

Encouragement and challenge in the Acts of the Apostles; a motif for mission?

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This dissertation is the product of my own work, and the work of others has been properly acknowledged throughout

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1. Introduction

“A church which pitches its tents without constantly looking out for new horizons, which does not continually strike camp, is being untrue to its calling. We must play down our longing for certainty, accept what is risky, and live by improvisation and experiment.” Hans Kung¹

Without the benefit, or hindrance, of two thousand years of church history to help influence their interaction, the apostles lived out their faith by reliance on the direction of the Holy Spirit. In the pre Christendom era² where certainty was a relatively alien concept improvisation and experiment seemed to rapidly become the hallmark of the fledgling Christian faith community. The Jerusalem believers were in many ways, because of no previous benchmark, forced into working out or accepting risky and untried missionary strategy in order to further the Kingdom of God. Indeed it could be argued that the entire strategy of the early church was risk taking experimentation.

Some would rightly contend that the church in the post modern era has begun to recognise that pioneering, experimentation and the breaking of boundaries must become, and is in fact rapidly becoming, a part of the churches’ missionary strategy once more. This strategy is not only to arrest and improve upon the declining numbers of believers, and to take seriously the scriptural evidence of how the early church engaged in mission, but also to take sober account of the context in which mission is lived out today:-

...the changing nature of our missionary context requires a new inculturation of the gospel within our society....The gospel has to be heard within the culture of the day, but it always has to be heard as a call to appropriate repentance. It is the incarnation of the gospel, within a dominantly consumer society, that provides the Church of England with its major missionary challenge”³

¹ Hirsch, A, *The Forgotten Ways* (Michigan: Brazos, 2007), 15

² Hirsch, *The Forgotten ways*, 276, argues that Christendom equates to AD 312 onwards –i.e post Constantine

³ Cray, G, in Archbishop Council, *Mission Shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), xii-xiii

As Archbishop Rowan Williams regularly states the church of today and the church of the future is to be a ‘mixed economy’ of traditional, contemporary and pioneering models of mission – the church is to be the place where experimentation is not deemed to be wrong.⁴ There is now a degree of renewed depth to the preachers oft asserted truism ‘*How do you spell faith? R-I-S-K!*’⁵

Risk taking, pioneering and working with unknown methods is one of the marks of what is happening on the ground today in terms of new (or re-introduced) forms of mission into a post modern consumer driven society.

With this in mind it is appropriate that this study will engage with some of the historical churches’ missionary strategy in relation to the Gentiles. This study will focus on one of the exemplars of a significant pioneering risk taking ministry within the early church in order to interface with what is happening in today’s church..

As we shall see later, a ground breaking, pioneering ministry was unquestionably one that belonged to the figure of Barnabas. His willingness to take risks, break new ground and, of highest importance, to encourage new forms of mission for the sake of the Kingdom was undeniably a major challenge to and influence on the way in which the church emerged from its base in Jerusalem. Barnabas was a man who was willing, for the sake of the Kingdom, to take chances for the Gospel: “*Barnabas possessed, we would venture to say, a sense of risk*”⁶

Encouragement to take risks, and to some extent the challenges this brought, was without doubt the trademark of who Barnabas was and it is for this reason that this man and his encouragement will be explored within this study and integrated into some understanding of contemporary mission.

Charles Spurgeon once famously preached to his congregation: “*I am the subject of depressions of spirit so fearful that I hope none of you ever get to such extremes of wretchedness that I go to*”. Although lacking any critical merit there may be some truth that those who achieve prominence in Christian ministry are occasionally subject to greater levels of despair than most. It could be argued that Charles Spurgeon, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, David

⁴ Williams, in *Mission Shaped Church*, vii

⁵ Delve, E, *12 Principles of Transformational Leadership* (London: Authentic, 2005), 30

⁶ Bevan, S, & Schroeder, R, *Constants in Context; a theology of mission for today*, (Orbis, New York, 2004), 26

Watson, Martin Luther and many others express on occasion in their writing, a sense of despondency about their situation – seemingly moments where there is little encouragement on offer. Wiersbe puts it well when he says rather simply: “*Discouragement is no respecter of persons*”⁷

It is perhaps true that many people who are seriously engaged in living out the mission of Jesus Christ will know something of the hopelessness of those times when there is seemingly no encouragement and no one willing to encourage their work. Discouragement is often quoted as one of the main reasons people give up on ministry. It may well be recognised, therefore, as imperative that encouragement and encouragers are seen as a vital part of the *Missio Dei*.

The significance therefore of Barnabas’ ministry, which has this major theme of encouragement, cannot be underestimated. And, although Luke is by no means auteur in the overall text when it comes to encouragement, it may well be seen that encouragement, along with the deep personal challenge that encouragement brings, is something of a hidden motif in his second book.

As we shall see below an analysis and critique of Barnabas’ character (and his encouragement) within Acts alongside an examination of his presence within the Epistles will be given. This will lead into a contextual study of mission in Barnabas’ setting and mission in the contemporary scene (using a hermeneutic of the emerging church in Acts 11 and the subsequent events at Antioch as a tool). As we shall see later this study will then offer some principles for contemporary ministerial practise and application.

2. Barnabas in the New Testament

Key Texts Relating to Barnabas

Based on early Christian scripture and subsequent historical influence Peter and Paul are undoubtedly the outstanding characters of the early church. Less outstanding, but nonetheless significant to Christian ministry, is indeed this character of Barnabas. The selling of a field⁸, a seemingly small act, launches Barnabas into the spotlight of history and marks him out as a

⁷Wiersbe, W., *Be Encouraged*, (Victor: Colorado, 1994), 11

⁸ Acts 4: 36

man whose encouraging actions were crucial to the mission of the emerging first century church.

Barnabas first inclusion by Luke in Acts is where he names him Joseph (or Joses which in Aramaic has the meaning; 'God shall add') who, as previously stated, sells a field and gives the proceeds to the Christian community (Acts 4:36-37). When the persecution of Hellenistic (Greek speaking) Christians begins in Jerusalem, Barnabas stays in the city, even though others of similar background flee (Acts 8:1-8; 11:19-22). This act enhances his good reputation in Jerusalem and he becomes the bridge builder for Paul to be accepted by the Jerusalem church. At first, the disciples in Jerusalem are afraid of Paul because they did not believe his conversion (Acts 9:26), but Barnabas speaks passionately on his behalf as he does on more than one occasion (Acts 9:27-28). Barnabas at one point is chastised by Paul for hypocrisy in following Peter's withdrawal from eating with Gentiles for fear of what 'the circumcision group' may say (Galatians 2: 13). Later Paul commends him for financially supporting himself in the work of the Gospel and not being a burden on the church (1 Cor 9: 6)

As news reaches Jerusalem of unknown missionary activity to Gentiles in Antioch, the Jerusalem church sends Barnabas to help, or investigate, the emerging church (Acts 11:19-26). Barnabas in turn recruits Paul to help further the work in Antioch. The two men work together in the church for a year, teaching the Christians there (Acts 11:26). When famine is predicted for Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul are sent with relief funds (Acts 11: 27-30). On their return to Antioch, Barnabas's cousin John Mark goes with them (Acts 12:25; Colossians 4:10).

Barnabas and Paul take on the mantle of preaching beyond the boundaries of Antioch (Acts 13:2-3). At this point in the Acts of the Apostles Barnabas's name comes before that of Paul which has implications that, at least for a while, Barnabas may have been considered the leader of the two. They travel to Cyprus and to several key areas in Asia Minor. While on mission at Lystra, the citizens identified Barnabas with the mythological god Zeus, and Paul with Hermes (Acts 14:8-12).

Latterly, at the Jerusalem council, Barnabas and Paul report back on their mission to the Gentiles (Acts 15). Following that council, as the two men are planning a further mission, a sharp disagreement happens that leads to a parting of their ways (Acts 15:36-41). Barnabas wants to take his younger cousin John Mark but Paul refuses because Mark had deserted them

on an earlier mission (Acts 13:13). Barnabas leaves for Cyprus with John Mark, and Paul travels to Syria and Cilicia with Silas (although the relationship between Barnabas and Paul has significance in the Acts of the Apostles it will not be specifically unfolded within this study however it will be referred to later on within the text). After that disagreement, as Bauckham rightly contends, the focal point of Acts shifts from Barnabas to Paul and to Paul's use of assistants to promote the gospel.⁹

Barnabas' Traditional Legacy

Some sources dating to around the third century, mostly of a less reliable nature, state that Barnabas returned to Cyprus and at Salamis was stoned to death, allegedly by Jews¹⁰. A monastery was erected in Cyprus where his body, according to legend, was laid after his murder (apparently the monastery and Barnabas' body was founded on the site of the burial place of the Emperor Zeno). As such Barnabas is venerated as the Patron Saint of Cyprus. However, it may well be that much of his association with Cyprus may have been nothing more than a mythologizing of the New Testament material regarding his origins. Legend also has it that the church in Cyprus and Milan looked to Barnabas as its founder in order to become more independent of Rome.

