

St. Barnabas: The forgotten apostle?

Aside from the Twelve, few others receive the designation of apostle in the New Testament. Chief among them is the apostle Paul. Among the others is his one-time collaborator Barnabas, whose memorial is celebrated by the Church on June 11.

Legend recalls Barnabas as one of the 70 disciples of Christ in the Gospel, but few details about him were recorded in the New Testament. However, the fact that he is mentioned by name repeatedly indicates a certain significance, and the context in which he is mentioned, particularly his partnership with Paul, expresses further importance. Given these realities, what we know about Barnabas from Scripture deserves closer reflection, especially since Barnabas' role in the early Christian community remains relevant for us all. But, even more, his designation as an apostle informs us that Barnabas was held up in the early Church as an exemplary Christian and a pre-eminent leader, and so he provides a model for all of those in ministry.

Detachment for Ministry

The vast majority of what we know about Barnabas is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. First known as Joseph, he came from the priestly Levite tribe and was a native of Cyprus (cf. Acts 4:36-37). Barnabas first emerged as one of the early Christians who sold a tract of land and placed the profits "at the feet of the apostles" (Acts 4:37). This is juxtaposed to other early Christians who gave only a portion of their profits to the early believers' common fund from a similar sale.

For his generosity, Barnabas is held up as an example by Luke. This generosity, however, reflects a deeper detachment that

reflects total commitment to the Gospel. In imitation of the Lord's own way of life, Barnabas is an example of the priest's call to simplicity of life and to the evangelical counsel of poverty. This detachment and generosity is not for its own sake, however; it is to open oneself to greater availability for mission and to remove distractions from Gospel living, as Barnabas – and countless other believers – have shown throughout the ages.

Through this radical commitment to the Gospel, Barnabas found the freedom available only in Christ, which became the foundation for his success in spreading the Good News. As he rose to leadership among early Christians, Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to oversee the evolving community of believers at Antioch.

A Priesthood for Others

Though a Levite, the priestly tribe of God's Chosen People, it is uncertain if Barnabas himself was a priest, as that would require him to be a direct progeny of Aaron, the brother of Moses. Nonetheless, Barnabas' Levite background remains a significant characteristic.

Regardless whether he was a priest or not, his own exposure to the priestly class would have endowed him with a particular knowledge of the life of Jewish priests. They were responsible for sacrifice and worship, either directly as priests or by filling supporting roles within Temple life.

Levites were sustained by the tithes of the other tribes of Israel and held few belongings for themselves. It is uncertain why Barnabas would have owned land, but since he was from Cyprus, regulations likely may have been different.

Because of their sacral duties, Levites maintained a distinct status among their brethren, and so one easily can imagine that Levite status meant a comfortable, well-provided

existence. Traces of a privileged caste – akin to what we know as clericalism – was found to varying degrees among the Levites, leaving many unaccountable to the wider community. That dynamic naturally stifles the spiritual life and leaves one navel-gazing, no longer interested in what lies beyond themselves, no longer engaged in spiritual growth or mission.

In Barnabas, though, nonesuch is found. What is discovered, most of which is contextual in nature, deserves reflection on the priestly image found in Barnabas. He shows radical commitment to the Gospel, selling the land he has and leaving the profits to the good of the Church, as mentioned. Barnabas left everything behind to advance the kingdom of God, taking upon himself a host of difficulties and sufferings for the sake of the Gospel. He is recognized as a skilled leader. We know he becomes a leader among the first Christians at Antioch (cf. Acts 11:22) – indeed the first believers to bear that name according to Acts (11:26).

Barnabas' name means "son of encouragement" (Acts 4:36), or sometimes is rendered "son of consolation," which speaks of a pastoral nature. He is found to teach the truth come what may. But he also is a unifying figure, unafraid to go out of his way to let the light of Christ shine in others, even when it means he must diminish. Therefore he is seen as a leader who recognizes that he must encourage and tease out the gifts and talents of others for the sake of the Kingdom and success of the mission. He recognizes he cannot go it alone. It could be said, then, that Barnabas embodies pastoral leadership, priestliness of the New Covenant, in a dynamic, life-giving way.

