A Ministry of Encouragement

Barnabas is one of those rare famous people everyone knows by their nickname. His real name was Joseph. But such was his life that all the other believers always called him Barnabas – meaning ***'son of encouragement'*** (Acts 4:36).

Basic qualities to be an encourager

<u>One who forsakes the right to personal privileges</u>

The first time Barnabas is mentioned in Acts gives us a key to what lies behind his ministry of encouragement. We are told that, ***"He sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet".*** (Acts 4:37) This action is given as an example of the radical Kingdom Community practice of sharing. A feature of this sharing was that, ***"No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had".*** (Acts 4:32) So Barnabas had learned not to cling to things! He had 'died' to his right to personal privileges. This quality had a big part to play in his ability to develop apostolic church planters!

Leadership, being in a place of respect, often encourages an attitude that pampers the ego. The power that comes with leadership can result in the leader demanding whatever he likes. There is a terrible danger of Christian egotists and such egotists cannot encourage others or develop others in their spiritual calling and gifts. They carefully protect their position so that they have no time to invest in others. Egotism of this sort stifles the development of others.

<u>A Risk-taker</u>

The next mention of Barnabas is when the believers in Jerusalem were afraid of any contact with Saul for they didn't believe that he was a genuine disciple (Acts 9:26-27). Clearly they believed he was a spy on a mission. You can imagine the hurt and despair in Saul's life at this time – here in Jerusalem where he had excelled as a scholar and as one tutored by Gamaliel to be a person in high office; here where he had rapidly climbed the social ladder. It was possibly here that his wife divorced him for his change of faith and his family rejected him. He probably anticipated the deep hostility of his former associates, but not the deep suspicion of the fellow believers! New believers often face great disappointment over the refusal of established believers to welcome them into the Kingdom Community. Such situations are only saved by encouragers like Barnabas who believe in them.

So Barnabas befriended Saul, encouraged him and took him to meet with the apostles – the inner circle of the leadership of the church. If Saul had been a clever spy, this would have been the opportunity he had been hoping for!

In addition, Saul was a risk! He was no ignorant Galilean, but a highly trained Pharisee from the inner governing body of the Jewish people. He was an outspoken, zealous speaker with a great deal of enthusiasm. I think there were probably many in the Kingdom Community very uneasy about Saul entering into the inner core of the community. But Barnabas had courage and sponsored Saul. Such risk-taking is typical of the ministry of encouragement.

<u>An Advocate</u>

Barnabas related to the apostles the story of Saul's encounter with the Lord Jesus and his conversion and subsequent witness in Damascus (Acts 9:27). He had listened carefully to Saul's story. He knew that in the culture his words would carry more weight than Saul's. He himself related Saul's story. Here is a case of a well-trusted advocate in the community doing the job of "public relations" for a new believer. Most "public relations" by a leader is done to promote himself. Here is a reverse! It is so easy to take so much time telling our own story

that we have little interest in listening to others – especially new believers – let alone telling their stories to others. Not so Barnabas the encourager.

Someone easily gladdened

Barnabas appears next in Acts as a representative of the Jerusalem Kingdom Community sent to check out the new radical, controversial community in Antioch. We are told that, ***"When he saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad"***. (Acts 11:23) This was a newly germinated community. There may have been many shortcomings and difficulties present in what he saw. But he focused his attention on the grace of God that he saw there and he was glad.

Encouragers are easily gladdened by God's grace evident in the lives of others – especially new believers. When some people see a new work of God, they compare it with their own work – in Barnabas' case this was the community in Jerusalem. They notice shortcomings and immaturity. They focus on these and criticise the work. By doing this they alienate themselves from the younger people and forfeit any chance they might have to influence them towards maturity. Many new, zealous and excited believers have sought to join communities but have found themselves received with much caution and criticised for their lack of wisdom and understanding. Such criticism has produced much discouragement and caused these new believers with so much potential to give up!

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The activities of an encourager

They encourage

Barnabas wasn't only gladdened by what he saw, he immediately began to encourage these new believers in Antioch, ***"To remain true to the Lord with all their hearts".*** (Acts 11:24)

The joy of this important leader from Jerusalem just being with them would have greatly encouraged the new believers. But encouragers have an active, positive role to play in leading others to maturity. Barnabas urged them to persevere in their total commitment to the Lord Jesus. It is so easy for new, enthusiastic believers to cool off once the initial thrill of new life wears off and discouragement, opposition and threats hit them. At this time the encourager spurs them on to persevere and keep growing into maturity. And the community in Antioch did persevere. The growth didn't stop for, ***"A great number of people were brought to the Lord"*** (Acts 11:24) after Barnabas came!

