



LEADERSHIP AUTHORITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CONTINUITY IN ACTS 20:17–38: A SOCIO-RHETORICAL MODEL OF POST-CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

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Transformational leadership theory remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding leadership during periods of organizational change. Although extensive empirical research links transformational leadership behaviors with positive organizational outcomes, the literature remains predominantly leader-centered and gives limited attention to how leadership influence persists during leadership transitions. This study examines Acts 20:17–38 as a biblical case study of leadership transition to explore how leadership authority is constructed and transferred during organizational change. Using socio-rhetorical analysis as outlined by Henson et al. (2020), the study analyzes the inner and intertexture of Paul’s farewell discourse to the Ephesian elders. The analysis identifies rhetorical patterns emphasizing moral credibility, relational accountability, vigilance, and stewardship of entrusted responsibility. Rather than transferring authority to a single successor, the passage relocates leadership responsibility to a plurality of elders and anchors authority in the mission of the community and the “word of grace” (Acts 20:32). The findings identify a post-charismatic leadership continuity model that explains how leadership influence becomes institutionalized through moral credibility, communal stewardship, transcendent authority, vigilance, and mission anchoring following the departure of a charismatic leader. The study contributes to leadership scholarship by extending transformational leadership theory through a biblical case of leadership institutionalization following charismatic departure.

Transformational leadership remains one of the most influential frameworks in contemporary leadership research, yet the literature gives limited attention to how transformational influence persists when the originating leader departs (Hoch et al., 2018; Northouse, 2022; Rudolph et al., 2021). Within Christian leadership scholarship,

researchers have increasingly explored how biblical narratives contribute to leadership theory development (Bekker, 2009; Huizing, 2011). Since its formal articulation by Bass (1985) and subsequent refinements, the theory has demonstrated consistent predictive value across sectors, linking leader behaviors to follower engagement, innovation, organizational commitment, and performance outcomes (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Northouse, 2022). Meta-analytic research confirms that transformational leadership (TL) correlates positively with both individual and organizational effectiveness (Banks et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2018). Recent biblical leadership scholarship has explored how scriptural narratives illuminate similar patterns of leadership formation, authority, and mission continuity (Despotis & Domestichos, 2023; Lalonde, 2024).

Despite its extensive empirical validation, TL research remains predominantly leader-centered. Scholars within biblical leadership research have similarly observed the need to examine leadership not only through charismatic influence but also through the development of communal leadership structures and institutional continuity (Clark, 2018; Clarke, 1993; Coley, 2024; Frye, 2023). The literature privileges leader behaviors, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, while emphasizing the presence of the charismatic agent who catalyzes transformation (Anderson & Sun, 2017; Banks et al., 2016). Research designs typically measure leader influence in ongoing relational contexts, focusing on performance metrics, follower attitudes, and engagement while the leader remains active (Hoch et al., 2018). While distributed leadership research has emphasized the diffusion of leadership functions across organizational actors and structures (Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2002; Tian et al., 2016), TL theory remains comparatively centered on the charismatic agent. TL theory has not sufficiently theorized how transformational identity persists structurally once the originating leader exits. In this study, post-charismatic continuity refers to the capacity of an organization to sustain mission, identity, and leadership practices following the departure of a founding or highly influential leader. The term charismatic is used here in the sociological sense associated with Weber (1947) and subsequently developed within TL literature, referring to the concentrated personal influence of a founding or transformational leader. This distinction orients the study toward questions of institutional continuity and authority transfer rather than theological endowment.

Recent scholarship has begun to question the conceptual boundaries and leader-centric bias of TL (Anderson & Sun, 2017; Banks et al., 2016). Recent meta-analyses of TL emphasize behavioral dimensions and performance outcomes but do not substantially address mechanisms of institutional continuity following leader departure (Banks et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2018). Even when leadership succession is discussed in broader management literature, transformational theory itself remains primarily oriented toward the active leader–follower relationship rather than post-charismatic stabilization. This leaves unresolved how transformational identity becomes embedded structurally once the initiating leader exits. Critics note construct overlap, theoretical inflation, and insufficient clarity regarding underlying mechanisms of influence (Banks et al., 2016). Less attention has been given to post-charismatic continuity, that is, how transformational influence becomes institutionalized within organizational structures, shared mission, and normative anchors independent of continued leader presence (Coffie et al., 2022; Walsh & Glynn, 2008). Recent biblical leadership scholarship has

begun examining how leadership continuity is sustained through intentional succession processes and leadership development structures that prepare future leaders to steward mission beyond the founding leader (Barresi, 2025; Minor, 2026). In practice, organizations frequently experience founder exits, mergers, acquisitions, and leadership turnover (Balser & Carmin, 2009; Nwuke & Adeola, 2023). In such contexts, transformation must endure beyond personality.

