Barnabas: A Model for Holistic Stewardship

is published by The Episcopal Network for

Stewardship in celebration of ministry to the

Episcopal Church and the greater Christian

community since 1995, with grateful hearts

to all who have supported the work of TENS

with their prayers, their gifts of time and

money, and their memberships; and a

special thanks to Dr. Ken Dobson and

Cati Moses Dobson for their faithful prayers

and financial support.

Acknowledgements
Cover art and design:
Dorothy Brown, St. Barnabas: An Icon,
Photographs by Tim Bocula

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Far too long, stewardship has been synonymous in the minds of many Christians with pledge drives, budgets, and capital fundraising. Holy Scripture, however, has always been clear that God wants more than our offerings: God wants us to be intentional and focused about all that we are and all that we have. It has been wisely said that our financial focus must not be limited to the ten percent we offer as the tithe, but instead include the other ninety percent that we spend or save. Even so, a purely financial focus can itself be too limiting. Our vision of stewardship must be a holistic one.

While the term holistic may be a modern one, the reality it represents has a rich history in the biblical texts and the Church’s history. Indeed, no one represents an intentional, focused, holistic approach to stewardship better than Joseph, the Levite from Cyprus, forever remembered by the name given to him by the apostles: Barnabas (Acts 4:36). As will be seen below, this character’s appearances in the book of Acts coincide with major turning points in the life of the early Church. In fact, it is safe to say that without Barnabas, we would never have known the Apostle Paul. For this reason alone, Joseph Barnabas is arguably one of the most important figures in the history of Christianity...while at the same time an often forgotten hero.

Barnabas may have our admiration, but he calls for our attention. He has a lesson to teach us. Above all else, Barnabas is the model holistic steward.
Barnabas first appears in Luke's account in Acts as a disciple who, having a field that belonged to him, sold it and brought the proceeds from that sale in full, laying them at the feet of the apostles (Acts 4:37). Distribution was then made, so that "there was not a needy person among them" (4:34). Consider the common complaint of many modern church members: "Stewardship is simply another way of saying, 'We need more money from you.'" Such an attitude reveals a deep-seated suspicion toward the church leadership and a disconnectedness between the individual member and the rest of the community. In contrast to this kind of thinking, Barnabas displayed both a respect for the authority of the Twelve as well as deep care for fellow believers.

Barnabas did not have an "April 15th" approach to giving—pay some kind of church tax to meet the bills—but rather a "December 25th" vision, in which all he possessed was seen as gift and all in the community were viewed as precious sisters and brothers. In 1 Corinthians 12:12, Paul speaks of the Christian community as "one body with many parts," with each part contributing their gifts "for the common good" (12:7). What Paul expresses through the "body" metaphor, Luke illustrates in concrete form through the character of Barnabas. Financial giving to and through the church, then, is the starting point of Christian stewardship for Barnabas, an opening into a deeper spiritual life.
The story of Barnabas does not end on “Pledge Sunday.” He does enjoy a brief period offstage, during which Luke offers images of members quite different from the faithful steward. In Acts 5 Luke exposes the selfishness and hypocrisy of two members who, in direct contrast to Barnabas, lay at the feet of the apostles only a portion of their funds while simultaneously lying about their level of giving. As a modern threat “Your money or your life” may be a bit cliché, but in Luke’s grim ending to Ananias and Sapphira’s tale, the cheating pair respectively fall down dead at the feet of the Apostle Peter (5:5, 10). Echoes of Jesus’ warning to the apostles may be heard in the background: “Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it.” (Luke 9:24)

Similarly, note the community’s struggle to integrate those who were not insiders, namely the Hellenist widows neglected in the daily distribution of food or funds (Acts 6–8). The story reveals a dark underside of the seemingly idyllic community in which “there was not a needy person among them” (4:34). In a situation where solace and support were lacking, a “son of encouragement” (4:36) was certainly needed.

When Barnabas does reappear in Acts, it is in full force, welcoming Paul (Saul) when others avoided him and personally bringing him to the “reector and vestry” of the Jerusalem church (9:26–31). This was not easy, inasmuch as this particular newcomer made the insiders of the Jerusalem church quite uncomfortable: “They were all afraid of him” (9:26). “But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles,” and vouched for the newcomer Paul (9:27).
We rarely have to worry today about former persecutors of the Church suddenly wanting to join, it does not take much detective work to observe the not-so-subtle ways in which many established churchgoers construct more walls than bridges toward newcomers. "We are a warm and welcoming church," many church members boast. Yet visitors who do not quickly assimilate themselves into the existing norms and structures of the community might well find the church doors to be revolving ones.

