



PAUL  
AND HIS  
TEAM

WHAT THE EARLY CHURCH  
CAN TEACH US ABOUT LEADERSHIP  
AND INFLUENCE

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FOREWORD BY HEATHER ZEMPEL



## CHAPTER THREE

# Offstage Leadership

*Unleashing the Influence  
of Behind-the-Scenes Leaders*

When most of us think of leadership—especially within the church—we immediately think of the highly visible “onstage” leaders: pastors, conference speakers, church staff members, worship leaders, etc. Sometimes these onstage leaders don’t stand on a physical stage, but they have another form of platform like a popular blog or a large following on social media. As Susan Cain so insightfully pointed out in her book *Quiet*, many of us equate charisma, extroversion, and visibility with leadership, but there is much more to leadership than that.<sup>1</sup>

In reality, onstage leaders are a tiny minority—the tip of the leadership iceberg within our Christian communities. The quiet, overwhelming majority of influencers in God’s kingdom are offstage leaders.

Historically speaking, offstage leaders were the type of people who carried letters between the churches in the first century. They were the ones who meticulously copied and preserved the Scriptures throughout the centuries. They were the ones who diligently made sure the poor had enough food to eat and the sick were taken care of. Offstage leaders were the ones through the centuries who had spiritual discussions at home and made sure their children learned the truth about God. They were the ones who carried the gospel to foreign—and sometimes hostile—nations, often doing the incredibly tedious work of translating the Scriptures as they brought Christ to people groups who had never heard of Him.

Today, offstage leaders do many of the same things. They make the Sunday service happen each week at church. They have spiritual discussions with their kids on the way to school. They make an impact on their communities by showing kindness to neighbors. They talk to their coworkers about Christ even when it's a little bit uncomfortable. Offstage leaders volunteer at food pantries, pray for the sick, and welcome guests at church. They enable, amplify, and in many ways outshine the ministry of onstage leaders.

All things considered, offstage leaders are the ones who get it done. No stage. No blog. No significant social media following. They faithfully apply their gifts within the corner of the kingdom that God has entrusted to them, often with little or no fanfare. These are the very people who ministry leaders are constantly trying to find and mobilize.

I've found that church leaders often use a curious strategy when attempting to legitimize and activate offstage leaders.

They point to biblical figures like Moses or Jesus' disciples and cast them as unlikely leaders because of their personal shortcomings or lack of formal education. It's sort of a "If they could do it, you can do it" strategy.

I'm not a fan of this approach. The twelve apostles, for example, were not really offstage leaders at all. Jesus hand-picked them and personally groomed them for future onstage leadership, which grew during His ministry and took off as the church expanded throughout the Roman world. Moses certainly had a huge platform as well, with tens of thousands of Israelites following his lead. It's hard for offstage leaders to relate to these larger-than-life figures.

To inspire and mobilize the offstage leaders in our midst, we need to instead highlight the many biblical influencers who truly were offstage leaders. We need to shine a light on the people who were the supporting cast and crew—the men and women who enabled the full impact of the big-name leaders' ministries. The Bible is full of quiet influencers, and their contribution to the kingdom cannot be overstated. But they're easy to miss because they're usually mentioned briefly and in portions of the Bible we often skip over.

For example, in the gospel of Luke, we find these few verses that highlight some important offstage leaders:

[Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom



seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means. And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, "A sower went out to sow his seed . . ." (Luke 8:1-5)

This is the sort of material that we easily pass over when we read the Bible, because we focus on Jesus' parable that He tells in the verses that come next. But these are the places where we see the important work of offstage leaders. Luke drew attention to the fact that Jesus' ministry was bankrolled, in part, by women—a very significant fact in such a patriarchal climate. When is the last time you thought about how Jesus and His disciples financed their ministry? Luke gives us a glimpse of the behind-the-scenes leadership that was taking place. Joanna is an especially notable example, since she apparently ran in governmental circles.<sup>2</sup>

In the rest of this chapter I will highlight a few members of Paul's team who seem to have operated in an offstage capacity. If you're an onstage ministry leader, I hope this will motivate you to find, deploy, and celebrate these vital behind-the-scenes leaders. If you are more of an offstage type, I hope this will encourage you about the extraordinary influence that you can have in God's kingdom. Also, if an onstage leader has asked for your help, I'm hoping this chapter motivates you to say yes. You are more valuable to the church than you could ever know!