To address this gap, this study engages Acts 20:17–38 as a socio-rhetorical case study of leadership transition. In this farewell discourse, Paul addresses the Ephesian elders before his departure. Authority is not transferred to a singular successor but relocated to plural elders, the word of grace (Acts 20:32, *New International Version Bible*, 2011), and the Spirit as appointing authority (20:28). Socio-rhetorical analysis, as articulated by Henson et al. (2020), provides a methodological framework for examining how leadership identity is constructed and reframed through textual, social, and rhetorical features. Studies of Acts 20 have examined leadership lifestyle and accountability within the passage (Stenschke, 2020), yet the text has not been systematically explored as a structural model of post-charismatic continuity within management theory.

The purpose of this study is to examine how TL theory can be extended by theorizing the structural relocation of authority necessary for organizational continuity following leader departure. Specifically, the study contributes to leadership scholarship by identifying a post-charismatic leadership continuity model within Acts 20:17–38 in which leadership influence becomes institutionalized through moral credibility, communal stewardship, transcendent authority, vigilance, and mission anchoring following the departure of a central leader. Through socio-rhetorical analysis of Acts 20:17–38, the study explores how leadership identity is reframed during transition, shifting from personal charisma to entrusted guardianship embedded within communal structures and normative anchors. This reframing, the study argues, represents not merely a pastoral moment but a transferable model of authority construction with direct implications for contemporary organizational leadership. Accordingly, the study specifically addresses the following research question: How does the socio-rhetorical texture of Acts 20:17–38 construct leadership authority during leadership transition, and what implications does this construction hold for TL theory?

This study contributes to biblical leadership scholarship by proposing that Acts 20 presents a model of post-charismatic leadership continuity in which authority is relocated from personal influence to communal guardianship and theological authority.

STATE OF THE TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP FIELD

TL has emerged as one of the most influential frameworks in contemporary leadership scholarship (Dinh et al., 2014; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). The theory addresses how leaders mobilize followers around shared purpose, reshape organizational meaning, and enable performance that exceeds transactional exchange relationships. As organizations confront rapid change, technological disruption, and intensified performance expectations, leadership approaches capable of motivating collective adaptation have become increasingly central to leadership research (Yukl, 2013). TL offers a conceptual lens for examining how leaders shape motivation, align

organizational identity, and sustain coordinated effort under conditions where traditional managerial authority alone may be insufficient.

The theory gained prominence through Burns (1978) and was operationalized by Bass (1985), who later integrated it around four core dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Bass, 1990; Bass & Riggio, 2006). TL has since become one of the most extensively studied frameworks in organizational research, consistently associated with follower commitment, engagement, and performance outcomes (Dinh et al., 2014; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Wang et al., 2011).

Despite this extensive empirical support, TL has also generated sustained scholarly debate regarding its conceptual boundaries, measurement practices, and theoretical scope (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Yukl, 1999). These discussions highlight both the influence and the limitations of the theory as a framework for understanding leadership influence within complex organizational environments.

TL's Empirical Reach and Explanatory Power

A significant strength of TL lies in the extensive empirical support documenting its relationship with positive organizational outcomes. Numerous studies have linked TL behaviors to follower satisfaction, organizational commitment, and perceived leadership effectiveness (Howell & Avolio, 1993; Podsakoff et al., 1990). Meta-analytic reviews further demonstrate consistent associations between TL and both individual and organizational performance across sectors and leadership levels (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Wang et al., 2011).

TL has also been associated with increased innovation and change readiness. By encouraging intellectual engagement and aligning followers around shared purpose, transformational leaders appear to foster adaptability in environments characterized by uncertainty and disruption (Eisenbach et al., 1999). These findings help explain why the theory has been widely adopted in research examining organizational change, leadership development, and strategic transformation.

Another strength of TL lies in its integrative structure. The Four I's provide a coherent framework that connects leader influence, follower motivation, and organizational alignment (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Day et al., 2004). This multidimensional structure allows researchers to examine leadership as a relational process rather than a set of isolated traits or managerial behaviors (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

The Leader-Centered Gap: Where TL Theory Falls Short

Despite its extensive empirical support, TL has also been subject to sustained scholarly critique. One recurring concern involves conceptual overlap with related leadership constructs, particularly charismatic leadership. Critics argue that the boundaries between transformational and charismatic leadership are not always clearly delineated, creating ambiguity in theory development and measurement (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Yukl, 1999).

Measurement practices have also been questioned. The frequent use of follower-report surveys and self-report instruments raises concerns regarding common method bias and construct inflation. Some scholars suggest that strong correlations between TL

and positive outcomes may partially reflect measurement artifacts rather than distinct causal mechanisms (Tourish, 2013).