Other non-Biblical sources, towards the end of the second century, especially Clement of Alexandria, name Barnabas as one of the seventy or seventy two disciples that are sent out by Jesus in Luke 10: 1. He is also named by Clement, perhaps with a desire to affirm Barnabas' apostolic status, as being otherwise known as Matthias (Matthias was chosen as an apostle to take the place of Judas).¹¹

Barnabas' Background

A Greek speaking native of Cyprus, Barnabas was a Jew of the Diaspora (the exiled Jews who did not live in Palestine). His Levitical background, he was descended from Israelite priests,

⁹ Bauckham argues that from this point on Paul can no longer work with partners, like he did with Barnabas, but prefers to work with assistants - Bauckham, R, *Barnabas in Galatians*, (JSNT, vol. 1, 1979)

¹⁰ For reference to this tradition of Barnabas in Salamis and the prophecy of his martyrdom in Cyprus see the less reliable source *The Acts of Barnabas* sited at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0817.htm>

¹¹ Kollmann, *Joseph Barnabas; His Life and Legacy*, 9

gave him a natural focus in Jerusalem and it is likely that when he first appears in Acts he was either living permanently in the city or was on an extended visit.¹²

Cyprus, his place of origin, had a buoyant economy in the first century. It was an incredibly fertile and wealthy land known for its silver and copper mining. It was a prolific exporter of timber products as a result of its vast woodlands. Intellectually Cyprus had played no significant role in world history but was steeped in Hellenistic culture and philosophy. From this it is possible to imagine, although there is precious little factual evidence, that Barnabas may have had an elementary Greek education, he certainly would have had a strong Jewish faith education, and was possibly connected to farming or acted as a merchant in one of the export trades – some scholars argue that his background was probably in farming as he was able to dispose of a field to benefit the Jerusalem church (whether this field was in Cyprus or elsewhere is unknown).¹³

His Christian conversion from Judaism probably happened after hearing the apostles' preaching soon after the resurrection of Christ although again this is by no means certain (Alexander Monachus actually attributes Barnabas' conversion as a result of Barnabas witnessing Jesus' healing of a lame man in John 5: 2-9 and other miracles performed in the Temple – this view however is not widely accepted).¹⁴

It is however, as we shall see later, very possible that Barnabas was a witness to the resurrected Jesus in Jerusalem which may have had direct bearing on his conversion.

Barnabas' Name

Luke records the essential elements of the ministry of the Levite named Joseph, later to be given the name Barnabas by the apostles, over a relatively small number of verses contained within the course of seven chapters of Acts. Those verses, along with limited Pauline material¹⁵, form all of the available biblical knowledge¹⁶ of the one whose translated nickname

¹² Kollmann, B., *Joseph Barnabas; His Life and Legacy*, (Liturgical Press: Minnesota, 1998), 9

¹³ Kollmann, *Joseph Barnabas; His Life and Legacy*, 6

¹⁴ Kollmann, *Joseph Barnabas; His Life and Legacy*, 9

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 9: 6; Galatians 2: 1, 9, 13; Colossians 4:10

¹⁶ Tertullian ascribes Barnabas as the author of *Hebrews* – however Origen and others believe the evidence for this is inconclusive - see Kollmann, B., *Joseph Barnabas; His Life and Legacy*, (Liturgical Press: Minnesota, 1998), 53-54

by Luke ‘Son of Encouragement’ eloquently describes his personality. Nevertheless the biblical material we do have, coupled with later unreliable sources¹⁷, still enable a rich understanding of the theological and missiological legacy of this remarkable man. As Bernd Kollmann states: “*Barnabas belongs among the truly significant individuals in early Christianity*”¹⁸

Barnabas’ character must have been significant for those with whom he came in to contact. Those church leaders in Jerusalem who re named him the ‘*Son of Encouragement*’ clearly recognised an integrity and a spirit of servant hood to give him this high name. It is just about possible that this title ‘*Son of Encouragement*’ originally referred to Manaen in Acts 13: 1, Manean being the Greek form of Menachem which means ‘the encourager’, and Luke subsequently inaccurately applied it to Barnabas – but this is extremely unlikely!

The Semitic name Barnabas, etymologically, is unknown outside of the New Testament which has been problematic for scholars. Luke could have chosen this name as a play on the Aramaic understanding for someone with gifts for prophetic utterance - in Aramaic his name could mean ‘Son of Prophecy’, ‘Son of Exhortation’ or ‘Son of Comfort’ which perhaps indicates that he was indeed gifted in prophetic teaching, as Johnson, along with many others, argues in his commentary on *Acts*.¹⁹ However, perhaps the relevance in this play on language is more to do with the fact that Barnabas carefully chose words that would build people up and encourage them rather than being careless with speech that could easily discourage.

Barnabas’ Apostolic Credentials

Barnabas was described by Luke on two occasions in Acts as holding the office of an apostle.²⁰ Paul also refers to the apostolic nature of Barnabas²¹. Paul’s understanding of what constitutes apostolic status, albeit in a simplistic understanding of a complex subject, is that an apostle

¹⁷ Many of these less reliable historiographical works give some insight into Barnabas but tend to promote separate specific ecclesiastical or theological goals for example; *Acts of Barnabas* (5th century); *Laudatio Barnabae* (6th century); *Letter of Barnabas* (2nd century); *Gospel of Barnabas* (copies both medieval and earlier often used by muslims to promote Jesus as a prophet rather than the Incarnation of God).

¹⁸ Kollmann, *Joseph Barnabas; His Life and Legacy*, 72

¹⁹ Johnson, D., *Acts*, (Banner; Edinburgh, 2003), 48

²⁰ Acts 14: 4, 14 - Luke is well known for keeping the title of Apostle to the ‘12’ and only assigning it to Paul and Barnabas in the slightly lesser role as messengers of the church in Antioch

²¹ 1 Corinthians 9: 4-6

must have experienced a vision of Christ and be commissioned by him in order to lay claim to that title²². If this is true then, as Bauckham argues, it is very possible that Barnabas could well have been one of the five hundred witnesses to Christ's resurrection attested to in 1 Corinthians 15 and subsequent commissioning in Acts 4: 14: "*In Paul's eyes Barnabas was an apostle, which should probably be taken to mean that he was personally commissioned by the risen Christ*"²³

However questions about Barnabas' apostleship continued to be raised and became important after his death - these questions were often discussed particularly during the Middle Ages.²⁴

When broken down, the word *apostle* certainly seems to reflect something of the activity of Barnabas. The Greek *apo* means 'off' and *stello* means 'send' – as we know Barnabas' main role was to be 'sent off' by Jerusalem to go to the new movement at Antioch and was also 'sent off' under the direct authority of the Holy Spirit thus, at least for some theologians, fulfilling the divine element of an apostles calling.²⁵

Barnabas' Temperament and Discernment

The Oxford English Dictionary describes the word *encouragement* in the following way: "*Encourage: (verb) To give courage, confidence, hope to an individual or group. To positively urge, advise. To show approval. To stimulate by help, reward etc. To promote or assist a person, enterprise, opinion etc*"²⁶

The first time Luke places Barnabas in *Acts* he is seen to display many of the above attributes toward the church community and its leaders – particularly in reference to giving *help* and *approval* to the *enterprise* of the church. Towards the end of Acts 4 Luke emphasises a mark of

²² Kollmann, *Joseph Barnabas; His Life and Legacy*, 10

²³ Bauckham, R, *Barnabas in Galatians*, (JSNT, vol. 1, 1979), 6

²⁴ The German theologians *Hefele* and *Braunsberger* did much work on this in the 19th century, and others have worked on it subsequently, however the Biblical material seems reliable in regard to Barnabas' apostleship. Although not one of the original twelve Luke clearly refers to Barnabas and Paul as apostle (see Acts 14: 4, 14). Bruce commenting on Acts 14: 14 states "*The two men are (distinctly) called apostles.*" Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 276

²⁵ Acts 13: 2-3

²⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, (OUP; Oxford, 1969)

the early church namely an understanding of *communitas*²⁷. Luke tells us that there was a common bond of vision, heart, spirit and mind. This sense of *communitas* living was born out in the practical sharing of the believer's possessions and finances and the giving of assistance to those who had need. Although Luke does not make this explicit there is an implication in Barnabas' actions that this common life was instigated by the apostles.²⁸ Barnabas therefore does the selfless act of selling some of his own land and offers it to the church via its leaders.

