

“THAT OLD TIME RELIGION”

“The Ideal Church Member”

Scripture Reading – Acts, 4:32-37

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. 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.

‘Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.’

Acts, 11:24, NIV

This series, based on THE BOOK OF ACTS, is entitled ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’.

The reason I want to call this series ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’ is that we need to look back in order that we might really look to the future. The old time religion needs to become the new time religion because it is the all time religion. If we get back to the basics of life in the Early Church, we might better understand what the Holy Spirit can do in our hearts and lives today.

THE BOOK OF ACTS is the story of success; the story of a church triumphant.

It is the story of a small group of uncultured and generally unlearned people with meagre resources – very little money, no prestige, and no church buildings. This small group of people went out to tell the story of a publicly executed Jew. They encountered three great obstacles – the imperial might of the Romans, the intellectual sophistication of the Greeks, and the religious bigotry of the Jews. They turned the world inside out and upside down for Jesus Christ.

The Acts of the Apostles is the story of a church on fire with evangelism and growth...

“THE CHURCH MEMBER OF MY DREAMS”

THE EVANGELICAL BEACON once printed an article entitled ‘THE IDEAL PASTOR’.

‘The ideal pastor is difficult to find, but if your church is fortunate, you may be able to secure his services. Because he lives by faith, he won't cost very much; but can still be counted upon to give heavily. He loves the older folks of the church, visiting them regularly; and he spends all of his time with the young people. He spends many hours on his knees before God; but he is always available to anyone who drops by for a friendly chat.

‘The ideal pastor loves to disciple new converts and gives full attention to calling in on the elderly, the ill, and those who are shut-in. He is always in the church office when you call; and is daily at the hospital looking for a soul to comfort. He never misses a church function, and regularly meets all the civic leaders within the community. He has a worldwide ministry through television, radio, tapes, and books and travels extensively preaching the Word. He still has time, however, to listen to everyone's problems and wants to be frequently updated on the progress of your bunions and backache.

‘The ideal pastor is 29 years old, and has been preaching for thirty years. He preaches sermons that win the hearts of the lost, and inspire the minds of the spiritually mature. He performs miracles, teaches faith, and evangelises with eloquence and fervour; yet is so profoundly simple that even young children are blessed, and teenagers take notes in his sermons. He understands the complexity of church finances and has mastery of the church budget, but never talks about money. He is a strong believer in holiness and church discipline, but never speaks a stern word to anyone. He can sing and lead music, and besides this, he helps each person and does all the things other people are too busy to do.

‘You are probably aware by now you do not have the ideal pastor, but take heart, you can easily re-shape your present leader. He should listen to everything you have to say, after all, he is God's servant. On the other hand, if you happen to have the ideal pastor, just wait a while and you won't; because he will soon be confined to a room at the hospital. There is an alternative: Love the pastor you do have and pray for him. You prayed, God answered, and now you have him... at least until he finds the ideal church full of ideal church members.’

My ideal church member would be Joseph, also known as Barnabas.

He was named Joseph, but they called him Barnabas. Barnabas is literally translated as ‘SON OF A PROPHET’, but we have it interpreted here as ‘**SON OF ENCOURAGEMENT**’. The word ‘ENCOURAGEMENT’ is the Greek word ‘PARAKLESIS’. Jesus used the same word to describe the Holy Spirit as the ‘COMFORTER’. Joseph was known as Barnabas because it described the man and his ministry. Barnabas was an encourager, the one who encouraged those around him.

Would you like a church full of encouragers, where everyone is nicknamed Barnabas?

If there is anything that we need today, it is encouragement, because we are often discouraged, and we often need to meet and deal with those who are discouraged. When people are discouraged they think God did it, but in reality, the devil caused it. The devil wants you discouraged because discouragement is the dark room where the negatives of failure are developed. How much we need a Barnabas to come alongside us and encourage us!

Perhaps Paul had Barnabas in mind when he wrote the words:

‘Praise be to the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort (ENCOURAGEMENT), who comforts (ENCOURAGES) us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort (ENCOURAGE) those in any trouble with the comfort (ENCOURAGEMENT) we ourselves have received from God.’

II Corinthians, 1:3-4, NIV

There are five characteristics in his life that I pray God will put into my life and into your life...

1. AN ENCOURAGER LIFTS LOADS

‘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, 4:36-37, NIV

There was a great distress in the Church in Jerusalem at this time.

