

GOD'S RECRUITS

by Steve Zeisler

A friend of mine described to me a discussion he'd had with his teenage son about the Academy Award winning movie *Braveheart*. Horses, battles, swords, villains and heroes account for some of the intrigue for an adolescent boy. But the father and son discussion centered on something more important---the attractiveness of a life lived for a grand purpose. Today's young people have been surrounded by so much me-first thinking, political correctness, and insistence on personal rights that it's refreshing for young people to be reminded that some people live for causes that are bigger than themselves; the discovery that there are things in life worth risking everything for.

My own two older children had somewhat of a similar reaction to the Star Wars trilogy, the story of a small band of heroes who faced extraordinary odds against entrenched evil, and were willing to risk everything for their cause. Even farther back, another film had the same effect on me, *The Magnificent Seven*. It was the story of seven cowboys who helped some Mexican villagers ward off disaster at the hands of marauding hordes of bandits.

The reason these kinds of stories have the capacity to influence young people who are trying to establish their values is that these are the kinds of stories that are told in the Bible. It is this same understanding of what it's like to live in the world that is behind most of the historical accounts in the Scriptures.

Consider the story of Abraham, a man sent with his nephew and a handful of family members to live in a land they knew nothing of, following the will of God, living as a remnant, surrounded by difficulties, struggles, and unbelief. Moses and his brother Aaron were sent back from the wilderness of Midian to face Pharaoh, the most powerful individual on earth, to risk everything to say to him, "Let my people go." Gideon and only three hundred men fought an immense army raiding the people of God. Daniel and his three friends faced a fiery furnace and a den of lions rather than deny their faith in God. Joseph and Mary went on the journey to Bethlehem pregnant with a child, too poor to have a place to stay, and yet they trusted God.

It's the same story over and over again---people having no worldly power, without the strength of an army or great wealth to call upon, are called to risk everything and live by faith. It's the story of a remnant carrying out a raid against a strong foe that is too strong for them, requiring they trust God, who prevails over the enemy. So we love being told that same kind of story in popular culture. Those who care about what is true are always underdogs.

In our study of the second missionary journey in Acts, which we began two messages ago, we have the same kind of story again. A handful of travelers for Christ's sake take on religious, political, and economic strongholds.

In this message I want to revisit the passage we've already studied in Discovery Papers 4482 and 4483, to re-examine the nine people who populate it. Part of what we've done so far is consider together what God is doing in the church. He stirs up the church. He takes relationships that seem secure and predictable and breaks them apart. He sends old friends off in different directions, even with painful partings. We should expect, if we are wise, that life in the community of Christ will be unpredictable precisely because our Lord is alive and creative, and he brings about changes.

We've also considered how God works in the world among people who are not religious and not good candidates, by our way of thinking, for faith in the Lord. Our Lord is as creative and unpredictable in the world as he is within the church.

Nine people have been introduced to us in this passage. Imagine them, if you will, standing on a stage in front of you: men and women, Jews and Gentiles, young and old, rich and poor. You may want to pause and reread

Acts 15:36-16:40, which is not reprinted here (you can find this text in Discovery Papers 4482 and 4483).

I hope that as you see these nine people again and think about what God was doing in choosing them, you'll see yourself, too. God recruits people like you and me. Not only will we find ourselves up on the stage, but we'll probably find people with whom we have little in common. If we met them in another setting, we might avoid them. But here we meet them in the cause of Christ, and we must embrace them.

Fatherly encourager, youthful apostle, child with great potential

This group of nine divides fairly easily into the three different scenes in which they are introduced, with three people in each scene. The first scene is Antioch. There is a discussion between Paul and Barnabas as to whether they should travel again. They get in an argument about the young man John Mark. What does the Bible teach us about these three men?

For one thing, they represent three different generations of Christian faith and leadership. Barnabas goes back to the beginning. He may well have been converted at Pentecost. He was certainly a part of the church after Peter's second great sermon and the numbering of the church in chapter 3. He is identified by name at the end of chapter 4. He saw the Lord work through the apostles in Jerusalem. He saw the death of Ananias and Sapphira, purifying the church. He saw the martyrdom of Stephen. He heard the account of how Philip led the Ethiopian eunuch to the Lord. He knew the story of Simon Magus in Samaria. He has seen the Lord win victory after victory and use all kinds of people. He is a very mature man, one of the most senior figures in the church. He was given the nickname Barnabas, Son of Encouragement (he was born Joseph), early in his Christian life, when he was called into leadership. There are very few things that Barnabas has not seen. He isn't fooled by failure. Nor is he taken aback by resistance; he has faced enemies many times before.

First John 1:12-14 talks about three generations in church life: There are fathers, who know God so deeply that for them he is described as "him who is from the beginning," the eternal One. There are youths, who are engaged in the battle, overcoming the evil one, strong with the word of God that abides in them. This is the generation that is called to fight today's battle with today's enemies. And there are children, who are focused on identity issues: Who is my Father? And what of my sins?

