

Power and Influence in Responsible Leadership (Part 3)

Earlier in this series of articles on Power and Influence in Responsible Leadership, Peter Heslam drew a distinction between power and authority, on the one hand, and influence and leadership on the other. He suggested that there is someone in history whose influence and leadership may account for significant portions of the Bible to have been written, even though that person held relatively little formal power and authority and none of their own words have ever been recorded. Peter revealed the identity of this person at the Faith in Business Leadership Retreat in April 2026.¹ He does so again for FiBQ readers below, suggesting that this person's example could help us exemplify power and influence in responsible leadership.

The mystery figure is Joseph. This is not the famous Joseph who wore a fancy coat, nor the even more famous Joseph whose fiancée became pregnant without it having anything to do with him. The Joseph in question is a less eye-catching figure. He was a Levite from the island of Cyprus, who may well have become a Christian amongst the crowds in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2.1–41). The apostles referred to him using the nickname Barnabas, which in Aramaic means ‘son of encouragement’ (Acts 4.36).

A towering figure amongst those apostles is Paul. His influence over the past 2000 years cannot be overestimated. But that influence could easily have been extinguished before it gathered pace. When Paul first arrived in Jerusalem after his conversion, the early Christians hid from him in terror. They took his claim to have become a Christian as a ploy to gain access to their circles. This would allow him to round up more Christians to be executed, like Stephen (Acts 8.1–3; 9.4, 13–21, 26; 26.9; Galatians 1.11–14).

But then Barnabas steps in. He brings Paul before the apostles and reassures them of Paul's change of heart (Acts 9.27). While others focused on Paul's past, Barnabas saw what God was doing in the present to transform his life. That courageous act of

encouragement opened the door to Paul's ministry, which included the writing of his 13 or so letters, which have radically shaped the Church and wider society to this day.

We know about Barnabas' relationship with Paul largely through the book of Acts. That was almost certainly written by Luke, as was the Gospel that bears his name. Luke's ministry was dependent on Paul's ministry – Luke was a travelling companion and journal keeper to Paul. We therefore also have Barnabas to thank for two more books in the Bible: Luke and Acts.

But Barnabas' influence through encouragement does not stop there. John Mark was also a travelling companion to Paul, and to Barnabas. When this young man abandoned them partway through a journey, Paul was furious. He refused to take John Mark when the time came for a second journey. Barnabas, on the other hand, insisted on giving John Mark a second chance. The disagreement was so sharp that Paul and Barnabas parted ways (Acts 15.36–41).

But Barnabas was right. John Mark grew, matured, and is likely to be the author of the Gospel of Mark. Even Paul later admitted that John Mark had become ‘helpful to me in my ministry’ (2 Timothy 4.11b). Barnabas

had again proved able to unlock someone else's calling.

When we put all this together, Barnabas's quiet ministry of encouragement stands behind around 13 epistles, two gospels, and the Book of Acts. That is an astonishing legacy for someone who never held much power, never sought the spotlight, and never had a single spoken word recorded.

What made Barnabas' gift of encouragement so influential? Clues can be found in his appearance in two cities. In Antioch he is described as ‘a good man, full of the Holy Spirit, and full of faith’ (Acts 11.24). His goodness, spiritual vitality and faith seem to have given Barnabas the courage to see potential where others saw risk; to welcome people others rejected; and to step back to allow others to step forward.

This last characteristic is reflected in an incident in the other city, Lystra. Barnabas and Paul go there after the Holy Spirit says to the church in Antioch, ‘set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’ (Acts 13.2). They promptly set off on what is generally called Paul's first missionary journey because Paul did a lot of the speaking. But it could be called Barnabas' first missionary journey, as it appears Barnabas was the leader.



When, in Lystra, Paul heals a lame man, the crowd took Paul and Barnabas to be gods. Barnabas they called Zeus (the chief god), and Paul they called Hermes (the gods' principal spokesperson). Even the priest of Zeus brought bulls to sacrifice to them (Acts 14.8-13). Barnabas and Paul of course would have none of it. But the incident makes clear that Barnabas was recognised as the leader by those to whom they ministered.

What does all this suggest about leadership today? Much popular writing on leadership stresses the importance of self-actualisation. In advanced technological economies like our own, this often translates into the self-expression necessary to project oneself convincingly in (visual and audible) digital media. Anything less will fail to have impact in a world of instant images, sound bites and live streaming.

But Barnabas shows us that true leaders do not need to be putting themselves out in front. They can, instead, be good at involving others in leadership roles and helping them to play to their strengths. Barnabas is a leader because his encouragement includes people – even people suspected by others, and people who had gifts that threatened to overshadow his own.

When such people are included in an important project, they can (like Paul and John Mark) become open to change. The secret to this is seeing, affirming, and facilitating the gifts we see in others. Barnabas-style leadership can mean saying to oneself, 'I see what God is doing in that person. Let me support them in their use of the gift God has given them'.

To those reading this article who are in a leadership role in whatever sphere/s

of life, here is a challenge. The next time you engage with a passage of scripture from Paul's epistles, or Acts, or the Gospels of Mark and Luke, think of Barnabas. Consider the power of encouragement he demonstrated to shape vocations, ministries, lives, communities, societies and cultures.

Starting small is a good place to begin. Perhaps you could encourage the next person you interact with after reading this piece – even if only with your smile, a word of affirmation, or by your general warmth of manner. All it requires is a willingness to believe in someone's potential. These may be small steps. But they could be the first steps of unlocking the Pauls, the Lukes and the John Marks that are needed in our generation. Taking seemingly insignificant steps could open up new ways for you to exercise power and influence in responsible leadership. 

1. For a summary by Peter Heslam of the FiB Leadership Retreat 2026, see the article 'Leadership as a Sacred Trust' on pp.18-19 of this issue.



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