This act of generosity operates on several levels. First, it affirms and encourages the leaders' desire for this type of communal living under Christ. Second, Barnabas assents to this type of lifestyle through his practical action and by so doing encourages others to operate in a similar way. Barnabas willingly relinquishes control of what is rightfully his to those who he deems have spiritual authority over him and, again, by doing so challenges others to follow suit (of course Luke places the disastrous story of Ananias and Sapphira immediately after this for many theological reasons but perhaps also to highlight the positive challenging nature of Barnabas' actions). Third, Luke uses this account of Barnabas' gift as a vehicle to promote his understanding that Barnabas' life and ministry is noted for its encouragement – it is after all here that Luke tells us that Barnabas is given the great title 'Son of Encouragement':-

*The warmth of the testimony on Barnabas' behalf both here and when he is called 'a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith' is unusual even in Acts and surely indicates a man of rare quality, a community builder, able to promote and sustain warm and constructive personal relationships*²⁹

It is perhaps here in Dunn's description of Barnabas that we have one key to the success of using encouragement as a tool for mission. He describes Barnabas as a *community builder* and a man *able to promote warm and constructive personal relationships* (which we will see more of shortly). This ability to break down barriers seems to indicate that wherever Barnabas appears there was not only openness between individual people but also openness to the work of the Holy Spirit in those people's lives (the work of the Spirit of course being a major theme of Luke's work in *Acts*).

Barnabas can be clearly seen throughout his ministry in *Acts* as a person who offers encouragement through his discernment and subsequent words and actions. He is a man who uses the gift of discernment (which incidentally is also closely associated in the New

²⁷The meaning of *Communitas* refers to Alan Hirsch's understanding of a faith community which gains identity only through focussing on shared mission - see Hirsch, *The Forgotten ways*, 277-278 this understanding will be described more fully later.

²⁸ Acts 4: 36-37

²⁹ Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 60

Testament with the gift of prophecy) to ascertain the needs of any given situation in which he finds himself and then encourages what is good. For example in Acts 11, as previously indicated, we see Barnabas' interaction with the unfolding events of the new work of God at Antioch – Barnabas is sent to investigate what is happening:-

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.³⁰

Barnabas, like Luke, is a man who uses discernment – he is one who seeks out *evidence*. They were definitely evidencing a life lived according to the way Christ lived because he encourages those converts to *remain true* to the Lord. He didn't have to instruct them further at this stage all he had to do was encourage them as they were already behaving in the right way. That right way was, in a very simplistic but accurate understanding, a single minded devotion to Jesus Christ – these new converts were clearly Christocentric as Barnabas must have been aware when he made the statement that they should '*remain true to the Lord with all their hearts*'.

3. Barnabas' Missionary Context and the Contemporary Context

Some Background

Antioch, now modern Antakya in the Hatay province of Turkey, was founded in 300 B.C by Seleucis Nicator the first ruler of the Seleucid dynasty and was named after his father Antiochus. It rapidly gained importance as a city and was the seat of government for the Roman province of Syria after Pompey made it a free city in 64 B.C. It was the third largest city in the known world. Antioch also stood as a commercial capital as well as a political one – traders had to pass through on their way to the West – it had significant financial importance. It stood as a pivot between the urbanised Mediterranean and the Eastern desert population – as such it had a very cosmopolitan character.³¹

Jews, and many other faiths and nationalities, became established inhabitants of free Antioch bringing with them and retaining their own varied culture and religious identities. The Jewish

³⁰ Acts 11: 22-24

³¹ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 224

people, along with others, however, were faced with a predominant Greek culture and philosophical outlook.

The city had become well known for a distinct lack of moral substance which was perhaps enhanced by cult worship. At Daphne, just five miles away, Artemis and Apollo were venerated and ritual prostitution was carried out under the auspices of the ancient Syrian worship of Astarte – many of the people of Antioch were greatly influenced and involved in this moral laxity.

The socio economic landscape then in Antioch, although in generalised terms, could be summarised in the following way:-

- Strongly influenced by Greek philosophy and culture
- A multi ethnic immigrant population
- A multi faith population
- Cosmopolitan character and outlook
- Lack of moral fibre (especially in sexual ethics)
- Politically powerful
- Socially mobile
- Financially motivated
- A diverse and rapidly shifting culture – this is a significant feature!

On one level it could be argued that the context in which Barnabas found himself is not dissimilar to the context that the contemporary missionary works in today:-

On the surface culture seems to change. Yet, at a deeper level, the ancient conflict still persists in the modern and post modern eras. Likewise, the apostles in Acts experienced mediated and mediating roles as the people of Jesus Christ collided with ancient Judaism in a radically Hellenizing world³²

This sense of a rapidly changing and diverse culture is perhaps the significant mark of the contemporary scene in 2007.

³² Gallagher, R, L, & Hertig, P, *Mission in Acts* (New York: Orbis, 2004), 60

It could further be argued that as cities, like Antioch, grew in population, and methods of communication were enhanced by the relative stability brought about by the *Pax Romana*, the Gospel was easier to transport:-

...why Christianity grew was very much influenced by the urbanization process.....social destabilisation of urban centres, particularly in the Eastern part of the empire, contributed to a social, psychological, and religious climate in which alienated individuals sought refuge in socioreligious communities which offered socialization in this world and salvation in the next³³

This has bearing on the contemporary climate as we are engaging with a diverse people who find themselves in a rapidly changing world, a people whose personal identity is formed by their social groupings and acquisition of wealth and possessions as opposed to their geographical location:-

When culture remains static, as the West was for many years, an understanding of outside culture is not as critical.....In a time of immense cultural change, however, the churches ignorance of the wider culture becomes problematic.³⁴

In Britain today, it might help to say that we must be with people how they are. 'How' is a word that suggests connection beyond geography and locality – connecting with people's cultures, values, lifestyles and networks, as well as their locations.³⁵

As the church engages with a people whose cultural background is different to the established patterns of traditional Christianity it has become clear that new approaches need to be taken in mission. This is precisely what occurred when the early Christians encountered the Gentiles in the first century.

The Setting of the Emerging Churches' Cultural and Spiritual Engagement with Non-Jews in Antioch

The first half of Acts Chapter 11 stands as an immediate conclusion to the events directly preceding it; namely Peter's interaction with the Gentiles and the subsequent conversion of Cornelius. What follows is the objection of the 'circumcised believers'³⁶ and Peter's robust defence and explanation of his actions. Luke's recording of this breaking down the wall of

³³ Bevan, S, & Schroeder, R, *Constants in Context; a theology of mission for today*, (Orbis, New York, 2004), 81

³⁴ Gibbs, E, & Bolger, R, *Emerging Churches*, (London, SPCK, 2006), 18

³⁵ Archbishops Council, *Mission Shaped Church*, 12

³⁶ Acts 11: 2 – the translation 'circumcised believers' is a better translation than 'the circumcision party' – see Dunn, Stott et al.

ceremonial regulation is detailed and necessary as some of the Jerusalem believers were initially more pre-occupied with the suspicion, which had validity, that Peter's stay within a Gentile home would have exposed him to non-kosher food. Seemingly this was higher on their agenda than to be encouraged by the good news that Gentiles were accepting and believing in Jesus as the Christ.

In order to accentuate the point of Peter's lack of defilement through having table fellowship with the uncircumcised gentiles, and to underline a defining moment of the validity of incorporating uncircumcised Gentiles into the church, Luke records again the events of his earlier vision³⁷. This repetition was a helpful device for recording and emphasising such an enormous event as this:-

*Narrative repetition, in detail and close proximity to the original account, while it may frustrate impatient modern readers, was a recognised device by which biblical historians emphasised the monumental importance of watershed events.*³⁸

Indeed, such a watershed event as God granting the message to Gentiles and their subsequent belief is emphasised by Luke recording Peter's account of the Gentiles receiving the Spirit in the same way as the Apostle's had received '*in the beginning*'³⁹ – this seemed to put an end to the theological and intellectual questioning of the Jerusalem leaders. Thankfully then the Jerusalem church, at least on this occasion, accepted Peter's word, and in so doing began to be encouraged to accept that this new event was a continuity of the work of the Holy Spirit. They therefore were furthermore beginning to be encouraged that the movement to the Gentiles was in fact a primary motive of God (although clearly the possibility remains evident that not all were convinced as the issue arises again in Acts 15: 1-5).