Revival had broken out and so many people wanted to know what was happening that they poured into Jerusalem. Many of them became Christians and decided to stay and learn more about their faith. They were not wealthy people; many of them were just common ordinary people. They had no place to go, and nothing to eat. As persecution arose, everything was in turmoil. There was a great need for financial resources to meet immediate needs.

Barnabas sold the field that belonged to him, and gave the money to the apostles.

Even in the first century, to sell houses or land meant selling your best link to security. You could count on valuable property for stability when times were tough. Barnabas yielded the desire for personal security, and gave the proceeds of what he sold to those he trusted to listen for, and to act upon, God’s behalf.

Barnabas saw a need and immediately moved in to meet that need.

It would be wonderful to be in a church full of people who want to lift one another’s loads and carry one another’s burdens. That is what Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus did. He had a piece of land and just sold it. Perhaps this was one of the acts of encouragement that earned him the nickname Barnabas. He was happy to help out even at great personal cost.

An encourager lifts burdens from people.

Do not make the mistake of thinking that you must sell your property in order to encourage someone or help carry their burdens. Maybe you have love that you can give. Maybe you have wisdom that you can give. Maybe you have advice that you can give. Maybe you have time that you can give. Maybe, you will make the ultimate sacrifice in order to carry another’s burden...

‘Chaplain Charlie Waters was moving with one of the companies of his battalion when it engaged a heavily armed enemy battalion. As the battle raged and casualties mounted, Waters, with complete disregard for his own safety, rushed forward into the line of contact. Unarmed and completely exposed, he moved among, as well as in front of the advancing troops, giving aid to the wounded, assisting in their evacuation, giving words of encouragement, and administering the last rites to the dying. When a wounded paratrooper was standing in front of assaulting forces, Waters ran forward, picked the man up on his shoulders and carried him to safety. At least six more times he went outside the perimeter to rescue wounded soldiers, exposing himself to both friendly and enemy fire. Chaplain Waters was encouraging and giving aid to the wounded when he himself was mortally wounded.’

Congressional Medal of Honour Citation (Vietnam)

‘Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.’

Galatians, 6:2, NIV

2. AN ENCOURAGER FINDS FRIENDS

‘When Saul came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He 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. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.’

Acts, 9:26-28, NIV

The Jews wanted to kill Saul because they thought he was a traitor.

Saul had been instrumental in persecuting Christians and made it his life’s work to destroy the newly formed Christian Church. On the way to Damascus, Jesus appeared to him, and he was converted. Saul now lined up with the Church, much to the chagrin of the Jewish leaders.

Saul went to Jerusalem to meet up with the Christians there.

Because of his past, they were naturally suspicious of him. They were not certain if he had really been saved; whether this was some kind of elaborate plot to identify more Christians in order to persecute them. Barnabas became a friend to a lonely and scared new disciple.

Saul was a man who needed a friend – a Christian friend.

Barnabas went to find him and stood with him as he was introduced to the fearful and suspicious Church. Barnabas told them what had happened on the road to Damascus, and in the city, and that he was convinced Saul was genuine. Barnabas, the encourager, took him by the hand and told them about the change that had occurred in his brother Saul.

An encourager sees the good in us that others cannot, saying: ‘I believe in you’.

‘Jackie Robinson was the first African American to play Major League Baseball. Breaking baseball’s colour barrier, he faced hostile crowds wherever he played. While playing in his home stadium of Ebbets Field, Brooklyn, he committed an error. The fans began to jeer him. He stood at second base, humiliated, while the crowd booed. Then, without saying a word, shortstop Pee Wee Reese went over and stood next to Robinson. He put his arm around him and faced the crowd. Suddenly the fans grew quiet. Jackie Robinson later said that the arm around his shoulder saved his career. Pee Wee Reese was a true friend that day – the one who stood up and said, “I believe in this man”.’

“BEING A BETTER BUDDY”, Guy Caley

There are a lot of people who need an encourager.

Whether you are a new Christian or have been on the way for some time, we all need encouragement...

‘Encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.’
1 Thessalonians, 5:11, NIV

3. AN ENCOURAGER BUILDS BRIDGES

‘Those who had been scattered by persecution travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, where they began to speak to Greeks, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.’

Acts, 11:19-24, NIV

To avoid persecution, some Christians settled in Antioch.

