YOU COULD BE NURTURING A FUTURE LEADER

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Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you needed help? You couldn’t solve your problem or overcome the challenge yourself—you needed someone beyond yourself? I’m sure we’ve all had that experience.

[May insert personal illustration of needing help of nurture or reclamation.]

Among the best known and most widely preached parables of Jesus are the ones with nurture, ministry, and reclamation at their heart.

For example, in Luke 10:30-37 Jesus tells the story of a Samaritan tenderly nurturing and caring for a badly injured and abused Jew. Yes, we know this parable well as, “The Good Samaritan.” At the mere mention of this parable, mental images readily flow of hemorrhaging abrasions kindheartedly cleansed and soothingly bandaged. We are also very familiar with the risks taken by the Good Samaritan to offer this nurture and care. Risks of similar assault to that of the Jewish victim or as a result of his Samaritan nationality, he risked suffering greater degrees of injury. Then there is the picture of the donkey ride—the ambulance or medevac of the era—for the nurtured. And as if this generosity wasn’t enough, there is the all expenses paid convalescence in the best available accommodation. Yes, in this story of Jesus, this presumably irreligious Samaritan was an astoundingly good nurturer!

Luke’s emphasis on nurture and reclamation is further illustrated by his record of Jesus’ parables of chapter 15. As we know, it includes stories of the Shepherd looking for the one lost sheep out of a flock of a hundred (vv. 3-7). Immediately following this graphic account of a nurturer who is dedicated to retaining the full measure of the flock, is the story of a woman who has lost just one of ten silver coins (vv. 8-10). In a mere handful of words, the parable describes the earnest intensity of the search for that which she treasures. And the search stops only when the lost coin is found. She too has retained the full measure of her treasure.

Then there is the story of the Lost Son, so painful for so many Seventh-day Adventist parents to read and contemplate because it bears too many resemblances to their child (or children) who may have made similar life choices.

These are stories of reclamation.

Notice Luke 15:1, 2: “Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, “This Man receives sinners and eats with them.”

The Pharisees and teachers of the law saw these people as “sinners” who were unworthy of salvation—beyond salvation. What person in their right mind would eat and associate with them and be polluted?

Jesus, on the other hand, saw them as His lamb, His coin, His child—just waiting to be found, reclaimed, or to return home. They once belonged to a loving God, and although they slipped from His embrace, they still bear the image of their Divine Creator. Jesus makes it clear
in these stories that this lamb, this coin, and this child are of incredible value to God, just like all His sheep, all His coins, and all His children.

Readers of these parables will soon discover that Jesus not only welcomes and eats with “sinners,” He celebrates their return. In other words, with these three parables, Jesus is saying to His critics, “You haven’t seen anything yet!”

In all three of these stories in Luke 15, there is a lot of diversity. There is a lost animal, object, and child. The stories feature a male, a woman, and a parent who suffer loss. In the third story, while reclaiming the younger son, there is ambiguity about the loss of the older son. This feature is not apparent in the other stories. The shepherd has all one hundred sheep and the woman has all ten coins when these stories conclude.

Yes, there are subtle and important variations in these stories. But there is also a single recurring significant feature. And this single recurring feature is most important in these stories because it is repeated in all three stories for impact. And what is emphasized in all three stories: when the lost is found there is celebration! There is celebration of nurture and reclamation:

• In celebration the shepherd places his found sheep upon his shoulders. The shepherd’s celebration continues on the homeward journey and his celebratory mood is not dampened by the effort of the trip home. When he reaches home, he initiates further and greater celebration calling his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him.
• The woman who has diligently searched for her lost coin until she found it similarly celebrates with friends and neighbors. In fact, in this brief story there are more words describing the ensuing celebration both on earth and heaven than the words used to describe the arduous searching process for that lost coin.
• The father, who has kept perpetual watch, with a seemingly unending surveillance of the horizon—eyes peeled for any sign of a lost son returning—initiates the most extravagant celebration and party. No expense seems to be spared for this celebration. Not just any goat or calf for this feast—the fattened one! Not just any clothes for this party—the best. The air of the party couldn’t be filled merely with joy, it needed music—and there was dancing too! This extraordinary festivity and merriment challenges many of the sensibilities of most Seventh-day Adventists.