A further limitation involves the theory's leader-centered orientation. Much of the literature focuses on the behaviors of the individual leader and their influence on followers while the leader remains active within the organization. Less attention has been given to how transformational influence is sustained once the initiating leader departs. Organizational transitions such as succession, retirement, or structural reorganization raise important questions regarding how transformational identity persists beyond the presence of the charismatic agent.

While leadership succession has received attention within broader management research, the TL literature has focused primarily on active leader–follower dynamics and the behavioral influence of the leader during periods of organizational change (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Wang et al., 2011). Studies of distributed and collective leadership suggest that leadership influence can become embedded within organizational systems and shared structures (Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2002; Hiller et al., 2006). However, relatively little theoretical work has examined how transformational influence becomes institutionalized following the departure of a founding or charismatic leader (Giambatista et al., 2005; Kesner & Sebor, 1994). As a result, an important gap remains in understanding how leadership identity, mission continuity, and authority structures are sustained during post-charismatic leadership transitions.

Leadership Continuity and the Research Gap

While succession planning has been studied in organizational leadership, TL theory itself has focused primarily on active leader–follower influence rather than mechanisms that sustain transformational identity following leader departure. Most empirical studies focus on active leader–follower relationships and short to medium-term organizational outcomes (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Wang et al., 2011). As a result, relatively little theoretical attention has been given to how transformational influence becomes embedded within organizational structures, shared mission, and communal leadership practices after the initiating leader exits.

This limitation is significant because organizations frequently encounter leadership transitions resulting from succession, retirement, or structural change. In such contexts, leadership influence must persist beyond the presence of the founding or charismatic leader. Understanding how transformational influence becomes institutionalized within organizational systems therefore remains an important research problem (Coffie et al., 2022; Kuntz et al., 2019; Walsh & Glynn, 2008).

RESEARCH DESIGN

The Case for Qualitative Textual Analysis

To address the research question, this study employs qualitative textual analysis using socio-rhetorical interpretation. Qualitative approaches are particularly appropriate when the objective is to examine meaning construction within texts and interpret how social and rhetorical dynamics shape understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Rather than focusing exclusively on historical reconstruction or linguistic analysis, this

approach examines how textual patterns interact with social context and theological discourse to produce meaning.

Socio-rhetorical interpretation is well suited for leadership research because it allows scholars to examine how authority, responsibility, and communal identity are constructed within narrative discourse. Biblical leadership narratives frequently communicate normative expectations through rhetorical structure, symbolic imagery, and social frameworks that guide community behavior. By examining these features, socio-rhetorical analysis allows researchers to identify how leadership models are embedded within the textual structure itself (Henson et al., 2020).

This study therefore applies socio-rhetorical analysis to Acts 20:17–38 to explore how the passage constructs leadership authority during a moment of organizational transition. The passage records Paul's farewell discourse to the Ephesian elders before he departs from the community. Biblical leadership research frequently highlights how narrative structures function to communicate leadership legitimacy and moral authority within scriptural texts (Frye, 2023; Huizing, 2011). Because the discourse addresses leadership responsibility, accountability, and the future oversight of the community, it provides a valuable case for examining how leadership authority is transferred and stabilized within a communal framework.

Reading Leadership in Layers: The Socio-Rhetorical Method

The analytical framework for this study follows the socio-rhetorical method outlined by Henson et al. (2020), which builds upon the socio-rhetorical interpretive approach originally developed by Robbins (1996). Socio-rhetorical interpretation examines multiple layers, or "textures," within a text to understand how meaning is generated through rhetorical, social, and theological dimensions. These textures include inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, and sacred texture (Henson et al., 2020; Viau, 2018).

Inner texture focuses on the rhetorical and literary features of the text itself. This includes patterns of repetition, argumentative structure, narrative sequencing, and rhetorical emphasis that guide the reader's understanding of the passage. Intertexture examines how the text interacts with other texts and traditions, including scriptural references, cultural norms, and shared symbolic frameworks that shape interpretation (Henson et al., 2020).

Socio-rhetorical interpretation recognizes that biblical texts function not only as historical records but also as communicative discourse that shapes the beliefs, practices, and identity of early Christian communities. By analyzing textual patterns and broader cultural frameworks, the method allows researchers to examine how leadership authority, responsibility, and communal identity are constructed within the narrative (Robbins, 1996).

Delimiting the Study: Inner Texture and Intertexture

While socio-rhetorical interpretation includes several analytical textures, this study focuses specifically on inner texture and intertexture, as these dimensions are most directly relevant to the research question. Inner texture analysis is used to examine the rhetorical structure of Paul's farewell discourse in Acts 20:17–38. Attention

is given to patterns of repetition, narrative sequencing, and rhetorical emphasis that establish Paul's credibility and frame the leadership responsibilities entrusted to the Ephesian elders. The discourse divides into three discernible textual units: retrospective ministry recollection (Acts 20:18–21), present compulsion and moral innocence (Acts 20:22–27), and future charge with embodied farewell (Acts 20:28–38). Repetitive terms within each unit, including *you know*, *tears*, *compelled*, *keep watch*, and *flock*, function cumulatively to build ethos and prepare the elders for leadership responsibility (Henson et al., 2020).