If Barnabas is a father in the faith, Paul is still new in leadership. He was called out of obscurity in Tarsus to teach young Christians in Antioch. He was a generation younger than Barnabas---on the front lines of the battle in 49 AD. And John Mark represents a child in the faith. Having given way to fear at a critical moment, he's not mature yet. He is still trying to work out who he is.

Barnabas was a firm foundation for both John Mark and Paul. They both owe their standing to Barnabas' encouraging ministry. John Mark, Barnabas' cousin we're told in Colossians, was rescued from cowardice. Paul would have been rejected for leadership in the church had it not been for Barnabas. Twice (in Jerusalem and later in Antioch) it was Barnabas who said that Paul (then known as Saul) was a man who could be used in the service of the Lord. And yet both John Mark and Paul will become much more prominent figures as New Testament authors than their mentor Barnabas. Paul will later write thirteen of the New Testament epistles. Mark will write the first canonical biography of Jesus.

Paul is one of the few early Christians about whom we have a physical description. The apocryphal work *The Acts of Paul at Thecla*, describes Paul this way: "...bald-headed, bow-legged, strongly built, a man small in size with meeting eyebrows and a rather large nose." His profession, tentmaker, suggests middle class roots.

Barnabas and John Mark are probably wealthy. We know that Barnabas had a field that he sold (Acts 4:37) to give the money to the church. John Mark was raised in a well-to-do family in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). When he wrote the gospel of Mark, he included the story of the rich young ruler as did Matthew and Luke, but his account adds one unique detail. Only Mark says that Jesus looked on him with compassion. Some have even speculated that this rich young man was Mark himself, meeting the Lord and at first refusing the call of discipleship. Even if it was not, he was probably similar enough to the rich young man that when he told the story, he wanted to include the gaze of Jesus' compassion.

Barnabas was a Levite, and Paul was a Benjamite. Paul was trained by Gamaliel, and has great religious credentials. Paul lived a lot of his life alone. There are sad references in his writings. At one point he wonders why Peter is allowed to take his wife journeying and Paul cannot. Paul's wife very likely left him when he was converted to Christian faith. At the end of his life, Paul says that everyone in Asia has abandoned him, and he names only a handful who stuck with him. Each of these men has a unique history and each has different strengths and weaknesses. All three are on the team.

Purposeful prophet, brilliant historian, son in the faith

The second scene takes place as chapter 16 unfolds and introduces us to the next group of three. Silas first. Like Paul, he is a youth in the faith. Acts 15:32 tells us that he has a teaching gift. He was sent from Jerusalem with the letter of the Jerusalem council. His name is sometimes rendered Silvanus in the New Testament. Silas well illustrated the aphorism, "when the going gets tough, the tough get going." Though Timothy and Luke were also present it is Paul and Silas who are outspoken enough to suffer the wrath of mobs in both Philippi and Thessalonica.

Luke, as I've mentioned, is a great literary figure, author of the two volume history, Luke and Acts. He has wonderful depth of insight into both the life of Christ and the life of the church. Luke is a Gentile.

Timothy, like John Mark, is a younger man. Timothy had mixed religious heritage and, like so many today, went through all of the difficulty of growing up without a father. Timothy was a withdrawn young man, and Paul took him on as "his son in the faith."

Eager new convert, slave girl freed, violent man made tender

The last three folks we meet are those in Philippi we spoke about last week, two women and a man. Lydia we know by name, the other two we know only by their descriptions---a slave girl and a jailer. They're all Gentiles. Once again we encounter people who are very different from any we have met before, who are different from each other.

If we were to try to think of Lydia in contemporary terms, we might imagine her to be an executive with a foreign accent at Nordstrom. She works in clothing. Purple dye was very expensive, so she is probably wealthy. The account Luke gives us of this lady's life is filled with what she is not---not a Jew, but a God-fearer; not a Roman, though Philippi is a Roman colony; not a Philippian, but from Thyatira; not married (the story talks about her household, not her husband's, as it would if she were married); and not a man. She is very likely widowed; her having a household suggests that she probably has children. All we know is that she established her own business, lives as an expatriate in Macedonia, and is an immensely capable person who has the softest of hearts for Christ.

The eighth of the nine people before us, the slave girl, is demonized by evil spirits and brutalized by evil men. She is probably much like a fifteen-year-old crack-addicted prostitute whom you might meet on the streets of a big city today. Her interior life is self-destructive, her exterior life abused by others.

Then finally we meet the Roman jailer, likely a veteran whose reputation for ruthlessness and intimidation qualified him to run one of Rome's repressive jails. Yet there is a tenderness about him that is striking---washing wounds, inviting Paul and Silas into his home.

