



LOVE-THY-NEIGHBOR COMMANDMENT AS LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLE: SHAPING ETHIOPIAN EVANGELICAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP THROUGH BIBLICAL THOUGHT

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This article develops a biblically grounded leadership framework by examining the love-thy-neighbor commandment (Matt. 22:39; Rom. 13:8–10) as a normative principle within Ethiopian Evangelical churches. Engaging steward leadership emphasizing responsibility, accountability, and faithful management of relationships, it argues that this commandment constitutes the theological and relational foundation of ethical, relational leadership (Rodin, 2010). In this study, through exegetical analysis, theological reflection, and empirical evidence, leadership is reframed not as mere authority or effectiveness but as the embodiment of relational responsibility. Unlike models prioritizing the positional authority of Abraham Maslow's (1943) self-centered motivational paradigm, authentic leadership emerges through ethically embodied, others-oriented relationships aligned with biblical teaching (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Empirical data from adherents across five Evangelical denominations show that the commandment's influence on leadership is primarily indirect, mediated by leaders' ethical integrity, adherents' relational engagement, and the consistent enactment of faith values. These findings demonstrate that ethical and effective leadership is realized through lived relational commitments. By integrating exegesis, theology, and empirical analysis, the study extends steward leadership by identifying the love-thy-neighbor commandment as its foundational ethic, offering a contextually relevant and theologically robust model for ethical, relational, and transformative leadership in Ethiopian Evangelical churches.

Keywords: biblical leadership, love-thy-neighbor, theological ethics, steward leadership, Ethiopian Evangelical Church, Ethiopia

Leadership within modern churches has increasingly become a subject of critical reflection, particularly in contexts such as Ethiopia, where rapid religious growth

intersects with complex social, cultural, and spiritual dynamics. While contemporary leadership frameworks have significantly influenced church practices, scholars have raised concerns regarding their theological adequacy and ethical grounding (Antakirana, 2025; Tangen, 2023). Research in biblical leadership consistently emphasizes that leadership within Christian contexts must extend beyond effectiveness and influence to embody spiritual integrity, relational accountability, and theological coherence (Cavins, 2019; Hatch & Kumar, 2019). More recent studies underscore the need for leadership models that are explicitly Christ-centered, ethically grounded, and responsive to contextual realities (Barresi, 2025; Coley, 2024).

In this regard, church leadership practices increasingly rely on popular management models like transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) and psychological constructs centered on self-actualization (Maslow, 1943) and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). However, scholars contend that reducing leadership to these secular motivational frameworks fails to account for the covenantal and theological dynamics essential to biblical ministry (Adams, 2021; Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011). A growing body of scholarship has sought to address these concerns by developing biblically grounded leadership models that emphasize character formation, discipleship, and ethical responsibility (e.g., Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011; Tangen, 2023; Thrall et al., 2004). Paradigms such as servant leadership, transformational leadership, and, more recently, steward leadership have emerged as influential models. Steward leadership, in particular, frames leadership as the responsible and accountable management of people, relationships, and resources entrusted by God, emphasizing faithfulness, ethical conduct, and commitment to the flourishing of others (DiVietro, 2025).

Similarly, studies on mentorship and leadership development highlight the formative role of intentional relationships in shaping leaders' moral and spiritual identity (Barresi, 2025; Drummond, 2019), while Pauline and early church models reinforce the importance of relational influence and community-oriented transformation (Lalonde, 2024; Massey, 2025). Together, these perspectives contribute to a robust understanding of leadership as inherently relational, ethical, and spiritually formative. Despite these advances, however, a critical gap remains in the literature. While steward leadership and related models provide a strong framework for understanding responsibility and accountability, they often do not fully articulate the underlying relational ethic that motivates and sustains such leadership. In particular, limited attention has been given to the love-thy-neighbor commandment (Matt. 22:39; Rom. 13:8–10) as a foundational and structuring principle of leadership.

Although love is widely recognized as a central Christian virtue, scholars note that it is frequently treated as a secondary or complementary trait rather than the organizing core of leadership practice (Straub, 2000). In response, researchers such as Bekker (2006) argue that agape, or self-sacrificial love, must be re-established as the foundational paradigm for all Christian leadership behaviors and ethical frameworks. Exegetical studies of Jesus' teaching demonstrate the integration of law, ethics, and relational intent in shaping transformative leadership (Braganza, 2025), while research on stakeholder ethics highlights the necessity of grounding leadership decisions in moral responsibility toward others (Wright, 2025). These insights point to the need for a more explicit integration of love as the theological foundation of leadership.

