

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 4/24/94
Acts 9:27; 11:22-26 "An Encourager in Action"

Intro: There is a need in the church today for people like Barnabas. Last week, we began a mini-series entitled, "Encouragement: Fresh Air in the Church." Our aim is to do a biographical study of the life of one of the greatest encouragers who ever walked on this planet. Barnabas. As we saw last Sunday, Barnabas was a man who was a breath of fresh air in the early church.

Barnabas was an encourager in action.

Caution: It's not easy to practice biblical encouragement. In fact, did you realize there are barriers we must overcome if we are to become true encouragers? There are. And as we probe the life of Barnabas this morning, we will see just that.

Gary Smalley tells a story about a wife that tried hard to encourage her husband. She called her husband at work one day, and said matter of factly, "Honey, there's something wrong with the car. There's water in the carberator." That stunned the husband. As far as he knew, his wife didn't even know what a carberator was, let alone that there would be water in it. He replied, "Dear, how do you know there is water in the carborator?" To which she replied, "Well...because I forgot to set the brake, and the car rolled in the lake."

Sometimes it's tough to encourage! In order to be an encourager, we must overcome some barriers. Like Barnabas did. What are the obstacles that keep us from encouraging? And how do we surmount these barriers?

Proposition: This morning we want to take a look at two scenes from Barnabas' life in Acts 9 & 11. In so doing, we will see four barriers that we must overcome if we are going to practice biblical encouragement.

- I. Scene #1: Barnabas endorsed an unwelcome convert (Acts 9:26-27).
 - A. We must overcome the barrier of Convenience.
"they were all afraid of him" (26)
 - B. We must overcome the barrier of Conformity.
"But Barnabas"
- II. Scene #2: Barnabas accepted alien believers (Acts 11:22-26).
 - A. We must overcome the barrier of Criticism.
"Antioch" (22-24)
 - B. We must overcome the barrier of Competition.
"Then departed Barnabas to seek Saul" (25-26)

Barnabas is not a limelight personality in the New Testament. You have to read the fine print to see him. Yet he was a man of action. We saw that in Acts 4 when he sold a piece of land to help out the needy in the church. And we'll see it this week in two scenes. Scene 1 is recorded in Acts 9. Let's watch the Encourager in action.

I. Scene #1: Barnabas endorsed an unwelcome convert (Acts 9:26-27).

Allow me to sketch the backdrop. The church started in Acts 2 when the Spirit descended on the followers of Christ at Pentecost. From that day on, the church experienced rapid growth in Judea. From the church's headquarters in Jerusalem, and throughout the land, wherever they went, Jesus' followers spread the good news about their Risen Savior. Within a matter of months, there were thousands of disciples.

Then the church hit a roadblock in Acts 8. They faced heated persecution. The zealot who headed up this anti-Christian campaign was a Pharisee named Saul. He went from house to house in Jerusalem, his mind focused on the devilish plan to destroy the church (8:3; 9:1).

You remember what happened. On his way to Damascus to hunt Christians, Saul was stricken to his knees by a blinding appearance of Jesus Himself! And by the grace of God, this murderer of Christians became a Christian! (about AD 33; Bruce)

How did people respond to Saul's conversion? Skeptical to say the least.

When Ananias had a vision in which he was told that Saul was now a converted man, he said (my paraphrase of 9:13-14), "You've got to be kidding, Lord! You want me to go see Saul, that zealot? Are we talking about the same guy?!"

When the Jews in Damascus heard the report, they considered Saul to be a redcoat, and tried to kill him (23). The Christians in Damascus saved Saul's life by sticking him in a basket, and lowering him down over the city wall at night (25).

Nobody really knew what to think of Saul, let alone what to do with him.

Saul spent some time in Arabia (Gal 1:17), and then eventually, three years after his conversion (according to Gal 1:18), he headed south to Jerusalem.

What happened when he got there? Look at Acts 9:26, "And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he tried to join himself to the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple." Afraid.

Suppose you were a Jew in 1940 and heard that Hitler had converted to Judaism. Would you believe the report? Would you invite the Fuhrer to your home for filaphels? I doubt it.

The disciples in Jerusalem held Saul at arm's length. They were afraid of him. They didn't believe his conversion was genuine. Can you blame them? How could they be sure that this was not a deceitful trick, another wicked attempt by this zealot to harm Christians?

In their fear, the believers did the rational thing, the safe thing. They wouldn't let Saul get near them. They hid behind the barrier of convenience.

But there was a risktaker in the church. And at that point, he stepped forward from behind that barrier, and endorsed this unwelcome convert. Who was he? V 27 "But Barnabas took him..." Barnabas, the son of Encouragement!

If we are going to practice biblical encouragement, here's the first barrier we must overcome.

A. We must overcome the barrier of Convenience.

"they were all afraid of him" (26)

A lot of us are like Sergeant Shultz, in the old TV show "Hogan's Heroes." When confronted by a situation which might jeopardise our convenience, we spout off those words, "I know nothing. I see nothing. I hear nothing."

