

The Continuing Acts of Jesus: But Barnabas

Acts 9:19-31

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Dan Hoffman

What do Pierre Trudeau, Terry Fox, Chris Hadfield, Sir John A MacDonald and Wayne Gretzky all have in common?

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Answer: These guys are among the top 10 Canadian heroes compiled in a survey of thousands of Canadians in preparation for our 150th anniversary.¹ Everyone who made the list has been influential and inspirational to countless Canadians

Within the Jesus following community heroes have arise as well. Women and men who have lived their lives radically and recklessly for the glory of God, and who have challenged and inspired the rest of us to pursue Christ more than we otherwise would.

In my own life one of the names at the top of this list is Todd Atkinson. I met him when I was 19, and he told lots of stories from his own life of seeing God at work.

One day he told me, there is nothing better than needing God, but this is something that doesn't happen often to us wealthy North Americans. To illustrate his point he told me a couple stories from his own life. The first was one where he showed up in a new town where he was going to spend several months preaching. And he knew he desperately needed a vehicle to get around, but didn't have the money to buy one. But after praying about this he decided just to see what God would do.

When his plane touched down the guy who picked him up, whom he had never met, handed him a set of keys and said "I just bought a new car and was going to sell my old one, but I woke up from a dream about someone I assume is you this morning. And in my dream I was giving them my car. So I think I'd better do that." Todd said stuff like this happened to him all the time. And I loved hearing him tell these stories, until he told one that blew my mind.

Todd had accumulated a \$30,000 debt over several years of being a student. His tuition had been paid for him by random people, but he had had to cover his living expenses. After graduating this was hanging over his head and keeping him in a spot where he was constantly just scraping by. But he wasn't depressed about this, in fact, he appreciated the pressure because it kept him in a spot where he needed God. Think about that.

Then one day someone gave him a gift of \$30,000. And Todd found himself in a spot he didn't expect. He could be debt free! But after praying about this he decided that instead of paying off his own debt he would give the \$30,000 away. And the motivation behind this was that he didn't want to get out of a spot where he needed to rely on God.

¹ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/top-10-canadian-heroes-list-includes-pierre-trudeau-jack-layton-1.2676398>

Now when I heard this story I had two responses. My first was man, God was trying to provide for Todd, and he missed his chance. But I've followed Todd over the last 20 years or so, and he hasn't starved to death. And I don't think he has ever regretted his decision. I also don't think God has said "Oh man! Todd just gave away the \$30,000 I worked hard to put together for him, now how am I supposed to provide?"... I just can't see God worrying about that.

And so my second response has been a huge challenge not to strive so hard to provide for myself and my family. Now this doesn't mean I've been lazy. But ever since hearing Todd's story I've been convinced that there is a commodity more important than the money that meets my daily needs. I want to see Jesus move, and I want to be part of what He is doing.

Perhaps you've got stories of men or women of faith who have inspired you to pursue Christ in a way you had never considered before. People respond well to inspiration.

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Please grab the Bible from the pew in front of you and open it up to Acts chapter 9. We will be picking up the story in the second half of verse 19. And we are going to look at a man who, while he never wrote anything, played a huge role in inspiring and encouraging people who wrote a third of the New Testament. Of course we are talking about Barnabas, and the two authors he inspired were Paul who wrote 13 of our epistles, and Mark who wrote one of the Gospels.

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But before we get to Barnabas, our text today starts with Saul. Now last week we looked at Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus. And we saw that his salvation was for us. Paul says:

I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His immense patience as an example for those who would believe in Him and receive eternal life. (1 Timothy 1:16)

And so we looked at how, if God could save Saul, then he can save us no matter how messed up we are. That's good news. And he can save those around us who don't show any signs of coming to faith. Saul's salvation was for our encouragement.