This study addresses this gap by proposing the love-thy-neighbor commandment (Matt. 22:39; Rom. 13:8–10) as the relational and theological core that undergirds steward leadership and other biblical leadership models. In this view, steward leadership provides the structural and ethical framework of responsible leadership, while the love-thy-neighbor commandment supplies the motivating principle that shapes how such responsibility is enacted in practice. By positioning this others-oriented love commandment as the central organizing principle, this article advances a more integrated understanding of leadership that unites ethical responsibility, relational commitment, and spiritual formation (Bekker, 2006; Outka, 1972). This perspective challenges prevailing paradigms that interpret love primarily through psychological or motivational lenses (e.g., Straub, 2000), offering a theological understanding of love instead as a binding moral obligation that compels action, forms character, and sustains Christian community (Sferrazzo & Nelson, 2022; Verdirame, 2020).

The significance of this article is threefold. Theologically, it contributes to the development of biblical leadership theory by identifying the love-thy-neighbor commandment as the foundational principle that gives coherence and depth to steward leadership and related models. Conceptually, it extends existing frameworks by demonstrating how ethical responsibility and relational engagement are grounded in a single, biblically mandated ethic. Contextually, it provides church leaders, particularly within Ethiopian Evangelical contexts, with a framework for cultivating leadership that is integrity-driven, relationally authentic, and contextually relevant.

Accordingly, the central aim of this article is to examine how the love-thy-neighbor commandment functions as a leadership principle shaping Ethiopian Evangelical Church leadership. Specifically, the article considers the mechanisms through which this commandment influences leadership outcomes, focusing on three dimensions: (a) leaders' ethical integrity and influence, (b) adherents' commitment and relational engagement, and (c) the consistent enactment of relational faith values in daily practice. Through an empirical approach, the study evaluates whether the influence of the love-thy-neighbor commandment is direct or mediated through these relational and ethical dimensions within a steward leadership framework.

To address these objectives, this study is structured into five key sections. The first section reviews relevant literature on biblical leadership theories, focusing on servant, transformational, and steward leadership models within a theological-ethical framework. The second section outlines the methodological approach, including research design, data collection, and analytical procedures. The third section presents the empirical findings, highlighting the mechanisms through which the love-thy-neighbor commandment shapes leadership outcomes. The fourth section synthesizes and discusses the implications of these findings for both theory and practice within the Ethiopian Evangelical context. Finally, the study concludes by summarizing key insights and offering recommendations for future research and leadership development.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

This literature review of the article engages four major streams of scholarship: biblical scholarship, leadership theory, prior Christian principle and church leadership focused studies, and the identification of a contextual and conceptual gap. Together,

these bodies of literature provide a foundation for examining the love-thy-neighbor as a leadership principle within Ethiopian Evangelical Churches in Ethiopia.

Biblical Scholarship, Commandment, and Leadership

Biblical scholarship consistently affirms that the love-thy-neighbor commandment is central to Christian ethical life and communal relationships. Rooted in Jesus' teaching (Matt. 22:39) and further elaborated in Pauline theology (Rom. 13:8–10), the love commandment is not merely an emotion but a moral obligation that governs interpersonal conduct and communal order. Theologically, this commandment is understood as the fulfillment of the law and the foundation of Christian ethics. Within biblical leadership discourse, emphasis has often been placed on servant leadership, stewardship, and humility as exemplified in Christ. However, almost no studies explicitly frame “love-thy-neighbor” as an operational leadership principle that shapes influence, decision-making, and relational engagement. While biblical narratives such as Pharaoh's oppressive exercise of power (Ex. 1:8–14) demonstrate the destructive consequences of leadership devoid of relational responsibility, Scripture consistently contrasts this with mandates for relational justice, compassion, and moral accountability (Mic. 6:8; Zech. 7:9–10). As Jesus later highlighted, worldly leaders lord authority over others, whereas biblical leadership requires relational service and moral care (Matt. 20:25–28). Thus, biblical scholarship provides a strong ethical foundation but has not sufficiently developed a systematic framework that connects the love-thy-neighbor commandment directly to measurable leadership outcomes in contemporary church contexts.

Ethics for Leadership Theory and Practice

Modern leadership theory has evolved through paradigms such as transformational, transactional, and adaptive leadership. Scholars increasingly stress that leadership effectiveness is relational, involving influence between leaders and followers within specific contexts, echoing John Maxwell's assertion that leadership is fundamentally about influence (Maxwell, 1998; Maxwell & Dornan, 1997). Ethical leadership has gained prominence, particularly in contexts emphasizing integrity, moral conviction, and personal character (Brown et al., 2005). Research on activist leadership shows that leaders achieve above-the-norm outcomes through ethical commitments and relational engagement rather than technique alone (Asif et al., 2019). Yet mainstream management frameworks typically adopt Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, reducing love to a psychological drive for belongingness or self-actualization. As scholars point out (Bekker, 2006; Verdirame, 2020), this psychological framing limits its applicability in faith-based contexts, where love (agape) is not merely a human need to be met, but an unyielding biblical command that governs leadership ethics and Christian conduct. Recent scholarship highlights steward leadership as a biblically grounded model framing leadership as the responsible management of people, relationships, and resources entrusted by God (DiVietro, 2025; Rodin, 2010). Steward leadership emphasizes accountability, ethical responsibility, and the flourishing of others. Beyond its structural and ethical guidance, it calls for theological reflection on relational motivations, especially the love-thy-neighbor that sustains authentic, ethically grounded

