

## **Building a Generous Church**

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Building a Church for Others Series

Acts 4:32-37

Have you noticed that celebrities are more and more trying to demonstrate their creative genius by imposing the most outrageous names upon their newborn babies? So Gwyneth Paltrow named her daughter, Apple.

Would you really want to go through life with the name “Apple?”

Michael Jackson’s sons are named Prince Michael I and Prince Michael II.

And in keeping with the royal family theme, Jermaine Jackson named his son “Jermajesty.”

“Will there be anything else, Jermajesty?”

Jason Lee and his fiancée named their son, Pilot Inspektor.

Bob Geldorf, the Irish singer, songwriter, actor and political activist, had three children. Their names are FiFi Trixibelle, Peaches Honey Blossom, and Pixie.

Sounds like French Poodles, not children!

David Bowie had a son he named Zowie. Again, can you imagine applying for a job with a large accounting firm, some conservative position as an estate planning attorney or banking – “Hi, I’m applying for your banking position. My name is Zowie Bowie.”

The actor, Rob Morrow, had a daughter named Tu. Do you get it? Tu Morrow. Cute.

John Cougar Mellencamp’s son’s name is Speck Wild Horse.

Apart from the outrageous names, you have all the dumb names that parents inflict on their children. These are actual names:

Shanda Lear  
Warren Peace  
Stanley Cupp  
Barb Dwyer  
Anne Teak  
Dan D. Lyons

There is a man named Bill Land, who named his daughter: Allison Wanda Land.

Or how about:

Constance Sweat

In contrast to the silly, inane, “Gee, aren’t I creative” approach to naming children in America, names in the Bible were really significant. They weren’t just a label, and they weren’t meant to be a reflection on the sheer creative genius of their parents. Names in the Bible often were a prediction of that person’s destiny. Sometimes names communicated something about the inner essence or character of a person.

So, for example, the angel of the Lord told Joseph to give Mary’s son the name Jesus, because the name Jesus means “the Lord saves”

Jesus = the Lord saves

And Jesus was to grow up to be the Savior of the world.

Before my son, Daniel, was born I was praying about what to name him and I had been taught a Sunday School song after I came to Christ that really impacted me. The chorus was;

Dare to be a Daniel  
Dare to stand alone  
Dare to have a purpose firm  
Dare to make it known  
When you find that you must choose  
Do what’s right and good.  
Think of Daniel and his friends  
And please the Lord your God.

I thought, “This is what I want for a son – someone who would dare to stand alone and dare to stand up for what’s right and good.”

When my daughter was pregnant with our granddaughter, I was praying for our granddaughter, which by the way is a very good thing when you conceive a child to pray for the child even when they are in the womb. And as I prayed for my granddaughter, and prayed over her destiny in life, I felt the Lord speak to me that she was going to be resilient. She was going to have a personality like a cork in water that even if it was pushed down, would pop right back up. And I felt the Lord say, “She is going to be like Naomi in the Bible. No difficulty will keep her down; she will succeed in the end.” And so I told my daughter, Sharon, this and she named our granddaughter, “Naomi.”

Names are meant to communicate something of a person's destiny, or something of a person's character. Today we are going to look at the life of one of my favorite characters in the New Testament, a man whose parents gave him the name Joseph, but who the apostles nicknamed "Barnabas." Barnabas means "Son of Encouragement."

He got the name "Barnabas" because he had this incredible gift, the incredible capacity to encourage other people. But Barnabas was not only an incredible encourager of others; Barnabas was an extraordinarily generous person.

Today, as I continue in this series that I've called "Building a Church for Others," I've called today's talk, "Building a Generous Church." Let's pray.

**Acts 4:32-37**

32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all 34 that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. 36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), 37 sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Before we look at Barnabas, I want to briefly underline for you the marks of a great church.

The marks of a great church

Now in verse 32 it says:

**Acts 4:32**

All the believers were one in heart and mind.

The first mark of a great church is unity. Lots of times we think about a great church and we think about its activity - we think about its program. We think about its preaching. But the first thing Luke calls our attention to regarding the early church was its unity.