In the Seventh-day Adventist Church we celebrate baptisms. There are multitudes of good reasons for this practice. This is good and right and to be encouraged. A person coming to Christ is an excellent reason to celebrate and rejoice.

But do we celebrate nurture and reclamation as Jesus described and emphasized in all these parables of Luke 15? This is something that we should carefully and seriously consider: How can we appropriately celebrate nurture and reclamation? A person returning to the church may not necessarily be blessed by such seemingly unrestrained celebrations, but we need to find ways of affirming and appropriately embracing the individuals who return to the fold. They need to know that we are thrilled and filled with overflowing joy because they have returned.

If we don’t find ways to celebrate these valuable people who return, we are in danger of being like the older brother, who had always been dutiful but resisted and resented the celebrations when his younger brother returned. These attitudes were clearly presented as being starkly contrary to those of the loving, accepting, forgiving, merciful and embracing Father. Clearly, one of the important messages of these parables is that God’s people must have these Divine attitudes: love and acceptance of people, eager to show forgiveness and mercy, being ever ready to embrace the returner and celebrate!
It is no wonder that these parables have captured the imagination of artists and preachers alike for centuries. They convey a picture of God that is pure and lovely.

Luke continues to propel this vital theme of nurture and reclamation in chapter 19. Luke records Jesus’ ministry to Zacchaeus. As a tax collector, Zacchaeus was regarded as a thief and betrayer of his nation and people. Again Jesus shocks His audience, this time by being a guest of a “sinner.”

Let me ask you a question: If the General Conference president came to your region and preached a sermon, where would you expect him to eat?

You would expect him to have lunch at the local president’s house or at a place where all the church leaders had gathered—correct? Everyone would be there dressed in formal clothes (probably in dark suits no matter how hot it was) and warmly expressing to the president how much they were blessed by his sermon. That’s the way we do things, and that’s what we expect. Imagine if the president shunned this meal and these people and instead went to eat with a person who was regarded as a thief, swindler, and rogue—someone who was betraying his country.

Most people would be shocked if the General Conference president did this. But Jesus explains His actions: “Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost’” (Luke 19:9, 10). For Jesus, his 3½-year ministry was too short to miss an opportunity to reclaim another lost child.

Our lives are short. And our Christian ministries are so short. It is amazing how quickly a year passes. None of us knows how long we will be blessed to continue in ministry. None of us knows our future. But this is what we do know: we don’t have time to waste in our ministries. Every day, every hour is an opportunity to reclaim another child of Jesus. Every moment is another opportunity to lead a person home into the loving embrace of Jesus!

This theme of nurturing and reclaiming is continued in Luke’s second volume: Acts. In Luke’s Gospel, it was Jesus who told parables of nurture and reclamation, and it was Jesus who did the nurturing and reclamation. He modeled nurture and reclamation to His disciples. He taught them and mentored them. In the Book of Acts, it is Jesus through His followers, empowered and inspired by the Holy Spirit, who nurture and reclaim.

Of all the characters that Luke presents to us in Acts, there is one who was the best and most proficient at nurturing and reclaiming—and he had a nickname to prove it.

We are introduced to this character for the first time in Acts 4:36, 37: “Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”

This is the first glimpse we have of Joseph, who was given by the disciples the nickname Barnabas. Nicknames often tell the story of a person very succinctly. The most obvious feature of a person can be captured in a simple nickname—like “Sons of Thunder.”

Positive nicknames are generally a good sign that the individual is well appreciated and regarded by his or her peers. (Among teenagers it’s not unusual that the most popular receive nicknames.) And as readers of Acts will discover, there is every reason to regard highly and appreciate Barnabas and he was aptly called “Son of Encouragement.” Barnabas is referred to 23 times in Acts, and he emerges as one of Luke’s heroes, one of the great heroes of the early church.

Why? Because he was a nurturer and reclaimer!
Barnabas was a Levite. Who were the Levites? According to Darrell L. Bock, “Levites were often wealthy and very well educated, but not all were priests. . . . Levites served in the temple, keeping watch over the gates, policing the area, instructing, and copying the Torah.”

We are not told where his land was located. It could have been in Judea or on his home island of Cyprus. It appears that the injunction against Levites owning land was relaxed widely by the first century. Even in the time of Jeremiah, we have the example of Jeremiah being a priest and purchasing a property (Jer. 32:7-12).