Intertexture analysis explores the broader textual and cultural frameworks informing the discourse. The passage draws upon established leadership imagery and scriptural traditions, including shepherd imagery associated with communal oversight. These intertextual connections situate the leadership responsibilities of the Ephesian elders within a broader biblical tradition that frames leadership as stewardship of a community entrusted to divine care.

Together, these two analytical dimensions allow the study to examine how Acts 20:17–38 constructs leadership authority during a moment of transition. By analyzing both the rhetorical structure of the discourse and its connection to broader scriptural and cultural traditions, the study seeks to identify how leadership influence is reframed from the authority of the departing leader to the ongoing responsibility of the community. The findings of this analysis provide the basis for examining how the leadership model presented in Acts 20 contributes to contemporary discussions of TL and organizational continuity.

ANALYSIS OF ACTS 20:17–38: RHETORIC, TRADITION, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF LEADERSHIP AUTHORITY

Context of the Farewell Discourse

Acts 20:17–38 records Paul's farewell discourse to the Ephesian elders during his final journey toward Jerusalem. Within the narrative structure of Acts, this speech represents the only extended address Paul delivers to Christian leaders rather than to a public audience. As such, the passage provides a rare window into early Christian leadership formation, responsibility, and transition. The narrative situates the speech at Miletus, where Paul summons the elders of the Ephesian church to meet him before his departure (Acts 20:17). The passage functions as a transitional moment within the broader narrative of Acts, marking the conclusion of Paul's extended ministry in Asia Minor and the beginning of a new phase of missionary activity characterized by impending hardship and uncertainty.

Within the literary structure of Acts, farewell speeches often serve to summarize leadership identity and prepare communities for leadership transition (Bock, 2007; Bruce, 1988; Keener, 2012). Paul's address follows this pattern by recounting his ministry among the Ephesians, warning of future challenges, and entrusting leadership responsibility to the elders (Keener, 2012). Rather than appointing a single successor, Paul addresses elders and anchors their responsibility in divine commission and communal stewardship. Paul does not appoint the elders in this passage; rather, he addresses an existing leadership body and entrusts them collectively with continued oversight of the community.

From a socio-rhetorical perspective, the speech provides insight into how leadership authority is constructed and transferred during a moment of organizational transition. The discourse combines autobiographical testimony, pastoral instruction, and theological exhortation to shape the leadership identity of the Ephesian elders. Analysis of the inner and intertexture of the passage reveals how rhetorical structure and scriptural traditions work together to frame leadership authority within communal responsibility.

Testimony, Transition, and Charge: Inner Texture and the Construction of Leadership Authority

Inner texture analysis examines the rhetorical features of the passage itself, including patterns of repetition, narrative sequencing, and rhetorical emphasis (Henson et al., 2020). These features guide the reader's interpretation of the discourse and reveal how the text constructs leadership authority.

Repetition and Rhetorical Emphasis. One of the most prominent features of the passage is Paul's repeated emphasis on his past conduct among the Ephesian community. Paul recounts that he served "with great humility and with tears" and endured trials while faithfully proclaiming the message entrusted to him (Acts 20:19–21), a rhetorical strategy that reinforces the credibility of his leadership example within the narrative (Keener, 2012; Peterson, 2009). The repetition of first-person testimony establishes credibility and reinforces the ethical foundation of Paul's leadership.

This autobiographical review functions rhetorically to authenticate the instructions that follow. Rather than asserting authority through position alone, Paul grounds his leadership legitimacy in demonstrated character and sacrificial service. The inner texture thus reveals that leadership legitimacy here is retrospective before it is prescriptive: Paul issues imperatives only after establishing what the elders have already witnessed, making demonstrated character the precondition for authoritative instruction. By recounting his own example, Paul provides a model that the Ephesian elders are expected to emulate. Leadership authority is therefore presented not as hierarchical control but as moral credibility established through faithful ministry, a theme that frequently characterizes leadership discourse in early Christian communities (Barentsen, 2011; Clarke, 2000; Wilson, 2018). The repeated appeals to shared memory—"you know" (Acts 20:18, 34)—function as a rhetorical verification mechanism: authority is not asserted but evidenced, grounded in what the elders themselves have already witnessed.