Barnabas operated in a much different way. He not only welcomed Paul, but soon thereafter invited him to be a teammate in ministry in Antioch: "Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, brought him to Antioch" (11:25-26). To Barnabas, a newcomer like Paul was not simply a "church consumer" to add to the rolls and attend ready-made programs, but rather was a fellow steward with unique gifts and talents that could be used for the church's work of mission.

Today we often see our ministry to newcomers as something far removed from stewardship. Indeed, a vestry member once warned me that newcomers cost the church money, using up already limited resources while contributing little in pledges. In such a paradigm, the more newcomers we bring in, the more it costs the church. With a touch of sarcasm in my voice, I responded to the vestry member: "Perhaps the best solution is not to welcome newcomers at all!" Sadly, he missed the irony of my statement and actually nodded his head in affirmation.
Let me go on record: This is maintenance thinking at its worst! Barnabas shows us a better way. He welcomed and empowered people like Paul and John Mark, for the same reason that he earlier presented his money to the apostles: Barnabas was a steward of others.

It is crucial that a good steward always knows who the true boss is! Barnabas certainly knew, for the next time he appears in Acts, he and other leaders of the church in Antioch are seen praying and fasting, awaiting God’s direction (12:25-13:3). While some people presently speak of their call to ministry in very private terms—“God called me, so you had better not challenge it”—Barnabas and Paul understood their calling as something confirmed and blessed by the larger community. It was precisely because Barnabas knew that the work was ultimately not his, but God’s, that he could dare to be the “kind, single-hearted, and considerate man,” later described by the martyr-bishop, John Chrysostom.

By choice, Barnabas had welcomed and utilized Paul. Later in Acts, by choice once again, Barnabas took a back seat to his multitalented and more visibly charismatic colleague. Luke’s phrase “Barnabas and Saul” (14:7) changes to “Paul and his companions” (14:13). Barnabas had once placed his money at the feet of the apostles; now he had to place his ego at the foot of the cross. Two thousand years later, we are so used to seeing Paul in the spotlight that we might forget the meaning of the saying, “It takes more grace to play second fiddle.” If this is true, then Barnabas was a concert violinist full of grace, providing spiritual harmony even as his former protégé surpassed him in visible leadership and skill.
By no means does this indicate that Barnabas was a nice but unimpressive figure. On the contrary, Paul may have been mistaken by the Lycaonians as the herald-god Hermes, but it was Barnabas who was hailed as Zeus, chief of the gods (14:12)! Instead of drawing attention to himself, however, Barnabas was a steward who intentionally empowered others.

Early in Acts, Peter looked into the eyes of a lame beggar and said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you: In the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk" (3:6). From the moment we are introduced to Barnabas, we realize that he did have silver and gold to give and that he freely did so for the work of ministry. His greater gift, however, was to help others see what they had to give. In short, as a holistic steward he reproduced other stewards!

Modern business visionaries and futurists often speak of "paradigm pioneers," those persons who see possibilities that others miss and explore territories that others avoid. Whereas settlers wait for things to be safe, pioneers press on and discover or create new landscapes altogether. Barnabas showed this pioneer spirit in reaching out to, empowering, and standing with Paul. Then with Paul, he did it again on a larger scale by welcoming non-Jews into what previously had been merely another Jewish sect.

The intentional inclusion of Gentiles into the community of faith was nothing less than a good long-term investment by Barnabas, although it was viewed with suspicion and not a little anxiety by many at the "home office."
Their fears, we learn, were well-founded. In Antioch, the home base of Barnabas and Paul, the followers of Jesus first became known as Christians (11:26). The status quo of the early community of faith was shattered. Barnabas, with Paul, was a steward not simply of past traditions, but also of future possibilities.

Perhaps this is the greatest difference between what we usually call stewardship—we almost always mean our annual pledge drive—and the kind of holistic stewardship represented by Barnabas. He was willing to alter existing structures and ideas in order to enrich the faith community and engage the neighboring world. Together with Paul, he helped form a “holistic stewardship commission,” as it were. Not only was financial giving included under its umbrella, but also newcomer ministry and the training and empowerment of new workers.

