

Portrait of a Peacemaker

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One of the most profound and rare eulogies in all the Bible is ascribed to Barnabas: "He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith" (Acts 11:24). That passage continues, "And a great number of people were brought to the Lord ...," no doubt in part because of Barnabas' encouragement and peacemaking mission. Romans 5:1 clearly teaches that when a man has been justified by faith, he will have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, the primary goal of the Christian peacemaker is to point men who are in conflict to the Savior.

Barnabas successfully resolved tensions and conflicts on four different levels: (1) between an individual and a group (Acts 9:20-31), (2) between two "races" of people (Acts 11:19-26), (3) between two churches, Jerusalem and Antioch (Acts 15:1-35), and (4) between two individuals, Paul and John Mark (Acts 13:13, 15:36-40; 2 Tim. 4:11).

Any man used by God to resolve conflicts between groups, nations, churches, and individuals is obviously a man whose character is worth emulating. F. F. Bruce says of this unique and good man who was full of the Holy Spirit and faith, "According to Luke, it was Barnabas whose good offices (character) brought Paul and the leaders of Jerusalem together. Although Paul says nothing of this it is antecedently probable that someone acted as *mediator*, and all that we know of Barnabas suggests that he was the very man to act in this way."

Interestingly, rather than providing a method or technique of the mediation process, Scripture provides a profile of the character of the person who was used by God to bring these people together. Although techniques of mediation are important, the best technique will fail if the mediator lacks the qualities exemplified in Barnabas' character.

Barnabas was a man of **encouragement** (Acts 4:36). His real name was Joseph the Levite, yet as the result of his attitudes and actions, the disciples surnamed him Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement." Wherever Barnabas is mentioned in the Bible, there is always the activity of encouragement (Acts 11:23; 14:22; 15:31). The term *encouragement* is derived from the Greek *parakaleo*. That word comes from the same root that Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit when he said, "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor" (John 14:16).

Barnabas was a man who **rejoiced**. Acts 11:23 and 15:3 reveal that he brought great joy to all the brethren. Proverbs 17:22 reminds us that "a cheerful heart is good medicine (therapeutic and restorative) but a crushed spirit dries up the bones." Like Barnabas, a peacemaker must have good presence and be a person with whom it is a joy to be associated.

Barnabas was **full of the Holy Spirit** (Acts 11:24). The most important prerequisite of the successful peacemaker is to be full of the Holy Spirit because the Spirit makes a peaceful character (Gal. 4:22; cf. 6:1). Romans 8:6 emphasizes this very fact when it says, "The mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace...." Because Barnabas was a man full of the Holy Spirit, his peacemaking impact was a natural consequence of God at work in his life.

Barnabas was a man of **courage** (Acts 9:26-27). When the disciples were skeptical of the Apostle Paul's conversion (Acts 9:26-27), it was Barnabas who took a calculated risk. He had the courage to bring the disciples together with Paul, the former terrorist of the Christian faith. Similar courage is later described in Acts 14:19,23, which tells about Barnabas and Paul returning to Lystra even though they had previously been stoned for their teaching. Ronald Kraybill, in his book *Repairing the Breach*, observes, "One lesson I have learned from involvement in conflict is that if those who are called to peacemaking wait for security or safety in their role, they never begin."

Barnabas was a man of **perseverance** (Acts 13:50; 14:21-24). Perseverance does not mean stubborn stupidity. It means persistence in the task undertaken! After being pressured to leave Lystra because of the rioting crowd, Paul and Barnabas waited for a reasonable length of time and then returned to complete the task of "strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith" (Acts 14:22). Necessary follow-up is part and parcel of the great reconciliation process of bringing men to God.

Barnabas was a man of **observation** (Acts 11:25-26). The development of a predominantly Gentile church in Antioch provided a potential base for missionary activity among the Gentiles. But the presence of Gentiles in the church in Antioch jeopardized its relationship with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. To remedy that situation, Barnabas enlisted the help of Paul, a blue-blooded Jewish-Christian, to teach the converts in Antioch and to reconcile religious misunderstandings between the two churches. Clearly, Barnabas had an investigative mind and knew what (or whom) the occasion called for. A peacemaker needs to be an astute observer so that he may prescribe the right antidote for the illness.