stewardship, providing a contextually relevant model for faith-based leadership (Bekker, 2006)

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This section develops an exegetical and theological understanding of the love-thy-neighbor commandment and connects it explicitly to leadership principles.

Exegesis of Love-Thy-Neighbor

Rooted in the Old Testament and reaffirmed by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel as the second greatest command (22:39), the call to love-thy-neighbor is interpreted by Paul in the Epistle to the Romans 13:8–10 as the fulfillment of the law, demonstrating its role as a unifying ethical principle across Scripture. In Matthew's Gospel 22:37–40, Jesus responds to a legal expert by summarizing the law into two inseparable commandments: love for God and love for neighbor, presenting love-thy-neighbor (Matt. 22:39) as the second like it, not as lesser, but as intrinsically linked. As New Testament lexicons and scholars emphasize, the Greek verb ἀγαπάω (agapaō) conveys a self-giving, practical love grounded in volitional commitment and action rather than fluctuating emotion (Louw & Nida, 1989). Drawing from the Book of Leviticus 19:18, Jesus elevates this command into a universal ethical principle that transcends ethnic and covenantal boundaries, a meaning further clarified in the Gospel of Luke 10:25–37, where the parable of the Good Samaritan defines Neighbor through compassionate action rather than identity. This teaching is deepened in the Epistle to the Romans 13:8–10, where Paul presents the love-thy-neighbor commandment as the fulfillment and summation of the law, framing it not as mere compliance but as the organizing principle of moral life and an ongoing obligation. In the Gospel of John 13:34–35, Jesus intensifies the command with a Christological standard: love one another as I have loved you, revealing love as sacrificial, relational, and incarnational, and establishing it as the ultimate measure of faithful living and leadership.

Theological Interpretation of Commandment

Theologically, the love-thy-neighbor commandment functions as a normative ethic rooted in the character of God. Three core themes emerge from this foundation:

- *Love-thy-neighbor as Divine Imperative, Not Human Need:* Unlike psychological models such as those proposed by Maslow (1943), which frame love as a human need within a hierarchy, biblical theology presents love as a divine commandment. It is grounded in God's nature (1 John 4:8) and revealed through Christ. Thus, the love commandment is not optional or contingent upon personal fulfillment, but obligatory for Christian believers and leaders alike.
- *Relational Mandate of Christian Life:* As articulated in Romans 13:8–10, where love fulfills the law, the love-thy-neighbor commandment is a binding mandate from Jesus Christ that governs Christian life and leadership. It establishes that believers are obligated to live in active, others-oriented relationships defined by justice, compassion, and mutual responsibility. Love-thy-neighbor is not abstract; rather, it is

a concrete command to avoid harm and intentionally pursue the good of others. Accordingly, leadership is not merely positional authority, but the execution of this mandate through ethical influence and relational responsibility.

- *Ethical Integrity and Holistic Obedience*: Love of neighbor fulfills the law by integrating all moral demands into a single guiding principle, replacing fragmented rule-keeping with a coherent framework for ethical discernment oriented toward others. Integrity thus becomes consistent, unified obedience rather than situational compliance. This is exemplified in Joseph's integrity (Gen. 39:9), where he resists sin under pressure, and Daniel's commitment (Dan. 1:8), where he upholds faith values with disciplined resolve. Both demonstrate that ethical consistency flows from an internally grounded, love-driven moral center. For leadership, this means integrity is the essential expression of holistic obedience, shaping trustworthy, relationally responsible, and transformative influence.

Thus, theologically, the love-thy-neighbor commandment is a non-optional divine imperative rooted in God's nature and revealed through Christ (Matt. 22:37–40; 1 John 4:8; Outka, 1972), defining both Christian identity and conduct. It operates as a relational mandate in which love fulfills the law by compelling believers toward active justice, compassion, and responsibility for others (Sferrazzo & Nelson, 2022). This command unifies all moral obligations into a single principle, producing consistent integrity and holistic obedience, as exemplified by biblical figures like Joseph (Gen. 39:9) and Daniel (Dan. 1:8). Consequently, Christian leadership is not merely positional, but the embodiment of this ethic expressed through trustworthy, self-giving, and relationally accountable influence.

