were named Christians in Antioch for the first time (Acts 11:26). The text indicates that Barnabas and Saul taught the people in a way that expected them to become leaders and to carry on the fellowship if the lead pastors left.

## **10. The first missionary journey, the Council in Jerusalem (Acts 13-15:35)**

When the Antioch church is in prayer and fasting, the Holy Spirit tells the church to “set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2). This becomes what scholars term Paul’s first missionary journey; Paul’s name is changed from Saul midway through the journey’s account on Cyprus (Acts 13:9),

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24 The other two models are informational and retreat (Hill, 2001:31).

25 A modern educational model would indicate the confessions and catechisms were taught (Hill, 2001:31).

and Paul from here on in Acts becomes the more prominent or at least more vocal one (Acts 13:13a). Probably the name change reflects the emphasis of his life from here on: his outreach to the Roman world. Significantly, John Mark leaves them in Perga and goes back to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13b). Paul and Barnabas, now a missionary duo with perhaps ancillary companions, continue on preaching in Antioch – Pisidia, Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe. In an exciting journey, they meet both conversions and antagonisms (Acts 13:42-51; 14:1-7, 19-21). Significantly, they plant churches and leave behind them an established system of elders for governing (Acts 14:23).

In Lystra, the crowd to whom Paul and Barnabas speak witnesses a miracle and thinks that Paul and Barnabas (dubbed Hermes and Zeus respectively) are gods incarnate from Mount Olympus. Paul and Barnabas tear their clothes and rush into the crowd proclaiming they are merely men, too (Acts 14:15). Perhaps because Barnabas is called Zeus, he is the more imposing figure (Gardner, 1995:76). In Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas speak in a synagogue and receive abusive talk from hostile Jews (13:45). Luke (13:46) credits both apostles as answering the jealous Jewish opposition by promising they would now turn to the gentiles because the Jews had rejected the word of God and did not consider themselves worthy of eternal life.

Paul and Barnabas then return to Antioch Syria. Men from Jerusalem (who are not named by Luke) come to Antioch and say that the gentiles need to be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15:1-2). Paul and Barnabas sharply dispute this and then are appointed to take their view to the Council in Jerusalem. Barnabas and Paul argue that the gentiles should be fully admitted into the new church (Acts 15:1-5, 12). Their argument prevails, thereby changing the course of history. What seems to turn the Council's feeling is the description of the workings of the Holy Spirit among the gentiles that Barnabas and Paul recount (Acts 15:12). James, the Council leader, rules that life should not be made more difficult for their new gentile brothers by requiring circumcision. Instead he sends Barnabas and Paul back with a letter calling the two "dear friends" and containing three directives and encouragements for the gentile believers: abstain from food offered to idols; abstain from sexual immorality; abstain from the meat of strangled animals and blood (Acts 15:25, 29). Barnabas and Paul return to Antioch, where the Council's decision is welcomed warmly (Acts 15:30-35).

## 11. Leadership disagreements (Acts 15:36-41)

The Biblical text presents its heroes and heroines realistically. Biblical leaders have faults.<sup>26</sup> Another story about Barnabas shows how he and Paul quarreled. It seems that their disagreement grew from their personality strengths. It also grew from their different perspectives (based on their personalities) of an earlier incident: John Mark's action of leaving the first missionary journey in Pamphylia and returning to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Acts already had shown Barnabas' loyalty to individuals and his big heartedness. Similarly, Paul's boldness, fearlessness, tenacity under persecution, devotion to the gospel's purity, and ability to count all obstacles as a loss for the joy of proclaiming Christ stand among his strong points already seen in Acts. These leadership attributes in both men clash head on.

The issue, as Acts presents it, concerns their second missionary journey. Arguably, Barnabas, the "people person," advocates giving John Mark another chance. The older Barnabas, seeing people as preeminent, seeks to include his cousin, perhaps to mentor him. Arguably, the easily irritated, feisty, younger Paul, however, sees the situation differently: the mission predominates. Research indicates that as first century people, Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark were sociocentric (group oriented) and not egocentric or individualistic in identity (Augsburger, 1996:150). Consequently, John Mark as a team member was there because he wanted to be; he was willing to make a commitment to its fellowship (Griswold *et al.*, 1993:204). He chose not to exit – but Paul gave him the left foot of fellowship by demanding he leave the team (Acts 15:38). Paul seemingly recalled John Mark's earlier desertion (Acts 13:13) and decided he could not be entrusted with the work of evangelism on another journey.