**LUKE'S OFFSTAGE LEADERSHIP**

Luke is my personal favorite offstage influencer from the New Testament era. I'm fascinated by him, which is why I focused on his writings in my seminary and doctoral studies. It is hard to overstate Luke's impact on the Christian faith today. His writings, Luke and Acts, make up around 27 percent of the New Testament, with a higher total word count than all of Paul's letters combined. Luke wrote more of the New Testament than any other single writer.

As stated in the prologue to his gospel, Luke went around meticulously interviewing eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry as well as verifying sources (Luke 1:1–4). He was like an investigative journalist. He wrote in the most sophisticated language of any New Testament writer, styling himself as an author in the tradition of celebrated Greek historians like Herodotus and Thucydides. The Acts of the Apostles—the sequel to his gospel—covers the key events of the first few decades after Christ's resurrection, providing an invaluable historical framework for understanding the backdrop of the New Testament letters.

Luke's writings are as theologically rich as they are historically reliable. Some of the most distinctive teachings of Jesus are found only in Luke's gospel—for example, the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son (Luke 10:25–37; 15:11–32). Where would our Christian faith be without his twin literary contributions of Luke and Acts? It's hard to imagine. But Luke seems to have been an offstage leader. He is only mentioned by name three times in the New Testament, each time in passing at the end of one of Paul's letters.

In Colossians 4:14, Paul writes, “Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.” This tells us something of Luke’s profession, and that he was with Paul when he wrote Colossians. Philemon, a letter written around the same time as Colossians and also sent to Colossae, also mentions Luke: “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers” (Philem. 23–24). In what many scholars believe was Paul’s final letter before his martyrdom, he once again mentions Luke at the end of 2 Timothy: “Luke alone is with me . . .” (2 Tim. 4:11). Luke may have been one of the last people to see Paul alive.

Beyond these explicit mentions of Luke in the Pauline letters, Luke seems to have subtly highlighted himself in several places—the so-called “We” sections of Acts (16:8–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16). In the book of Acts, Luke generally chronicled early Christian history as a third-person narrator. On a few occasions, however, he switched to the first-person plural voice. For example, in Acts 16:10, Luke wrote, “When Paul had seen the vision, immediately **we** sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called **us** to preach the gospel to them.” These sections of Acts are believed by many scholars to be portions of Paul’s journeys when Luke was physically present. He was noting in these instances that he himself was involved in the narrative.

Let’s summarize Luke’s contributions: He went around and interviewed eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry to write a historically and theologically reliable gospel. He traveled with Paul for significant portions of his missionary journeys, and stayed at his side during his imprisonment. Then he

wrote the Acts of the Apostles, a companion to his gospel and the earliest historical record we have of the growth of the early church in the first century.<sup>3</sup>

Luke is barely mentioned by name in the Bible, but his writings have echoed down through the centuries to all of us. He is a fantastic example of the kind of influence behind-the-scenes leaders can have.

### TYCHICUS'S OFFSTAGE LEADERSHIP

Tychicus is one of those names you might recognize if you've read the New Testament closely, but most of us know little about him. As was the case with Luke, Tychicus was only mentioned a few times, so unless we are proactive in examining those instances, we won't learn much about him. But there's enough material for a compelling picture to emerge.

What we know about Tychicus comes mainly from his travel itineraries, and the brief comments Paul makes about his character. In Acts, Luke tells us that Tychicus accompanied Paul on a portion of his journeys. In Acts 20:4, Luke lists some of Paul's travel companions as he made his way through Greece and Macedonia: "Sopater the Berean, son of Pyrrhus, accompanied him; and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus; and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy; and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus." We know, therefore, that Tychicus was from Asia, which was the name of a Roman province in the western portion of modern Turkey.