It's quite a lineup, isn't it? There is great variety among these nine. And we're all represented up there someplace ourselves. We have either a terrible background or a decent one, as these people do. We come from wealthy circumstances, as Lydia and Barnabas and John Mark do; from poor circumstances, as the slave girl (and perhaps the jailer) do; or from middle-class backgrounds, as Paul and probably Silas do. We may be a professional, as Luke is; or a tentmaker, as Paul is. We may have extensive religious credentials, as Paul does; or have a background more filled with the demonic than the holy, like the slave girl. Every conceivable person may be included, among them people who are very different from us, with whom we have nothing in common but Jesus.

God endorses team ministry

I want to draw some applications from this. Let me observe first, as we look at our friends standing in front of us, that God clearly endorses team ministry. The regular way of life among the members of the early church is that ministry takes place in groups. No leader is permitted the kind of top-of-the-pyramid experience that we see too often in contemporary church and religious settings, in which there is a CEO in whom is vested all the authority, but who is very lonely as a result. No one can hold "the boss" accountable, and his strengths and weaknesses are reproduced in the organization. The New Testament pattern is that a group of people leads together, and leaders have accountable partners and varieties of gifts.

Further, there is no way to train young people for Christian leadership except to make them part of a ministry team that is doing that work. The most advanced forms of training for effectiveness in the world do not qualify a man or woman to serve in the cause of Christ. The things that qualify any of us to lead in the church--humility, faith, knowledge of God, ability to follow the leading of the Spirit, knowledge of what our spiritual gifts are, growing competency---are all the kind of things that you can learn only in settings where the more mature saints can help the younger folks to grow. That also argues for the importance of team ministry.

Now let's consider three tensions that we can see in these chapters and that we can benefit from observing, because they remain tensions today.

Tension between generations

The first one has to do with generations. Barnabas, Paul, and John Mark represent three generations, and some of the struggle to get along together, to continue to be able to move forward in ministry together, has to do with the fact that different generations look at things differently. Young people often think they're more qualified than they are. John Mark assumed that he had more courage than he had. Those who are the youths in the story, who are shouldering the most responsibility for doing battle with the evil one in their generation, don't know what to think about those who are older and have a deep and peaceful sense that God is in charge, nor do they always know what to do with those who aren't formed yet. Sometimes the older saints are looked on as being behind the times, not having anything left to offer. There are certainly tensions around generations in this church and every other church I know about. People who have walked with the Lord a long time see things one way, people who feel the heat of today's battle see things another way, and people who are trying to figure out who they are in Christ see things yet another way. We need to let God hold us together. People who look at life differently because of their age and experience in the Lord need each other, although our tendency is to draw near to those who reinforce our point of view.

Tension between genders

The second tension has to do with gender. The point is subtly but clearly made that when Paul saw Lydia come to Christ, he had trouble giving her credit. The Lord opened her heart before Paul was ready for her heart to be opened. She had to appeal to him, "If you consider me a believer in the Lord....", even though she did believe and had been baptized. And finally it says that she had to persuade the team to come to her house.

This is one tension that is easy to observe in this day and age, in this church and everywhere else. Men frequently don't take women seriously enough. The observation has often been made that a woman has to be twice as good as a man to be considered for the same opportunity. The way Luke wrote this story suggests that Paul was in the wrong. The church is flourishing at Lydia's house by the end of chapter 16; Paul's reticence to acknowledge her was part of the problem. He had to get over it. This can serve as a challenge to men in this generation, in this church and every other, not to overlook women, especially those whose gifts, background, and qualifications make them unusual.

But listen carefully to what Lydia says. She doesn't claim that she deserves recognition because she has her own business, has made a name for herself, and has been extremely successful. She says, "If you consider me a believer in the Lord...." Her identity and her appeal are to be taken seriously because of what has taken place in her heart as a servant of Christ. In the long run, that is the only appeal that allows men and women to trust one another, believe in one another, promote one another, and be glad for one another's contributions. The

external degrees and accomplishments are not the key to oneness and confident belief in one another. What qualifications has the Lord given? What reality of faith is there? I believe that is the way tension regarding gender is going to be solved.

Tension due to diversity

Lastly, the qualifications of these people could not be more diverse. There are extremely impressive religious qualifications on the one hand, and absolutely none on the other. There are wealth and poverty, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, elders and youths, healthy families and dysfunctional families. Every type of division---class, race, ethnicity. And yet it is this group that is to fight the war. It is these nine people working together who are to advance the cause of Christ. Arrayed against them are the Roman empire, the philosophy of the Greeks, the idolatry of all the ancient world, the economic power of those who make their living abusing those who are weak, the Roman jails, the anger of Jewish spiritual leadership, the courts of Rome---everything. All they have is one another, the call of the Lord, and the presence of the Spirit. But it's enough. These folks changed the world.

That describes us. We're a remnant, we're not powerful in any worldly sense. We're to take risks for Jesus' sake, not knowing where the risks will lead us. And we need to do it together. That's what it means to be the church

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