Barnabas was **accepting** (Acts 11:22-23). Unlike many Jewish Christians, he did not shun the Gentile Christians, but rather rejoiced that God reached out to include them in his covenant. As the apostle Paul later wrote, "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Rom. 15:7). A peacemaker must always be willing to accept people as they are, but then lovingly encourage and exhort them to move on to more godly attitudes and behavior.

Barnabas was a man with a **sense of timing** (Acts 9:30-31, 11:25-26). Not only did he discern that Paul was going to be used by God in a mighty way, but he also discerned when Paul would best be used in that way. In Acts 9:30-31 the brethren sent Paul home to Tarsus to prevent chaos and rioting in Jerusalem as a result of his zealous debating. After Paul had experienced ten to twelve years of tent-making in Tarsus and de-programming in the desert, Barnabas sought him out and brought him to Antioch for the beginning of the most dynamic ministry in the history of the Christian Church.

Barnabas also recognized when John Mark was not ready for the mission field (see Acts 13:13). Unlike Paul, however, he did not consider John Mark a permanent liability but a late-bloomer. It is fortunate that Barnabas recognized the timing needed for John's maturation since John Mark later helped Peter write his epistles! John Mark also became useful to Paul in Paul's twilight years (2 Tim. 4:11).

Barnabas also was **willing to confront** others (Acts 15:2,36-37). The true peacemaker is willing to confront his enemies as well as his friends. Barnabas confronted Paul about John Mark in Acts 15:36-37 and was temporarily wounded by separation from the man who was his best friend. Later, however, perhaps thanks to Barnabas, Paul and John Mark were reconciled (see 2 Tim 4:11).

Barnabas and Paul confronted nonbelievers with the gospel, Judaizers with the truth (Acts 15:2), and fellow Christians with proper biblical interpretations (Acts 15:2-11; Gal. 2:7). The courage to confront exposes the peacemaker to misunderstanding and rejection, but it provides God with a channel through which He can work to bring about repentance and reconciliation.

Barnabas was **discerning** (Acts 11:22). It was Barnabas who was selected by the Jerusalem church to evaluate the validity of the Christian movement in Antioch. The Jerusalem elders who sent Barnabas to Antioch were confident of his discernment and peacemaking skills. A man of discernment looks at motives as well as facts.

Barnabas was **submissive and accountable** to others (Acts 4:36-37). He was a man of status (a Roman citizen) and means (a property owner), yet he was willing to share his personal

wealth by denying himself and giving to a higher cause. Obviously, Barnabas felt accountable to God. Not only was Barnabas submissive to God, he was also submissive to God's people! Acts 14:26-27 reveals that Paul and Barnabas were accountable to their home church at Antioch. The mediation process must not be one of authority void of accountability. We must subject ourselves one to another (Eph. 5:21).

Barnabas was *trustworthy* (Acts 11:27-30). The Gentile Christians at Antioch raised funds to provide relief for the famine-stricken Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Barnabas may have initiated that collection to remove any lingering skepticism in Jerusalem about the validity of the faith of the Gentile Christians in Antioch.

Barnabas was *humble* (Acts 14:8-14). A mediator or peacemaker must always recognize his role as one of God's servants. When Paul and Barnabas were acclaimed as gods and worshiped after healing the lame man (Acts 14:8-9), they quickly corrected that error and pointed men to the true Miracle-Worker, Jesus Christ (Acts 14:14-18). Regardless of the success of his peacemaking mission, the mediator must always recognize that he is "an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master..." (2 Tim. 2:21).