In many ways the Jerusalem church represented the legacy of the Jewish root of Christianity and these events at Caesarea, as Dunn points out, were not the manifestations of a breakaway group but a pre-ordained development of the missionary call from God. Acceptance of Peter and acceptance of these events was crucial to the unity of the emerging church:-

*Luke underlines just how important were not only the events at Caesarea themselves, but also the acceptance of them by the Jerusalem Apostles. Thus the unity of the new movement and its continuity with its previous heritage, even through the process of transformation of previously cherished and fundamental beliefs, is maintained.*⁴⁰

³⁷ Acts 10: 9-46 and Acts 11: 4-17

³⁸ Johnson, D., *Acts*, (Banner of Truth Trust: Edinburgh, 2003), 140

³⁹ Acts 11: 15

⁴⁰ Dunn, J., *The Acts of the Apostles*, (Epworth: Peterborough, 1996), 148

Luke concludes his previous material with these ground breaking words of encouragement to Gentiles everywhere ‘*So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.*’⁴¹ The remainder of his book is to be dominated by this theme and from chapter 13 onwards he unfolds the encouraging work of Barnabas and subsequently the missionary work and journeys of Paul to the Gentiles.

However before he begins to do this he offers two brief scenes that act as a transitional vehicle between the conversion of the first Gentile by Peter and the methodical evangelism of Gentiles by Paul⁴². The second scene has, as its motif, the challenge and opposition to the apostles and emerging church by Herod Agrippa I. The first scene however (Acts 11: 19-30) concentrates on the extension of the church Northwards as a product, as we will study in more detail later, of evangelistic work of unknown missionaries. Even though this is now a moving out of the church Luke again makes every effort to keep the heart of this missionary work tied back to Jerusalem – once more to support an emphasis that this is not a break away movement but a continuity of God’s work.⁴³

According to many commentators Luke uses a Hellenistic⁴⁴ source for this section – Dunn argues for a ‘*more or less coherent*’ source, possibly told or written by the original church at Antioch, and mentions a variety of descriptions and repetitions in the passage that echo earlier material in Acts 6 – 8.⁴⁵ This theme is also taken up by Marshall, Barrett and others who comment that Luke’s personal input and imprint is on the work which also has an ‘Antioch source’ for some of the detail.⁴⁶ What is clear is that as historian as well as theologian Luke is determined to portray the events as truthfully as possible – as Stott points out:-

*(Luke) belonged to the second generation who had received the tradition about Jesus from the apostolic eyewitnesses (and) he had not accepted it uncritically. On the contrary he had ‘carefully investigated everything from the beginning’.*⁴⁷

⁴¹ Acts 11: 18

⁴²Stott, J, *The Message of Acts* (Leicester: IVP, 1990), 200

⁴³ Acts 11: 22

⁴⁴ *Hellenist* in this context primarily denotes a Greek speaker - not necessarily tying this to a specific race or culture – see Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 81

⁴⁵ Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 80 & 152

⁴⁶ Marshall, I. H., *Acts* (Leicester: IVP, 1980), 199

⁴⁷ Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 22

Whatever the exact detail of the source Luke uses we may never fully know; what is of more importance for this exegesis is the significance of the passage.

This first scene then, the churches breakthrough at Antioch, is apparently described by the author in fairly brief terms. By implication then could this be taken as an indication of Luke being unaware of the significance of such a breakthrough? The answer is an emphatic ‘NO’. Luke deliberately places this vignette after the conversion of Cornelius and the acceptance of his conversion by Jerusalem. We already know the emphasis that Luke has given to the acceptance of Gentiles into the faith (the reiteration of Peter’s vision in Acts 11: 4-14, the coming of the Spirit to the Gentiles in Acts 11: 15 and acceptance by Jerusalem etc). This emphasis and subsequent placing of the action in Antioch immediately afterwards goes some considerable way by Luke in showing how this theological new direction was being encouraged to become grounded in the lives of Gentiles and in its historic consequence:-

Ironically, then, the playing down of the significance of the Antioch breakthrough attests Luke’s appreciation of its importance. It was so important that it had to be securely interwoven into the history of the movement’s steady expansion, and the revolutionary shift to the Gentiles validated beforehand by the critically scrutinized and divinely approved breakthrough at Caesarea.⁴⁸

A strong secondary argument to validate the author’s sense of importance of the events in Antioch is his intentional inclusion of the potentially overlooked comment that *“The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch”*⁴⁹ This new identity of those who were followers of Jesus, first used here in Antioch, provides the template of what the emerging church had become – Jewish believers in mission to Gentiles, and, of immense significance, forming with them the one church. This new movement and its diverse membership now had a distinctive title, as Barrett makes clear: *“...they were no more Jews than they were heathen; they were in fact a third race, Christians.”*⁵⁰

Acts 11: 19 tells this: *“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.”* In the first instance this preaching only to Jews would make sense. Antioch, the third largest city in the Roman Empire, was a principal hub of the Diaspora. Greek speaking Jewish believers in Christ would not have abandoned their practise of worship and meeting in

⁴⁸ Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 153

⁴⁹ Acts 11: 26

⁵⁰ Barrett, C. K., *Acts: A Shorter Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 173

the synagogues of the places they found themselves (following Stephen's martyrdom and their hasty departure from Jerusalem - see Acts 8: 1, 4). Moreover as Dunn points out: "*They may have turned from the Temple, but they had by no means abandoned the synagogue as the natural focus for their own worship and for the exposition of their faith as Jews*"⁵¹

As a first port of call then, for these unnamed Jewish believers, explaining the good news of Jesus to those whom they had an affiliation made supreme sense – a natural cultural connection was already there – which was in this case their shared Jewish heritage and practise. For modern missionary practise, albeit in a very simplistic understanding, connecting with those whom you have some form of cultural relationship would seem to be the first place to engage in mission (Hirsch argues that before the Christian can be even begin to be heard there are potentially up to four different significant cultural barriers to overcome in sharing the gospel today)⁵². A shared connection would therefore hopefully give an individual some platform of trust in breaking down some of the barriers in order to offer something of one's faith in Christ. Sharing faith or preaching as Acts puts it was not an add on for those who were keen, no, this was seen as a primary focus of all believers - as Acts 8: 4 shows '*those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went*'. How different is this to many forms of Western Christianity today! Many who claim Jesus as their own in the twenty first century bear little resemblance to their first century counterparts. Many Christians today are more than happy to keep their faith a private matter and leave the evangelism to the leaders or those who appear to have a distinct calling in this area – it seems that a radical de-clericalisation of the church, if that is an appropriate phrase, and a new ownership of a 'priesthood of all believers' needs to take place as a matter of some urgency. However, in the first century, evangelism was indeed the work of all the believers.

But the Jewish focus of the early churches preaching was soon to take a dramatic and overwhelming change that would re-shape and revolutionise the mission of the church.

Acts 11: 20 tells this: "*Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus*" As is often the case in the Church much of the gospel work is done by the unsung heroes, those men and women who remain nameless. Here at Antioch the situation is the

⁵¹ Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 154

⁵² Hirsch, *The Forgotten ways*, 56-58 explains what the barriers are but for the purposes of this essay are secondary

same. Luke gives some information about those who are telling the good news but as for their personal identity he feels this is an unnecessary detail. Suffice to say that Luke records this account and by so doing tells us something of more significance than individual names.

Luke has been at some length to testify that the new development with Cornelius, and subsequent developments in Antioch, has been to some degree in continuity with and dependant upon Jerusalem. This verse suggests that the new action, by deliberate omission of any further detail from the text, was in fact *independent* of Jerusalem. These men of *Cyprus* and *Cyrene*, presumably prompted by the Holy Spirit (Acts 11: 21) had taken it upon themselves to share the good news about the Lord (note the use of the title given here for Jesus; *Lord*). Presumably for some time this sharing had been taking place amongst non-Jews.

Over the years the textual detail of the translation of ‘Greeks’ (*hellenistes*) has caused some considerable debate among scholars. The depth of that argument would take a separate essay to unfold⁵³. However most translators agree that the people to whom Luke refers are the Antiochenes who were ‘God fearers’, a people who: “...*were indeed Gentiles, but Gentiles who had some kind of relationship with Judaism*”⁵⁴

Of significance is that Luke makes no reference to any demands made on the converts, either here or elsewhere in the passage, to any observance of any Jewish law or indeed circumcision. This is a subtle change of direction at this stage of the early church, clearly noted by its omission, and perhaps a pre-cursor of later debate (Luke emphatically returns to this in Acts 15). There is no information as to how the Jews would have reacted to this lack of observance – nonetheless it was of immense importance to the Gentiles because, as we shall see in some detail later, they were being encouraged by Barnabas to be Christians without any need to conform to a cultural stereotype⁵⁵, or, as the old hymn goes they were accepted ‘*just as I am*’. Again, from a contemporary cultural perspective, anyone seriously engaged in mission would do well to recognise that Christianity can be relevant in whatever form it takes (provided it adheres to the essential doctrines of the faith) – it does not have to fit into a stereotypical inherited model of what church looks like!

