THE MOST IMPORTANT MISSIONARY

Posted on April 15, 2015 by Eddie

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Category: Bible & Mission

Who is the most important missionary in the Bible?

Immediately some of you will have answered by saying â€œGodâ€ , â€œJesusâ€ or â€œthe Trinityâ€ . Give yourself top marks if you came up with an answer along those lines. The Bible is the story of Godâ€™s mission down through history to reconcile everything on heaven and earth through the death of Jesus on the cross. Whenever we read the Bible, we have to remember that the central character is always God himself.

So, let me rephrase my question. Who is the most important missionary in the Bible, who isnâ€™t divine?

This one isnâ€™t too difficult is it? I suspect that most people who know their Bibles and who have an interest in mission answered with one name; Paul. Paul, the former Saul of Tarsus, the man who persecuted Christians, but went on to plant churches all across Turkey and Greece. Paul who wrote amazing theological and pastoral letters to the young churches. He is the greatest (non-divine) missionary in the Bible.

Iâ€™m sure lots of people would answer that way and Iâ€™m also sure that they are all wrong! I donâ€™t think Paul is the most important missionary in the Bible. He is important, vitally important, but he wasnâ€™t the *most* important missionary. Let me tell you about the man I believe deserves that title.

We first meet our missionary hero in Acts 4:36. Joseph was a Levite a member of the hereditary tribe of Jewish priests, but he hadnâ€™t grown up in Jerusalem. He was a member of the Jewish diaspora from Cyprus. Perhaps he was one of the people who had made the pilgrimage to the city for the day of Pentecost and who had been converted by Peterâ€™s Spirit filled sermon in Acts 2. We canâ€™t be sure, but we do know that he was a bit of an outsider. What we do know is that he was both wealthy and generous. When the first believers started to get to grips with the economic disparity in the community, Joseph sold a field he owned and gave the money over to the Apostles so that they could distribute it to help others.

We learn one more thing about Joseph in this short passage; he had a nickname. People called him Barnabas which literally means â€˜Son of Encouragementâ€™, but we would be more likely to simply say â€˜Encouragerâ€™, today. Joseph was such a great guy, so helpful and encouraging to be around that they called him â€˜Encouragerâ€™.

Obviously, he was a really nice man, but he doesnâ€™t come across as being very important. He sells his land, gives the money to the disciples and then we hear nothing more about him for four chapters. At first glance, the couple of verses that mention him seem to be nothing more than a footnote to the story.

As Barnabas fades from the scene, the Acts spotlight falls firmly on Paul, or Saul as he was known at this point. The story of Paulâ€™s conversion is well known. He was travelling to Damascus to hunt

down Christians there, when Jesus revealed himself to him. However, the fact that the story is familiar means that we donâ€™t always get to grips with the details. When we read that Paul persecuted the Church, we really need to think about the Taliban or some other branch of religious extremists. Paul was violent and the Christians were very, very scared of him. When he first went to Jerusalem to meet with the leaders of the church, they wanted nothing to do with him. You canâ€™t blame the Apostles for that. Paul said heâ€™d been converted, but how likely was that? From their point of view, it was far more likely that Paul was trying to worm his way into the group of Christians so that he could arrest the leaders and have them put to death. No wonder they wanted nothing to do with him.

Then Barnabas, yes him, went and found Paul and took him to meet the Apostles. Make no mistake, this was a huge risk. If Paul was bluffing, Barnabas could have been killed and perhaps the whole leadership of the young church would have been wiped out. However, because Barnabas spoke up for him, the Apostles were willing to listen to Paul and they were amazed at what God was doing in his life. Without Barnabas intervention, it is likely that Paul would never have been accepted by the leadership of the Church in Jerusalem.

A few years later something scandalous took place in the Church in the city of Antioch. Christians from Greece and Cyprus started sharing the good news of Jesus with people who were not Jews. Up till this time, only Jews had become Christians, except for a few special cases where God had directly intervened. The idea of preaching to Gentiles was shocking and the doctrine police had to be called in. The mother church in Jerusalem decided to send Barnabas to Antioch to check out what was happening. Perhaps they chose Barnabas because like some of the local Christians, he was from Cyprus; we donâ€™t know. What we do know is that Barnabas met with the local Christians, saw God at work in their lives and encouraged them. What they were doing was a radical departure from church tradition and from the whole Old Testament tradition that the church was built on. No one had done anything like this. It would have been easy for Barnabas to tell them to stop preaching to Greeks and to stick with their traditional mission to the Jews; but he didnâ€™t!

From that day on, Christianity was never the same. Barnabas encouraged the Christians in Antioch to reach outside of Judaism and as a result, the Good News of Jesus was able to spread around the whole world. Without Barnabas, Christianity could have stayed as a small sect within Judaism.

Barnabas stayed in Antioch for a while helping to teach the Church and as the work load increased, he went to find his friend Paul and the two of them were involved as leaders there.

Barnabas and Paul worked well together and eventually the leaders of the church in Antioch decided that God was calling them to be sent out as missionaries. Acts 13-14 tells the story of how they travelled through Turkey and Cyprus, preaching the Gospel and planting churches. It is true that Paul was the main speaker, but Barnabas did his share of preaching too.

Some time after their return to Antioch, Paul and Barnabas decided to go back and visit all of the

churches they had planted. Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them. He was a young man who had joined them on their first journey, but who had given up and gone home. Paul didnâ€™t feel he could trust Mark, but true to form, Barnabas wanted to give him a second chance. The disagreement got so heated that Barnabas and Paul went their separate ways. Luke, who wrote the book of Acts went with Paul and Barnabas fades quietly from the scene. The last thing we hear about Barnabas is him being sidelined because he wanted to give a young man a second chance. It seems fitting somehow.

Paul was the famous missionary; the one weâ€™ve all head about. It was Paul who planted churches across the known world and who wrote the amazing New Testament letters. But it was Barnabas who brought Paul into Christian leadership and who nurtured the early foundations of mission to the Gentiles, that Paul later built on. Paul simply could not have done everything he did without the quiet, encouraging work of Barnabas in the background. Barnabas saw God at work in Paul and in the Church in Antioch, while the Apostles in Jerusalem were nervous and afraid. He stepped out in faith and took risks, but he never stole the headlines.

Barnabas wasnâ€™t perfect, he made mistakes (Galatians 2:13), but world mission depends on people like him: people who will encourage innovation, who will support and build up new Christian movements that donâ€™t fit established stereotypes. These are who will occupy the background roles and support the church planters and evangelists as they do their stuff and who will see potential in young Christians and provide opportunities for them to grow and develop.

There is nothing spectacular about people like Barnabas, but they are the ones who lay the foundations that others build on.

Could you be a Barnabas?

This is an early draft of a piece I wrote for Mission Matters, an introduction to opportunities for Christian service overseas. If you'd like to see what it looks like when it is properly edited, formatted and typo-free, then get a copy of Mission Matters.Â