So Barnabas sold his land, without any fuss or fanfare, and laid all the proceeds at the feet of the apostles. This honest, generous and unassuming approach of Barnabas stands in stark contrast to what follows immediately in Acts: the story of the deceitful Ananias and Sapphira. It is a little disappointing that many of us may know the story of the unfaithful Ananias and Sapphira better than the remarkably faithful Barnabas.

So who was this Barnabas?

Acts 11:24 describes him as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” as well as being a very fruitful evangelist.

Colossians 4:10 informs us that Barnabas was a cousin of John Mark. This is the Mark who wrote the Gospel Mark, the youthful disciple of Jesus.

The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary [page 121], introduces to us a tradition that identifies Barnabas as one of the Seventy (or 72 in some translations) sent out by Jesus, as recorded in Luke 10:1.

In Acts 9 we receive a greater insight into Barnabas’ methods of operation as a disciple of Jesus and essentially as a disciple-maker: “When Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus” (vv. 26-30).

While all the disciples in Jerusalem were afraid of Saul, who had a well-known reputation as a persecutor and killer of Christians (just ask Ananias of Damascus), Barnabas was fearless. It appears that Barnabas was not afraid to risk or lose his life.

Verse 27 describes how Barnabas took Saul and brought him to the apostles. This carries the idea that Barnabas “took him under his wing.” And if we reflect on Galatians 1:18, it says that Saul/Paul visited Jerusalem on this occasion for 15 days, so it is reasonable to assume that Barnabas didn’t merely support him for one initial meeting—which may have lasted for minutes or hours at the longest—but most likely the best part of two weeks!

In this context, particularly in the Jerusalem of this era, two weeks could be a long time. For example Jesus, in less than a week, was welcomed into the city triumphantly yet within that same week was crucified by an angry mob. Jerusalem was a dangerous and volatile city, and Barnabas was prepared to associate closely with Saul, who could well have been regarded as a traitor. Barnabas in nurturing Saul was potentially endangering himself.

Barnabas also verified Saul’s conversion story. Sometimes it can be very difficult to tell our story—it can be difficult to “blow our own trumpet” because it can appear that we boasting. But Barnabas helped Saul, confirming his astonishing Damascus Road experience.
It can also be difficult to tell our story—particularly if it is an amazing miraculous story—to a skeptical audience. And the Apostles were skeptical! So Barnabas showed Saul/Paul how to tell his extraordinary testimony to this rather untrusting audience. And Paul was to learn from this mentoring, because years later, as recorded in Acts 22, Paul shares his testimony confidently before persecutors in Jerusalem; and as recorded in Acts 26, once again Paul boldly proclaims his conversion testimony before the unbelieving Agrippa.

So clearly, Barnabas was an important mentor and disciple-maker for Saul, who was still unimportant at this time.

This passage concludes with Saul, to avoid being murdered in Jerusalem, being sent back home to Tarsus. This was for his own safety—similar to a witness protection program. Here, in Tarsus, Saul would remain in obscurity. We are not told what Saul did during this time. In Luke’s account he does nothing to distinguish himself. He remains inconspicuous, unseen, and unheard.

The next occasion in which we read of Barnabas is Acts 11:22. Barnabas is sent by the church in Jerusalem to the fledgling work in Antioch. Barnabas conducts his ministry well in Antioch and then we read that he “departed for Tarsus to seek Saul” (v. 25). We are not told how Barnabas travelled from Antioch to Tarsus. If he went by land, it was 238 kilometers (148 miles). If he travelled approximately 30 kms per day, which was the typical travel distance in a day, it would have taken Barnabas 8 travelling days walking.

It is also likely that Barnabas travelled at his own expense. Paul was to later write in 1 Corinthians 9: 3-7 that he and Barnabas worked for no wages—even his expenses don’t appear to be covered! Barnabas was a remarkable man, donating all the proceeds of the sale of his property and then ministering as a volunteer. So not only did Barnabas undertake this considerable journey just to find Saul, it is likely he self-funded the expenses.

"And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch" (Acts 11:26). The words: “and when he found him” reminds us of Luke’s earlier wording in his record of Jesus’ parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin.