⁵³ For something of the debate ref - Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 154; Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 202; Marshall, I. H., *Acts*, 201

⁵⁴ Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 202

⁵⁵ They would however have to adopt monotheism, reject idol worship and accept Christian moral and ethical norms

Acts 11: 21 tells this: *“The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord”*. Here Luke is rightly attributing all that is happening to be the work of God. Johnson and others argue that *‘The Lord’s hand was with them’* was a Jewish metaphor to indicate the approval of God and the power of the Spirit working with them⁵⁶. Therefore Luke leaves no room for ambiguity – this new thing is God’s doing – and, if proof were needed, the result of the Lord’s action is that *‘a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord’*.

This summary of success is used by Luke elsewhere in Acts (2: 47; 9: 31 etc) and is designed to accentuate the rightness of what is happening. Perhaps there is an argument in contemporary faith that states if you are doing what God requires of a church then it will be blessed with growth?⁵⁷ However elsewhere in Acts we seem to see that doing what God requires can bring indifference, hostility and imprisonment. Perhaps the main encouragement and strong challenge from Acts is that, irrespective of the outcome of missionary activity, we are commanded nonetheless to be faithful to God’s calling to be active in a missionary fashion come what may.

The door is now open for Barnabas’ significant missionary breakthrough with the Gentiles in Antioch.

4. Extracting Principles from Barnabas’ Ministry for Contemporary Ministry

The Breakthrough at Antioch

“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: 22-24

Barnabas sees what is happening in Antioch, knows it is of God, and as previously stated his response is encouragement and his outlook is to be *glad*. Barnabas risked believing that God

⁵⁶ Johnson, D., *Acts*, 144. Other scriptural references for this metaphor; 1 Sam. 5: 6, 9; 2 Sam. 3: 12 and elsewhere in Acts.

⁵⁷ Larkin in Larkin, W, & Williams, J, *Mission in the New Testament; an evangelical approach*, (Orbis, New York, 1998), 184, states *“Though the response is never 100 per cent, there is a continuing positive response, so that what Luke says of the Jerusalem church in the early days, he deems a true description of the church in any day.”*

was working his grace into this new and unusual situation in Antioch. Openness and discernment of the movement of the Holy Spirit marks out Barnabas and he stands as a precursor and exemplar of those great men and women of contemporary faith who will allow God's work to come about in a new way – Barnabas could be a symbol for fresh expressions of being church today: *“Neither religious prejudice nor racial pride was allowed to colour his judgement or impair the welcome he extended to Gentile Christianity.”*⁵⁸

Barnabas clearly welcomed all into the Kingdom of God. This ministry of welcome and acceptance could not be anything but an encouragement to those who recently converted and those who were in the process of conversion. Barnabas did not allow people who expressed themselves in a different way to be outside of the glorious message of the Gospel. Again, for those who are seriously engaged in mission today, there is a sharp lesson to be learned. It is all too easy to solely do mission to those of a similar socio-economic, cultural and class background – but this is not the call to make disciples of all nations – a true living out of that calling is to extend an encouraging welcome, just as Barnabas did, to those who are completely different to one's own cultural grouping – especially to the gentiles. Taking a look at the church in Antioch it is possible to see the reality of how Barnabas was operating: *“In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.”*⁵⁹ Luke sees this inclusion of gentiles as an epochal and covenantal shift from the Old Testament era and recognises it as being historically unique as well as an exemplar for future church mission.

Norman Thomas describes the scene of that Church in Antioch of Acts 13: 1 in the following way:-

*The Spirit could not be walled up in homogeneous Christianity.....Picture the table fellowship of the Antioch ministry team. Barnabas was there, a Cypriot landowner and Levite. Beside him sat Simeon 'who was called Niger' – meaning 'black', possibly from Africa. Next sat Lucius of Cyrene, also from Africa. Beside Lucius sat Manaen – an aristocrat of the court of the ruler Herod. Saul that fiery intellectual from Tarsus, completed the picture. I do not imagine that it was easy for them to live together in peace. But they must have achieved it. How else would joint leadership have been possible?*⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Evans, *Barnabas the Bridge Builder*, 249

⁵⁹ Acts 13: 1

⁶⁰ Thomas, N, in *Mission in Acts; ancient narratives in contemporary context*, (Orbis, New York, 2004),152

Perhaps the encouraging words and ministry of Barnabas was the key to the peaceful situation experienced by these multi cultural and ethnically diverse leaders in Antioch?

However, moving back to Acts 11: 22-24, there is to be no blithe and woolly encouragement of anything that on the surface purports to be authentic Christianity. Barnabas is a man who seeks out *evidence*⁶¹. This new thing happening in Antioch, for it to be real, has to show evidence of Godly action in the life of the converts. Although Luke does not indicate what this evidence might be we can be sure that in some way they would be living a changed existence (morally and spiritually but of course not necessarily culturally). In fact they must be evidencing a life lived out according to the way of the Lord, in the new Christian context of that word, because he encourages those converts to *remain true* to the Lord – he seemingly didn't have to instruct them further at this stage – they were already behaving in the right way⁶². Again, for contemporary ministry, could we argue that we need to see evidence of change in a community or individual in order to say that success has been achieved in mission? Some adherence to the way of the Lord must be one primary indicator of success in mission!

Turning Point

The events at Antioch proved to be a turning point in the mission of the church. Antioch would eventually succeed Jerusalem as the centre of the expanding church and especially the expanding ministry to the Gentiles. Barnabas plays a significant role in this building and expanding on Peter's earlier work to the Gentiles. However, Barnabas is also a man who knows his own limitations. To extend the work would require someone with different gifting:-

*He saw the need for this work to be consolidated and was realistic enough to acknowledge that he needed help. After exhausting the converts to 'cleave to the Lord', we are told – and this must be one of the most significant sentences in the story of the early church – 'Then departed Barnabasto seek for Saul'. Barnabas found him and brought him back.*⁶³

⁶¹ Acts 11: 23

⁶² One event however doesn't show the character of a group of people *toute simple*. Erasmus said sow an act, reap a habit, sow a habit reap a character, sow a character reap a destiny. It may well have been the case that Barnabas spent time encouraging the values Erasmus later articulated.

⁶³ Evans, *Barnabas the Bridge Builder*, 249

Barnabas' actions in recognising his own limitations are both a great encouragement and an immense challenge to those in ministry today. There are many in ministry who are more used to operating in a 'lone ranger' style of leadership (and indeed it could be argued that, especially in Anglican terms, the church structures exacerbate this as the vows of ordination indicate that most of the giftings of the entire church should be found in the one person being ordained).⁶⁴ Barnabas encourages a collegiate ministry where everyone's gifts are brought to the fore – however this, as previously stated, can be extremely challenging to inherited models of leadership where multi skills have been assumed to be found in the hands of just one professional minister. How much better to have specific giftings publicly acknowledged in an individual minister which would affirm that person in their specific calling? This would also have the effect of empowering other peoples gifting in their area of expertise and also broadening an understanding for the need for these gifts to be brought together to work in a collegiate manner.

Meeting Needs

The New Testament commentator D. Allender said this: *"If the motive is love, and the target is fear, then any words and actions will be encouraging"*.⁶⁵

In *Acts* Luke portrays the needs of the early church community throughout his work - from the urgent need in the early chapters to replace a fallen Apostle, the need for fellowship, the need for honesty amongst the believers and the need of poverty relief; to the later chapters needs for gentiles to be welcomed in to the faith community, the need for strength in adversity, courage in imprisonment, boldness in proclamation and the need for hope when all could be lost. In each of these cases the specific needs of the early church are handsomely met. If Allender's statement is accurate then it is clear that through the meeting of specific needs, however that is achieved, then encouragement in some form must be present: *"Encouragement depends on loving motivation in the encourager as well as wisdom to discern the needs of the other person accurately."*⁶⁶

⁶⁴ According to the *Alternative Service Book 1980's* ordinal there are 37 distinct roles that the ordained should have skills in – this public airing of what a minister is supposedly called to do naturally leads to a clericalisation of ministry as opposed to a 'priesthood of all believers'.