Churches are full of people who hide behind the barrier of convenience. But Barnabas was not one of them. It would have been convenient for him to join the crowd, and stay in the safe comfort zone behind the wall. But he didn't. He played the role of an encourager. He took action.

How? What did Barnabas do? He took 3 steps in v 27.

1. Barnabas took Saul.
2. Barnabas brought Saul to the apostles/leaders.
3. Barnabas declared the truth about Saul with a verbal defense.

Barnabas' activity stands in stark contrast with the fearful inactivity of the rest in v 26. They were afraid, but Barnabas took action. He became the friend Saul so desperately needed.

You say, "How did Barnabas know? When all the other timid souls were hiding behind the barrier of convenience, how did Barnabas know that Saul was Ok?"

Simply--He MADE IT his business to know. That's what an encourager does.

Barnabas was a "take action" kind of person. He didn't just watch things happen. He didn't look at injustice and say, "Well, that's too bad, but it's none of my business. Besides, I've got my own problems to worry about."

No. You see, a true encourager doesn't hide behind excuses. I was struck this past Thursday when I read Prov 21:3 (NIV), "To do what is RIGHT and JUST is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice."

May I ask you something? Are you a person who lives life resolving to do what is right and just? Or do you just do what is convenient?

Two weeks ago, our family went to a Red's game. As we were walking up the ramp from the Parking Garage to the Stadium, a man stepped in front of us and asked, "Could you spare me a few dollars for some food?" Inside I was struck by fear, "Is this guy going to hurt me or my family?" Do you know what I did? I broke eye contact, looked at the floor, and walked on by. That was the convenient thing to do.

What would you have done? You see, sadly, most of us are guilty of hiding behind the barrier of convenience more often than we care to admit.

To be a biblical encourager, we need to overcome that barrier. And another...

B. We must overcome the barrier of Conformity.

Look at the first two words of v 27, "But Barnabas." What words! Barnabas broke the barrier of conformity.

What motivated Barnabas to defend Saul, when others would not? Was it mere sentiment? Was it because he felt sorry for Saul? No, it went deeper than that. The text indicates it was because he was convinced it was the will of the Lord.

Listen to what he said in v 27, "declared how he (Saul) had seen the Lord in the way, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus."

Don't overlook that. When everybody else is scratching their heads wondering, "How can we know this guy is for real?", Barnabas diffused the question. He pointed out 3 powerful evidences of a genuine conversion. One, he has seen the Lord. Two, the Lord spoke to him. And three, he preached boldly at Damascus in Jesus' name!

Barnabas saw what others missed. He was saying, "Listen brothers! The Lord's in this! The Lord has chosen this man to be a vessel to take His name to all people (see 9:15). Dare we shun him? Dare we oppose the Lord's purpose and will?"

Barnabas overcame the barrier of conformity. He didn't let peer pressure keep him from doing what was right. He fixed his eyes on the will of the Lord. Sometimes an encourager stands alone. He cuts across the grain. She is not a status quo person.

Don't miss this. Biblical encouragement is more than saying nice words in pleasant tones. Sometimes it involves saying convicting words in firm tones. Can't you just hear Barnabas going up to Peter and the others and saying, "Hey, why are you guys avoiding Saul? Is this the way the Lord would want us to behave? Peter, where would you be today if our Lord hadn't taken a risk with you?"

I remind you of what we learned last week. Exhortation ("Parakalo") involves both encouragement and admonishment. They go hand in hand.

What resulted from this "risk" that Barnabas took? Two results. The first result was increased fellowship. V 28 "And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem." The believers accepted Saul because Barnabas stood up for him.

The second result was increased evangelism. Through Saul, the church reached out to a different ethnic group. V 29 "And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians." Saul preached to the Hellenists (Jews from outside the land of Israel).

Isn't that great? The church experienced increased fellowship and increased evangelism, which it would not have known had it not been for Barnabas. In fact, humanly speaking, if there had been no Barnabas, there would have been no apostle Paul. And if there had been no Paul, half of our New Testament would be missing, and the gospel would have never reached Europe! Thank God for Barnabas!

When Barnabas endorsed an unwelcome convert, he overcame two barriers: convenience, and conformity. So must we if we are to practice biblical encouragement.

Tran: That's scene one. Scene one ends with an assassination attempt (29-30). The Hellenist Jews tried to kill Saul, so he went to his home city of Tarsus. He stayed in obscurity for the next 10 years (see LaSor, 168). We will see him again in Scene 2.

II. Scene #2: Barnabas accepted alien believers (Acts 11:22-26).

The church was planted on Jewish soil. But the seed of the gospel soon spread to Gentile turf. And it landed in Antioch. READ Acts 11:19-21

Wow! Christians in Antioch! The church in Jerusalem must have been thrilled. To be honest, not everyone was. Why not?