This implies that Barnabas needed to do some thorough searching to find Saul. And then Barnabas brought Saul back to Antioch. The total return trip was most likely more than 500 kms (more than 300 miles)! Barnabas wanted to disciple and nurture Saul—who had been at home in Tarsus for a considerable amount of time. Some commentators claim it could have been as long as a few years (based on Galatians 1–2). In Antioch, Barnabas trained, nurtured, and discipled Saul for a year.

God blessed both of these mighty workers in their ministries. Barnabas and Paul had very effective ministries as evangelists both when working as a team and independently. Importantly, Barnabas didn’t just focus his ministry on nurture and reclamation. The only recorded speech we have of Barnabas is an evangelistic message he co-preached with Paul at Lystra—to a pagan audience (Acts 14:15-17).

Ellen G. White comments on the importance of the training offered by Barnabas: “Experienced workers today do a noble work when, instead of trying to carry all the burdens themselves, they train younger workers and place burdens on their shoulders.”

And so Saul grew, under the blessing of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit and under the nurturing training of Barnabas.
Ellen G. White was also to write of Paul as tutored, nurtured, and discipled by Barnabas: “Paul’s heart burned with a love for sinners, and he put all his energies into the work of soul winning. There never lived a more self-denying, persevering worker.”

We know well of the extraordinary ministry of Paul—Apostle, missionary, evangelist, pastor, teacher, trainer, biblical author, humanitarian aid worker—the list goes on! Paul was certainly an amazing servant of God. It’s perfectly reasonable to wonder: “What would have happened to Paul had not Barnabas nurtured him?”

Luke also describes Barnabas as a key person in the nurture, reclamation, and development of another very important New Testament character: “After some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing.’ Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus” (Acts 15:36-39).

Even though John Mark had deserted Paul and Barnabas during an earlier missionary journey (13:13), Barnabas saw the potential of Mark, this youthful disciple of Jesus, and was eager to offer him some encouragement, further training, and another opportunity.

Ellen G. White provides this valuable insight: “This desertion caused Paul to judge Mark unfavorably, and even severely, for a time. Barnabas, on the other hand, was inclined to excuse him because of his inexperience. He felt anxious that Mark should not abandon the ministry, for he saw in him qualifications that would fit him to be a useful worker for Christ. In after years his solicitude in Mark's behalf was richly rewarded, for the young man gave himself unreservedly to the Lord and to the work of proclaiming the gospel message in difficult fields. Under the blessing of God, and the wise training of Barnabas, he developed into a valuable worker.”

Paul was afterward reconciled to Mark and received him as a fellow laborer. He also recommended him to the Colossians as one who was a fellow worker “for the kingdom of God” and “a comfort to me” (Col. 4:11). Again, not long before his own death, he spoke of Mark as “profitable” to him “for the ministry” (2 Tim. 4:11, KJV).

History tells us that Mark, inspired by the Holy Spirit, was to author one of the most significant pieces of Christian literature—“The Gospel According to Mark”—the “Mark” of the New Testament. This was a new genre of literature. It was an innovative way of telling the story of Jesus and also instructing and nurturing people into being disciples of Jesus.

Also, biblical scholars tell us that Mark’s gospel account formed the foundation for the Gospels later written by Matthew and Luke. Imagine a Bible without the gospels of Mark, Matthew or Luke!

There is an obvious and natural question we must ask: Where would the Christian faith be without the nurture and reclamation ministry of Barnabas—the Barnabas who nurtured, discipled, trained, and mentored Mark, the Barnabas who nurtured, trained, discipled, and mentored Paul to be an Apostle, missionary, evangelist, pastor, teacher, trainer, biblical author and humanitarian aid worker?

How much stronger would our church be if we retained the evangelistic emphasis but also were more effective with our nurture and retention?

This morning we began with the situation where people needed help—help beyond themselves:
• The wounded traveler on the Jerusalem—Jericho Road;
• The lost sheep, coin, and son;
• Zacchaeus;
• Saul/Paul; and
• John Mark/Mark.
Through the wonderful ministry of nurture and reclamation, we can celebrate all these good news stories:
The traveler was healed.
The lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son were all reclaimed.
Zacchaeus was similarly reclaimed.
Paul and Mark developed into mighty servants of God.
What story can we write of the ministry of nurture and reclamation?

1. Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references in this sermon are from the New King James Version of the Bible.
3. The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary, p. 121.
6. Ibid., p. 367.
7. Ibid., p. 170.