PRIOR STUDIES

Researchers in church leadership increasingly emphasize that effective leadership practice requires the integration of biblical theology, ethical formation, and relational dynamics (Antakirana, 2025; Perry, 2018). As Perry (2018) argued, leadership ethics without a theological foundation lacks a firm grounding, necessitating a model where biblical truth directly shapes character and governs relational interactions within the faith community. Recent scholarship further expands this perspective by incorporating emerging themes such as competency modeling, organizational learning, and ethical engagement with technology. Contemporary leadership research continues to explore leadership as a multidimensional phenomenon grounded in Scripture while engaging modern challenges such as emotional intelligence and organizational complexity.

A central theme across the literature is that leadership effectiveness is deeply rooted in moral and spiritual formation. Barresi (2025) found that leadership integrity is cultivated through structured teaching, mentorship, and intergenerational discipleship, recommending intentional mentoring systems as foundational for leadership development. Similarly, Massey (2025) emphasized Christ-centered transformation through relational influence and communication. Extending this line of inquiry, Coley (2024) developed a Christlike leadership competency model that integrates being and doing what is right and just, identifying humble, passionate leadership obedience as a

core dimension of effective leadership. Importantly, Coley recommended further empirical testing and measurement development to validate this construct, highlighting the need to operationalize biblical leadership concepts into measurable variables. These findings align with earlier scholarship emphasizing the foundation of self (McDonald, 2019), ethical integrity (Cavins, 2019), and selflessness (Lloyd, 2019). DiVietro (2025) further demonstrated that leadership effectiveness is strengthened through stewardship and discipleship-oriented organizational cultures, recommending the intentional integration of leadership development into organizational systems for long-term transformation.

Relational and community-centered leadership also emerges as a dominant theme. Montaudon-Tomas (2019) highlighted the role of spiritual virtues in sustaining organizational health, while Dean (2019) underscored the importance of humility and service. Lalonde (2024) significantly extended this discussion by conceptualizing Jesus and the early church as a prototype of a learning organization. Her findings indicate that effective leaders foster environments characterized by continuous learning, shared vision, and critical reflection. Specifically, she recommends that leaders model learning behaviors, create forums for inquiry and dialogue, empower followers to function as change agents, and cultivate systems thinking to sustain organizational transformation. Similarly, Braganza (2025) demonstrated that Jesus' leadership approach transforms followers by addressing internal motivations, not merely external compliance, recommending a focus on heart transformation as a pathway to sustainable change. Wright (2025) reinforced the ethical dimension of leadership by emphasizing the importance of moral discernment and accountability, particularly in resisting harmful conformity.

Biblical and theological analyses further highlight servant leadership, mentorship, and adaptability as essential leadership competencies. Keehn (2019) and Drummond (2019) emphasized mentorship as foundational to leadership development, a finding strongly reinforced by Barresi (2025). In addition, Lalonde (2024) showed that Jesus' leadership model involved immersive, relational learning experiences that enabled followers to internalize values such as love and service, ultimately empowering them to lead others.

A growing area of scholarship also addresses leadership in the context of technological change. Duhon and Kirby (2024) argued that ethical leadership in the age of artificial intelligence (AI) requires discernment grounded in biblical principles. Their findings emphasize that leaders must evaluate not only the functionality of technology but also its impact on character formation and sanctification. They recommend the development of ethical guidelines and guardrails, including accountability structures, community involvement, and decision-making frameworks that ensure technology use is biblically grounded, ethically sound, and supportive of spiritual growth. Importantly, they caution against over-reliance on technology, echoing Bonhoeffer's warnings that technology can both aid and hinder spiritual formation. As such, leaders are encouraged to adopt adaptive and flexible leadership models capable of responding to rapid technological change while maintaining core theological commitments.

Despite significant contributions, key gaps remain. First, while the literature emphasizes love, service, and relational engagement, the love-thy-neighbor commandment is rarely explicitly conceptualized or operationalized as a central

leadership construct; it is typically embedded within broader virtues rather than treated as a primary analytical variable. Second, although recent studies call for empirical validation, the field remains largely theological and conceptual, with limited evidence linking biblical principles to measurable leadership outcomes. Third, existing studies provide applied insights but lack integration into a coherent, empirically testable framework connecting theology, leadership competencies, and organizational outcomes, leaving causal mechanisms underdeveloped. Importantly, while steward leadership highlights responsibility, accountability, and ethical management of relationships, it insufficiently specifies the underlying motivational ethic that drives such leadership. The role of the love-thy-neighbor commandment as the foundational, others-oriented principle shaping leaders' integrity, relational engagement, and adherents' commitment remains underexplored. Finally, research is predominantly Western, with limited attention to African, particularly Ethiopian Evangelical contexts.