**Acts 4:32**

All the believers were one in heart and mind.

And it is the unity of the church that Jesus prayed for in the Garden of Gethsemane in his high priestly prayer. We read in John 17:20-23:

**John 17:20-23**

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—23 I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

I love the little phrase in verse 23:

**John 17:23**

I ...may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

How does the larger community know that Christianity is true? What is the mark? What is the evidence today that Jesus is who he said he was – the way to God, the ultimate answer to the world's problems, the one who can save us? Why should the community believe what the church says about Jesus?

There was a great Hindu religious leader from India a generation ago, who from looking at all the fighting among Christians, said, "Christians are just ordinary people, who make extraordinary claims." In other words: I see nothing particularly special about Christians that I should believe these extraordinary claims that they are following the true path to God.

Jesus said it is the unity of his followers that gives evidentiary weight to his claim that he is the unique Son of God.

How can we come from so many different backgrounds; some of you grew up in church, some of you were unchurched; we have people from mainline Protestant backgrounds, Pentecostals, conservative evangelicals, Roman Catholics, and Jewish people like myself; people with Muslim backgrounds; people who are atheists, who have different temperaments, different educations; urban, suburban, different races, and different ethnicities – how can we possibly be brought together and be one?

A.W. Tozer, the great devotional writer, once said:

Has it ever occurred to you that 100 pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each must individually bow. So 100 worshippers meet together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly

be were they to become “unity” conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.

You know, the biggest problem in the world today, the issue that is the obsession of postmoderns is how can we all get along. We have all these divisions – Shites and Sunnis killing each other in Iraq; Israelis and Palestinians; Hindus and Muslims in India. How can we all get along? Many say the answer is to believe nothing very strongly. It is strong beliefs that divide people and cause them to kill each other. The Bible offers a radically different answer. It says turn your heart to Jesus and you will end up loving, not hating someone who is different than you.

The way we bridge our difference is not by politically engineering, or removing all of our cultural differences, watering down our beliefs to the lowest common denominator. God alone can preserve our cultural differences and make us one. The way we become one is that each of us makes a commitment to tune our hearts to Jesus. And when a Caucasian and African American, and Latino, and Asian, and Jew, and Gentile, Muslim background and Christian background, someone from the city, and someone from the suburbs, and a church person, and an unchurched person – whatever our backgrounds are – when we all choose to focus our hearts on Jesus, the Spirit of God brings us near one another and causes us to love each other.

Unity. And the maintenance of this unity has to be one of the highest priorities of any church. You know, it is so easy to get so engrossed in what we are doing for Christ that we neglect our relationships with each other. “Oh, I can treat so-and-so poorly.” “I don’t have to clean up this particular mess with that person.” “I can be irritable or judgmental, so long as I’m involved in the mission for Christ.”

Friend, do you understand that the mission for Christ is directly impacted by our unity. The world knows that there is something special about Jesus when you walk into a diverse church and you immediately sense a deep spiritual unity among all the people.

Unity and witnessing. That is the second mark of a great church. Verse 33:

**Acts 4:33**

With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all

Stephen spoke about this last week. But you know what you see in the early church is there were never any period of time in which the church did not share its faith and invite neighbors into a relationship with Christ. Witnessing is not a sometime program of the church, something you do during the annual evangelistic crusade. Just like unity is not something we occasionally do during our annual love-one-another-week, the church is not the church unless it is

bearing witness. The way I describe it to pastors is I say: No matter what else you do, pastor, you always have your foot down on the accelerator; you're always moving the church forward in the world.

We aren't holy enough. Work on holiness while you witness.  
We don't have enough leaders. Develop leaders while you witness.  
Our building is too small. Add services while you witness.

No matter what else you do, Christian, bear witness to Christ.

But my marriage isn't very good. Well, strengthen your marriage while you witness. The early church got this. The book of Acts could be called "The History of Early Church Witnessing." Witnessing is found in 27 out of 28 chapters in the book of Acts.