That being the case, it is no surprise that Paul dispatched Tychicus with several very important letters meant for that area. At the end of Ephesians, Paul writes, "So that you also



may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts” (Eph. 6:21–22).

Tychicus was from the province of Asia, and Ephesus was the chief city of that area. So Paul was sending Tychicus back home to his old stomping grounds to carry the letter we call Ephesians to the church in the city of Ephesus. What an important task! Paul describes him as a “beloved brother and faithful minister,” speaking to the important role he played on Paul’s team and why he was trustworthy to personally carry Paul’s letter.

Paul makes similar comments about Tychicus at the end of his letter to the Colossians.

Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. (Col. 4:7–9)

Colossae was a small town in the same region as Ephesus, and Paul wanted Tychicus to go there along with Onesimus to deliver the letter we call Colossians as well as a general update on Paul’s situation as a prisoner in Rome. It is probable that Tychicus also carried Paul’s letter to Philemon, since

it concerned Onesimus's return to Colossae (more on that in chapter 7).

Paul mentions Tychicus a couple of other times. At the end of his letter to Titus, Paul writes, "When I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there" (Titus 3:12). Similarly, at the end of 2 Timothy, Paul writes, "Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus" (2 Tim. 4:12).

The picture emerging of Tychicus is that he was a trusted friend and associate of Paul's, and a courier of several important letters that ended up in our New Testament. Can you imagine our New Testament without Ephesians, Colossians, or Philemon? Can you imagine how different the spiritual trajectory of Ephesus and Colossae would have been without Paul's words in those letters? Paul was dependent on people like Tychicus to help him shepherd the many scattered Christian communities around the Mediterranean world. Traveling as much as Tychicus did was an expensive, dangerous, arduous task. We owe him a great debt.

### **EPAPHRAS'S OFFSTAGE LEADERSHIP**

Like Tychicus, Epaphras is one of those names that we easily skip over (or clumsily pronounce) when we read the New Testament. But he played a very important role as the original evangelist of the Lycus Valley, where Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis were located. Paul was not the first one to bring the good news about Jesus to that area—Epaphras was. As Paul wrote in Colossians 1:7–8, "... You learned [the gospel] from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister

of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.” Epaphras laid the foundation of ministry in Colossae, on which Paul continued to build. Paul mentioned Epaphras again later in the same letter: “Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis” (Col. 4:12–13).

Paul used several key phrases to describe Epaphras in his letters, like “fellow servant,” “faithful minister,” and “servant of Christ Jesus.” He also describes him as a prayer warrior on behalf of the Colossians, working hard and traveling far to foster their faith and spiritual growth (Col. 4:12). In his letter to Philemon, Paul says, “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you” (Philem. 23). This letter gives us another designation for Epaphras: “fellow prisoner.” Take them all together, and you can see that Epaphras was wholeheartedly dedicated to serving the church.

Epaphras first brought the gospel to the Lycus Valley, and then worked tirelessly alongside Paul to help those Christian communities grow in their faith. He prayed, he worked, he ministered, he traveled, and he was eventually imprisoned. If Paul were here today, he would tell us that Epaphras was an invaluable part of his team.

### **WHAT THIS MEANS FOR US TODAY**

Paul knew there was no way he could effectively lead so many far-flung congregations without people like Luke, Tychicus,

and Epaphras on his team. There was too much work to be done for Paul to do everything himself. The early church was a loose network of new congregations populated by Christians who were young in their faith. Paul simply did not have the luxury of leading without a team of people working behind the scenes, especially once he was imprisoned.

As a former Pharisee, Paul would have known the Jewish Scriptures well, and would have remembered how Moses delegated to other leaders in order to lead effectively during their time in the desert. Moses's father-in-law Jethro had famously given him a healthy perspective on leadership: "You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone" (Ex. 18:18).