Narrative Sequencing. The structure of the discourse follows a clear rhetorical progression. The speech begins with reflection on past ministry (Acts 20:18–21), transitions to Paul's present circumstances and impending departure (Acts 20:22–27), and concludes with instruction and warning for the future leadership of the community (Acts 20:28–35). The middle unit (Acts 20:22–27) is rhetorically significant: Paul's declaration of Spirit compulsion and moral innocence functions as a credibility bridge, linking his past example to the future charge he is about to issue. This temporal movement from past to future reinforces the speech's transitional nature. The structure is further marked by encapsulation: references to tears and vigilance in verses 19 and

31 bookend the discourse, framing the entire speech with emotional intensity and alertness (Henson et al., 2020). The embodied closure of verses 36–38, kneeling, embracing, and weeping, extends this sensory pattern, underscoring that leadership transition here is not merely rhetorical but relationally enacted.

The recounting of Paul's ministry establishes the foundation for the leadership responsibilities entrusted to the elders. By demonstrating the integrity and faithfulness that characterized his own leadership, Paul frames the expectations for those who will continue the work after his departure. The speech culminates in the exhortation that the elders must "keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (Acts 20:28).

This progression reveals how authority is transferred through rhetorical framing. Paul does not simply relinquish leadership; he interprets the transition as a continuation of the mission entrusted to the community. Leadership authority becomes a responsibility shared among the elders rather than a position vested in a single successor.

Leadership Responsibility and Communal Accountability. Another significant rhetorical feature of the passage is the emphasis on vigilance and accountability. Paul repeatedly warns the elders of future challenges, including the emergence of "savage wolves" who will threaten the community (Acts 20:29–30). These warnings frame leadership as a protective responsibility requiring attentiveness and moral discipline, reflecting the broader biblical leadership tradition in which leaders are called to confront threats and speak truth even in difficult circumstances (Buford, 2009).

Paul's exhortation that the elders must "be on your guard" (Acts 20:31) reinforces the seriousness of this responsibility. Leadership is portrayed as ongoing stewardship of a community entrusted to their care. By emphasizing watchfulness and accountability, the discourse establishes leadership not as personal authority but as guardianship of the collective mission.

The Tradition Behind the Text: Intertextual Dimensions of Leadership

Intertexture analysis examines how the passage interacts with broader textual and cultural traditions (Henson et al., 2020). In Acts 20:17–38, Paul's discourse draws upon scriptural imagery, early Christian leadership traditions, and cultural expectations that shape the meaning of the text.

Shepherd Imagery and Biblical Leadership Tradition. A central intertextual element in the passage is the use of shepherd imagery to describe leadership responsibility, an image deeply rooted in the leadership traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures (deSilva, 2018; Marshall, 1980). Paul instructs the elders to "shepherd the church of God" (Acts 20:28), language that evokes a long-standing biblical tradition associating leadership with pastoral care.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, shepherd imagery frequently describes the responsibility of leaders to guide and protect the people of God. Figures such as Moses and David are portrayed as shepherds who lead the community with care and accountability. Prophetic critiques of corrupt leadership likewise employ shepherd imagery to condemn leaders who neglect their responsibilities (deSilva, 2018). Ezekiel

34, which indicts shepherds who exploit rather than protect the flock and anticipates God's own shepherding of the dispersed community, provides the most sustained intertextual precedent for the accountability language Paul deploys in Acts 20:28–29.

By invoking this imagery, the discourse situates the role of the Ephesian elders within a broader biblical tradition of communal stewardship. Leadership is not defined primarily by authority or status but by responsibility for the well-being of the community entrusted to their care. This framing reinforces the ethical and relational dimensions of leadership.

Early Christian Leadership Structures. The passage also reflects the emerging leadership structures within early Christian communities. Rather than identifying a single hierarchical leader, Acts 20 refers to a group of elders who share responsibility for overseeing the community, reflecting the collective leadership structures common within early Christian congregations (Clarke, 2008; Peterson, 2009; Schnabel, 2012). This plural leadership model reflects the communal nature of early church governance.

Historical studies of early Christian communities suggest that leadership was often exercised collectively through elders who provided oversight, teaching, and pastoral care (Keener, 2012). The language used in Acts 20 indicates that these elders functioned as guardians of the community's spiritual and organizational well-being.

The passage further emphasizes that this leadership responsibility originates not merely from human appointment but from divine commissioning. Paul reminds the elders that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers of the church (Acts 20:28). This statement reinforces the theological dimension of leadership authority while simultaneously decentralizing authority from any single human leader.

Ethical Example and Economic Integrity. Another important intertextual dimension involves Paul's emphasis on economic integrity. Paul reminds the elders that he did not covet silver or gold and that he supported himself through his own labor (Acts 20:33–35). This emphasis reflects broader cultural concerns regarding patronage and financial influence in the Greco-Roman world.

