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Encourage One Another



When have you seen something go viral?

QUESTION 1

#BSFLrelationships

Encourage people in their relationships with Christ and one another.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Until recently, not many people were familiar with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also called Lou Gehrig's disease, which is an incurable, progressive, muscle-weakening disease that ultimately ends in death. Then the ice-bucket challenge emerged in the summer of 2014. People were challenged to pour a bucket of ice and water on their heads to raise awareness of ALS and encourage donations for research. Whoever did this challenge could then challenge others.

Thanks to videos being posted on social media, the idea went viral. People all over the country and even in other nations jumped on the bandwagon and took the challenge. By the end of 2014, few did not know about this fatal disease.

The ice-bucket challenge shows how something exciting can spread quickly. The early Christians did not need an ice-bucket challenge to motivate them to share Christ. They had a message of life they were eager to share. In the Book of Acts, we meet a man named Barnabas who lived a life of sharing and encouraging others to share. He accepted the challenge to follow Christ and then encouraged others to do the same.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Acts 11:19-21 (CSB)

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered as a result of the persecution that started because of Stephen made their way as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.

In the earliest days of the Christian church, two characteristics stood out: It was a movement among Jews and it was largely confined to Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit had come on the early believers while in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-4), and while the church was growing by leaps and bounds, the new Christians pretty much stayed right where they were.

All that changed, however, when Stephen was killed (7:58–8:1). The Jewish leaders had been growing increasingly hostile toward the Christ-followers, which led to Stephen's death. He became the first martyr in the church, and after his death a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. As a result, believers scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. While we might think they were simply running for their lives, they took with them the gospel of Christ. "Those who were scattered went on their way preaching the word" (8:4).

Our passage mentions that believers had made their way to three places in particular: Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. They shared the gospel in these places, but they shared it with no one except Jews. Following Jesus was merely considered an extension of their heritage and religion; it was not viewed as something separate from Judaism. It makes sense, then, that Jewish believers would take the message of Christ to other Jews. It was their natural comfort zone.

Why do we sometimes shy away from certain groups of people when sharing the gospel?

QUESTION 2

That approach changed in Antioch. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, containing between 500,000 and 800,000 people. Some believers didn't just go to their fellow Jews; they "began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus" (v. 20). The good news pushed them out of their comfort zones to talk to the Greek-speaking non-Jews. They were not necessarily preaching from a pulpit like a pastor does today. The actual term used here is the word from which we get our word "evangelism"; it certainly could include what we think of as preaching but it also encompassed any way we tell others about Jesus. As Michael Green observed, these early believers "gossiped the gospel" wherever they went.⁵

Antioch has been described as a city ripe for a movement of God,⁶ and "the Lord's hand was with them" (v. 21). As a result, "a large number who believed turned to the Lord" (v. 21). God certainly uses planning and strategy, but in this case, God planted a church through a movement of people motivated to share Christ no matter what.

Acts 11:22-24 (CSB)

²² News about them reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to travel as far as Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts, ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And large numbers of people were added to the Lord.

The early church had the leadership it needed in Jerusalem, and those good leaders sought to encourage other churches and to ensure the church was teaching and growing as it should. That's why they sent Barnabas to Antioch. Barnabas was an ideal choice for several reasons. He was from Cyprus (4:36), as were some of the believers who initiated the movement of God in Antioch. This also meant Barnabas was a Hellenist, a Jew whose language and culture was more Greek than Hebrew. These things positioned him well to assess what God was doing among the Gentiles.

Who has made a spiritual investment in your life?

QUESTION 3

When have you been challenged to leave your comfort zone as a disciple of Christ?

QUESTION 4

Once in Antioch, Barnabas did three things:

1. **Barnabas saw the grace of God at work.** Why did Barnabas see God's grace? He was looking for it! God is working even now; we simply need the eyes to see.
2. **Barnabas rejoiced.** It was clear that God was working among the new believers. When we focus on seeing God at work, we're drawn to praise Him. Barnabas's spiritual eyes and joyful heart naturally led him to do the third thing.
3. **Barnabas encouraged them.** Although he was not one of Jesus' twelve apostles, Barnabas consistently was a source of encouragement to others, apparently including the Twelve. His real name was Joseph, but he had such a habit of encouraging others he was renamed Barnabas, which is from two Aramaic words meaning "son of encouragement" (4:36). When other disciples wanted to keep a young believer named Saul of Tarsus at arm's length because of his past persecution of the church, Barnabas reached out to him and encouraged the church in Jerusalem also to accept him (9:26-27). Barnabas continued exercising the gift of encouragement in Antioch. He "encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts" (v. 23).

Of all the qualities of Barnabas, the one we see most consistently here and throughout the Book of Acts is his gift of encouragement. He was a good man, led by the Spirit of God to encourage others to follow the Lord.



"Iron sharpens iron,
and one person sharpens another."

PROVERBS 27:17

GOD'S GRACE AT WORK



When you think about Acts 11:22-24, what captures your attention? Describe, list, or sketch your response.

"News about them reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to travel as far as Antioch. When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And large numbers of people were added to the Lord."

Acts 11:25-26 (CSB)

²⁵ Then he went to Tarsus to search for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught large numbers. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.

The church in Antioch was growing. As a result, Barnabas needed help—and he knew whom he wanted: Saul. We don't know a lot about Saul during this time, but it was likely that, for about ten years, he was preaching in Syria and Cilicia, the area of his hometown (Galatians 1:21-23). So Barnabas “went to Tarsus to search for Saul” (v. 25).

