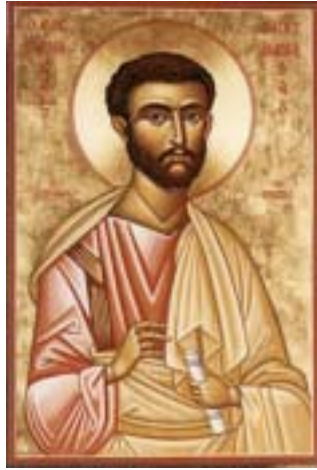


# “Barnabas the Encourager”

Acts 4:32-37; 9:26-27; 11:19-26; 13:1-3; 15:36-41



Rev. Tom Campbell-Schmitt  
July 22, 2007

*As a student of American culture and an American male I couldn't help but notice a rather intriguing article that was published in a recent issue of Newsweek. The headline read: "In Hollywood, Beta Males Best Alpha Dogs." My days in biology and sociology classes are long gone, but I do remember something about Alpha males. So to refresh my memory I went to the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, and found this definition:*

*In social animals, the alpha male is the individual in the community whom the others follow and defer to.*

*"In the natural world, Chimpanzees show deference to the alpha of the community by ritualized gestures such as bowing, allowing the alpha to walk first in a procession, or standing aside when the alpha challenges.*

*Canines also show deference to the alpha in the pack, by allowing it to be the first to eat and, usually, the first to mate; wolves are a good example of this. The status of the alpha is generally achieved by means of superior physical prowess.*

*In humans, the expression refers to a male who is powerful or high on the social ladder, similar to hegemonic masculinity. In Western cultures, the term is usually pejorative and describes a man who is overtly or affectedly masculine to the point of rejecting any affront to his ascribed status."*

*So much for the Alpha. But what's this business about the Beta Male? Let's read on...*

*"In the power hierarchy of the animal group, another role is defined and named. The Beta male, which is the contender,*

*subservient to the alpha male, but only after testing. The betas act as second-in-command and can either be dethroned alpha males or future alphas if they persist in challenging the regnant alpha male."*

The *Newsweek* article states, "This summer Bruce Willis is the last he-man standing. Apparently society has grown weary of the Teflon-coated John Wayne stereotypes; the chest-beating, leader-of-the-pack, types. A masculine type is emerging who isn't concerned with status and winning at all costs. He is an easy-going, rather ordinary fellow with an underwhelming physique and average looks. He's not into power, money or status. He operates with an entirely different set of values than the Alpha Male." Maybe you'll be able to spot some of them in the movies you see this summer.

In his blog entitled *The Beta-Male Manifesto*, Christopher Moore writes: "While we all accept that the limelight will always fall on the politicians, professional athletes, CEOs, and other Alpha males for whom leadership seems to come as naturally as handcuffs, it is another breed of male, a lower-key, less-dominant variety, that actually directs human existence. The world may be led by Alpha Males, but the machinery of the world turns on the bearings of the Beta Male...While Alpha males are often gifted with superior physical attributes—size, strength, speed, and good looks—the Beta Male gene has survived not by meeting and overcoming adversity, but by anticipating and avoiding it. That is, when the alpha males were out charging after mastodons, the beta males could imagine in advance that attacking what was essentially an angry, woolly bulldozer with a pointed stick, might be a losing proposition, so he hung back at camp to console the grieving widows whose Alpha-male mates had been stomped into mastodon moss."

This morning we meet up with a Beta Male from a long time ago. His story is found within the pages of the book of Acts, which records some of the history of the fledgling church. The real name of this Beta Male is Joseph, but the apostles gave him the nickname of Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement." In the next few minutes I think you will come to understand why this Beta Male was given a new name.

We don't know much about Barnabas' background expect that he came from a family that was part of the tribe of Levi who lived on the island of Cyprus. The first time we encounter Barnabas is in the fourth chapter of Acts (4:32-37). He was a member of the Jerusalem church—a layperson—who was apparently pretty well off financially. As many of the people in the congregation did, he sold some of his property and donated the proceeds to his church. We can assume it was fairly valuable property for two reasons: One is that he was from Cyprus which was a particularly large and fertile island off the coast of Syria. It was famous for its wines, grains, oils, figs and honey. To own land on Cyprus was to own something of exceptional value. The second reason we can assume his gift was significant was that it was specifically mentioned by Luke, the writer of Acts, so we can surmise that it was probably quite generous.