⁶⁵ Crabb, L., & Allender, D., *Encouragement; The Key to Caring*, (Zondervan; Michigan, 1984), 79

⁶⁶Allender, *Encouragement*, 79

There was, at least for Barnabas, no need for the Antioch converts to adhere to any mode or way of being church as the following in discipleship of Jesus Christ was the single most important thing. Many commentators recognise that within new models of being church today there needs to be an encouragement for a similar Christocentric faith with a similar single minded, wholehearted devotion to being a disciple and less emphasis on adhering to the marks of what traditional understandings of being church look like:-

....if the experience of church was simple enough that just about anyone can do it, and is made up of people who have taken up their cross and follow Jesus at any cost, the result will be a movement that empowers the common Christian to do the un-common works of God.....many of our current practises seem to be the wrong way round.....we seem to make church complex and discipleship too easy.⁶⁷

Seeking Evidence

With Barnabas' seeking evidence of the converted life of the new disciples in mind could it be argued, for contemporary ministry, that we need to encourage individuals and communities into some form of practical outworking of any new found belief in Christ (especially because, in a very sweeping understanding, some forms of evangelicalism can be caricatured as a purely cognitive ascension to doctrines of personal salvation with less emphasis on social and personal change). With that also in mind could it again be restated that we need to see this evidence of change in a community or individual in order to say that real success has been achieved in mission? Once more it is true to note that blind encouragement which produces no results and no change of life is of little importance.

Barnabas' arrival at Antioch, at the request of the Jerusalem believers, has been seen by some as less as a means of encouragement and more as merely as a way of collating information and allowing Jerusalem a degree of control over the unfolding events⁶⁸. But, as John Stott concludes, it may well have been to help nurture this young church (particularly in light of Barnabas' nature and character to be an encourager)⁶⁹. Whichever way we choose to see this it was in fact a wise move to send Barnabas, not least because of his gifts of character, but also because he was a Cypriot by birth and would have a natural affinity with the men of Cyprus who were carrying out this new mission in Antioch. In many ways Barnabas stood as an

⁶⁷ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 104

⁶⁸ Barrett, C. K., *Acts: A Shorter Commentary*, 174

⁶⁹ Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 203

encouraging pivot between the Hellenistic and the Hebrew elements of the church, holding both together. Could it be rightly said that the church today needs people who can hold together those of different perspectives? Barnabas has been described as a ‘bridge builder’⁷⁰ and this is abundantly accurate as not only was he accepted by the *men of Cyprus* but Barnabas’ credentials were high within the hierarchy of the faith community as Dunn points out: “...*he is one who shared the charismatic endowment of the Hellenist leadership (Acts 6: 5; 11: 24)*”⁷¹

So Barnabas sees this emerging Jesus movement in Antioch and perhaps has a supernatural awareness that it is of God. Whatever the source of his awareness that the new movement is from God the text makes absolutely clear that Barnabas’ response to what he finds is to simply be *glad*. He is indeed glad that God is doing something new and something very vibrant. This stands in stark contrast to the negativity of the Jerusalem church in their earlier response to similar activity (Acts 11: 3). Barnabas risked believing that God would work his grace into strange places and as a result of this belief he encouraged what was happening.

Openness to the Movement of the Holy Spirit

Openness to the Spirit marks out Barnabas and he stands in the vanguard of those great men and women of contemporary faith who encourage and actively will and allow God’s work to come about in a new way. Too often the church begins to decline because of people’s fear of trying to do something new in terms of mission. Hirsch persuasively argues that, although sometimes alien and often very challenging, new and unusual movements of mission can in the long term bring about much good:-

*...new movements awaken the centrality of the core meanings of the gospel freed from the paraphernalia of inherited traditions and rituals.....vital movements arise always in the context of rejection of the predominant institutions (e.g. Wesley and Booth).....vigorous movements almost always create movements of renewal, in the end they do go on to produce renewal in the life of the broader church.*⁷²

In the contemporary church new movements in mission, like *Fresh Expressions*, are beginning to turn a very large wheel that, hopefully, will soon gather momentum and once more focus

⁷⁰ Evans, H, *Barnabas the bridge builder* (Expository Times, vol. 89, 1978), 248

⁷¹ Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 155

⁷² Hirsch, *The Forgotten ways*, 56

every believers heart to mission. Some argue that the momentum in new forms of being church and new ways of engaging in mission has in fact already gained critical mass – it has been contended that it is only in accepting and encouraging these new, or reintroduced, forms of mission that the church can survive:-

...the real future of Western Christianity resides in these fledgling groups and movements...I believe that we have passed some form of critical mass, and there is good reason for hope. But we must be willing to significantly realign resources, invest in the future, take a journey, and experiment like mad.....The Spirit is moving in marvellous ways again. Movements are being sparked and the church is just beginning to wake up to its missional calling. But shedding Christendom is no easy task.....The absolutely vital issue for newer emerging churches will be their capacity to become genuinely missional....new and emergent churches are the result of being missional and not the other way round.⁷³

Quite what form the new methods and structures of leadership and the shape of what these emerging churches look like in any detail is beyond the scope of this study but nonetheless there is a clear principle, based on the encouraging work of Barnabas in Acts and the new emerging church movement, that experimentation in mission needs to be encouraged.

As we now move further into contemporary understandings of the *Missio Dei* encouraging a renewed vision for mission and worship of the one true God is essential if the church is to be what it is called to be. Mission and worship should be the heartbeat and identity of every Christian – this is the story that lies at the centre of who a Christian is.

Six Marks of Contemporary Mission

Hirsch makes the point that the early church, as seen in Acts, was encouraged, and Barnabas was clearly foundational in this encouragement, to be missional above all else. He argues that we are in urgent need for the return of the church putting Christ at the centre and focus of all things. This clarion call for Jesus to be at the heart of what makes a missional church cannot be underplayed – in contemporary Anglicanism, let alone any other denomination, many ministers are not admonished for pluralistic and non Biblical tendencies and are active in promoting

⁷³ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 71

other faiths as being of an equal status to Christianity.⁷⁴ This state of affairs would have been anathema to the leadership in Acts.

Hirsch suggests that to be authentically replicating the missionary principles of the early church not only does Jesus need to be returned to the centre but there also needs to be five other elements present.⁷⁵ Each of these elements, also suggested by Bevans and Schroeder in *Constants in Context*⁷⁶, seem to reflect something of what Barnabas was actively encouraging in Antioch :-

- i. **A Focus on Disciple Making;** As C. S. Lewis understood, the purpose of the church is to draw people to Christ and to make them like Christ – he comments: *“If the church is not doing this, then all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible, are a waste of time”*⁷⁷

Barnabas openly encouraged the making of disciples in the new movement of the church in Antioch in Acts 11. This was a primary focus of those involved in the mission to Gentiles and when Barnabas saw this was happening in Antioch he supported and welcomed it whether it was done under the auspices of the Jerusalem authorities or not.

- ii. **A missional Incarnational Impulse;** Here we see the essential nature of what the church is called to be – a sent people; *“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you”* John 20: 21. The impulse, the heart beat of the church, is to be an outgoing, sending, spreading or missional church; not static or trying to attract new members *in* but fully *going out* to the mission field. Couple this missional nature with a desire to be embedded into host cultures then we have the second mark of Hirsch’s understanding of what both the early church and the contemporary church is called to be: *“It is an essential aspect of Christianity’s capacity to spread itself and cross cultural boundariesin order to relate to and influence the host group, it will need to do it from within its cultural forms and expressions.”*⁷⁸

Barnabas encouraged this aspect of the churches missional engagement with the Gentile population in Antioch and did not overtly try and change the cultural norms – to be Christ

⁷⁴ For example the Rev David Hart who has written of his personal conversion to Hinduism in his book *Trading Faith; Global religion in an age of rapid change* (2006) yet still practises as a minister under the authority of the Bishop of Ely

⁷⁵ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 79

⁷⁶ Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 35-72

⁷⁷ Vaus, M, *Mere Theology*, (IVP, Leicester, 2004), 167

⁷⁸ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 285

like seemed to be the only explicit requirement for membership of the emerging church in Antioch - there was no element of adopting the cultural 'Jewish' identity of the church in Jerusalem. In this understanding Barnabas encouraged the people of Antioch to embrace the gospel and live it out in ways which were meaningful to them (although as Paul points out in Galatians 2: 11-16 even Barnabas, through natural human fear of the Jews and through the example of Peter, actually withdraws for a while from table fellowship with the Gentile converts and seemingly, as Paul says, '*forces Gentiles to follow Jewish customs*' – that is until Paul puts him back on the straight and narrow!)