Success of Self-Awareness

These characteristics are most on display in Barnabas' relationship with Paul. After his transformative experience on the road to Damascus, which led to the conversion of the one-time Christian persecutor, Paul shows up on Barnabas' radar.

The one who often is referred to as “the Apostle” was introduced to the apostles by Barnabas (cf. Acts 9:27). In fact, Barnabas even vouched for him it seems, after Paul “tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26).

The two formed a missionary team to evangelize the Gentiles and, early on, when referenced together, Barnabas received top billing. Together they encouraged Jews who came to Christ to remain faithful to their calling (cf. Acts 13:43). Together they spoke boldly the Gospel truths, and together they faced hardship. At Lystra, “They called Barnabas ‘Zeus’ and Paul ‘Hermes,’ because he was the chief speaker” (Acts 14:12). As Paul’s skills began to flourish and shine, Barnabas does not seem to show any jealousy or hostility.

A disagreement caused them to split ways, however (cf. Acts 15:36-39). While the details are not entirely clear, we know that as Paul and Barnabas prepared for their second missionary trip, they disagreed on whether John Mark (a relative of Barnabas who had joined them for the first part of the duo’s first missionary journey, but left early for an undisclosed reason) should accompany them. Paul refused to let John Mark accompany them on the second trip, despite Barnabas’ support of the idea. It is the last we hear of Barnabas in the Bible.

There is no record that Barnabas would have done anything other than have gone about his apostolic work, traveling with John Mark. It was clear to him that Paul had emerged as “the Apostle” who would revolutionize the nascent Church through his evangelization of “the Greeks.” It seems that Barnabas embraced the sage adage of John the Baptist. Though in a different context, it is a lesson in humility for us all: “He must increase; I must decrease” (Jn 3:30).

Challenging Peter

Before going their separate ways, Barnabas joined Paul

resolutely to seek unity within the Church on a fundamental issue, where unity had not been achieved through Peter's efforts alone. Any look at Barnabas and his contributions to the life of the early Church must consider the Council of Jerusalem.

Some were claiming that one must be circumcised in order to become a Christian: "Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). Naturally, as apostles to the Gentiles, Paul and Barnabas were sensitive to the importance of this issue – and its error – so they went "to Jerusalem to the apostles and presbyters about this question" (Acts 15:2). It is interesting to note that Paul indicates "even" Barnabas may have been persuaded, at one point, by the "hypocrisy," as Paul led the charge on opposing in Jerusalem (cf. Gal 2:13).

Paul and Barnabas were convicted that the claim supported by Peter was wrong, and they successfully engaged him to bring him around to the truth. Paul and Barnabas clearly opposed the idea that one can achieve salvation through one's own actions. In fact, the two challenged Peter, who had tried to bridge the gap on the issue by proposing a compromise. Peter's interlocutors posited – and correctly so, as the results of the Council of Jerusalem show – that salvation is purely gratuitous, never earned and always pure gift. The expectations of the old Law were made new according to the grace of Jesus Christ.

Did Paul and Barnabas, in daring to challenge Peter on this issue, expose a weakness on the first pope's part? They knew that Peter's position was untenable, so they forced a discussion among the wider community of leaders in pursuit of truth. As Paul later wrote in Galatians 2:11: "I opposed him to his face because he clearly was wrong."

In the end, the situation casts Peter as one who attempted to achieve unity by making a concession to divided factions.

Whereas it was incumbent upon Peter to secure unity among the brethren, his concession came at the expense of explicitly denying what was true at the core. They did not go down the road of conciliarism, but deferred to Peter in a dialogue in which he willingly participated. It was a collegial exercise where truth prevailed. In challenging Peter, Paul and Barnabas give a model for those in leadership: that it is important to speak the truth as the means to achieve true unity, even if it might seem like swimming against the tide.

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