Accordingly, this article addresses these conceptual, empirical, and contextual gaps by extending steward leadership through the explicit integration of the love-thy-neighbor commandment as its core motivating ethic within a contextually grounded and empirically tested framework. The study proposes love-thy-neighbor as a normative, others-oriented leadership principle and empirically examines its role as a determinant of leadership effectiveness within Ethiopian Evangelical churches. Building on prior findings that emphasize mentorship (Barresi, 2025), Christlike competency (Coley, 2024), ethical discernment (Duhon & Kirby, 2024), and learning organization practices (Lalonde, 2024), the study integrates biblical theology, leadership theory, and empirical analysis into a unified framework. By doing so, it advances the literature beyond conceptual and theological discussions toward a systematic and measurable model of biblically grounded leadership. Furthermore, it contributes a contextually relevant framework that responds to the unique realities of Ethiopian church leadership, thereby bridging the gap between theological conviction and practical leadership application.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study employs an integrative methodological approach that combines exegetical analysis, theological reflection, and empirical investigation. This approach is appropriate for bridging biblical interpretation, theological reasoning, and leadership practice within a specific context.

Exegetical Analysis

The command to "love-thy-neighbor" in the Gospel of Matthew 22:39 appears in response to a question about the greatest commandment. By linking it with love for God, Jesus Christ presents neighbor-love as inseparable from devotion to God, not a secondary ethic. The Greek ἀγαπάω (*agapaō*) denotes volitional, self-giving commitment, and its imperative form marks it as essential to covenantal faithfulness rather than optional morality. The command echoes the Book of Leviticus 19:18, where it functions within Israel's covenant community, but in Matthew its scope is widened, detaching neighbor from narrow ethnic limits and grounding it in the ethic of the Kingdom of God. This preserves continuity with the Torah while universalizing its ethical demand. In Epistle to the Romans 13:8–10, Paul the Apostle develops this teaching into

a governing ethical principle. By stating that love fulfills (*plērōma*) the law, he presents it as the law's complete realization rather than one command among many. His inclusion of specific commandments shows they are all contained within neighbor-love, which is defined as ongoing, active, and non-harmful action toward others. Together, these texts trace a progression from Levitical command to Jesus' expansion, to Paul's theological consolidation, establishing neighbor-love as the central unifying principle of biblical ethics for the Christian life, including leadership.

Theological Reflection

Building on the exegetical findings in the Gospel of Matthew 22:39 and Epistle to the Romans 13:8–10, theological reflection interprets the love commandment as a foundational doctrinal principle rather than a mere ethical instruction. Rooted in the Book of Leviticus 19:18 and expanded in the New Testament, it functions as a unifying axis for Christian ethics and community life. In this framework, the love commandment (*agapaō*) reflects divine nature and therefore defines faithful human existence. As articulated by Jesus Christ, love of God and neighbor are inseparable, making relational responsibility a theological reality rather than a secondary moral duty. Leadership, therefore, is shaped by participation in this divine relational order. Paul's teaching in Romans reinforces this by presenting the love commandment as the fulfillment (*plērōma*) of the law. For Paul the Apostle, it is the comprehensive principle that integrates and completes all ethical obligations. Church Leadership is thus redefined as the embodiment of this fulfilled moral vision within the community. This perspective emphasizes that the love commandment is not need-based but divinely mandated. In contrast to models such as those of Abraham Maslow (1943), which situate love within a human hierarchy of needs, the biblical witness frames it as an imperative grounded in God's character. Therefore, the love commandment emerges as the central organizing principle for leadership, uniting doctrine, ethics, and communal life in a single, coherent theological vision.

EMPIRICAL COMPONENT OF THE STUDY

This section of the study utilizes descriptive and mediation analysis as a part of an integrative methodology that combines exegetical rigor, theological depth, and empirical validation to address the identified research gap in biblical leadership. Exegetical and theological analysis ensures the study remains firmly grounded in Scripture while bridging the gap between ancient texts and contemporary leadership challenges. This foundation provides the conceptual framework necessary to move beyond textual analysis into a practically relevant leadership model. To validate this framework, the study incorporates a quantitative empirical component using descriptive data and mediation analysis. The survey data were collected from 125 adherents across five Evangelical denominations in Ethiopia. This sample size is methodologically justified; according to structural equation modeling (SEM) standards, a sample of 100 or more is statistically robust for models featuring five or fewer constructs with at least three items each. To ensure the integrity of the results, discriminant validity was rigorously assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio as proposed by Henseler et al. (2015). The study yielded an HTMT value of 0.75, which is well below

the conservative 0.85 threshold. This result confirms that the theological constructs within the model are statistically distinct and accurately measured, establishing high discriminant validity. By examining the direct and indirect effects of the love-thy-neighbor principle on leadership outcomes, this approach avoids purely theoretical conclusions. The integration of these methods ensures that the proposed framework is not only biblically grounded and theologically coherent but also empirically validated and practically applicable within the Ethiopian Evangelical Church context.