There is of course a potential problem with planting into an alien culture and letting the Gospel be lived out within it. For example in the mid 1990's the *Nine O'clock Service* in the Anglican diocese of Sheffield hit severe problems. Hailed at the time as a pioneering spirit filled ministry speaking into a clubbing culture, the Gospel appeared to quickly take root among Sheffield's youth. The Nine O'clock Service, in a very simplistic understanding, was a heady mixture of technology meets rave music meets psychedelia meets the new age. Striking, relevant and attracting many young female members the church leadership, under the Reverend Chris Brain, spiralled out of control. Rev Brain abused his position and had sexual liaisons with a number of those young female members. The fall out from this was immense. The cause, which is multi faceted and clearly based in human sinfulness, was not helped by the culture. The culture was completely alien to the established church and because of this they went to the extreme measure of completely allowing autonomy for Chris Brain in terms of accountability – based on the principle that he knew and understood the culture and they didn't. There was simply no accountability. The rest is history. Had there been accountability based in relationships with the diocese, local church or some other body the potential for disaster could have been avoided.

It is clear that encouraging the Gospel to be planted into alien cultures still requires the *fruit of the Spirit* and Godly lives to be seen. Accountability, in some form or another, needs to be in place. In Antioch Barnabas, by his very presence, must have been part of the accountability process.

iii. An Apostolic Environment; In part this is about the kind of leadership required for the church of today and the church of the future. A leadership where the primary task of the

apostle (for the purposes of this study let us assume this word could be substituted for leader, minister, pastor and so on) is to call the church away from merely being in maintenance and survival mode into something much more dynamic. The apostolic role is to be one of visionary. This is about creating the environment where the charismatic callings from God, as expressed in Ephesians 4, can be used to further the kingdom. This is about the creation of a church atmosphere where everything is geared towards encouraging mission:-

The apostolic role within established churches and denominations (and new movements) requires the reinterpreting of the denomination's foundational values in the light of the demands of its mission today. The ultimate goal of these apostolic leaders is to call the denomination away from maintenance, back to mission⁷⁹

At its core the apostolic task is about encouraging the pioneering of missionary activity and also integrating mission into the central doctrinal values or DNA of the church. Barnabas, again, can be seen to be encouraging, as an apostle, this missionary environment in his work at Antioch in Acts 11.

There is however a slight element of a problem with this aspect of Hirsch's understanding. Gearing everything towards mission is a righteous and fully commendable pursuit but there still needs to be some emphasis on the care of the existing members of the church. Although only anecdotal one of the oft heard complaints from established Christians in churches that are mission focussed is that the teaching is constantly about how to evangelise and precious little about how to love and live out the Christian life writ large.

While focussing on mission we also need to keep one eye open on feeding the existing flock too.

- iv. A Need for the Churches' Systems to Become *Organic* in Nature;** God, in and through creation, clearly arranges human life in an organic way and not in man made mechanistic structures. Organic images of the church and the kingdom abound in the Bible; the *body*, the *vineyard*, the *field* and so on. These organic images help us to see what the essence of the make up of the systems of the church and kingdom should be like. Part of the problem for the established church is that its systems tend to become institutionalised, very

⁷⁹ Stephen Addison in Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 154

inflexible, restraining and overly structured (not that some structure in church is not important of course – without some structure the whole thing can collapse) which in turn, although a huge generalisation, tends to stifle new movements of the Holy Spirit. Organic systems however imply fluidity, ease of movement, swift decision making, networks of responsibility and authority built on relationships and so on: “...it’s the network structure where power and responsibility is diffused throughout the organisation and not concentrated at the centre that more approximates our real nature and calling as the body of Christ.”⁸⁰

In Antioch Barnabas’ main concern was for the new movement to continue doing what it was already doing. He seemingly did not impose any formal structure upon them, even though presumably he had the authority from Jerusalem to do so; he merely encouraged the organic ways to carry on!

- v. **A Move to *Communitas* and Not Community;** Linguistics is always difficult when trying to pin down something almost indescribable. In itself there is nothing wrong with church being described as community however Hirsch highlights something of the tendency of non missional church communities to become a ‘*huddle and cuddle*’ group of believers - a more inert institution caring for its members as opposed to something more dynamic and active. *Communitas* has something of its root in the word *community* and in the word *communication*. As one can imagine, in the context of mission, communication describes something of movement. This movement is of the transferring of the gospel between the faith community and those who have yet to receive the gospel. *Communitas* is the church when it has shaken off its collective securities of buildings, institutions, hierarchies and traditions and moved into a world of action. *Communitas* is akin to the Russian Orthodox understanding of *Sobernost* whereby the fellowship is completely moved and shaken by the Spirit towards a shared focus on a single activity⁸¹. The essence of church as *communitas* is the believers gathered around and active in a common goal of mission: “Mission is not only the ‘mother of theology’mission might also be called the ‘mother of the church,’ the great task believers have been given that binds them together, provides them with nourishment, focuses their energies, heals their sinfulness and provides them with challenge and vision.”⁸²

⁸⁰ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 188

⁸¹ Ramon, Bro, *The Flame of Sacred Love*, (Oxford, BRF, 1999), 95

⁸² Bevan, S, & Schroeder, R, *Constants in Context; a theology of mission for today*, (Orbis, New York, 2004), 11

This challenge to rally around missionary goals can be a risky business as it is a calling to venture into an unknown journey and into unknown territory: *“It involves adventure and movement, and it describes that unique experience of togetherness that really happens only among a group of people inspired by the vision of a better world actually attempting to do something about it.”*⁸³

The work in Antioch clearly was something new and unknown yet with Barnabas the work of the Spirit was in safe hands. Barnabas was undoubtedly aware of something of the nature of what gathering round the common goal of the Mission Dei could bring therefore it was in his nature to encourage the evangelists in Antioch to carry on as they were.

As always when new ways are introduced into the mission of the church, or old ways are re-introduced, there will inevitably be strong voices of opposition. Risk taking for the church, writ large, is not something that is always welcomed: *“... ..(new forms of mission) is not without significant challenge to, and resistance from, the current way in which the Western church do things.”*⁸⁴

Furthermore the whole of the current emerging church movement, or in Anglican terms *Fresh Expressions* of being church, is often itself at a loss to know exactly what it is doing. The recently appointed Missioner in this area, Steve Croft, clearly identifies that much of the missionary strategy and practice being done under the *Fresh Expressions* banner is a step out into the unknown:-

*In most of the places I speak these days, I try and communicate (obviously) that fresh expressions of church are needed and are emerging. But I also try to say explicitly that as a whole church we don't yet know how to do this kind of mission. We are on a steep learning curve.*⁸⁵

Encouragement to take these risks, however, in terms of new visions, new ideas and the use of what for many is unorthodox methods in engaging with mission should be welcomed. The fear of breaking into the unknown and the fear of stepping out in faith to see what God is doing can severely hold the church back in mission. However, Barnabas was a man who welcomed this kind of new activity with an open heart and with glad words of encouragement. It is little

⁸³ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 277-278

⁸⁴ Hirsch, *The Forgotten ways*, 16

⁸⁵ Croft, S, in *The Church of England Newspaper*, (May 24th 2007), 21

wonder then that William Barclay generously describes Barnabas as the man with the biggest heart in the church.⁸⁶

The Language of Barnabas

Exploring Barnabas' ministry further we can see more evidence of his work of encouragement and challenge. Barnabas carefully chose words that would build people up and encourage them rather than being careless with his speech that could so easily discourage. He was a man who was open with his praise – *“he encouraged them all.”*⁸⁷ This sense of openness is both bred by encouragement and allows encouragement to operate: *“...we must first concern ourselves with creating a relational atmosphere in which words can reach (people) deeply”*⁸⁸

Barnabas' recorded words were words of grace, friendship, reconciliation, motivation and hope (Acts 11: 24-26 Acts 9: 27-28). As a leader he would have commanded respect through his choice of encouraging language and through the challenge of his personal lifestyle. Whenever Barnabas was around there was the possibility of any given situation to be changed for the good - as Allender points out it is through encouraging words that an atmosphere for change can truly be nurtured.⁸⁹

Again, for contemporary understanding, a leader's choice of words has the power to build up or tear down a congregation engaging in mission. To use words of encouragement is to give hope, self-assurance and assistance in face of adversity. To encourage can urge the defeated to do the impossible. To encourage can foster a sense of well being and confidence. It is self explanatory that words of discouragement and criticism, that are not constructively thought through, can have the reverse effect. Barnabas, our exemplar, consistently chooses encouraging words as his tool for church growth and mission.

