



LEADER–MEMBER EXCHANGE AND FOLLOWER FAILURE IN THE GETHSEMANE NARRATIVE: A SOCIO-RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF MATTHEW 26:36–46

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Leaders inevitably encounter moments when trusted followers fail at critical times. Moments of follower failure can destabilize leader-follower relationships and challenge the leader's ability to maintain organizational direction. Leadership relationships are often tested when followers fail to fulfill expected roles, and while leadership research has extensively examined leader-follower relationship formation and outcomes, less attention has been given to how leadership should respond when trusted followers fail. This study analyzes Matthew 26:36–46 to examine how leaders may respond when abandoned by followers. The purpose of this study is to explore leadership responses to follower failure through Jesus's interaction with Peter, James, and John in the Garden of Gethsemane. Leader-member exchange theory is applied as an interpretive lens to the intertexture and inner-texture analysis of the Gethsemane narrative. The analysis reveals Jesus's steadfastness in the mission, continued engagement despite follower failure, and His calling of followers beyond failure into future opportunities. The study contributes to biblical leadership scholarship by integrating leadership theory with biblical narrative to propose a Christ-centered framework for navigating follower failure

Leaders inevitably experience moments when followers fail at crucial times. When failure occurs, the relational expectations between the leader and follower collapse, creating emotional strain and threatening organizational outcomes (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Leaders must respond in some way to follower failure to preserve relational integrity when possible and continue progress towards desired outcomes. Broken trust affects relational and emotional domains. Leaders may experience disappointment, isolation, and feelings of betrayal, while follower failure can undermine morale, credibility, and shared mission commitment. The leader's response carries

implications for the immediate relationships and future organizational direction. This study examines how leaders should respond when followers fail to fulfill relational or role expectations within a leader-follower relationship.

Although leadership research has examined relational quality and exchange processes between leaders and followers (Graen et al., 1973; Liden & Maslyn, 1998; McCrane, 1991; Rosse & Kraut, 1983), and research has applied biblical perspectives to leader-follower relationships and outcomes (Akerlund, 2014; Dose, 2006; Hunt, 2023), less attention has been given to how leaders should respond when presented with follower failure, particularly in a Christocentric framework. Much of the existing scholarship emphasizes relational formation, trust development, and performance outcomes, yet offers little guidance on leader behavior during relational breakdown, leaving the leader's response during such breakdowns underexplored.

Failure between a leader and a follower is a relational construct (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), and the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory provides a relational framework for examining differentiated exchange between leaders and followers, especially within high-trust "in-group" relationships. Because LMX differentiates between high- and low-quality exchanges, it provides a useful framework for examining in-group failure. To explore this dynamic within a biblical narrative, this study employs socio-rhetorical analysis (SRA) to examine Matthew 26:36–46 and Jesus's interaction with Peter, James, and John. The Gethsemane narrative presents Jesus, the leader, as without fault and the disciples as incurring repeated failure. In contrast, organizational leaders should always examine their own contribution to relational breakdowns; however, this study intentionally examines the leader's response after failure occurs, apart from any contributing fault of the leader. Accordingly, this study addresses the research question: How should a leader act when abandoned by their followers, through no fault of their own?

STATE OF LMX RESEARCH

LMX theory has captured the academic world's attention since the 1970s, and there is no sign of research slowing down (Anand et al., 2011). Northouse (2022) suggested that LMX theory differs from most leadership theories in its focus; many leadership theories focus on the leader or the follower, whereas LMX focuses on the relationship and exchange between them. An extended database search for "Leader-Member Exchange" returns 31,430 articles, 7,857 book chapters, and 741 books.

LMX theory originated from role theory, shifting leadership studies from leader-centric views to dyadic relationships (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Graen, 1976; Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen et al., 1973; Liden & Graen, 1980). Early dyadic research by Graen et al. (1973) established that leader-follower relationships develop through negotiated role processes, in which expectations between the parties are clarified and refined over time. Graen et al.'s (1973) study was instrumental in demonstrating that dyads do not all develop the same, laying the empirical foundation for later distinctions between in-groups and out-groups in LMX theory. "Out-group" relations followed formal employment expectations, while other "in-group" relationships involved greater trust and received greater attention from the leader (Liden & Graen, 1980). Member roles are either "developed" or "negotiated" based on the level of the leader-member relationship (Rosse & Kraut, 1983; Scandura & Graen, 1984).