This story in Acts illustrates that conflict between believers – even apostles – happens. Yet disagreement between Christians should not be seen as fatal to the proclamation of the Gospel. Neither should disagreement be seen in a win/lose mindset. However, the text in Acts reads as if Barnabas and Paul decided to argue first and talk later – something surely typical of church and denomination squabbles today (Stafford, 1997:33).

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26 Canonical examples include Abram's deception (Gen. 12:10-20); Moses' anger (Num. 20:1-12); David's adultery and murder (2 Sam. 12:7-9); and Peter's cowardice (Matt. 26:69-75).

The text omits two factors many find crucial to avoiding or minimizing conflict. First, prayer: there is no evidence Barnabas and Paul prayed – and Acts abounds with examples of prayer (see Acts 1:14; 2:42; 6:4; 9:11). Second, a mediator, a peacemaker, is absent.

The text offers no indication that Barnabas and Paul sought peace or called in a peacemaker/mediator. This is ironic because they had served as peacemakers/mediators shortly before in the Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:12-15). Peacemaking or mediation requires a number of characteristics. For example, all parties must want a constructive result. Selecting a neutral place is helpful. Parties must avoid rushing to a solution. Feelings must be listened to and vented. If the goal is conciliation, the parties must choose not to repay wrong with wrong (Stafford, 1997:32-34).

Significantly, Luke indicates no direct benefit to either party regarding the dispute and assigns no right or wrong to the dispute.<sup>27</sup> With the exception of choosing to write from here on about Paul, Luke takes no sides.

Reconciliation involves facing the tension that initially separates people (see Lyon, 1999:290). Barnabas and Paul choose to separate.<sup>28</sup> They choose to part and to cool their tempers. The text indicates that Paul and John Mark later experienced reconciliation and a good working relationship (2 Tim. 4:11). There is no textual indication either way about Paul and Barnabas. The fine character traits of each man, however, lead readers to expect reconciliation. In addition, Pauline references in Galatians 2, 1 Corinthians 9:6, and Colossians 4:19 indicate the split probably was not final or terminal (Paget, 1994:4). In Biblical thought, forgiveness is a relational process between disputants. Indeed, years later Paul may have been writing to himself when he described the different dimensions of reconciliation, a word that occurs thirteen times in his writings. Augsburg (1996:151) outlines Paul's three stages of reconciliation. First, a person must be reconciled to God; second, people are

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27 Calvin (1966:61) posits, on the one hand, that some great pride in Barnabas caused him to forsake the great honor of being Paul's companion and, on the other hand, that Paul lacked kindness in pardoning the mistake of a faithful assistant. Calvin (1966:61) warns that this example teaches Christians to be on the look-out for the chinks open to Satan.

28 Separation is a Biblical principle that is often overlooked. Genesis abounds with stories of friends and families who separate. Examples include Lot and Abraham, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers (see Petersen, 2005:31).

reconciled to others from whom they were alienated, and third, people are called to be reconcilers and do the work of conciliation between those who are alienated and at enmity with each other (see 2 Cor. 5:18-19).

## 12. Conclusion

The multiple New Testament entries about Barnabas portray a man of sterling character. These qualities make Barnabas a successful leader and one who merits the apposite of the Bible's great encourager. Barnabas clearly and consistently recognised God's grace in unlikely people – the murderer Saul, the uncircumcised gentiles in Antioch, and his cousin John Mark who seemed a fearful, spineless deserter, an early casualty on the mission field. He sought them out. His nickname *Son of Encouragement* also is sometimes translated Son of Consolation (Bruce, 1954:109). If consolation is the meaning, then Barnabas was a skilled, compassionate comforter.

The evidence given in Acts shows that Barnabas' own life had a purpose. He decided to remain true to the Lord Jesus. His money backed up his commitment. From his own experience and purpose of heart, he convinced the new believers in Antioch also "to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts" (Acts 11:23). The focused, purposeful life is very attractive. The fact that Barnabas was focused meant he could lead others. Barnabas' life with the new Antioch disciples showed his perseverance as an apostle. A principle among the apostles was this: follow me as I follow the Lord (John 10:27; 2 Thess. 3:9).

Every instance in Acts presents Barnabas as one who wholeheartedly follows the Lord Jesus, is available for kingdom purposes, and readily gives himself to God's service.