Because Antioch was very different from Jerusalem. Antioch was 300 miles north of Jerusalem. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire (behind Rome and Alexandria), with a population of over half a million people. It was a magnificent city. Main street was more than four miles long, paved with marble, and lined on both sides by marble colonades (Wiersbe, 448). It was a city known for its night life (the only city in the world at the time that had streets lighted at night; Wiersbe, 448). The

city was famous for its central heating, plumbing, and sanitary facilities. Cicero referred to Antioch as "a renowned and populous city, the seat of brilliant scholarship and artistic refinement (in LaSor, 166)."

Know this, too. Antioch was a city known for its sensual pleasure, in wickedness, second only to Corinth. It was noted for its dancers, and actors, and chariot races. About 5 miles south of the city was the pleasure garden dedicated to the worship of Daphne. It was there that horrid acts of crude prostitution took place, in the name of religion.

And out of that cesspool, God saved some people. News reached the church in Jerusalem. They decided to send a representative and check things out. Guess who they chose?

V 22 "...and they sent forth Barnabas."

Why Barnabas? In general terms, because he was an Encourager. He was just what these new Christians needed. But more specifically, because he was a man who could overcome a third barrier. And so must we.

A. We must overcome the barrier of Criticism--"Antioch" (22-24).

You say, "I don't see any criticism mentioned here. How did Barnabas overcome criticism?"

Antioch was very different from Jerusalem. And the new Christians in Antioch were different from their brothers in Christ down south, too. They were Gentile. They were saved out of pagan backgrounds. They ate meat offered to pagan idols. They wore their hair differently. They liked different kinds of entertainment. They wore different styles of clothing.

Think about something. Is it possible for Christians with so many differences to experience unity? Some would say, "Yes, as soon as we get rid of the differences." Is that biblical unity? Do we have to like the same music styles to have unity? Do we all have to wear suits and ties and dresses to have unity? No. In biblical unity, we celebrate what we have in common (that's Christ), and accept what makes us different (styles, etc).

That's what Barnabas did. Watch what Barnabas did in v 23, "Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all..."

Listen to the text. Does it say that when Barnabas got to Antioch, and looked at the Christians there, he said, "That's not the way we do it back in Jerusalem..."? No. He was glad, and encouraged them.

Why? V 24 "For he was a righteous man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." A person full of faith is a person who can see what others cannot see.

Suppose we got a letter that said a spiritual awakening was taking place right now in Los Angeles, in the inner city. Suppose we learned that by His grace, God saved a whole group of gang members. And in this letter, these former dope dealers and once violent aggressors asked us to come and help them grow spiritually. They also sent a picture of themselves. Their "church" is an empty storefront. They don't wear ties to church. They don't wear suits. They don't sing Wesley's hymns (for that

matter, they've never heard of Charles Wesley). But they love Christ. And they want us to come and help them grow.

Would you go? Barnabas would. You say, "What would people say if they saw me hanging around people like that?"

What do you think they said about Barnabas. Check out Acts 15:1-2 some time, and you'll see that some of the traditionalists in Jerusalem were very critical about what was happening in Antioch. But that didn't stop Barnabas. Barnabas took a risk in behalf of the Christians in Antioch.

If we want to be biblical encouragers, we must overcome the barrier of criticism.

Barnabas was an encourager in action. To be so, he overcame the barriers of convenience, conformity, and criticism. By his example, he taught us to remove a 4th.

B. We must overcome the barrier of Competition.

Notice the first phrase of v 25, "Then departed Barnabas to seek Saul." Think about that. Why did he recruit Saul? V 24 says that many people were added to the Lord in Antioch.

Barnabas was a team player. He knew the young church in Antioch needed more than he could give. An insecure man would have bluffed his way. Not Barnabas. He admitted he needed help. So he went to find the best suited man for the job. Saul. And the church prospered because of it (v 26).

Barnabas overcame the barrier of Competition. J. Oswald Sanders wrote this about Barnabas (171), "Only a big man would have made such a selection, for to a man of Barnabas's discernment it would be obvious that this dynamic and brilliant scholar would speedily outshine and outstrip him. He was willing to accept a subordinate role, in the interests of the Kingdom. He did not feel that it demeaned him to give place to a less experienced but more able junior...He slipped into second place with not the slightest evidence of jealousy."

For the good of the church in Antioch, Barnabas recruited Saul.

Challenge:

It's not easy to be an encourager. In fact, there are some barriers we must cross over if we are to bring the refreshment of encouragement to those who need it.

What are the barriers that are keeping you from being an encourager? Is convenience? Are you too busy and preoccupied with your own agenda to notice the needs of others?

How about conformity? Are you afraid to do what is right because you're trying to do what is popular?

Then there's the barrier of criticism. Is God wanting you to help someone in need, but you've been resisting, because this person is different. And you're afraid of what others might say.

And the barrier of competition. Is there someone that you could help grow in Christ, yet you've avoided, because you realize this person, with a little encouragement, might steal the limelight from you?

Beloved, if we are to be encouragers, it takes action, not intention. It takes risks. But it's worth it. Ask Barnabas.

Ministry in Music: Kevin Pierpont, "Reach Out and Touch"