In many ancient contexts, leaders exercised authority through patronage networks that created obligations of loyalty and dependence, a social structure widely documented in Greco-Roman society (deSilva, 2018; Keener, 2012). Paul's insistence on economic independence distinguishes Christian leadership from these conventional models of influence. By refusing financial gain and emphasizing generosity toward the weak, Paul establishes an alternative leadership ethic grounded in service and integrity.

This ethical framework reinforces the relational foundation of leadership within the early Christian community. Authority is legitimized not through wealth or status but through sacrificial service and commitment to the well-being of others.

Integrated Interpretation: A Post-Charismatic Leadership Continuity Model

When examined through the lenses of inner and intertexture, Acts 20:17–38 reveals a distinctive model of leadership transition that may be described as a post-charismatic leadership continuity model. Within this model, leadership authority is sustained through five interconnected mechanisms: moral credibility, communal stewardship, vigilance, mission anchoring, and transcendent authority (see Table 1).

Table 1
Post-Charismatic Leadership Continuity Model

Component	Function in the model	Textual grounding (Acts 20)	Leadership theory connection
Moral credibility	Establishes the retrospective foundation of leadership authority through demonstrated character and faithful service.	Repeated appeals to shared memory — "you know" (20:18, 34); ministry of humility and tears (20:19).	Parallels idealized influence; authority legitimized through ethical modeling rather than positional power (Bass & Riggio, 2006).
Communal stewardship	Relocates authority from the departing leader to a collective body charged with ongoing guardianship of the mission.	Plural elders charged to "keep watch over all the flock" (20:28).	Reflects distributed leadership; organizational resilience through shared rather than concentrated authority (Clark, 2018; Frye, 2023; Tian et al., 2016).
Transcendent authority	Anchors leadership authority in divine commission, ensuring continuity beyond any individual leader's presence.	Holy Spirit as appointing authority (20:28).	Grounds leadership legitimacy in an appointing authority independent of personal charisma, ensuring continuity when the founding leader's presence is removed (Walsh & Glynn, 2008; Weber, 1947)
Vigilance	Frames ongoing transition as a protective responsibility requiring active attentiveness to internal and external threats to the community.	Warning of savage wolves (20:29–30); "be on your guard" (20:31)	Post-charismatic continuity requires active guardianship rather than passive inheritance of the departing leader's influence; leaders must remain attentive to internal and external threats to organizational mission and identity.
Mission anchoring	Situates authority within the enduring mission and identity of the community rather than the departing leader's personal presence.	Community entrusted to "the word of grace" (20:32).	When mission becomes the organizing principle, transformational influence persists beyond the leader's presence (Bass & Riggio, 2006)

Moral credibility functions as the foundation of leadership authority through demonstrated character and faithful service. Paul's recounting of his ministry emphasizes humility, perseverance, and integrity, presenting these qualities as the foundation of legitimate leadership.

Communal stewardship relocates leadership authority from an individual leader to a collective body of elders. This relocation of authority reflects a leadership model rooted in collective stewardship rather than individual dominance. The elders are entrusted with safeguarding the mission of the community and ensuring its continuity. This pattern reflects broader biblical leadership models that emphasize collective stewardship and distributed responsibility within faith communities (Clark, 2018; Frye, 2023; Keebler, 2018).

Transcendent authority anchors leadership authority in divine commission and shared mission. By reminding the elders that the Holy Spirit appointed them to oversee the church, Paul frames leadership as participation in a mission larger than any individual leader.

Vigilance frames leadership as an ongoing protective responsibility requiring active attentiveness to both internal and external threats to the community. Paul's warning against savage wolves who will arise from within and without (Acts 20:29–30) and his charge to 'be on your guard' (20:31) establish that post-charismatic continuity is not passive inheritance but active stewardship demanding sustained moral discipline.

Mission anchoring situates leadership authority within the enduring mission and identity of the community rather than within the departing leader's personal presence. By entrusting the community to 'the word of grace' (Acts 20:32), Paul establishes the mission itself as the organizing principle that guides leadership action after his departure, ensuring that continuity is embedded in shared purpose rather than in any individual.

Taken together, these elements reveal how the text reframes leadership authority during a moment of transition. Rather than allowing leadership identity to collapse with the departure of a charismatic figure, the discourse relocates authority within communal structures and theological commitments capable of sustaining continuity. This model of leadership transition provides a crucial point of dialogue with contemporary leadership theory, particularly discussions of TL and the challenge of sustaining organizational identity beyond the presence of the founding leader.

BEYOND THE ACTIVE LEADER: WHAT ACTS 20 CONTRIBUTES TO TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

Transformational Leadership and Moral Credibility

The socio-rhetorical analysis of Acts 20:17–38 offers several insights that contribute to contemporary leadership scholarship, particularly discussions surrounding TL. One of the most striking features of the passage is the centrality of moral credibility as the foundation of leadership authority. Paul establishes his leadership not through formal status or hierarchical power but through demonstrated integrity, sacrificial service, and relational accountability. His recounting of ministry "with humility and with tears" (Acts 20:19) reinforces that leadership influence emerges from visible alignment between character, action, and mission.