The basis of Barnabas' nickname, Son of Encouragement, needs to be considered. Yes, the text shows it both as a natural inclination – he was a "people person", someone who genuinely liked people and enjoyed being around them – and a gift from the Holy Spirit (Rom. 12:8). Any gift of the Holy Spirit needs constant replenishment via prayer, study, and use.<sup>29</sup> Barnabas could only give out what was

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29 The idea in Acts is that the Holy Spirit is alive, is present, and is active in the lives of believers. Barnabas' life as portrayed in Acts is one in which ministry to others flowed as a source of blessing to others). Barnabas is a man like

given to him. Going on one's own merit and energy makes a person "Mr. Nice Guy" or a "Ms. Congeniality" (see Hoyt-Oliver, 2006:21); there's nothing wrong with these nicknames. But merely being nice doesn't last for eternity. Barnabas' work lasted. How did it last? Why does Luke cite it as an example again and again? Some clues stand out.

Barnabas gave encouragement because he received encouragement. The text mentions he was a prophet, teacher, apostle, and miracle worker. As a teacher he studied the Scrolls – the same way Paul did (2 Tim. 4:13). In order to teach sound doctrine, he constantly needed to study. He internalised, incorporated, and taught the Word of God he studied. Seeing God's work made him glad (Acts 11:23) – it encouraged him. His glad countenance and big attitude were contagious; others became glad and glimpsed the big vision of God through him. From the Lord's personal encouragement to him, Barnabas gave encouragement and provided a model of encouragement to others.

Barnabas was equally at ease with the Hebrews and the Hellenists. He probably felt closer theologically to the Stephen group of internationals than to the Twelve disciples (Kollmann, 2004:62). Barnabas sponsored his younger colleague, Saul, and championed him. For the majority of what came to be known as Paul's first missionary journey, Barnabas led. True, gradually, but only gradually, Paul emerged from Barnabas' shadow as the primary, vocal advocate of a gospel that was gentile-friendly and did not require circumcision.

Despite the 29 New Testament entries about Barnabas attesting to his stature and importance in the Early Church, he is not too well known in modern Christian circles. His slide into obscurity was apparent even in the Middle Ages. For example, commenting on Acts 11:25-30, Gregory of Nazianzus said that "even though Barnabas stood by Paul during conflicts, he was *indebted to Paul* for choosing him and making him his partner" (italics added; Kollmann, 2004:61). According to the Biblical record, Gregory is incorrect. *Barnabas* chose Saul/Paul and championed him. They shared leadership. Calvin (1966:61) likewise errs when he writes that *Paul* bestowed "a great honor" on Barnabas when he suggested they "go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the

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Stephen who is described as one full of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual fullness speaks of God's overflowing gift of the Holy Spirit.



word of the Lord and see how they are doing” (Acts 15:36). In addition, overlooking Barnabas continues in commentaries. Barclay (1966b:15-17), commenting on Galatians 2:1-10, a passage mentioning Barnabas twice, omits any reference to Barnabas and instead commends Paul for his refusal to be overawed by Judaisers advocating circumcision.

Clearly, Barnabas, because there are no authenticating canonical writings ascribed to him, declined in importance quickly over two millennia. Yet careful study of texts in Acts (and elsewhere in Paul’s canonical epistles) as this article begins to show, demonstrates that at the time of the Early Church, Barnabas proved a key leader. His influence in the early history of Christian theology and the formation of the church structure has been bypassed by scholars who concentrate on Paul, Peter, and John, and because of the recent discovery of the ossuary, on James (Shanks & Witherington, 2003).<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps Barnabas was martyred decades earlier than was Paul; perhaps his life was cut off soon after he and Paul separated. The text does not say. But what is known from Acts is that Barnabas was a fully recognised leader in the Early Church. As one splitting his time between Jerusalem and Antioch, he participated in Early Church councils and saw with vision that the New Covenant extended to the uncircumcised. Joseph Barnabas, Son of Encouragement, receives equal status with James, John, Peter, and Paul in the early sections of Acts and therefore not only should be honored as a founding leader of the Early Church but also should receive more scholarly scrutiny.

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30 Witherington (Shanks & Witherington, 2003:222) believes that a new millennia encourages scholars to take a new look at the significance of early Jews like James, and I would add, Barnabas.

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**Key concepts:**

Antioch  
Barnabas  
Early Church: leaders  
encouragement  
Jerusalem Council  
Saul/Paul

**Kernbegrippe:**

Antiochië  
Barnabas  
Jerusalem Raad  
Saulus/Paulus  
vertroosting  
Vroeë Kerk: leiers