There they began to tell people about Jesus. People believed and revival broke out in the city. Word of revival reached the Church in Jerusalem. They were not sure what was happening in Antioch and because no apostles were involved, they wondered whether real Christianity had spread to the Greeks there or not. They wondered if the revival really was of God.

The Church sent Barnabas to Antioch to investigate.

Can you imagine anyone better qualified to investigate? The Bible tells us that Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith. In Antioch, he saw the true grace of God at work. He believed this revival had the unmistakeable stamp of the authenticity of God upon it. Barnabas just went around slapping backs, hugging, praising God, and encouraging the new converts.

Barnabas built a bridge from Jerusalem to Antioch.

Although the Church in Jerusalem was still very young, it already had a tradition within it. Barnabas knew the tradition, admired, and understood it. What was happening in Antioch was similar but different. It was similar because God was at work in the hearts of people, but it was different because these were Greek Christians, who had a different culture. When Barnabas saw the new with his knowledge of the old, he valued his tradition and saw real value in the new frontier. God used him to mould these two vital and valid expressions of faith together.

Barnabas’ example brought a spiritual dimension into daily life.

When a friend shares a struggle they are facing with us, what stops us from offering prayer about it right there and then? When a friend today is failing to meet the Lord’s expectations, an encourager cannot just let that pass, because he knows he is a spiritual influence on others.

‘A professional man lost his job and was forced to take a menial construction job. Day after day, he was subjected to the crude language and humour of his boss and co-workers. One day he made a mistake which made him the butt of jokes for days. Finally, he decided that he would work one more day and quit. As the offensive foreman brought him his final pay packet, he said: “Hey, there’s a woman working in the front office who knows you. Says she takes care of your kids sometimes”. The woman helped in the nursery of the church where the man and his family worshiped. When the man opened his envelope, he found, along with his pay, a handwritten note from the payroll secretary: “When one part of the

Body of Christ suffers, we all suffer with it... I Just wanted you to know that I’m praying for you these days”. He stared at the note, astonished at God’s timing. He hadn’t even known the woman worked for this company. Here in his lowest hour, she had given him the encouragement to go on, to push yet another wheelbarrow of dirt up the ramp.’

“ANOTHER CHANCE”, Dean Merrill

How many times people say: “We’ve never don’t it like this before”.

Someone said there are three kinds of church leaders: there are RISK TAKERS, CARE TAKERS, and UNDERTAKERS. A lot of people do not want to be risk takers. They do not want anything new and they do not want anything to disturb them. They like it just as it is in Jerusalem, but God does something wonderful in Antioch. Do you want to be a part of what God is doing today?

‘The task of every generation is to discover the way God is moving and to move with him.’

Jonathan Edwards

4. AN ENCOURAGER DEVELOPS DISCIPLES

‘Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians at Antioch.’

Acts, 11:25-26, NIV

Barnabas realised that this new Church needed good teaching.

He was big enough to realise that he himself could not do the job, but he knew that Saul could. That conclusion may seem no big deal for us, because we know that Saul, who became Paul, had a profound impact upon the Church (as he still does with his letters today). Barnabas saw Saul as more than just a new convert to Christianity, he had loads of potential.

‘A sixteen year old boy dropped out of school because his teacher said he was mentally deficient, and could not learn any more. From the age of 16 to 32, he had had 67 jobs. He just could not do anything. Then somebody looked at him and said, “You know that boy has talent, he has latent ability. I believe we ought to give him an IQ test”. They did, and his IQ was 161. They said, “Son, you’re brilliant. You are a genius”. So he began to study, and now he is a scientist, working in laser technology with a very large salary. All because someone looked at him and realised that this boy had buried talent and had enough gumption to say: “There is something in that boy, let’s get it out of him”.’

Barnabas, the encourager, recognised the potential within Saul.

He realised that there were buried gifts within this relatively new convert. He recognised that God had given him an uncanny insight into his Word. He knew that Saul had the ability to do the work, did he have the availability? He travelled to Tarsus and persuaded Saul to take on the role of teacher to those being saved in Antioch. Saul became such a proficient teacher of the Word of God that they were first called Christians at Antioch because Saul taught Christ.

After a year in Antioch, the pair headed out on a missionary journey.

Luke originally referred to them as 'BARNABAS & SAUL'. Some point along the way Saul's name changed to Paul and from then on we read 'PAUL & BARNABAS'. Barnabas had trained Saul so well, that Paul surpassed him in leadership, and what did Barnabas do? He cheered him on!

