CONNECTIONS

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Some thoughts on why Barnabas made two trips to Cyprus.
Category: Christian Life

Over the last couple of days, I've been reading and thinking about BarnabasÂ which has led me to pondering about the importance of family and cultural connections in mission.

Let me explain.

We don't actually know much about Barnabas, beyond the fact that he was actually called Joseph, was a Levite and he came from Cyprus (Acts 4:36,37). The nickname Barnabas was given to him apparently because he was in the habit of encouraging people (as nicknames go, it's not a bad one).

We see get the first evidence of Barnabas as an encourager in Acts 9:26 and following. Paul, who had recently become a Christian, travelled to Jerusalem to meet the apostles. They, understandably, were very cagey of this man who until recently had been banging believers up in jail and having them killed. It was Barnabas who acted as a go between and brought Paul to the apostles, breaking down the barriers of suspicion and mistrust. A couple of chapters later, when Barnabas started to work with the new church in Antioch, we read that he went to Tarsus to get Paul to come and join him. Barnabas provided Paul with opportunities for ministry in a new setting.

Then in Acts 13:5, Paul and Barnabas, accompanied by John-Mark (described as Barnabas cousin Col. 4:10) set off on their first missionary journey. The first place they headed to was Cyprus - Barnabas home. Perhaps he had friends or family there who could welcome them and provide them with somewhere to stay. Perhaps Barnabas knew of a small group of believers. We don't know specifically why they went to Cyprus, but it does seem significant that they chose somewhere where they had natural connections. In some ways, this mirrors Paul's later practice of always visiting the synagogue when he went to a new city.

Shortly after their time in Cyprus, John-Mark went back to Jerusalem. We aren't told why, but the implication is that he couldn't stand the rigours of the missionary lifestyle. We'd call it burnout, today.

Famously, a few years later, when Paul and Barnabas made plans for their second missionary journey (Acts 15; 36-41), they fell out over whether they should take John-Mark with them. Barnabas, the natural encourager, wanted to give Mark a second chance, while Paul didn't want to take someone who might distract them from their mission. In the end, the disagreement was so intense that the two of them split up. Paul headed to Syria and Cilicia while Barnabas and Mark went to (where else?) Cyprus. In seeking to restore and encourage Mark, Barnabas took him to a place where he had been before, where he may well have had family connections and where he knew he could thrive.

Eventually, we know that Barnabas' rehabilitation programme for Mark worked, because in 2 Timothy 4 we read Paul asking for Mark to be sent to him because he was a useful helper.

The story is a familiar one, but I'd never noticed the repeated theme of Cyprus before. Just a couple of thoughts:

- Sometimes the best way to reach out with the Gospel is through those to whom we have a natural affinity or link.
- Perhaps the best way to train new missionaries or to help restore people suffering from burnout is to provide opportunities to minister in familiar circumstances. Not everyone is ready or suited to being in the hard places.