Survey Data Analysis Results and Discussion

First, by presenting the empirical study result, the section then integrates biblical insights, theological reflection, and empirical findings to demonstrate how the love-thy-neighbor commandment functions as a practical leadership principle within contemporary Ethiopian Evangelical churches. The discussion develops logically from the survey data analysis and interprets the findings through a theological leadership lens.

Table 1

Perceived Impact of Love-Thy-Neighbor on Church Leaders' Ethical Integrity

No	Items of Measurement	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Practicing "love your neighbour" promotes fair and just leadership within the church.	4.41	0.722
2	Practicing relational faith values encourages ethical decision-making in leadership.	4.36	0.734
3	The consistent practice of love fosters accountability and transparency in church leadership.	4.4	0.71
4	Leaders who model love and compassion demonstrate higher moral integrity.	4.44	0.695

Source: Computed from survey data using SPSS 27.0

Table 1 presents respondents' perceptions of the impact of the love-thy-neighbor commandment on leaders' ethical integrity, with high mean scores (ranging approximately from 4.36 to 4.44) indicating strong agreement, and relatively low standard deviations (around 0.69–0.73) suggesting consistent responses among participants.

Table 2*Perceived Impact of Love-Thy-Neighbor on Adherents' Relational Engagement*

No	Items of Measurement	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Christians who actively live out their faith contribute to building a trustworthy and peaceful community.	4.25	0.801
2	love in leadership enhances trust between church leaders and members.	4.38	0.705
3	The application of the Love- Thy- Neighbour commandment strengthens unity within the church.	4.33	0.748
4	Acts of love encourage active participation and engagement among church members.	4.35	0.73

Source: Computed from survey data using SPSS 27.0

Table 2 presents the perceived impact on adherents' relational engagement. This table also shows high mean values (approximately 4.25 to 4.38), reflecting positive perceptions, while slightly higher standard deviations (about 0.70–0.80) indicate moderate variability in responses.

Table 3*Impact of Love-Thy-Neighbor on Consistency in Practicing Relational Faith Values*

No	Items of Measurement	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Acts of love and justice at the community level can influence broader societal and national outcomes over time.	4.42	0.622
2	Leaders who model love and compassion inspire greater commitment among followers.	4.47	0.69
3	Consistent practice of relational values strengthens faith expression in daily life.	4.39	0.715
4	Living out the Love- Thy- Neighbour commandment reinforces long-term faith commitment.	4.37	0.728

Source: Computed from survey data using SPSS 27.0

Table 3 presents the influence on consistency in practicing relational faith values, with the highest mean scores (around 4.37 to 4.47), demonstrating very strong agreement, and lower standard deviations (approximately 0.62–0.73), indicating a high level of consistency in respondents' views. The mean and standard deviation values across all three tables 1 through 3 suggest strong consensus on the importance of practicing the

love-thy-neighbor commandment as a central factor in shaping effective church leadership.

Table 4

Impact of Love-Thy-Neighbor on Leadership Effectiveness

Relationship	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		P-Value	Conclusion
			Lower Bound	Upper bound		
Love Neighbors→ leadership	0.072	0.078	0.697	0.812	0.022	Partial Mediation

Source: Computed from survey data using SPSS 27.0 and AMOS 23.0

Table 4 presents the results of the quantitative analysis of survey data collected from five Evangelical denominations, examining the influence of the love-thy-neighbor principle on leadership effectiveness. The findings indicate a modest direct relationship between the principle and perceived leadership effectiveness ($r = 0.072$). However, mediation analysis reveals a statistically significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.078$, $p = 0.022$), with a confidence interval ranging from 0.697 to 0.812. The indirect effect works through three key mediating variables: leaders' ethical integrity, adherents' relational engagement, and consistency in practicing relational faith values. The results indicate partial mediation exists (Hayes, 2022), suggesting that the effect of the love-thy-neighbor principle on leadership effectiveness is primarily transmitted through these mediating factors rather than through a strong direct effect. The findings suggest that the love-thy-neighbor commandment functions not merely as a declarative or cognitive belief but as an embodied ethical practice. Leadership effectiveness, therefore, emerges not simply from professing love, but from consistently enacting it through integrity, relational engagement, and faithful practice.