So many folks don't get this. So often church history is taught as the history of Christian doctrine, or the history of doctrinal controversies. But the greatest church historian of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kenneth Scott Latourette, of Yale University, got it exactly right when he titled his monumental 7-volume history of the church not *A History of Christian Doctrine*, or *A History of Denominational Differences*. He titled his 7-volume history of the church, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*.

That is exactly what the church is about. It is ever-expanding and ever-witnessing.

The third mark of a great church we see in verse 33:

**Acts 4:33**

With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all

And you can underline in your Bible, it says in verse 33:

And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all.

The phrase in Greek is literally "mega grace."

Wouldn't you like that to be said of the Vineyard? What I experienced when I came to this place was mega grace, God's free gift, God's unmerited favor. I wasn't judged because of my past. I wasn't judged based on my divorce, or having my baby without a husband, or having been to prison. I was treated with grace and it was this grace that helped me find Jesus.

And the generosity of the church, which is the fourth mark of a great church,

Generosity is the overflow of grace. You can tell, Jesus tells us, when someone has been a recipient of grace because that person immediately becomes a great giver. Freely you receive, Jesus says, freely give. It is not hard when there is overflow. It is hard to give when you are dried up inside. But when you personally experience God's kindness towards you when your relationship with God is real and you feel his love for you, it is not hard to be generous. Grace and generosity belong together like heaven and earth. Generosity follows grace as thunder follows lightening.

So it says in verses 34-35:

**Acts 4:34-35**

that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

In verse 34 we find the fulfillment of the Old Testament blessing found in the book of Deuteronomy. It says in Deuteronomy 15:4-5:

**Deuteronomy 15:4-5**

However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, 5 if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.

See, the gospel has economic implications. Jesus said that he came to preach good news to the poor. And if the gospel is not good news to the poor, then it is not the gospel at all. What I mean is unless the gospel causes the poor to be lifted out of their poverty as well as forgives us our sins, then we have not understood the full gospel. The full gospel not only reconciles us to God, but the full gospel pursues racial reconciliation and economic justice. We can't have all white churches and all black churches and claim to believe the gospel. We can't have all wealthy churches and all poor churches and say we have the gospel.

The gospel is not merely a theological message. The real gospel has impact on the poor, which means the real gospel has impact on your bank account balance. And if you don't see your bank balance going down from time to time because you are giving to the poor, then you do need to wonder whether you have been impacted by the real gospel.

Grace and generosity are tied together in the New Testament. And if you never hear thunder followed by a flash of lightening in the sky, then you have to expect that what you've seen is not lightening at all. Maybe it is a search light, or a car light. And if you are not generous to the poor, then you've got to wonder if you've

really experienced the grace of God, of if, instead, you've simply given yourself grace. The gospel is good news to the poor, or it is not the gospel at all.

Now, we see Barnabas as an example of this generosity, verses 36-37:

**Acts 4:36-37**

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Now some people see in this model of the early church a kind of Christian communism. But when it says in verse 32:

**Acts 4:32**

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.

I believe it simply means that people's possessions were available to the Lord to be given as God directed. This is not communism. Communism is legislated sharing, sometimes legislated at the point of a gun. You have two cows, I have none; the state takes your second cow and gives it to me. Or worse, the state shoots both your cows so you don't have more than me. But grace-filled generosity is not legislated. It is voluntary.

Voluntary Giving

We read in verse 34:

**Acts 4:34**

that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales

The early church, though it was marked by generosity, still practiced private ownership. The giving wasn't required. The giving came from people's hearts who were touched by mega grace.

Now, the giving in the early church was not just voluntary, it was regular.

Regular Giving

It says in verse 34:

**Acts 4:34**



that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales

Generous giving is always regular giving.

Here is what I observe in our church. And I want to be as honest and authentic as I can with you because my job as pastor is to disciple the church in every area of life, including our giving. What I observe in the church is that there are some people who don't give at all. They are simply not generous. There are some people who give a great deal. But most who give do so sporadically. They might give two months in a row and then skip three months; then give for a month and skip four more months.