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Today's story picks up with Saul beginning to preach in Damascus shortly after having his eyes healed by Ananias. Look at verse 19

[Read Acts 9:19b-22]

Now we could really spend a whole sermon looking at the significance of these few verses, but there is only one thing that I really want to draw out of this today, and that is the transition from pre-conversion Saul to post conversion Saul.

So the last recorded words Saul spoke prior to Jesus revealing Himself are in verse 5 where we read:

'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked.

This is Saul speaking into the bright light that has shone all around him. And the response he receives is that Jesus Christ, who he thought was dead, isn't just alive, but is Lord of the universe. And in this moment Saul receives both the shock of having the carpet pulled out from underneath everything he has built his life on, and also his vision taken away.

And then we read that Saul went to Damascus and spent three days neither eating or drinking. Can you imagine what must have been rattling around in his head. Just days earlier he had been salivating over the thought of devouring Jesus' church, and now he had been chosen to proclaim Jesus' name to the world. What we get in these verses is the total destruction of one worldview, and the rebuilding of another.

And so when Ananias prays for him and his vision is restored he gets baptized, spends a couple days with the disciples in Damascus, and then gets to work on his mission. And the very first words out of his mouth are the words of verse 20: "Jesus is the Son of God." And then in verse 22 we see that he "baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah."

The transition here is huge, and it is very unique in Acts. In fact this is the only time in Acts that the words "Son of God" appear. So Luke is making it very clear that from this moment on Saul's life would revolve around the deep assurance that Jesus was no mere mortal, He is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. And He is alive and in control of the universe. Jesus is the God we live for.

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Now we are going to spend lots of time in Paul's life so we are going to leave him here for now and turn to Barnabas who gets very little screen time, but plays a significant role. So let's pick up the text in verse 26:

[Read Acts 9:26-30]

Barnabas is a behind the scenes, often overlooked and under appreciated person. But he is one of the big agents Jesus used to inspire Christ-like confidence in the Christian community of the first century. While other people were busy building their own empires, Barnabas built Jesus' kingdom by leader making. And so today I want to look at three aspects of Barnabas' life and what it meant for him to be a leader maker in contrast to an empire builder.

Now as we get going we should probably define "Christian leadership." And we need to do this because leadership, in the world we live in, is a big deal, but often takes a very different form from Christian leadership. So we hear lots about CEO's and other business executives, and sports stars, and politicians. And generally these people are powerful and force others to do their bidding.

John Piper says Christian leadership in contrast, speaks of the “degree that you shape others toward the image of Christ.”² Christian leadership is about helping other people look like Jesus.

Now there are two reasons I really like this definition. The first is that it applies to every obedient Christ follower. All of us are supposed to be shaping those around us into the image of Christ. Now of course when we are talking about Christian leadership we are usually referring to those who are gifted at influencing others towards Christ-likeness, but the fact is all of us can do this to some extent. I like that.

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The second reason I like this definition is that it is built on the idea that Jesus is the best example of a leader that exists. Certainly He fits within the definition Piper provides – not only was He the standard of Christ-likeness, but He was exceptionally good at conforming others into His image. The more people hung out with Him the more they looked like Him.

And Jesus went about accomplishing this in an incredibly revolutionary way. You see, while most leaders are insecure and so use their power to keep the people around them down, Jesus was so profoundly confident in Himself that He was able to build people up. And so He could lead people towards Christ-likeness by doing things like washing their feet and bending down to where the woman, caught in adultery, had been thrown, and ultimately dying on the cross for our sin. And as a result billions of people have had their lives transformed by the power of Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate Christian leader.

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And Jesus is also the ultimate leader maker. So Jesus spent His ministry with people like Peter and Mary Magdalene and James and John – messed up people – and He built them into the pillars of His church. And Barnabas was like Jesus in this way. Barnabas was a leader maker.

So what I want to do for the rest of our time is look at three ways Barnabas resisted the temptation to build his own empire, and instead gave himself to making leaders. And my goal in doing this is that we would be inspired to emulate Him and become a church dedicated to building up unlikely people for the increase of Jesus’ kingdom.