Biblical Insight and Empirical Confirmation

This empirical pattern aligns closely with the biblical teaching found in the Gospel of Matthew 22:39 and Epistle to the Romans 13:8–10, where the love commandment is presented as an active fulfillment of the law. The findings support the exegetical conclusion that the love commandment is inherently action-oriented. The indirect nature of the effect mirrors the biblical emphasis on fruit-bearing rather than mere verbal affirmation (Matt. 7:16). Leaders influence others not simply by teaching love, but by modeling it through ethical integrity and relational engagement. This reinforces the theological claim that love functions as a mediating virtue, shaping both character and community.

Leadership as Relational Influence

The findings provide empirical support for the widely cited leadership principle articulated by John Maxwell that leadership is fundamentally influence (Maxwell, 1998;

Maxwell & Dornan, 1997). However, this study refines that assertion by demonstrating that influence is relationally and ethically mediated through love commandment enforcement. Leaders who consistently practice love-thy-neighbor cultivate trust, credibility, and commitment among followers. Survey responses indicate higher levels of engagement and commitment among adherents who perceive their leaders as relationally attentive, compassionate, and ethically consistent. This suggests that influence in church leadership is not positional but relationally constructed through ongoing interactions grounded in this love commandment.

Ethical Integrity as a Leadership Effectiveness Driver

One of the strongest mediating variables identified in the analysis is ethical integrity. This finding resounds with biblical expectations of leadership character (1 Tim. 3:2–7), where moral consistency is foundational. From a theological perspective, love of neighbor necessitates ethical behavior such as honesty, fairness, accountability, and justice. The survey data confirm that leaders who embody these qualities are perceived as more effective, not merely because of competence, but because of moral credibility. This challenges models influenced by purely motivational frameworks, such as those associated with Abraham Maslow (1943), which interpret love as a need to be fulfilled. Instead, the findings affirm that love operates as a normative ethical obligation that shapes biblical leadership behavior and outcomes.

Relational Engagement and Formation

A second key mediating factor is adherents' relational engagement. The data analysis results indicate that when leaders actively demonstrate care, empathy, and inclusivity, followers exhibit stronger commitment and participation. This reflects the biblical vision of community (*koinonia*), where relationships are central to spiritual life. Love-thy-neighbor, therefore, is not an abstract principle but a relational practice that fosters belonging and mutual responsibility. Leadership, in this sense, becomes a process of community formation rather than organizational control.

Embodied Practice and Consistency

The third mediating mechanism, consistent enactment of relational faith values, highlights the importance of lived example. The data suggest that inconsistency between proclaimed values and actual behavior weakens leadership influence, while consistency strengthens it. This finding aligns with biblical teachings such as being doers of the word, and not hearers only (James 1:22). Leadership effectiveness is thus tied to embodied theology, where beliefs are visibly practiced. The relatively stronger indirect effect in the analysis underscores that leadership is formed over time through repeated, observable actions.

Integrating Theology and Leadership

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that love-thy-neighbor functions as a comprehensive leadership principle that integrates theology and practice. Theologically, it is rooted in divine command and relational ethics (Outka, 1972; Verdirame, 2020).

Empirically, it operates through identifiable mechanisms such as moral obligation and relational stewardship that shape positive organizational and followership outcomes (Asif et al., 2019; Rodin, 2010). This integration provides a vital corrective to both purely theoretical theology and purely pragmatic leadership models. Specifically, it demonstrates two core dynamics:

- Theology without practice lacks transformational impact: Abstract theological concepts fail to yield ecclesial or social renewal unless translated into active, relational engagement (Antakirana, 2025; Bekker, 2006).
- Leadership without theological grounding lacks ethical depth: Pragmatic, secular management techniques risk prioritizing functional efficiency over moral integrity and spiritual formation (Adams, 2021; Perry, 2018).

By bridging these domains, the study presents a model of leadership that is biblically faithful, relationally grounded, and empirically supported (Sferrazzo & Nelson, 2022; Viljoen, 2019).

SYNTHESIZING

The love-thy-neighbor commandment offers a comprehensive and integrative framework for leadership, positioning influence as inherently relational, ethical, and transformative. Leadership is influence; however, biblical scholarship deepens this understanding by grounding influence in the self-giving love commandment and moral example rather than positional authority. In this sense, the commandment not only aligns with but extends steward leadership by moving beyond responsible oversight to relational accountability rooted in sacrificial love and care for others. Leadership thus becomes an ethical stewardship of people, relationships, and communal well-being. Scholars such as Lloyd (2019) and Cavins (2019) affirmed that ethical integrity is the core of authentic leadership, while Coley (2024) emphasized being and doing what is right and just as central to Christlike leadership competency. The love-thy-neighbor commandment strengthens this by framing integrity not merely as a personal virtue but as a relational obligation that governs how leaders steward influence for the benefit of others. Furthermore, the commandment shapes leadership as deeply relational and others-oriented. Hatch and Kumar (2019) and Gregory (2019) highlighted leadership for human flourishing and transformation, aligning with the biblical call to foster trust, belonging, and service. DiVietro (2025) explicitly connected this to steward leadership, showing that leaders function as stewards who intentionally develop others for kingdom influence, while Massey (2025) reinforced this through Pauline models of relational and transformational leadership.

