

The man time forgot

Acts 15:36 - 16:5

April 2, 2006

It's not fair ...

It's not fair that pushy people get noticed. It's not fair that people who blow their own horn get the headlines. It's not fair that headstrong, one-track-minded, tolerate-no-dissent crusaders are remembered in the history books.

It's not fair that character and intelligence and diligence are not enough to gain you recognition. It's not fair that peacemaking is not considered an heroic virtue. It's not fair that goodness, in and of itself, is not judged more important than success.

It's not fair.

It's not fair that Paul is celebrated as THE driving force behind the growth and development of the Christian church, while Barnabas is the man time forgot. We have heard a little in the book of Acts about Barnabas and his important role in the birthing of the Gentile church, but after the split between him and Paul recorded in Acts 15, we never hear about him again. How many contemporary seminary courses, Bible studies, or sermons do you think there are that deal with Barnabas' legacy to the church? With Paul's legacy to the church? Barnabas is the man time forgot. It's not fair.

Now I do not mean in any way to denigrate Paul's accomplishments or Paul's character or Paul's faith or Paul's clear sense of mission and his faithfulness in carrying out that mission. His missionary journeys laid the foundation of the modern Christian church. His letters are an invaluable guide for living faithfully as a follower of Jesus even in our own day. And his theology of grace is, well, simply astounding! But it is a shame that a man like Barnabas is so often overlooked and forgotten.

Let me remind you about Barnabas. Barnabas was there from the beginning as the community of believers took shape in Jerusalem. He was among those who readily sold personal property and turned the proceeds over to the apostles for the benefit of everybody else. He was the one who went to bat for Paul when the rest of the Jerusalem leadership wanted nothing to do with this enemy of the church.

He was the one who introduced Paul to the church at Antioch-on-the-Orontes, and shared with Paul the yearlong teaching ministry among the Jews and Gentiles of that unique congregation. He accompanied Paul on the first missionary enterprise into Asia. Or, rather, it was Paul who accompanied him! Barnabas' name is listed first among the leaders of the Antioch church, and when Luke describes the early stages of their trip, it is always "Barnabas and Saul," not "Saul and Barnabas."

Barnabas stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Paul challenging the emissaries who came to Antioch from Jerusalem, telling Gentile believers they must be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses to be in the right with God. And he went to bat for John Mark, challenging Paul when Paul wanted to leave him behind on the return trip to the churches in Asia.

This is who Barnabas was: loyal, committed to his friends, and a staunch advocate of those no else wanted to befriend; a man of great integrity who lived what he believed and did not waver from deeply held values, regardless of circumstance; a peacemaker, a reconciler, and a tireless worker in the service of the Lord Jesus.

It is most fair to say that our own church owes its existence to the ministry of Paul and the church at Antioch. Without their ready inclusion of Gentile believers and their vision for the proclamation of the gospel far and wide, the church may never have spread from Jerusalem to Syria, and from Syria to Asia and Europe, and from Europe to the New World, and from the New World to Iowa! But the ministries of both Paul and the church at Antioch would never have gotten off the ground without Barnabas. We owe so much to this man who gets so little credit.

It's not fair. But it doesn't matter!

It doesn't matter whether or not Barnabas has been forgotten by history, because I am certain he was not forgotten by his Lord! What he did cannot be undone, and the value of what he did for the sake of the Kingdom can never be diminished. Who cares what people remember? I really don't think Barnabas would care. What matters is that Barnabas loved the Lord Jesus sincerely, and served him diligently, and was not distracted by lesser allegiances or by the need to make a name for himself.

It is people like Barnabas who make a real difference in this world. Not the people who get the headlines, but the people who do the work. Loyal people, hardworking people, people motivated by love and not by the need for attention. People who bring out the best in the people around them and enable them to succeed. People who stand up for those of questionable virtue, for those who fail, giving them a second chance and a third chance and a fourth, until they finally prove the wisdom of the One who believes in them.

That is still true today. Sometimes the church can be distracted by its own cult of celebrity. We celebrate the achievements of wildly successful megachurch icons, we read the books of best-selling Christian authors, we attend conferences all featuring the same list of contemporary church heroes. But as valuable a service as these Christian celebrities do provide -- and they do -- I truly believe that most of the real work of the gospel is being done by all kinds of people you have never heard of ... people like you. The real work of the gospel is done one little act of generosity, one little act of forgiveness, one little act of courage, at a time.

The church of Jesus Christ needs people like Barnabas, and people like Paul: go-getters and peacemakers, people who leave behind a legacy of achievement and people who leave behind a legacy of love. Barnabas and Paul made a good team. Their strengths complemented each other well. That's why it is such a shame that they went their separate ways. The church of Jesus Christ will survive and even thrive in spite of such quarrels, but it does God no honor to turn our backs on each other.

So today I remember both of them. I thank God for Paul -- for his ardent passion for Jesus, for his uncompromising zeal for defending the gospel, for his deep devotion to the welfare of the churches spread throughout the world that he knew.

I thank God for Barnabas -- for his ardent passion for Jesus, for his wise leadership of the church in its infancy, for his courageous advocacy on behalf of all God's children.

And I thank God for you. For all of you who are passionate about serving Jesus. For all of you who genuinely care about neighbors inside and outside the church, paying close attention to their needs and doing your best to meet those needs in quiet and unheralded ways. For all of you who write that encouraging note, who say that encouraging word, who offer that encouraging help.

You are great in the kingdom of God, and Barnabas' reward will be your reward: *Well done, my good and faithful servant!*