They promote others into effective ministry

Soon Barnabas realised he needed help. So he travelled Tarsus – a trip that must have taken him several days – and brought Saul to help him (Acts 11:25). Saul had so many spiritual gifts that Barnabas was seriously jeopardising his status as the prominent leader in Antioch! But encouragers know that there are others who can do some things better than they can. They don't try and protect their flock from the ministries of other gifted leaders. They are not defensive people always trying to prove their own abilities. No, they try to develop and improve the abilities of others so they can fully use the spiritual/natural gifts they have been given. Sadly, some leaders are willing to work with new believers (and new recruits), but capable colleagues threaten them. Barnabas brought a colleague who had more capabilities than he did to help the Kingdom Community in Antioch.

They Turn over leadership

Barnabas and Saul had a period of fruitful ministry together in Antioch. Then they went together to carry relief money to the suffering believers in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30). They returned to Antioch with a cousin of Barnabas – John Mark (Acts 12:25). From Antioch the Holy Spirit guided Barnabas and Saul to launch out on their first great journey to spread the

Good News. Mark joined them. Barnabas was the leader of the team. [When describing the team Luke says "Barnabas and Saul" – Acts 11:26, 30; 12:25; 13:2, 7] But soon it becomes "Paul and Barnabas" – Acts 13:43, 45, 50. Acts 13:13 puts it simply, ***"Paul and his friends"***. The junior man in the team – Paul – has emerged as the leader and Barnabas has allowed him to take over leadership. Encouragers will gladly hand over leadership to those they have been encouraging when it becomes evident that God has called and equipped them for that leadership slot. This isn't easy! In his commentary on Acts F.F. Bruce says of this exchange of leadership role, "**It takes more grace than I can tell to play the second fiddle well**".

This is particularly true when the new leader is his own trainee. Of course this doesn't mean that Barnabas was any less important in his service to the Kingdom. **Importance in God's sight has nothing to do with prominence.** Prominence is a factor related to giftedness and calling, not to importance and significance.

<u>They sometimes become discouraged</u>

During this first journey together the generous spirit of Barnabas received a very painful blow when his cousin, Mark, left the team (Acts 13:13). Later we are told that this was an act of desertion (Acts 15:38). So encouragers are easily gladdened, but encouragers are also easily saddened! Not all those in whom they place their hopes live up to their expectations. The humiliation, the disappointment and the pain this brings sorely tempts encouragers to give up their ministry of encouragement. The generous heart is replaced by cold cynicism and suspicion of the gifting and calling of others. This disqualifies them from being encouragers. They become the opposite! They have forgotten how very patient God is with all of us.

<u>They look beyond shortcomings</u>

Barnabas didn't give up! The vision of the potential of the grace of God in a person soon overcame his disappointment over Mark and he was able to look at him with eyes of hope. So he remained committed to keep encouraging this deserter. He insisted that Mark join the team for the next tour. Here is a great example of the encourager. He looks beyond the shortcomings and the failures with eyes of hope to see what can be achieved through the operation of God's grace in the life of a prospective leader.

How very important hope is in a discipling ministry! It is this hope in God's grace that will help us persevere with weak people. When this hope is communicated to weak, struggling and failing believers, it strengthens them with courage to persevere and reach out and grab the great future God has in store for them.

<u>They make a costly commitment to people</u>

Barnabas costly commitment to Mark was mingled with hope. Paul didn't trust Mark and refused to take him with them. Barnabas insisted he must go. ***"They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left."*** (Acts 15:39-40)

Leaders are sometimes afraid to be committed to younger potential leaders because they can and do make mistakes. Such mistakes can jeopardise the work. But we will not develop leaders in this way.

Thankfully the story doesn't end with the sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas. Paul learned a great deal from the row. He clearly missed Barnabas a great deal and he himself changed as we can see in the second journey he took. Certainly Mark changed too. Mark lived up to the hopes that Barnabas had for him. He became Paul's valued co-worker (Col. 4:10; 1 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24). Later on he became Peter's companion and "son" in the faith (1 Peter 5:13). It is almost certain that was the writer of the Gospel according to Mark.

Here then is the description of a remarkable ministry of leadership development and the qualities and activities we all need to have.

- Forsaking the right to personal privileges
- Being a risk taker
- Getting involved in advocacy
- Being easily gladdened
- Encouraging people
- Promoting others into effective ministry
- Turning over leadership
- Sometimes bearing the burden of discouragement
- Looking beyond shortcomings in others
- Having a costly commitment to those you are discipling

This is all possible because of a firm hope based on the possibilities of grace in the lives of weak people. May we be those who learn to look at people with hope and do all we can to see those hopes realised.