

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 4/17/94  
Acts 4:36-37 "Fresh Air in the Church"

**Children's Sermon:** "A Broken Clock" adapted from story by Joe Troll

**Intro:**

About three years ago, my great aunt Edith died. Sherry and I drove the nearly four hour trip to Guernsey county for the funeral service. After the trip to the cemetery, we drove to the old Harding homestead where my great-grandparents lived and raised 8 children. As I surveyed the farm, I reflected on what life was like for my ancestors so many years ago.

Then we drove down the gravel road to the old one room church. Pleasant Grove Church. I had heard my grandmother tell me about it many times. As we stood in front of it, I noticed the old cemetery to my right, next to the church. Then I stared at this building where my loved ones had worshiped in years gone by. The paint on the white board siding was cracked and peeling. The building was little more an empty shell. I could tell it had been vacated years ago.

We went inside. I saw broken glass, hymnals with bent covers and faded color lying on the floor. I found an old Sunday School attendance book dated over 60 years ago, filled with names of people most of whom were longer in this world.

I thought to myself, "If only these walls could talk, what stories they could tell!" But they couldn't.

One of the things that struck me most about that old church building was not what I saw. It was the smell. It smelled old. The smell of life was gone. The air was stagnant, musty, and stale. The old church was in desperate need of some fresh air.

An old church building without people is a stale, musty place. Yet you know, there are new church buildings with people that are stale and musty.

What's missing? Fresh air.

I want to pose this thought to you this morning. The church today is in great need of some fresh air. You say, "Fresh air? What's that?"

It's that quality which transforms a church from a cold organization into a living organism. It's that dynamic which, when present, is like an open window which brings in a breeze of refreshment. It's what gets rid of the stale air in the fellowship of God's people. What is that quality?

One word--Encouragement.

The Bible has much to say about encouragement. Did you realize that the church can't exist without it? We're told in Heb 3:13 (NIV), "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today." Encouragement is not optional, either. You know the words of Heb 10:25, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing." We all know that church attendance is not an option for the obedient Christian. But why do we need to meet together? The end of the verse tells us, "Let us not give up meeting together...but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Beloved, when a church stops encouraging, the air soon grows stale.

If we are going to enjoy the fresh air of encouragement in the church, what will it take? What does encouragement look like in living color?

In His Word, God gave us the record of a man who, outside of Jesus Himself, was one of the greatest encouragers who ever lived. He was literally a breath of fresh air in the early church. We're going to examine what the Bible says about him starting today, in a three week mini-series entitled, "Encouragement: Fresh Air in the Church."

Who was this man? His name was Joseph. God used this one man to make an impact on the early church that lives on to this day.

Objection: "Can one person really bring fresh air to a church?" Joseph did. And Joseph can show us how to be more Christ-like encouragers.

What does it take to be an encourager? We'll see in Acts 4.

**Proposition: In Acts 4:36-37, we see two traits which bring the fresh air of encouragement to a church. Barnabas modeled them both.**

I. Trait #1: An encourager exhibits the Right Reputation (36).

II. Trait #2: An encourager exhibits the Right Action (37).

A. His giving revealed his Generosity.

"Having land, sold it, and brought the money"

1. He saw himself as a steward of God.

2. He shared his surplus.

B. His giving revealed his Humility.

"and laid it at the apostles' feet"

Lessons: The prerequisites for encouragement...

1. I must give my all to the Lord.

2. I must have a sense of responsibility for you.

3. I must be willing to get involved in your life.

"Barnabas? I thought you said his name was Joseph?" I did. It was. But Joseph had such a reputation for encouragement that the apostles changed his name. To Barnabas. Do you know what that means? We'll see this morning.

READ: Acts 4:36-37

Let's notice the two traits of encouragement modeled by Barnabas.

**I. Trait #1: An encourager exhibits the Right Reputation (36).**

Barnabas had quite a reputation. What do we know about him? We can surmise 5 observations from Luke's comment in v 36.

1. His real name was Joseph. He was a Jewish man.

2. He was from Cyprus. Cyprus was an island, west of Israel. That means Barnabas had lived outside of the land of promise.

But Barnabas also had a residence in Jerusalem. It's possible that he lived with his Aunt Mary, and her son, John Mark (Barnabas' cousin; see Acts 12:12).

3. Apparently, he was a rather wealthy man. He was a landowner, in Cyprus. Cyprus was a rich area, producing wine, oils, figs, honey, and wheat ( Stringfellow, 215). Evidently, Barnabas was an influential man, a man of wealth.

4. He was a Levite. You say, "Didn't the Jewish law forbid a Levite from owning property?" Yes, in Num 18:20, 24. But Barnabas lived outside the land of Israel.