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So, the first thing that jumps out of this text is the way verse 27 starts. Look there if you would. Verse 26 establishes a very understandable context. Saul has come back to Jerusalem. This is a city that knows him well. But there is not internet or cell phones, which means the story of Damascus hasn’t beaten him back home. And so all the Christians in Jerusalem know of Saul is a man who will go to the Nth degree to catch and incarcerate Jesus followers. And now he is attempting to join them. So they get scarred. They think it is a trick. And they don’t want to let him in.

² John Piper <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/barnabas-the-maker-of-a-great-leader>

And then we get two amazing words in verse 27: “But Barnabas.” It’s brilliant! Barnabas isn’t like everyone else. He is not afraid. He is a leader maker. He is a guy who is willing to take a risk to build someone else up. And so Barnabas puts his credibility on the line to stand with Saul. And Barnabas has a reputation to lose. So back in chapter 4 we were introduced to him in one of those ideal church passages. Luke writes:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had... And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

This is one of those text, like the one at the end of chapter 2, where the church is pictured getting it right. There aren’t many ideal passages like this. And then Luke continues by attaching a face to this incredible picture:

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 4:32-37)

Barnabas is the posterboy of the way things are supposed to happen in church. He’s an encouragement to everyone. And he shows this by risking to give away what God had given him, to provide for others. I think Todd Atkinson. This is the kind of guy Barnabas was. And then in today’s text he shows it again by risking to stand up for someone with a terrible reputation who claims Jesus has made a difference in their life.

Here’s the take away: if you want to be a leader maker you need to risk losing what you have in order to build up people who haven’t proven themselves yet. Leader makers are people who take chances. And these chances don’t always work out. Barnabas’ chances work out pretty good here, but risks don’t always work out – at least not the way we think they will.

So if you take a risk to support a new ministry there is a chance that the ministry won’t be successful. You may lose your time and money. And if you take a risk on a new leader they may let you down. But a Jesus-honouring leader maker takes the risk anyway. Risk taking for Jesus brings Him glory.

So Barnabas saw something in Saul that impressed him. He saw his potential and became his advocate. And the result was that the church in Jerusalem accepted him. “If Barnabas, the son of encouragement, will vouch for you, then you must be okay.”

And then immediately their resolve was tested (verse 29). Saul had a big mouth and quickly provoked the Jews to so much anger they tried to kill him. And the church of Jerusalem, that had just decided to trust Saul because of Barnabas, chose to risk their own safety to smuggle him off to Tarsus. They did this for Barnabas!

Leader makers in Jesus' kingdom aren't worried about building their own empires. So they take risks with their reputations and resources to give people with no experience or reputation a chance. So friend, are you willing to take a risk with what you have for the possibility of partnering with Jesus in what He is doing in someone else?

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The second mark that we can derive from Barnabas' life is that leader makers are humble and self-effacing. This means that they are good at stepping out of the lime light and into the background while pushing others to the front.

Now we don't get a chance to see this in Acts 9, but a couple chapters later it becomes evident. So in Acts 11 the story picks up with some of those, who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed, going to Antioch and preaching about Jesus. Word of this gets back to Jerusalem and the Apostles want to make sure everything was on the up and up, and so they send Barnabas to check it out. And when he gets there we read:

When [Barnabas] arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, 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 11:23-24)

It's a total success. Barnabas the encourager shows up and encourages people, and the result is even more people come to Jesus.

Now this is really Barnabas' opportunity to shine. He had been commissioned by the Apostles, so he had a totally legitimate ministry. He could have settled down, built a church, and become the bishop of Antioch. But Barnabas... is a leader maker like Jesus. And so he isn't interested in building his own empire, he wants to be part of what Jesus is doing to build His kingdom. And so in the very next verses we get something amazing. It reads:

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. (Acts 11:25-26)

Instead of solidifying himself as the big man on campus, Barnabas is so confident in his identity that he sends for Saul, who he knows has a way more charismatic personality and is a way better preacher. And Barnabas invites him to do ministry in Antioch.