Many people don't give when they are on vacation. Every church notices a summer slump. "If I'm not here when the offering plate is passed, then I don't give." Now, I am certain that even when you go on vacation, you make your mortgage payment. You send it out a few days early, if you are going to be away at the first of the month. Why should your giving to God be less regular or less disciplined than your mortgage payment, or your car payment? So many people, if they miss church, don't give. What you are saying is, not only did I miss church and not worship God, but I give myself a raise. If you plan on a vacation in the next few months, mail in your tithe, mail in your building fund pledge, just like you mail in your mortgage payment or your credit card bill. The only people I have ever met who give substantially have developed the habit of giving regularly.

Where is my suggestion to you? If you are paid weekly, give weekly. If you are paid monthly, write a check monthly. If you are given a bonus, then write a check on your bonus. If receive a financial gift, write a check on the gift. If you receive an inheritance, write a check on the inheritance.

Generous people have developed a discipline of regular giving on all of their income. They don't just give when they are emotionally moved by a touching story.

And just parenthetically, there really is a difference between doing an occasional generous deed and being a generous person. It is wrapped up in this idea of disciplined giving. Generosity of great givers is not simply a spur of the moment impulse. Anyone can feel an occasional pang of charity, a spasm of generosity brought on by the mood of the moment. Generous people have developed giving as a way of life that transcends the ups and downs of their emotions. They know that sometimes, like everyone else, they won't feel like giving. So they've developed a disciplined commitment which requires not only a promise, but a follow through.

So they've developed the discipline of going to small group whether they feel like it in the moment or not because they want to be there to contribute to the life of others. They have the discipline of going down to the food pantry, or teaching in children's ministry, or serving as an usher in the church, so they don't blow it off, or not show up because generosity has become a way of life.

One church expert discovered that people who have a discipline of regular giving give four times as much as people who don't have that discipline at all. So often, those who don't have the discipline of regular giving wildly over-estimate their giving. "I'm sure that I'm close to a tithe." On your taxes this past year, compare your receipt to your gross income. Is it near 10% of your gross income?

So let me ask you, friend, can you say that generosity for you is a way of life, or is it just an emotional spasm? Wouldn't it be nice to not just occasionally do generous deeds, but be a generous person?

Generous giving is voluntary. It is regular. And it is sacrificial.

### Sacrificial Giving

People in this great early church were selling houses and selling their land and giving the money to the Lord. There is a wonderful text in 2 Corinthians 8:2-3 which says this:

#### **2 Corinthians 8:2-3**

In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own,

Paul ties together things that we always keep apart – severe trial and overflowing joy; extreme poverty and rich generosity. Sacrificial giving is not the special purview of the very wealthy. Sacrificial giving is a blessing given to everyone including the poor.

Now, there are different levels at which you can give. You can give less than your ability. You can give as much as your ability. You can give beyond your ability. It says here in 2 Corinthians 8:3 concerning the Macedonian church which was a great church:

#### **2 Corinthians 8:3**

For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own,

Friends, wouldn't you agree with me that at least 85% of Christians in America give less than their ability? Maybe 14% give as much as they are able. And maybe 1% of American Christians give beyond their ability. When I think of folks

who give beyond their ability, I think of a woman from the Philippines who came over to America with very few possessions, except a few pieces of jewelry that she inherited from her family. These pieces of jewelry were her security. They were the only things she had that were really valuable. When we built the community center, I received a note from this woman saying: "I want so desperately to give to people who have less than me. God has moved in my heart to give away my jewelry."

Voluntary giving, regular giving, sacrificial giving – this was Barnabas.

### The Generosity of a Good Man

Barnabas was an example of someone who was generous with his possessions.

### Generous with his possessions

And by the way, I believe the one thing that keeps us from being generous is fear. We think the one thing that keeps us from being generous is poverty. But all over the world, there are examples of the most impoverished people being generous.

I read a book by a missionary who was handing out rice in a poor village. He gave this woman two quarts of rice. She immediately divided the two quarts in half and packed up half of the rice and began going to her neighbor. He said, "What are you doing?" She said, "My family will have enough to eat today with one quart of rice. But my neighbor is starving."