Of course, this is one of the reasons Beta Barnabas is a different kind of hero and role model for us. Possessions for him were viewed through the lens of stewardship rather than ownership. He understood the biblical standard of the tithe. Growing up as a devout Jew, he was taught to set aside one-tenth of his income for the work of the kingdom. This was to be the floor, not the ceiling. But he wanted to do more than just the minimum, so he gave well beyond his tithe. He was a good man, generous with what he had.

The next time we encounter Barnabas is in the ninth chapter of Acts (9:26-27). It was after the famous conversion of Saul, whose name eventually became Paul. Saul was what we would call an Alpha Male and they certainly have their place in serving Christ. If you recall his pre-conversion story, Saul was leading the charge against anyone whom he felt was perverting the Jewish faith. He was the Defender of Orthodoxy sort of like Cardinal Ratzinger was known as the Defender of Catholic Orthodoxy before his election as Pope Benedict.

Saul became convinced a new sect known as "Followers of the Way" had veered way off course perverting historic Judaism and was leading people astray as it proclaimed that this Jesus who had been crucified was the promised Messiah. Good Jew that he was, Saul was willing to wipe out such heresy by any means necessary—including torture and murder. But as he was on his way to Damascus to take on members of this new sect, Saul's life was turned completely around by an encounter with the living Christ.

You can imagine the reaction of the early Christians when they heard the news. They could not believe it and they certainly didn't trust it. Think about it. Here was one of their most vocal, most violent enemies now saying he was their friend; he was ONE of them—the newest convert to faith in Jesus Christ—in fact, appointed as an apostle by Christ himself. Yeah, right. If you were one of them, would you have believed it? It would be a little like saying Osama bin Laden was now rumored to have become an Orthodox Jew and was last seen applying for citizenship in Israel. It only made good sense for the early Christians NOT to welcome Saul with open arms when they knew full well the lengths that he had gone to do his murderous work. He was, after all, a terrorist of sorts.

Now enter Barnabas. Acts 9: 26 says, "When Saul had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles." By the time Saul had regained his sight after his Damascus Road experience, word spread that he had had escaped from Damascus by being lowered in a basket through a window in the city wall to elude his Jewish pursuers. But still the church leaders were not convinced of his sincerity. After all, Saul's escape could have just been a clever ruse. So Barnabas decided to conduct his own investigation. He gleaned the details of Saul's conversion. He found out how Saul had been mentored by people he knew and trusted after he left Damascus; he even interviewed Saul himself. In the end, Barnabas was so convinced that Saul's conversion was genuine and he took it upon himself to sponsor Saul before the apostles.

The third time we meet Barnabas is in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts (11:19-26), the passage we read this morning. Christianity was spreading not just among the Jews, but among non-Jews as well. In one particular city, Antioch, according to the biblical account, a large number of so-called Gentiles were converted and began coming to church. It was a whole new world. There had never been any Gentiles in the church before, and the leadership in Jerusalem didn't know what to make of it so they decided to investigate. They sent Barnabas up to Antioch to find out what was going on and to do a kind of needs-assessment. He went, and was delighted with what he saw happening, but he also recognized the tremendous challenges the church in Antioch was facing. These new converts needed solid instruction in the faith. So Barnabas thought to himself, "I know just the person who can help." He made a quick trip to Tarsus and recruited Saul to come down and be their teacher.

When he arrived the two teamed up together for a year or so with the result that many more Gentiles were brought into the fellowship of the church. But that's not the last time we hear about Barnabas. We meet him again in Acts chapter 13:1-3. And here his situation changes. He and Paul had gone from Antioch to Jerusalem to report on the progress of the Syrian church. While they were there, word came of a serious famine that was spreading over the Roman world and the two of them were sent back to Antioch, taking with them a special offering which had been collected for famine relief in their area. Once they distributed the gifts to those who had need they continued their work of teaching and preaching.

John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas. We know from Acts 12:25 that he had accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. But when they came to Perga in Pamphylia we're told "John departed from them and returned to Jerusalem" (Acts 13:13). So Paul and Barnabas continued on without him. They went to cities like Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. As they continued to teach and heal the Gentiles were so moved by their words and deeds they shouted out, "'The gods have come down to us in human form!' Barnabas, they called Zeus; and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker" (Acts 14:11-12).

When they doubled back to Antioch Paul suggested that they visit every city where they had started a church to see how they were doing and offer encouragement. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them. But being an Alpha Male, Paul refused because John had deserted them on their first missionary journey. He wasn't macho enough so he was eliminated. Paul and Barnabas disagreed so sharply that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed to Cyprus. Paul chose Silas and journeyed through Syria to Cilicia (Acts 15:36-41).

