

"THE MINISTRY OF ENCOURAGEMENT"

(Acts 13:13-52)

(Ajith Fernando)

Acts provides us with a fascinating picture of the way Barnabas served as an encourager to Paul and to Mark. This section gives three common experiences of encouragers. (1) Luke's reversal in the order of names (mentioning Paul's before Barnabas from verse 13 on¹) suggests that Luke wants to show that Paul had become the prominent partner in the team. Here is a common experience of encouragers—they exhibit a willingness to hand over leadership to a junior person, if that is best for the progress of the kingdom.

(2) Once Paul became the prominent partner, Barnabas was simply there while Paul did the preaching and teaching. If, as suggested in our discussion of 4:36, the name Barnabas means "Son of Exhortation," Barnabas was a good teacher. But good teachers who are encouragers will give the teaching slot to someone who may be a more effective teacher for a particular situation and simply be there as a team member.

(3) Barnabas was also an encourager to Mark, his cousin (Col.4:10)—a fact that becomes evident when Paul decides not to take Mark along on a later journey, which led in turn to Barnabas's decision to separate from Paul and travel with Mark (Acts 15:37-39). Mark's decision to leave the team at Perga (13:13) must have been a source of sorrow for Barnabas. Encouragers face such blows, as some of those for whom they have high hopes fail to live up to their expectations.

Encouragers hand over leadership. It must not have been easy for Barnabas to hand leadership over to Paul. Paul was in some ways his trainee. Barnabas was probably physically older than Paul—and certainly older spiritually. He was also probably more distinguished looking, for later the people of Lystra called Barnabas Zeus, the chief Greek god, and Paul Hermes, the spokesman of the god (14:12). Commenting on the exchange of leadership roles F.F. Bruce cites the rhymester,

It takes more grace than I can tell

To play the second fiddle well.²

This is a challenge that all leaders will face at some time. We must be willing to hand over our position if that will benefit the kingdom. And if we do so, we must make it easy for our successors. I am thankful to report that I have often seen this happen in Christian circles, where the senior leader stayed on as a fund-raiser or an advisor to the younger person and where the younger leader benefitted from the senior persons experience without being



¹ In verse 13 Barnabas's name is not even mentioned.

² F.F. Bruce, *The Pauline Circle*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 19.

threatened by his or her presence.

In order to let this transition take place smoothly, the senior leader may need to take definite steps in crucifying the flesh. The famous Bible teacher F. B. Meyer (1847-1929) often ministered at D. L. Moody's Northfield Bible Conference and always drew large crowds to his meetings. Then the younger Bible teacher G. Campbell Morgan (1863-1945) began to preach there, and his stirring Bible studies began to attract larger audiences than Meyers. Meyer confessed to some of his close friends that he was sometimes envious of Morgan. But then he said, "The only way I can conquer my feelings is to pray for him daily, which I do."³ This was a definite step he took to adopt a kingdom perspective over his loss of prominence in the hands of a younger preacher.

If Paul was the speaker, Barnabas must have listened while he spoke. Many top leaders today, given their busy schedules, might think it a waste of time to be listening to junior people preach. But one of the great privileges and joys of leadership is to "just be there" in order to encourage a younger person, as he or she does what we know we too could do very well. My seminary teacher and mentor, Dr. Robert Coleman, used to say that the glory of the teacher is to sit at the feet of the student and learn from him or her. I had the opportunity of preaching a few times when I was a student in seminary. That was a difficult task because in seminaries sermons are critiqued. Dr. Coleman would say, "I'll be there in the Amen corner"—and always was. When I became nervous while preaching, all I had to do was to look in his direction and see his beaming face. That encouraged me to go on preaching with zeal.

Luke reverted to the old order of "Barnabas and Paul" in his report of the proceedings of the Jerusalem Council (15:12) and of the letter that the council sent to the churches (15:25). Barnabas was an esteemed senior leader in Jerusalem, and it was certainly more appropriate for him to take the lead role there rather than Paul. Paul apparently let that happen. In other words, leadership is not an inalienable right to which we cling tenaciously. It is rather a responsibility related to the agenda of the kingdom. That agenda is always more important than our personal prominence and status.

³ W.Y. Fullerton, *F.B. Meyer: A Biography* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, n.d), p. 37.