Paul could not bear the heavy load of leading all of these churches by himself, particularly in a climate of escalating persecution and when travel was so slow and dangerous. Paul needed offstage leaders who kept the machinery of ministry running.

Luke did his research and created a master two-volume work that would have an exponential impact in the centuries to come. Epaphras and Tychicus spent a lot of time alone, on the road, facing constant danger in order to carry their precious cargo: the gospel of Jesus Christ and letters from Paul to young churches that desperately needed guidance.

What does this mean for us today? It means that if God has entrusted us with an onstage leadership role in His church, we must understand that we were never meant to lead alone. God has surrounded us with gifted offstage leaders who can and will make significant contributions to the ministry,

perhaps more significant than our own. Paul didn't lead alone. Why should we?

Paul allowed people to see that he was vulnerable—that he *needed* them. We must be willing to show the same transparency about our limits. We need to look around us for the fellow workers that God has put in our circle, people who can work behind the scenes to do great things for the kingdom. If you're an onstage leader, find these people and let them take stuff off your plate! They'll probably do it better than you if you'll let them. Let those offstage leaders set an agenda based on their gifts that you might not have even considered. Give them some control. Trust them. Maintain relationships with them, as Paul did.

Then follow Paul's example from his letters and shine a light on them. Give them credit! View them as equals and find ways to acknowledge them as partners. When Paul described people like Luke, Epaphras, and Tychicus he often used words with the Greek prefix *syn-*, which we often translate as “fellow.” The *syn-* prefix conveyed the idea of doing something *with* someone else. It was a marker of equality.

For example, Paul calls Luke and others his *συνεργός* (*synergos*), which we translate as “fellow worker.” That's where our English word *synergy* comes from. It means to work together. Epaphras and Tychicus are described by Paul with the word *σύνδουλος* (*syndoulos*), or “fellow servant.” Paul viewed them as his partners in ministry, and his language clearly reflected that.

If, on the other hand, you are more of an offstage leader, you need to understand that God might want to use you in a significant way, as a fellow worker with those onstage leaders



you see around you. My encouragement to you is this: get in the game. Onstage leaders need you, whether they readily admit it or not. You might be one of those people like Luke, or Epaphras, or Tychicus, or the women who provided financially for Jesus' ministry.

For example, in terms of numbers and degree of influence, parents are the most influential bunch of leaders in the church—and most of them are offstage leaders. They have the opportunity to invest in the next generation on a minute-by-minute basis (literally). Grandparents are another powerful influence within the church as they share their wisdom and experiences with their grandchildren. Other family members can play similar roles. We may not think of our parents or grandparents as church leaders since most of them don't hold formal leadership titles, but their behind-the-scenes influence can impact the spiritual landscape of entire family trees.

Just because you don't have a stage, a microphone, or a popular blog does not mean that God doesn't have an important role for you to play. You can influence from an offstage position in ways that will change lives. I wonder if Luke ever imagined his writings would endure for so long. It's probable that Epaphras and Tychicus did not realize the letters they carried would continue to influence our spiritual lives in the twenty-first century. Don't sell yourself short. God has a beautiful purpose for your influence if you'll make it available to Him.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- What stood out to you about this chapter?
- Why do you think that leadership is often equated with visibility or extroversion?
- What are some unique ways that offstage influencers can provide leadership for the church today?
- Can you think of any other offstage leaders in Scripture that made a big impact?
- Who has been the most influential offstage leader in your spiritual life? How did God use them to help you grow?
- What did you find most challenging about this chapter?
- What is one thing you can change this week based on what you learned in this chapter?
- Sample Prayer: Lord, help me to see my influence the way You see it. Help me not to have too high an opinion of it, and help me not to sell it short. I want to steward my influence as a gift from You, so show me how to use it. Lead me out of my comfort zone to fulfill the purpose You have for me. I trust You, and I submit to Your leading. Amen.

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