Barnabas was sympathetic to Paul's concerns, but he had compassion for John Mark who was just learning the ropes. He was willing to give Mark another chance, when Paul wanted to have nothing to do

with him. Barnabas wanted to show patience to Mark, when Paul was ready to write him off altogether.

What I find interesting is that Barnabas was treating Mark the same way he treated Paul years earlier when everyone in Jerusalem wanted nothing to do with him. We're now seeing a pattern in the behavior of Barnabas, aren't we? What is that pattern? He's an encourager. He helped out Paul when no one else wanted to touch him. Now we see him helping out John Mark when Paul is ready to give up on him.

Barnabas understood that everyone fails from time to time. There is not a person in this room who doesn't need a little help along the way. Barnabas could see the potential in Mark that Paul could not see. He wanted to help Mark become the very best person he could be. Tradition has it that Mark went on to write the second Gospel. He is also believed to be the first patriarch of Alexandria and is revered by both the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church, and is therefore considered the founder of Christianity in Africa.

I think Paul learned from the example of his friend Barnabas. Because in his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul says, "Encourage one another and build each other up" (I Thessalonians 5:11) The Greek word *parakaleo* has several related meanings: to exhort, admonish, teach, beg, entreat, beseech, console, encourage, comfort. But in the New Testament the basic word is always used for one primary purpose—to describe functions that will help someone to be built up in their faith.

We have all experienced the frustration of being around unreliable people. After awhile we learn not to count on them. If there's an important job to do, we look for people that we can count on. But that doesn't mean we give up on them.

Notice again the meaning of *parakaleo*: to exhort, admonish, teach, beg, entreat, beseech, console, encourage, comfort. Sometimes we need to comfort the afflicted, but at other times we need to afflict the comfortable. To encourage them to get off their duff and start taking their lives seriously—because we only get one; and God wants us to make the most of it. We've all met people like Barnabas who believed in us so much that we began to believe in ourselves. The result was we tried harder and we did better.

Last summer a friend told me about a service project his teenage son participated in. In many ways it was similar to our own Mexico Mission team which travels each spring break down to Tijuana, Mexico, to building homes for the poor. The young people on this particular trip were divided into groups of 15-20, including a few adults who know what they are doing when it comes to construction. They were then assigned a house to build or repair. They work very hard all week long on their projects and were to be on the job by 7AM, working until late into the afternoon.

One thing that makes it possible for these teens to do all this manual labor was something their leaders called an *Encouragrams*. When the students first arrived in camp they were each given an en-

velope with their name on it; all the envelopes were taped to a huge board. There were tables nearby with pencils and little pieces of paper. And throughout the week these teens would write each other short notes to encourage another crew member or friend.

What was interesting was to see these young people come dragging back into camp dead tired after 10 hours of manual labor in the hot summer sun; go right to their envelope and find a note that said something like, "Keep up the good work! I know you are tired, but I know you can handle it!" or "Your sweat encouraged me to do the same!" This wall was the most frequented place in camp. These kids would rather go there than sleep or eat! Why? Because of their hunger for encouragement and affirmation.

We all need to receive it; we all need to give it—especially if we're followers of Christ—the Great Encourager. Whether you're an Alpha male or female or a Beta male or female, everyone of you can be an encourager. I went online earlier this week and came across an entire industry that makes sending notes and cards to some as simple as a mouse click. Watch this short clip, which is a complimentary eCard from Dayspring.com.

The great thing about this ministry is that you can be a home-bound invalid and still send off a note of encouragement to someone, even as you receive notes of encouragement from others. Sometimes, however, there is a disconnect between our thoughts and our actions. We think of someone but just don't get around to telling them. So this morning we're going to make it real easy.

In the narthex we have set up some tables, pens, and stationery. While you're enjoying your coffee, take 5 minutes to write a note of encouragement to someone. Then take that note home with you and put it in the mail or get online and send them an eCard. "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up in faith." (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

*Ben Johnson, who teaches at Columbia Seminary in Atlanta says, "I am persuaded that some people outside the church will never find their way inside the church until the love and acceptance and forgiveness and encouragement of Christ is offered to them by a member of that church." You and I are called to be involved in the ministry of encouragement.*

*Every time Barnabas is mentioned in Acts, he's bringing encouragement.*

*The world around us is filled with discouraged people who desperately need encouragement: friends, neighbors, co-workers, even members of our own family. You might want to ask yourself two questions: 1) Who has God placed in my life to be my encourager? and 2) Who has God placed in my life to encourage? An encourager is aware and sensitive to what people are experiencing. What their circumstances and struggles are. An encourager comes along side someone and communicates by word as well as by their actions that they understand and care. They take the time to make a phone call, send a card or an email.*