Barnabas was a man of *faith* (Acts 11:24). Those who please God and who are used by Him must have faith (Heb. 11). Only by faith in God's promises can we be assured that He will be in the midst of the peacemaking process. By faith the "barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:8-16) will be destroyed. Like Barnabas, the peacemaker must be motivated by faith in God's promises.

Barnabas *recognized his capacities and limitations* (Acts 13:7). The incident of confrontation with the demon-inspired magician, Elymas, in Acts 13:7 introduced a shift in church leadership. Up to that time, Barnabas had been recognized as the leader of the church in Antioch and Cyprus. Beginning with the incident in Acts 13:7, Paul became the prominent figure. Barnabas recognized that the principle "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30) was based on the human capacities, roles, and limitations that God has given each one of us for a particular season.

Barnabas was *anointed by God* (Acts 13:2-4). God called and anointed Barnabas and Paul for missionary work, the ultimate peacemaking and reconciliation activity. God enables His servants to do His work. We need to pray for and watch for individuals whom God has gifted with peacemaking abilities and skills. Although every Christian is responsible for peacemaking activities in his or her own sphere of influence, certain individuals are gifted with special abilities for exhortation (Romans 12:8). God has called His body to the peacemaking process, and it stands to reason that He will accommodate His call by raising up anointed peacemakers.

In addition to those qualities specifically demonstrated by Barnabas in the Book of Acts, a peacemaker must develop several other vital characteristics that are essential for Christian service. First, **a peacemaker must desire to serve** (1 Tim. 3:1). He will not be effective if he enters into this work reluctantly or half-heartedly. This is not to say that he should enjoy meddling in others' problems, nor does it mean that a peacemaker will never prefer not to become involved. But when the need is clearly before him, out of love for Christ, he will respond to it wholeheartedly (John 12:24-26).

A peacemaker must be a person of prayer. Philippians 4:6-7 speaks of the "peace of God which transcends all understanding...." That peace is a result of a healthy prayer life. Moreover, it is through prayer that we learn to discern God's will and align ourselves with it.

A peacemaker must also love the Word (Eph. 6:15). His feet are shod "with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" (Eph. 6:15). The statement "The Spirit of God

uses the Word of God in the man of God" reveals God's way of protecting His Word from becoming misused. Effective peacemakers must be diligent students of His Word.

A **peacemaker must be a person who "thinks right."** The "God of peace" is with the man who thinks on "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, etc." (Phil. 4:8). This does not mean that the peacemaker is naive or gullible, but rather that he sees the whole picture. Remember, the counterfeit is more easily recognized when one is thoroughly familiar with the genuine.

A **peacemaker must be willing to practice** the principles and skills needed to settle disputes and maintain peace (Phil. 4:9). God can use a complete novice to help others settle conflicts, so we should not wait until we are experts before we offer ourselves to him as peacemakers. At the same time, God delights to see his people cultivate their understanding, gifts, and talents through "constant use" (Heb. 5:14) so that we can become increasingly effective in serving him.

Peacemakers must be willing to be vulnerable (Psalm 22). The greatest peacemaker of all, Jesus Christ, made Himself vulnerable not only to death, but also to the most cruel, dehumanizing, hideous, and insane method of execution man has ever devised. Psalm 22:6-18 vividly describes the price that Jesus paid for man's reconciliation to God. Although we will never be called to such an act of atonement, we are called to be imitators of Christ. To do this we must appropriate the submissive attitude Jesus exemplified (Phil. 2:3-7), and such submission will make us vulnerable.

In summary, a peacemaker must be wise, that is, able to respond to life God's way. When Paul learned of the conflicts within the church at Corinth, he lamented, "Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?" (1 Cor. 6:5). James likewise notes the crucial link between wisdom, peacemaking, and the other character qualities mentioned above:

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:17-18).

Any honest person will quickly realize that he does not possess all of these qualities in a fully developed form. But that should not discourage us from serving the Lord as peacemakers, for God promises to equip us for the tasks he sets before us. First Thessalonians 5:23-24 says, "Now may God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. *The One who calls you is faithful and He will do it*" (emphasis added).