5. The apostles gave him a nickname.

If you could change your name, would you? What name would you choose? To our Western culture, names have very little meaning other than identification. But in the Eastern culture, such as in biblical times, names were full of significance. Abram's name was changed to Abraham. Saul became Paul. Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter. Thomas was called Didymus. The name meant something.

Then there was Joseph. Here was a man who so impacted the apostles that they changed his name! It was an Aramaic name. Barny (Living Bible). Barnabas, which was comprised of two smaller words: "Bar" meaning "son of" (eg--Barmitzvah); for the Jews, the idiom "son of" indicated a person's character (eg--"sons of thunder").

What does "Barnabas" mean? The text says, "the son of consolation" (Paraklasis). By definition, one called alongside to help. The son of Encouragement.

Can't you just see Peter and John and the other apostles? Here was this fellow Joseph. He was such a blessing to the church that they derived a nickname for him. When people saw him coming, they yelled, "Hello Encourager!"

What a reputation! Someone wrote this about Barnabas (Dinsdale T. Young, in J. Oswald Sanders, People Just Like Us, 167), "Certain Bible personalities are very dramatic in their unannouncedness. They appear without any introduction. They burst upon us... Barnabas beams unexpectedly upon the church like a flood of sunshine. And he was an incarnation of sunshine."

Dr. F.B. Meyer, one of the most popular conference speakers at the turn of the century, said that if he had his life to live over again, he would devote much more time to the ministry of comfort and encouragement (Sanders, 169).

Barnabas was a breath of fresh air in the church! He was an encourager, a paraklatis, "one called alongside to help." He devoted his life to pointing others to Jesus through the ministry of encouragement.

An encourager is a person who has the Right Reputation. Like Barnabas.

Let me ask you. Are you known as an encourager? Are you a breath of fresh air to the people around you? Do people say of you, "Wow, I like to be around him/her?" Or, "Uh-oh, here comes sour grapes!"

Larry Crabb, in his book Encouragement: The Key to Caring, wrote this, "We do not learn to encourage by memorizing a list of phrases. There is no such list, at least none worth memorizing. Encouragement is not a technique based on selecting certain words; it is an attitude, a view of others as valuable with a commitment to treat them accordingly." (104)

Tran: Encouragement flows out of reputation. Trait #1--Right Reputation.

## II. Trait #2: An encourager exhibits the Right Action (37).

Barnabas' life was full of activity that encouraged. We'll take a look at about three examples next week. He took Saul of Tarsus under his wing when nobody else would, in Acts 9. He worked with the Gentile believers in Antioch, when others were skeptical, in Acts 11. He restored the youthful deserted John Mark, when Paul had thrown in the towel on him, in Acts 15.

Throughout his life, Barnabas put his encouragement into action.

Notice how he exhibited right action in 4:37, "Having land, sold it..." Barnabas gave. Encouragement costs something. Why did Barnabas give? What motivated him?

I would suggest his act of giving reveals two virtues that must accompany true encouragement.

### A. His giving revealed his Generosity.

"Having land, sold it, and brought the money"

Barnabas was a wealthy man. How wealthy was he? We don't know. How do you measure wealth? Here are two standards which were true of Barnabas: One, he had more than others. Two, he had more than he needed for himself.

That's true of a lot of us, isn't it? As Americans, we have more than others. And most of us have more than we need for ourselves. That's wealth.

Now, money is not evil. Rather the love of money is evil (I Tim 6:10). Wealth is not bad. But what should we do with our wealth? We can learn from Barnabas and the other early Christians.

The early church had an amazing "Care Ministry." We read about it in Acts 4:32-35, "And the multitude of those that believed..."

Notice the reputation of the church in Jerusalem. The church which started in Acts 2 was but a few years old. Yet they turned Jerusalem upside down. How? By preaching the Risen Christ (33).

Yet this church was not all mouth. It had heart too. Their fellowship was real. The statement in v 34 is shocking, "Neither was there any among them that lacked." Wow! There were NO unmet needs in the church, no hungry children, no widows with leaky roofs, no single mothers with unpaid electric bills? How could that be?

The text tells us (34-35), "for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold...and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need."

Isn't that communism? No, it's genuine fellowship. "Communism says, 'What's yours is mine; I'll take it.' Fellowship says, 'What's mine is yours; I'll share it.'" (LaSor, 71).

Remember, by this time, the Jerusalem church had thousands of people in it. Yet it had an incredible care ministry. And one man led the way as a model, Barnabas.

How did the care ministry work? Let's follow the steps modeled by Barnabas.

1. He saw himself as a steward of God.

So did the others. They saw their possessions, not as their own, but as the Lord's. The text says Barnabas had land, sold it, and brought the proceeds to the apostles to help the poor. Why? Because he saw himself as a steward of God.

Here's how a steward looks at life: "My money is God's. My house is God's. My land is God's. My talents are God's. My time is God's. I am God's. I am a steward. My responsibility is to invest what God has entrusted to my care in a way that will matter for eternity."