'Forty thousand fans were on hand in the Oakland Stadium when Rickey Henderson tied Lou Brock's career stolen base baseball record. According to USA TODAY, Lou had followed Henderson's career, and was excited about his success. Realising that Henderson would set a new record, Brock said, "I'll be there. Do you think I'm going to miss out on it now? Rickey did in twelve years what took me nineteen. He is amazing". What Lou Brock did in cheering on Rickey Henderson should be a way of life in the family of God. Few circumstances give us a better opportunity to exhibit God's grace than when someone succeeds and surpasses us in an area of our own strength and reputation.'

"OUR DAILY BREAD", Mart de Hann

Surely, in the spiritual realm, we must have people like this.

There are people within our small congregation who have latent talents and spiritual gifts that must be brought to the surface. What happens if those talents and gifts enable that person to surpass you? How would you feel if there was someone better suited to do the task that you have been doing for many years? How would you feel if God exalted that person to the forefront even though you had been doing a faithful work which seemingly got no recognition?

5. AN ENCOURAGER FIXES FAILURES

'Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing". Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.'

Acts, 15:36-40, NIV

Paul and Barnabas linked up and became missionaries.

Barnabas suggested taking his nephew John Mark on their first journey. Soon Mark left and returned home. We do not know why Mark quit. Maybe it was too hard on him; maybe he was afraid; maybe he was home sick; maybe he was spiritually discouraged; maybe he was backslidden. Whatever the reason, he left the missionaries and returned home.

Paul and Barnabas planned another missionary journey.

They argued over whether or not to take John Mark. Barnabas wanted to take him, but Paul thought he was a quitter and so did not think it wise. They had a sharp disagreement. They had strong words, and decided to separate. Paul went on his way with a new partner in mission, Silas. Barnabas went off with John Mark. Notice this though: they may have disagreed and went their separate ways, but they went preaching the Gospel and the ministry continued.

Barnabas took the failure of John Mark and helped fix it.

He recognised that this young man had good stuff inside of him and, given the chance, he could stay the pace in mission and ministry. Thank God he did, because Mark would later write the Gospel that bears his name (it was the first gospel written).

The confidence shown in John Mark by Barnabas would prove well founded.

So much so, that eventually Paul began to see his true worth. However, had not Barnabas shown such faith in Mark, the story might well have been completely different.

'Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.'

II Timothy, 4:11, NIV

"You are never a failure until you decide to quit"

'There was a boy whose daddy died when he was five years old. This boy dropped out of school when he was sixteen, and he had already lost two jobs by the time he was seventeen. By the time he was eighteen, he was married. By the time he was nineteen, he was the father of a little baby. By the time he was twenty, he and his wife had separated.

'From that time on, he tried to make a living, but failed at everything. He tried to be a railway conductor, but he failed. He tried the army, but he washed out. He applied to law school, but he could not make the grade. He tried farming, but he could not grow anything in the world. He tried to be an insurance salesman, but he could not sell a single policy. He even tried to kidnap his little baby to hold him in his own arms, but he couldn't even do that. Finally, he got a job as a dishwasher and a cook, because he could not do anything else. After years of trying, he successfully talked his wife into coming back to him. Together in a little café, they cooked and washed dishes.

'When this man reached 65 years of age, he retired and received his first social security cheque for \$105.00. On the day that cheque came he looked at it and was so discouraged that he said, "I've been a failure all of my life, a cook and a dishwasher. I can't do anything. I can't make anything work. Now the government is going to have to take care of me". He decided to commit suicide at the age of 65, and went out in the backyard of his house, sat down in the shade of a tree and began to write out his will.

'Then he got thinking, "Why should I be such a failure? Is there anything I can do? Isn't there anything I know how to do? There is just one thing I can do better than most folks, I can cook". Suddenly, an idea came to him. He went to the local bank and borrowed \$87.00 against his next social security cheque. Then he went down to the local supermarket and bought some chicken and some boxes. He fried that chicken the way only he could fry it, and went from door to door, at the age of 65, in Harlan and Corbin, Kentucky, selling that chicken. You have probably already guessed his name. He was Colonel Harlan Sanders, of Kentucky Fried Chicken fame. At 65, he was a failure, ready to commit suicide, believing that he couldn't do anything. Now he is known the world over.'

What we all need, at one time or another in our spiritual walk is some Barnabas, to come alongside us and give us all the encouragement that we need. Can you be that Barnabas?