And then watch what happens. If you keep looking forward through Acts to chapter 13 the church in Antioch gets established and we read:

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:2-3)

Notice here that it is Barnabas and Saul still. Barnabas is still the guy with the reputation pouring into Saul. And this carries on until a little later in chapter 13 we bump into a guy named Elymas the sorcerer. And he is trying to lead Barnabas and Saul's people away from Christ. And then all of a sudden Saul, full of the Holy Spirit, tears him apart:

You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time. (Acts 13:10-11 ESV)

And after Saul spoke the guy went blind and everyone took Saul really seriously.

Now this is probably not the way Barnabas would have handled this situation. Barnabas saw the good side in everyone to a fault – it gets him in trouble later.³ And that's because sometimes standing up for Christ isn't about being nice, it is about truth and boldness. And that is where Saul's gifts shone. And Barnabas knew this and supported him in it.

And then in the very next verse Saul is referred to as Paul for the first time, and he is out in front and Barnabas is following.

So verse 13 reads "From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga."⁴ And then verse 42 reads: "As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further." And then verse 46 says "Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly." And chapter 14 verse 1 says "At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue."

Barnabas, the great son of encouragement, has successfully promoted Saul and diminished himself. He's older than Saul, he's been around longer, he's got more experience, he's got a longer reputation. But Barnabas... is a leader maker not an empire builder. And like Jesus proved, making leaders is about bending down and washing feet. And that is what Barnabas does. Barnabas makes Saul into the leader.

So friend, ask yourself: How can I look like Barnabas? How can I look like Jesus? How can I bend down to build up the people around me into Christ-likeness?

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³ Galatians 2:13 "The other Jews joined [Peter] in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray."

⁴ Acts 13:13

The final aspect of leader-making I want to take from Barnabas' life is his commitment to people over money. Barnabas is following Jesus for the joy set before him, rather than the empire right now.

So we already referred back to chapter 4 where Barnabas sells his land and puts the money at the Apostle's feet. That's how he started. But he continues in this for his entire ministry. 20 years later, when Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, he responds to one of their errors with the scathing rebuke:

Don't we have the right to food and drink? Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living? (1 Corinthians 9:4-6)

It's been years, and still Paul and Barnabas are working for free. And they are doing this, not because it is wrong for pastors to get paid – this is the opposite of their point, but because they want to make it clear that their motivation is for the increase of Jesus' glory not money. They are building His kingdom, not their own empires.

So friend, ask yourself: where do my passions lie? Am I most concerned about money? Or am I passionate about using what I've got to build the people around me up? This is what Barnabas did. This looks like Jesus.

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So let's pull all this together and come back to the challenge we established at the beginning: are you an empire builder, or have you been inspired by someone, like the son of encouragement, to build Jesus' kingdom by leader making?

Barnabas was a man who risked elevating younger, less experienced people with stained reputations all for the glory of God's kingdom. And in doing this He lead them towards Christ-likeness.

And Barnabas humbly let go of his position to put others first. Barnabas was comfortable in the foreground, but he chose to bend down and follow Saul rather than build his own empire. Barnabas looked like Jesus. And the result was the people around him began to look like Jesus too.

And finally, Barnabas knew where his treasure lay. Barnabas was a man who used his time and money to make leaders rather than empires. And the result was a Jesus-honouring testimony no one could fault.

So brothers and sisters, let the heroes of our faith inspire you. Look like Barnabas, look like Paul. Look like Jesus. Give up building your own empire, and give yourself to leading the people around you towards their full potential. And in this may you find, like Barnabas, that all of us have the ability to become heroes of the faith to somebody as we shape them towards the image of Christ.

I love you. Let me pray for us.