Much has been said about the need in our churches to move from a maintenance mentality to a mission mentality. What is downplayed is the fact that such a paradigm shift is usually challenged, resisted, even sabotaged. A wise priest once told me that real growth does not begin in a parish until either the existing leadership is converted or new leaders arise. As long as Barnabas the steward had been simply a faithful financial backer of the Jerusalem community, he was praised and appreciated as an encourager. Soon, however, he and Paul began to be seen by many as a threat to the established order. In Acts 15, things at last came to a head.
What was at stake in the Jerusalem council? Why were members of the so-called “circumcision party” so afraid of Barnabbas and Paul’s inclusion of new, non-Jewish members?

As might be suggested by the name change of the community of believers in Antioch (“and there they were first called Christians”), a considerable shift in identity and power occurred there. Gentiles who had no stake in the familiar traditions of Judaism suddenly caused the “pillars of the church” in Jerusalem to tremble. After all, if Christian Jew and Christian non-Jew were sitting together at a common table, then of what value were any of the familiar traditions? Clearly, a compromise was needed.

James the Just, the leader of the council, offered such a compromise, extending a welcoming hand to incoming Gentiles while simultaneously imposing some key obligations on them. If Barnabbas and Paul had chosen to ignore the offer made by James, the result might very well have been a congregationalist movement of break-off churches separated from the “home office” back in Jerusalem. Once again, Barnabbas and Paul exhibited a holistic approach by showing concern for the larger faith community, honoring the pronouncements of the council even as they earlier had made a priority of their “diocesan pledge,” a collection for Jerusalem.
In many congregations today, funding to the diocese or outreach to anything beyond the local parish is usually approved with reluctance and the first thing to go when the budget is tight. Barnabas and Paul instead saw such outreach as an integral part of their stewardship and as a tangible sign of their connectedness to the larger Christian community. In Acts 11:28–30, in response to a famine that hit Judea especially hard, the duo spearheaded a drive to collect money from their churches to help the impoverished believers in Jerusalem.

Luke is clear that this outreach/diocesan pledge drive was one that relied more on the goodwill of the givers than on any strong arm tactics of Barnabas and Paul: "The disciples determined that, according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers in Judea" (Acts 11:29). There is probably little doubt that these same disciples had seen such generosity modeled for them in Barnabas. Similarly, it is little wonder that the Jerusalem elders, in turn, decided to send their joint message of welcome and plea for cooperation to the Gentiles via "our beloved Barnabas and Paul" (15:25). Barnabas was, as always, a true bridge builder.
Walls are always easier built than bridges, however. Immediately following the Jerusalem council, Barnabas leaves the Lukan stage for good. A “sharp disagreement” (15:39) over the “deserter” John Mark (15:38) led this holistic steward, this steward of others, to part from Paul, his stricter former protégé, now senior partner. In the end, the character of Joseph Barnabas in the book of Acts disappears as suddenly as he appeared.

In his brief time in the spotlight, Barnabas displayed the kinds of qualities and priorities that we desire if we are to be stewards of all that God gives us: not only our money, but also our fellow believers and those newcomers whose lives intersect our own. If we truly wish to be holistic stewards in our churches and our communities, then we need look no further than to Barnabas in Acts for our model.
Questions for Discussion

What is my/our attitude toward pledging (Acts 4:32–37)?

Do I/we have an April 15th or December 25th approach to giving?

What are the obstacles that prevent my/our church from being a truly welcoming and empowering place for newcomers (9:26ff.)?

How can I/we take our individual and communal prayer life to a new level (12:2)?

In what ways can I/we more intentionally make a priority of outreach? How can I/we more creatively interact with the larger diocese/faith community (11:29; 15:1–35)?

What does it ultimately mean to "be a Barnabas" in my/our church and world?
Barnabas
in the Book of Acts

One who gives generously
Acts 4:32–37

One who welcomes graciously
Acts 9:26–31

One who seeks out other workers
Acts 11:19–30

One who seeks God's direction
Acts 12:25–13:3

One who takes a supporting role
Acts 13:4–14:28

One who challenges the status quo
Acts 15:1–35

One who errs on the side of mercy
Acts 15:36–41
Our Purpose . . .

- To lead in the growth of a network of dedicated stewardship ministers serving congregations and dioceses.
- To support each other with personal consultations and fellowship opportunities as well as print, video and electronic resources.

The Episcopal Network for Stewardship

Barnabas: A Model for Holistic Stewardship
Booklet price (plus shipping/handling)
$1.50 each; 10 @ $15.00;
50 @ $65.00; 100 @ $120.00.
There is no charge for the Leader's Guide.

For membership information, a copy of our Resource Catalogue, more stewardship resources, or to place an order for this publication, please contact us at:

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