We think what keeps us from being generous is poverty. It is not poverty; it is fear that closes our hand. I know people whose nest eggs are enough to cover every contingency, but they hold back just in case some low probability of reversal of fortune occurs. Many, many of us could give several times what we give to the Lord without the slightest risk to ourselves.

And you know, our lives are less rich because we hold back. Mother Teresa called this, "the poverty of the rich." Being generous breaks the grip of fear on our lives. We say, "I'm going to learn to trust God and not put my trust in money."

Barnabas was a generous man not only in respect to his possessions, but Barnabas was generous with people who had not yet arrived.

### Generous with people who had not yet arrived.

In Acts 9 we read of the conversion of Saul, who is better known as the apostle Paul. And it says in Acts 9:26-28:

**Acts 9:26-28**

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. 28 So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

Now, I don't know what the apostle Paul was like immediately following his conversion. But I know what he would become in terms of the mature fruit of the Spirit that you see in his later letters – his gentleness, his kindness. I'm sure that all of the rough edges of this persecutor of the church were not rubbed in his initial conversion experience. But Barnabas was generous with people who had not yet arrived.

Let me tell you about someone who has become my friend. I'm going to call him Greg. This is an absolutely true story. When I met Greg he was a new Christian and he had a lot of obvious flaws. In fact, he was frankly the kind of person that I had problems with. Greg grew up in a broken home and so he had a high need for affirmation. He was always insecure about his performance. He constantly looked to me and other leaders to see what I thought of him. When Greg was in college, he used to go to a few wealthy church members' homes on Sunday afternoon and eat like crazy because it was his only really good meal all week. He didn't have a very good job. So I sort of felt like he was glomming off of others. I was concerned that he was using older adults as a meal ticket, which is really what he was doing.

Greg was very opinionated which was particularly annoying since a lot of times he didn't really know what he was talking about. He hadn't read very much Christian history, Christian theology, but he had an opinion about everything and he shared his opinions freely. He wasn't very polite. It was like he was raised by a family of wolves. He rarely said "please," or "thank you."

I could go on and on listing Greg's flaws, but the amazing thing was that even though I was annoyed by Greg, there were a few generous people that I saw who were willing to invest in Greg, even though they, too, obviously saw the tons of dirt in his life. They believed that there was gold in them thar hills. And as Greg grew in the Lord and matured, he became a leader. Some of the rough edges were rubbed off of his life.

And in case you haven't figured it out, I am Greg. And as I look back over my life, for some peculiar reason known only to God, there were lots of people who invested in me, who believed in me, who had a vision for me when it would have been easy to discount me or write me off, who would have thought it easy to say

“there’s just too much dirt here, we’ll wait until most of it is cleared away before we start investing in this guy.”

Brothers and sisters, there are so many folks in this church who are new to the Lord, who are just returning to church. And what these new folks need, what young people need, what people who are returning to church need are generous older Christians who can see past the dirt, who can see the gold in them thar hills; people who will invest in our middle schoolers, people who will invest in our teens, mature Christians who will invest in Joshua House-age young adults, who will come alongside young marrieds, and folks in their 30’s, 40’s, 50’s and 60’s who are just coming to Christ; folks who will say, “You know, I see lots of potential in you.”

Barnabas was that kind of man. He was generous with his possessions. He was generous with people who haven’t yet arrived. He was generous with Christians who were different.

#### Generous with Christians who are different

We read in Acts 11:19-24:

#### **Acts 11:19-24**

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. 20 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. 21 The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. 22 News of this reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

The gospel spread in ever-expanding concentric circles from the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea to these half-breeds in Samaria and now to the Gentiles up in Antioch, which today would be near the border of Lebanon and Turkey. And it was the providence of God that the Jews in the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to investigate what was going on in Antioch. Because a different man, a less generous man, a more narrow-hearted man may have seen what was happening in this church at Antioch and quenched the Spirit. But it says of Barnabas in verse 24:

#### **Acts 11:24**

He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

Unfortunately, the TNIV leaves out a crucial word that is present in the Greek. It should read:

For he was a good man...