This emphasis closely parallels the TL construct of idealized influence, which describes the capacity of leaders to inspire trust and respect through consistent ethical conduct (Bass & Riggio, 2006). TL theory suggests that followers are more likely to internalize organizational goals when leaders demonstrate authenticity and integrity. The rhetorical structure of Paul's farewell discourse reinforces this dynamic. By grounding his instructions in the example of his own conduct, Paul demonstrates that leadership authority is sustained through moral credibility rather than positional authority.

The passage therefore provides a narrative illustration of the mechanisms described within TL theory. Paul's leadership influence is not derived from formal authority structures but from a relational history of faithful service that establishes legitimacy within the community. This suggests that TL influence may be strengthened when leadership authority is anchored in visible patterns of ethical consistency and sacrificial commitment.

Leadership Transition and the Limits of Leader-Centered Models

While the passage reflects several elements associated with TL, it also highlights a limitation within the theory's traditional formulation. Much of the TL literature focuses on the behaviors of an individual leader and the immediate effects of those behaviors on follower motivation and performance (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Wang et al., 2011). Less attention has been given to how transformational influence is sustained once the initiating leader departs.

Acts 20 addresses precisely this challenge. Paul's farewell discourse occurs at a moment when the community must continue its mission without the ongoing presence of its founding leader. Rather than attempting to preserve authority through personal succession, Paul relocates authority within a plurality of elders and anchors their responsibility in divine commission and communal stewardship, reflecting the emerging leadership structures present within early Christian communities (Clarke, 2008; Schnabel, 2012). Leadership continuity is therefore achieved not through the preservation of charismatic authority but through the institutionalization of leadership responsibility within the community.

This relocation of authority suggests an important extension of TL theory. If TL is to sustain organizational identity beyond the tenure of the initiating leader, the values, mission, and practices articulated by the leader must become embedded within the organizational structure itself. Acts 20 demonstrates a model in which transformational influence becomes institutionalized through shared leadership and communal stewardship. This transfer is not simply organizational but theological: by reminding the elders that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers (Acts 20:28), Paul locates the ultimate source of leadership authority outside any human leader, ensuring that continuity rests on transcendent commission rather than personal succession.

Communal Stewardship and Distributed Leadership

Another important implication of the passage concerns the distribution of leadership responsibility within the community. Paul entrusts oversight not to a single successor but to a collective body of elders who share responsibility for guiding and

protecting the community. This plural leadership structure emphasizes collaboration, accountability, and mutual responsibility, characteristics associated with distributed leadership models in contemporary leadership research (Tian et al., 2016; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Yukl et al., 2020).

This model resonates with contemporary discussions of distributed leadership, which emphasize the diffusion of leadership functions across organizational actors rather than their concentration in a single individual (Tian et al., 2016). Distributed leadership research suggests that organizations are more resilient when leadership capacity is shared across multiple individuals rather than dependent on a single charismatic figure (Kempster, 2019; Nwuke & Adeola, 2023).

The leadership structure reflected in Acts 20 demonstrates an early example of such distributed leadership. By entrusting multiple elders and emphasizing their collective responsibility to shepherd the community, the passage portrays leadership as a shared stewardship rather than an individual possession. This approach strengthens organizational continuity by ensuring that leadership influence does not disappear with the departure of a single leader.

Mission Anchoring and Organizational Identity

A final implication concerns the anchoring of leadership authority within mission and theological identity. Paul reminds the elders that they have been appointed by the Holy Spirit to shepherd the church of God (Acts 20:28). This framing shifts the source of leadership authority away from individual charisma and toward participation in a larger mission.

From a leadership perspective, this emphasis reinforces the importance of organizational identity in sustaining transformational influence. Transformational leaders frequently articulate a compelling vision that connects individual contributions to a broader organizational purpose (Bass & Riggio, 2006). However, for such influence to endure beyond the presence of the initiating leader, the mission itself must become the primary organizing principle of the community.

Acts 20 illustrates how such mission anchoring occurs. By entrusting the community to “the word of grace” (Acts 20:32), Paul situates leadership authority within the ongoing narrative and identity of the community rather than within his personal leadership. The mission becomes the enduring reference point that guides leadership action after the founding leader’s departure.

This insight suggests that TL may achieve its greatest durability when the leader’s vision becomes embedded within shared organizational identity. In such cases, leadership influence persists not because followers remain attached to a charismatic figure but because the community itself embodies the mission articulated by that leader.

Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice: Applying the Post-Charismatic Leadership Continuity Model

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that TL theory may benefit from greater attention to the processes through which leadership influence becomes institutionalized within organizations. While TL research has focused primarily on the behaviors of individual leaders and their effects on followers, the socio-rhetorical

analysis of Acts 20:17–38 highlights how leadership influence can be sustained through moral credibility, communal stewardship, transcendent authority, vigilance, and mission anchoring after the departure of a central leader. In this sense, the passage provides a conceptual bridge between TL and emerging discussions of distributed and institutionalized leadership. While the theory has demonstrated strong explanatory power regarding leader–follower dynamics, it offers fewer insights into how transformational influence persists across leadership transitions.

Acts 20 provides a complementary perspective by illustrating how leadership authority can be relocated from an individual leader to communal structures, shared mission, and ethical stewardship. In this model, transformational influence does not disappear when the initiating leader departs; instead, it becomes embedded within the practices and responsibilities of the community itself.

For contemporary organizations facing leadership transitions, this model highlights the importance of developing leadership structures that distribute responsibility, reinforce shared mission, and cultivate ethical credibility. Leaders who seek to generate lasting organizational transformation must therefore look beyond the immediate effects of their leadership behaviors and consider how the values and commitments they articulate can be sustained within the organizational system after their departure. The model further demands that such continuity be actively maintained: post-charismatic transitions require ongoing vigilance against internal drift and external threats capable of eroding the mission and identity the departing leader helped establish.

These findings carry significance for several audiences. For leadership scholars, the analysis demonstrates how biblical narrative can extend contemporary leadership theory by illuminating mechanisms through which leadership influence becomes institutionalized following leader departure. For organizational leaders, particularly those guiding founder-led organizations or navigating leadership succession, the passage illustrates how leadership continuity can be strengthened through distributed responsibility, shared mission, and ethical credibility. For ministry leaders, the discourse offers a model of pastoral leadership transition that prioritizes communal stewardship over personal authority, emphasizing the role of collective leadership in sustaining mission across generations.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how leadership authority is constructed and transferred within Acts 20:17–38 and considered the implications of this construction for contemporary leadership scholarship. Such integration of biblical exegesis and leadership theory reflects the growing interdisciplinary conversation within biblical leadership scholarship (Bekker, 2009; Huizing, 2011). Through socio-rhetorical analysis of Paul's farewell discourse to the Ephesian elders, the study explored how the passage frames leadership continuity at a moment when a central leader prepares to depart. The analysis revealed a post-charismatic leadership continuity model in which leadership authority is grounded in moral credibility, communal stewardship, transcendent authority, vigilance, and mission anchoring rather than in personal succession or institutional hierarchy.

At the same time, the passage extends beyond a purely leader-centered framework. Acts 20 does not preserve authority through the appointment of a single successor. Instead, Paul addresses an existing body of elders and charges them collectively to shepherd the community entrusted to their care. Leadership responsibility is therefore relocated within communal structures and anchored in the mission of the church itself. By framing the elders' oversight as a stewardship entrusted by the Holy Spirit, the discourse situates leadership authority within a theological narrative that transcends the presence of any individual leader.

This model provides an important contribution to leadership scholarship. TL research has demonstrated considerable explanatory power regarding leader–follower dynamics, yet comparatively little attention has been given to how transformational influence endures across leadership transitions. The leadership framework reflected in Acts 20 suggests that transformational influence becomes sustainable when the values, mission, and ethical commitments articulated by a leader are embedded within the life of the community. Biblical leadership scholars have increasingly emphasized the role of communal leadership development and mentorship in sustaining mission continuity across generations of leadership (Despotis & Domestichos, 2023; Lalonde, 2024). Leadership continuity, in this sense, is achieved not through the perpetuation of charismatic authority but through the institutionalization of shared responsibility and mission identity (Balser & Carmin, 2009; Walsh & Glynn, 2008).

For contemporary organizations and ministry contexts alike, the passage offers a compelling vision of leadership continuity. Leaders who seek to cultivate lasting transformation must look beyond the immediate influence of their leadership behaviors and consider how their vision will be sustained after their departure (Robbins & Judge, 2015). When leadership authority is grounded in character, shared mission, and communal stewardship, organizational identity can endure even as leadership transitions occur (Greenleaf, 1977).

Consistent with the aims of biblical leadership scholarship, this study demonstrates how exegetical analysis of Scripture can inform contemporary leadership theory and practice. Future research may further explore other biblical leadership transitions using socio-rhetorical methods, examining how these texts illuminate enduring questions of leadership continuity, authority, and communal responsibility. Such interdisciplinary engagement between biblical studies and leadership research expands the study of leadership by demonstrating how biblical texts offer enduring models of authority, responsibility, and organizational continuity capable of informing contemporary leadership theory.

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