One of the greatest ways to encourage people to serve and minister is to let them work alongside us. Jesus did this with His twelve apostles; Saul (later called Paul) would do it later with others such as Silas, Timothy, and Luke (Acts 15:40; 16:1-3,10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1–28:16). And that is what Barnabas did with Saul. Saul was not a novice to ministry. He had been preaching and teaching, but now Barnabas brought him to Antioch to help with the church. Together “they met with the church and taught large numbers” (v. 26).

Saul already had a missionary zeal and Barnabas was always looking for opportunities to encourage others to come to Christ. The church at Antioch also had been blessed with several other learned prophets and teachers. Under their leadership, then, it is no surprise that the church at Antioch was the first the Holy Spirit called to send out a missionary team—and that team was none other than Barnabas and Saul (13:2).

How can we encourage others to step up and serve? As we follow the example of Barnabas, we can let the other person watch as we model what to do. Then, we can serve together. Finally, we hand off. We allow the person to do the task or ministry all on his her own. “And let us watch out for one another to provoke love and good works ... encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25).



What are some advantages of doing God's work together?

QUESTION 5

LIVE IT OUT

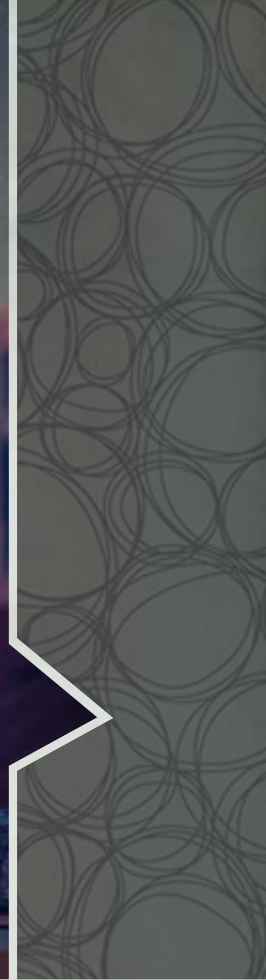
We are surrounded by people who need encouragement. What will you do to encourage others to grow in Christ and serve Him?

- » **A word of thanks.** Do you have a network of people encouraging you in your faith? Write their names down this week and be purposeful about thanking them individually.
- » **A word of encouragement.** Take time this week to encourage someone in their walk with Christ. Make a call, write a note, or come alongside the person you know who needs a word of support.
- » **A relationship of encouragement.** Do you currently have a relationship with a mature Christian friend in which you both encourage each other to deeper discipleship? If not, begin praying now for this kind of relationship and be on the lookout for someone God provides.



The early Christians knew they had a life-giving message to share and so do we. Accept the challenge to be a Barnabas and watch to see how God chooses to use you for His kingdom. **Whom can you encourage in the faith this week?**

My thoughts



BETTER TOGETHER

BY HOLLEY GERTH

I tentatively smile at the women surrounding the table. We've gathered to study God's Word and yet, beneath my calm expression, I feel a twinge of anxiety. What if I don't fit in? My fears are confirmed as those around me begin to share and I realize we're different in many ways. With a sinking feeling I think, *These are not my people*. Then just as quickly, it seems God whispers to my heart, "But they are My people. And that's what matters."

We tend to look for folks who are just like us. When everyone else in the room thinks, talks, and even dresses like we do, then we feel safer. It seems like we'll be welcomed, accepted, and understood. But I'm learning God invites us to go beyond our comfort zones and connect with those who have little in common with us—at least from a human perspective.

In Jesus, it's our differences that
can really make the difference.



The Apostle Paul challenged early believers in this area when he wrote these words to the Corinthians: "God has placed each one of the parts in one body just as He wanted. And if they were all the same part, where would the body be? Now there are many parts, yet one body" (1 Corinthians 12:18-20, NIV). Scholars describe Corinth as an important city of Greece both commercially and politically. That means Christians who worshiped there likely differed in everything from economic status to nationality.

Today the kinds of variances we get stuck on tend to also include personalities or preferences. We have thoughts like, *Everyone is so outgoing and I'm more of a listener, so I don't belong.* Or the reverse, *These women are so quiet and gentle, but I can't stop talking.* But Paul's encouragement still remains true for us now. Are you content to let those around you share their stories while you offer the support of your presence? Then you're probably an ear. And if you're the one who seems to find the nearest microphone (or you don't even need one), then you're probably a mouth.

That's the way God created the body of Christ to be. It's His beautiful plan for us to need, help, and serve one another. Yet instead of embracing that, we often allow our insecurity or pride to convince us that we need to go find a church full of ears or mouths. But what if when we discover

we're the only one like us, it doesn't mean we don't belong? What if it just means we've found where we're needed most?

I'm learning God invites us to go beyond our comfort zones and connect with those who have little in common with us—at least from a human perspective.

I decided to stick with the group of women who seemed so unlike me. Over the next few weeks, we learned from each other and grew together. To my surprise, I discovered because we weren't the same, I wasn't the same by the end of our time together either.

In Jesus, it's our differences that can really make the difference.



Holley Gerth is resisting the urge to try hard to impress you with this bio. Instead, she'd simply like to say she's a messy woman who's deeply loved by her Savior and she wants every woman in the world to fully know how much she's loved, too. She shares that message through her blog and bestselling books like *You're Already Amazing*. Connect with Holley at holleygerth.com.

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