What Barnabas did in Antioch came out of his being a good man. He is the only person, by the way, in the book of Acts that is described this way. He was a good man. He had a good heart – an open, pure, generous heart. When I read that phrase, I prayed: O God, give me a good heart.

What was it that his good heart produced? I love this phrase:

When he saw evidence of the grace of God, he was glad.

Generous people, good people see the hand of God when other people only see problems. Good people, generous people see evidence of the hand of God when other people only see differences. Generous people, good people see evidence of the hand of God when other people only see a violation of the way that we do things around here.

Barnabas was going to a Gentile church. They were culturally different than the Jews in Jerusalem. They were culturally different than the Jews in the dispersion. I'm sure that the Christians in Antioch sang different songs than the Jews in Jerusalem. The Christians in Antioch spoke a different language. They probably had different customs. They likely dressed differently. Narrow-hearted people, less generous people get stuck on the obvious. Good people, generous people see evidence of the hand of God.

I can't tell you how many times over the years someone has criticized this church because we said kind things about Roman Catholics, or recommended a book by a Pentecostal or mainline Protestant author, perhaps commended a practice that came out of the Anglican Church. People write to me and say: Don't you understand the doctrinal problems with this system, or that system? The answer is: Of course, we understand the doctrinal issues. The question is: Can you see God wherever people are confessing Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior? Do you believe that God is generous enough to save people who are in traditions very different than our own, so long as they turn to Christ?

Don't you want to be part of a church that is generous towards the whole body of Christ – even those parts with the icons, even those parts with the statues, even those parts that dance on the pews, even those parts that insist that the King James Bible is the only version that God wants? Don't you think God was

generous enough to embrace every single Christian denomination even though they, and we, are confused about a lot of issues?

It says:

Barnabas saw evidence of the grace of God and was glad.

A generous person is easily gladdened because they have eyes for God. Whereas, a stingy person is easily turned off. They just see the differences, and the errors, and the problems. It doesn't mean that Barnabas didn't see problems. He exhorted the people. He taught them about remaining true to the Lord. But generous people refuse to quench the Spirit, even when the Spirit is manifesting in a way that is uncomfortable for them, different than what they are used to; stretches them.

Finally, Barnabas was generous with people who failed.

Generous with people who failed.

**Acts 15:36-41**

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." 37 Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, 38 but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. 39 They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. 41 He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

We don't know why John Mark deserted Paul and Barnabas in Pamphylia. There are lots of different suggestions. Maybe there was the difficulty of missionary life and all of its discomfort. Maybe he got sick in Pamphylia. Maybe he was homesick. Maybe he didn't get along with Paul. Whatever the reason, Paul considered Mark's leaving as a desertion. But Barnabas, who was John Mark's cousin, saw the situation differently. He wanted to give John Mark another chance.

Now, we are not told in the Bible that Barnabas was right and Paul was wrong; or Paul was right and Barnabas was wrong. We've got here a classic illustration of a common church and missionary conflict. One person says: We can't place the interest of the individual over the entire work. This individual is damaging the work. They need to go. Another person says: We can't ever forget the individual. Should we be cause-centered; should we be people-centered? There is no right answer, or one-size-fits-all in every situation.

We know several things about this conflict, though. We do know that God in his wisdom created two missions in the place of one. Barnabas and Mark sailed off for Cyprus. And Paul and Silas traveled to Europe. And it may be that God used this conflict for the good in spreading the gospel. Certainly, God used this conflict in partnering Paul up with Silas, who became Paul's helper in the writing of Paul's letters.

We also know that the fact that Barnabas came alongside of Mark resulted in Mark being restored. John Mark became the author of the second gospel – the gospel of Mark. And even Paul recognized some years later that John Mark was, in fact, a useful servant of the Lord. We read in 2 Timothy 4:11 that at the end of Paul's life, he said this:

**2 Timothy 4:11**

Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.

Generous people don't toss other folks on the scrap heap, even when those other people have failed. They come alongside and say: Don't give up.