How do we do that? Watch what Barnabas did--step two.

## 2. He shared his surplus.

And so did the others in the church. Those with more than enough did not stockpile, but shared with those in need.

We can't help but be impressed by the generosity of Barnabas, can we? Stop right there. We better NOT be. Barnabas did not give to impress us or anyone else. And if we leave Acts 4 impressed by Barnabas' generosity, we've missed the point.

How do we know that? Because His giving was marked not only by generosity, but also by an even greater quality.

### B. His giving revealed his Humility.

What did Barnabas do with the money he made off the land sale? Did he give it to the poor? No. To whom did he give it?

V 37--"and laid it at the apostles' feet"

Think about that. Why did Barnabas (and the others, v 35) lay the money at the apostles' feet? What does that mean?

First, it highlights the importance of the local church. The church is not merely a preaching center. God designed it to be a caring community. Would there be need for government programs if the church did its job?

Second, giving the money to the apostles ensured the money went to legitimate needs. Eventually, the care ministry got so big, the apostles delegated the task to specially qualified men (Acts 6). V 35 is clear that the giving was to meet "needs" not "greeds."

There is a third reason. Giving the money to the church through the apostles helped eliminate wrong motives in giving. The money went first to the church leaders, then to the person in need. What did that prevent? Manipulation.

You see, the world keeps track of its giving. Donors to political campaigns do, "Hey, I gave you big bucks last year, now how about it? You owe me one..."

It even happens in churches. "I remember talking to a wise, older Christian several years ago. He wanted to go on a missions trip, but obviously, the funds were a challenge. Someone approached him, and offered to pay his way. But he declined the money. I couldn't figure out why. Then he shared, "I knew if I accepted that gift it would be like a rope around my neck. It was a gift that had strings attached to it.

There were no strings attached to Barnabas' gift. His giving was marked by humility.

There's an unfortunate chapter break between 4:37 and 5:1. That break keeps us from seeing a strong contrast. Chapter four ends with the glowing report of the

church's unity and fellowship and sharing to meet needs. The church had great encouragers like Barnabas.

BUT (5:1), the same church also had a man very different from Barnabas. His name was Ananias, and his wife was Saphira. They too sold a piece of land. And they too gave some money to the church. On the surface, they resemble Barnabas. But only on the surface.

Let's suppose we were sitting in the living room of Ananias and Saphira right after they got home from church, the day Barnabas gave his gift. William LaSor suggests the conversation may have gone like this (74-5). "Sapphira said to Ananias (or the reverse; it makes no difference): 'That was nice, what Barnabas did, wasn't it? Didn't the church make a fuss over him? Why can't we do something like that?' Ananias replied: 'We can't afford it; not if we are going to enlarge the living room.' Sapphira said, 'But couldn't we sell a field, and keep some of the money to enlarge the house?' Ananias answered, 'Yes, but the church would think we were selfish, keeping some of the money when so many poor people don't have enough to eat.' And Sapphira said, 'But who would know how much we got for the field?'

"So they worked out their satanic plan (5:3), in order that no one would ever know. But some One did know."

### **Lessons: The prerequisites for encouragement...**

What kind of air do you circulate in the church, stale air or fresh air? Ask yourself, "Am I like Barnabas or Ananias and Saphira?"

Let's talk in practical terms. If I want to be an encourager, what will it take? From the example of Barnabas this morning, I see three prerequisites which I must accept if I am going to bring fresh air in the church.

#### *1. I must give my all to the Lord.*

Why is it that I have two cars in my garage, more clothes hanging in my closet than I could wear in months, food cupboards stocked high, a freezer full not only of meat, but icecream...and my brother in Christ in the Ukraine doesn't even have enough bread to feed his family? Why is that?

Why are we so blessed? Only because of the grace of God.

And woe upon us when we think we DESERVE these blessings! Fellow believers, we are stewards. If I am to be a good steward, if I want to be a breath of fresh air in the church, I must stop clutching my blessings, and say, "They are Yours, Lord. I give my all to You."

#### *2. I must have a sense of responsibility for you.*

Barnabas felt responsible for his brothers and sisters in Christ. Do we? Oh beloved, fellowship is a sacred thing. Dare we take it lightly?

One of the marks of being filled with the Spirit is seen right here, in our relationships with one another (Eph 5:18-21). We are responsible for each other.

#### *3. I must be willing to get involved in your life.*

Being an encourager demands that I be willing to get involved in your life. It takes work. It doesn't just happen. We must determine to take our eyes off of ourselves, and encourage each other.

May the ranks of people like Barnabas increase!

**Challenge:**

It would be very easy to leave thinking, "Yea, he's right. The church needs encouragement. I wonder who will encourage ME?"

And if we do, we've missed it. I want to challenge you this week to BE an encourager. Be a breath of fresh air in this church, wherever you are.