Importantly, leadership effectiveness is demonstrated through embodied practice. Braganza (2025) underscored Jesus' model of internalizing the law through lived obedience, while Barresi (2025) showed that integrity is cultivated through intentional teaching and mentorship, particularly within the Titus 2 framework. This reinforces Drummond (2019) and Keehn (2019), who identified mentoring as central to biblical leadership formation, further strengthening the stewardship dimension of leadership as the development and care of others. Ethical consistency produces

sustained transformational impact. Montaudon-Tomas (2019) linked leadership vitality to the fruit of the Spirit, while Dean (2019) demonstrated how integrating Christian values shapes organizational culture. Wright (2025) broadened this perspective to include stakeholder ethics, and Duhon and Kirby (2024) extended it to contemporary domains such as ethical technology use, indicating that steward leadership informed by love must engage responsibly with evolving contexts. Now therefore, the love-thy-neighbor commandment emerges as a unifying theological and practical model of leadership that both fulfills and extends steward leadership. Rooted in Scripture and reinforced by interdisciplinary scholarship, it reframes leadership as ethical stewardship expressed through influence, integrity, mentorship, and relational engagement. It positions the love commandment not as a peripheral virtue, but as the central organizing principle that governs how leadership is practiced, sustained, and evaluated in transformative and contextually relevant ways.

IMPLICATIONS

The empirical validation of the love-thy-neighbor framework establishes the love commandment as a central ethical and relational determinant of leadership effectiveness, calling for a fundamental shift from positional authority to embodied integrity and influence (Bekker, 2006; Greenleaf, 1977). This overall outcome generates four critical implications for practice, ethical formation, institutional governance, and contextual application:

- *Practical and ecclesial implications:* The findings demonstrate that leadership effectiveness relies on moving away from structural dominance toward love-driven relational dynamics. Leaders within faith-based organizations must prioritize service, active engagement, and moral accountability over hierarchical status to foster organizational trust and follower commitment (Asif et al., 2019).
- *Relational–ethical formation:* Leadership development programs should be redefined to emphasize character formation and relational ethics. Authority must emerge from authentic engagement, self-giving service, and ethical integrity rather than formal title or appointed office (Rodin, 2010).
- *Institutional transformation:* Christian organizations must operationalize the love commandment as an explicit, normative guiding principle. This requires embedding compassion, justice, and transparent accountability directly into mission statements, strategic planning, leadership training, and institutional culture (Perry, 2018; Sferrazzo & Nelson, 2022).
- *Contextual transformative impact:* Within the Ethiopian Evangelical context, leadership effectiveness is best realized through moral consistency and relational influence. Grounding leadership in lived biblical values such as holistic service (diakonia) and communal stewardship provides a sustainable, culturally relevant alternative to unexamined Western management paradigms and dualistic leadership models (Gebissa, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the love-thy-neighbor commandment is not merely a theological ideal but a practical and transformative framework for leadership within Ethiopian Evangelical churches. Biblically grounded and theologically interpreted, it functions as a normative, relational, and action-oriented ethic central to leadership practice. Empirical findings further reveal that its influence on leadership effectiveness is indirect, operating through ethical integrity, relational engagement, and the consistent embodiment of faith-based values, affirming that leadership is influence expressed through lived love rather than verbal assertion, and this is directly in alignment with John Maxwell's assertion that leadership is fundamentally about influence (Maxwell, 1998; Maxwell & Dornan, 1997). The study's primary contribution lies in bridging biblical theology and leadership practice by repositioning love-thy-neighbor as a central organizing principle of leadership. In contrast to the psychologically driven model of Abraham Maslow's (1943) self-centered motivational paradigm, it establishes the love commandment as a divine imperative shaping leadership identity, behavior, and outcomes. Methodologically, the study demonstrates that theological constructs can be empirically examined within specific contexts. While offering a robust framework, it invites further research across broader contexts, longitudinal designs, and comparative and qualitative approaches to deepen understanding of love-thy-neighbor commandment-centered leadership. And, affirms that the commandment provides a coherent, ethical, and transformative model for leadership in contemporary church settings.

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