Let me close with this story:

In 1992 at the Summer Olympic Games in Barcelona, Derek Redmond was a British runner in the 400 meter semi-final. He was determined to win an Olympics in this event since he had been forced to withdraw from the 400 at the 1988 summer games just ten minutes before the event because of an Achilles tendon injury. He underwent five different surgeries on his Achilles tendon over the next year. So when the 1992 games arrived, he wanted to show the world how good he was and who he was.

Derek's father, Jim, accompanied him to the Barcelona games. He was there in the stands just like he had been for all of Derek's world competitions. Derek and his dad were as close as a father and son could be. They were best friends.

The top four finishers in the 400-meter semi-finals qualified for the Olympic finals. The stadium was packed with 65,000 fans. The race began and Redmond broke the pack and quickly seized the lead. Down the backstretch with only 175 meters remaining, Redmond was a shoe-in to make the finals. Suddenly, he heard a pop and then a cracking noise. He tried to focus and regain his rhythm, but something was terribly wrong. His left leg stopped working. His face twisted into a grimace as he slowed to a stop. He crouched with his head in his hands as the seven other athletes ran past the finish line.

Derek, at first, thought he had been shot. Then, after a few seconds, he realized that his hamstring was gone. The officials were running towards him with a stretcher. Derek waved them off and began to hobble down the backstretch. It



was obvious that his race was over, but something inside of him continued to run on one good leg. Everything he worked for was finished. He said, "In that moment, I hated everyone in the world. I hated hamstrings. I felt so bitter that I was injured again."

So there he was, hobbling on one leg down the track. And even though the other finishers had already finished the race, suddenly everyone in the stands realized that Redmond wasn't dropping out. The crowd, when they saw him dragging himself down the track, rose and began to roar. The roar got louder and louder. Derek said, "I wasn't doing it for the crowd. I was doing it for me. I wanted to finish the race." One painful step at a time, each one a little slower than the last.

His face was twisted in pain. Tears were running down his face. He continued to limp. Suddenly, his dad, Jim, leaped over the fence at the bottom of the stands. He avoided the security guards and ran out to his son. Two security people chased him, but dad said, "That's my son out there and I'm going to help him."

Finally, with Derek refusing to surrender and painfully limping around the track, Jim reached his son at the final curve, about 120-meters from the finish line. Dad wrapped his arm around his waist and said, "I'm here, son. I'm here for you. We are going to finish this race together." Derek put his arms around his father's shoulders and began to weep. And then together, arm in arm, father and son, with 65,000 people cheering and clapping and crying, they finished the race together as they vowed they would.

Two steps before the finish line, Jim released the grip that he had on his son so that Derek could finish the race by himself. Then he threw his arms around Derek and both of them were crying. Everyone in the stands were crying. People watching the TV were crying.

When I think of Barnabas, this generous encourager, the image that comes to my mind is Jim Redmond helping his son to finish the race. Generous people put their arms around someone who has failed, someone who has shot themselves in the foot, someone who has been beaten down by life's circumstances and they say, "I'm not going to let you quit. I know you've messed up; I know you've hurt yourself; I know others have hurt you. But I'm going to put my arm around your shoulder and together we are going to finish this race." That's who Jesus is.

May God make the Vineyard a generous church. Let's pray.

## **Building a Generous Church**

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Rich Nathan

May 12-13, 2007

Building a Church for Others Series

Acts 4:32-37

### **I. The Marks of a Great Church (Acts 4:32-37)**

- A. Unity (Acts 4:32)
- B. Witnessing (Acts 4:33)
- C. Grace (Acts 4:33)
- D. Generosity (Acts 4:34-35)
  - i. Voluntary Giving
  - ii. Regular Giving
  - iii. Sacrificial Giving

### **II. The Generosity of a Great Man**

- A. Generous with His Possessions (Acts 4:36-37)
- B. Generous with People Who Have Not Yet Arrived (Acts 9:26-28)
- C. Generous with Christians Who Are Different (Acts 11:19-24)
- D. Generous with People Who Have Failed (Acts 15:36-41)