How then might this be used in the contemporary church? In the first instance perhaps those with a public voice for the church, both local ministers and those in positions of greater authority, might reflect more seriously on the way in which they come across to the general

⁸⁶ Barclay, W, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (St Andrew's Press, Edinburgh, 1953), 95

⁸⁷ Acts 11: 23

⁸⁸ Allender, *Encouragement*, 39

⁸⁹ Allender, *Encouragement*, 109

community. For many the voice of the church is one of moral condemnation and one which has an unhealthy concern with internal politics and an obsession with things that Jesus had precious little concern for (again a gross caricature but perhaps one which does have some merit). Perhaps many people who are not part of the church may have some sympathy with Brian McClaren's statement: "*The more I study the Bible and reflect on the life and teachings of Jesus, the more I think most of Christianity as practised today has very little to do with the real Jesus found in there*"⁹⁰

How much better to hear the voice of the church speaking words of the compassionate Christ - words of warm encouragement about the good things that are happening within individuals and communities both on a local and national level. This type of bridge building, albeit in a terribly simplistic understanding, may allow for the gospel to take a foothold in un-chartered territory.

Secondly, there is a sense in which the life that Barnabas clearly shows at this juncture in *Acts* is a life that is attractive and worth living. He ably demonstrates something of what it is to be Christian in its truest sense. Here is a man not burdened by regulation or religion but a man who is freely, gladly and joyfully following his Master – good reason then that Stott claims Barnabas to be a man truly living in generosity and openness; one who fulfils and lives out the Christian ideal.⁹¹ Surely there has to be something magnetic and attractive about those Christians who live out that lifestyle in today's world? Can there be any better opening to mission in any context or culture than a warm, encouraging, sacrificial, others focussed, life lived in true joy?

The Character and Integrity of Barnabas as a Missioner

The outstanding character of Barnabas is hugely important. The previously given title 'Son of encouragement' (Acts 4: 36) is enhanced by Luke's description of *a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith*. As we have already seen Luke records Barnabas as a heartfelt giver (Acts 4: 36) but he is also one who is prepared to stand up for others and take risks (Acts 9: 27). He is a person who is a missionary and actively encourages mission (Acts 11 onwards as already discussed). He is described as one who is conciliatory; encouraging; an enabler of others ministry; a teacher and an apostle (Acts 12). Harold Evans beautifully describes Barnabas as a

⁹⁰ McClaren, D, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, (Michigan; Zondervan, 2004), 79

⁹¹ Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 108

man with *a warm spirit* and of *broad sympathy*, a man who was no less than a Christian axis between cultures.⁹² What a wonderful character!

Little wonder then that Luke records the result of this man's character was *that a great number of people were brought to the Lord*. Again, for contemporary mission, it is becoming much clearer that people of integrity and high character are the one's whom God is choosing to use in this age. Steve Chalke argues strongly for this point when he states that Christian missionaries now, more than at any other time, need to have a depth of character that reflects something of the love and grace of God – Chalke emphasises that our behaviour and character truly reflect our belief about God.⁹³ Perhaps, though, it is people of character whom God has always chosen as effective missionaries? This Godly calling to live a life of high character is, or should be, the calling for every single Christian. Barnabas clearly challenged, through his own lifestyle, for every single Christian around him to live a life worthy of the calling they received.⁹⁴

As an aside, although this is only anecdotal evidence, two recent Ordinands who have recognised ministries through one local church⁹⁵ have suggested that the selectors at their selection conference spent more time examining their character than they did on any academic, ministerial or church experience they had. Character is hugely important for those who are intent on stepping out in mission – people will listen to those who have integrity of character.

5. Conclusion: Based on the Reconciling Nature of Barnabas

“Barnabas suggested taking John Mark, but Paul was not in favour of taking along the man who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had refused to share in their work. There was sharp disagreement so that they parted company, and Barnabas sailed off with Mark to Cyprus”
Acts 15: 37-39

In Acts 13 we encounter John Mark assisting Barnabas and Paul on a missionary journey to Cyprus. At Pamphylia John Mark, perhaps through fear or possibly resentment of Paul's leadership⁹⁶, although the text does not make this clear, decides to suddenly leave and return to Jerusalem. Whatever the reason for John Mark's disappearance Paul was not prepared to forgive or forget. He believed that John Mark had committed an act of desertion in the mission

⁹²Evans, H, *Barnabas the bridge builder* (Expository Times, vol. 89, 1978), 249

⁹³ Chalke, S., *Intelligent Church*, (Zondervan; Michigan, 2006), 20-21

⁹⁴ Ephesians 4: 1

⁹⁵ These two Ordinands came to recognise a calling to full time ministry through All Saints', Loose in Canterbury Diocese

⁹⁶ For more on this see Bruce, F, F, *The Book of the Acts*, (Michigan, Eerdmans, 1988), 251, where he states “...*(Mark) resented the way in which his cousin Barnabas was falling into second place.*”

field and for Paul this was sufficient reason for him to disqualify John Mark from future missionary work for Jesus.

There is perhaps a strong degree of irony here with Paul. We know that in his own life and ministry he was synonymous with being offered a second chance. The road to Damascus encounter with Christ, the post conversion meeting with the Jerusalem believers and so on marked Paul out as a man who had much personal experience of being forgiven. Quite why he took exception to John Mark's desertion has been debated down the centuries. And, although there is evidence of a later reconciliation it is clear that, at least for now, Paul declares that John Mark should be abandoned.⁹⁷

This rejection of John Mark, as the text makes plain, brings *sharp disagreement* between Barnabas and Paul which does not make good reading. However Luke does not apportion blame: "*Luke's realism in recording it helps us to remember that the two men, as they themselves said to the people of Lystra, were human beings with feelings like any other.....Luke does not relate the dispute in such a way as to put Paul in the right and Barnabas in the wrong*"⁹⁸

If anything the text favours Barnabas in as much as his own nature is one to recognise a good ministry in an individual which Paul, at least on this occasion, does not.⁹⁹

Whoever was right in the disagreement is to some extent irrelevant because what is clear is that this amazing encourager, Barnabas, is prepared to give John Mark a second chance, just as he initially encouraged the Jerusalem believers to give Saul a second chance earlier in their friendship.

Barnabas takes John Mark on a missionary journey to Cyprus and then we hear no more of this great man of the early church. Yet of course we do hear more of John Mark as he becomes one of the four evangelists of the Gospels – but where would we have been without the encouragement of Barnabas for Mark to continue in ministry? And, of course, we know that

⁹⁷ In 2 Timothy Paul writes "*Make every effort to come and see me as soon as you can. As it is, Demas has deserted me for love of his life and gone to Thessalonica, Crescens has gone to Galatia and Titus to Dalmatia; only Luke is with me. Bring Mark with you; I find him a useful helper in my work*" 2 Timothy 4: 9-11

⁹⁸ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 301

⁹⁹ This view of Luke's impartiality over the John Mark dispute is not universally accepted as Witherington III suggests; "*Luke sides with Paul in this matter*", Witherington III, B, *The Acts of the Apostles; a socio rhetorical commentary*, (Eerdmans, Michigan, 1998) - 472

Paul continues the great journeys of mission to the Gentiles - but, again, where would we have been without the encouragement of Barnabas for Saul in the first instance?

It seems clear that the contemporary church needs a renewed spirit of Barnabas within its midst:-

It takes special gifts to recognise God at work in new ways and not be jealous, afraid or worried about what others will think. It takes a special goodness to rejoice in something new and to give out the right kind of encouragement. Barnabas taught the new Christians that they couldn't do it all. He went to find Saul and together they helped to build a different kind of church – one not based around temple worship or Jewish patterns. This was a new church, one which became the springboard for spreading the gospel to Cyprus, modern Turkey and Greece.

All across the country, we are seeing people drawn to faith in different ways - from a range of different backgrounds - and creating fresh expressions of church.

Every circuit and parish will need its Barnabas if this movement is to increase and to flourish. Barnabas will be needed in the General Synod and the Methodist Conference, in deanery pastoral committees, in meetings of circuit stewards - everywhere where decisions are taken. God needs Christians of goodness, full of the Holy Spirit, who are able simply to rejoice, to encourage, to teach and support. You may not be called to establish a fresh expression of church. But you may be called to be a Barnabas.¹⁰⁰

Furthermore it seems clear that Luke makes the gift of encouragement, and the challenges that encouragement brings, to undoubtedly be a motif for mission both in his work on the early church and his own encouragement for believers today!

It is indeed a significant thing to be a Christian encourager like Barnabas – an unsung hero he may be but his impact on the mission and theology of the church was immense; Marshall comments quite accurately that: “...no other man is described as good in Acts, and in his spiritual gifts he stood on a level with Stephen...The fact that Barnabas had the spiritual insight to recognise that God's plan was being fulfilled at Antioch was of decisive significance for the growth of the church.”¹⁰¹

Encouragement and the challenge it brings is undoubtedly a motif for mission within the Acts of the Apostles and is undoubtedly a motif for mission today.

¹⁰⁰ Croft, S, in ‘Expressions’ <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/uploads/documents/Expressions>

¹⁰¹ Marshall, I. H., Acts, 202

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