Further research expanded LMX theory from a singular focus on employee satisfaction to include multidimensional behavioral aspects, showing that subordinates' contributions, loyalty, and affect (relational attraction toward the leader) shape the quality of leader-member relationships (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Graen et al., 1982). McCrane (1991) raised awareness that LMX can have a negative organizational impact when a leader has higher-quality relationships with some members but not others. LMX theory adopted a multi-level perspective to encompass dyadic relationships across groups, organizations, and systems (Dansereau et al., 1995).

Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) seminal work established the classical LMX framework and consolidated terminology, outlining four dyadic relationship stages: 1) role-taking, 2) role-making, 3) leadership-making, and 4) team-making. These stages form a follower relationship, and in the leadership-making stage, members begin as strangers, move to acquaintances, and end in a partnership (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). LMX represents both transactional and transformational forms of leadership and sets the stage for high-quality member experiences and positive organizational outcomes (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The expansion from solely high-quality and low-quality dyadic relationship designation to more dimensions opened LMX theory to more sophisticated and accurate measurement methods.

Despite the depth of LMX scholarship, little research explores how high-quality leader-member relationships break down in moments of crisis or how leaders may respond when trusted in-group followers fail them. Gardner et al. (2019) maintained that followers perceive leaders in diverse ways based on leaders' attributes, actions, and contextual circumstances; furthermore, Restubog et al. (2010) noted that followers feel the breach in the relationship between leader and follower more negatively than the leader feels a breach. Yet little research examines simple failure without the leader's fault. Although high-LMX relationships usually protect followers during stressful conditions, empirical work rarely considers how emotional or spiritual strain erodes affective trust within strong dyads (Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999).

Follower disengagement often reflects a shift away from a high relationship towards a more transactional exchange, which reduces commitment and increases withdrawal (Loi et al., 2009). This shift parallels the disciples' behavior in Gethsemane and creates a gap in understanding how leaders may respond when trusted followers falter for reasons unrelated to leadership quality. LMX scholarship focuses on the exchange between leaders and followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), yet relational strain occurs when followers fail to reciprocate (Gouldner, 1960). Existing research also does not address how leaders manage their own response to follower failure. This gap is significant because Jesus's relationship with Peter, James, and John in Matthew 26:36–46 reflects an in-group dynamic in which followers abandon their leader in his most vulnerable moment, yet Jesus still conducted His mission. Current LMX studies rarely address follower failure in faith-based contexts and offer limited guidance for leaders navigating relational breakdown. This gap leads to the guiding research question in this study: How should a leader act when abandoned by their followers, through no fault of their own?

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on three presuppositions. First, Matthew is divinely inspired scripture and provides authoritative insights into Christlike leadership. Second, the Gethsemane narrative (Matt. 26:36–46) represents historical events and functions as a historical record and as instructional material that reveals principles applicable beyond its immediate context. Third, modern leadership theory can illuminate relational dynamics in biblical texts that are relevant in contemporary frameworks. SRA provides the scholar with a multidimensional framework for interpreting scripture through key texture categories that analyze rhetoric, cultural background, and literary patterns (Robbins, 1996). SRA is an appropriate method for this study because it uncovers layers of meaning that shape relational and leadership interactions in the Gethsemane narrative. Particularly, SRA is suited to this study because it enables the examination of the relational dynamics within the narrative and the broader cultural-theological setting, which together illuminate how first-century audiences would have understood the leader-follower dynamics at Gethsemane. The five textures of SRA include inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture, and Robbins (1996) noted that the interpreter may pass the text through any of the five filters of SRA to ascertain the pericope's theological meaning and contemporary significance. This study employs inner-texture analysis to examine the narrative's repetitive patterns, word choice, and structural progression, and intertexture analysis to situate Jesus's actions within the broader biblical tradition of suffering, testing, and divine obedience. LMX theory functions as an interpretive lens that complements the SRA exegetical method.

Inner-texture is essential for this study. Identifying repeated words, phrases, actions, and patterns within the pericope reveals the author's priorities. A close reading of the text examines what elements recur and how repetition creates rhythm and progression in the narrative. Procedurally, this study begins by identifying repetitive words, phrases, and patterns evident in the narrative in Matthew 26:36–46, with special emphasis on any progressive patterns that exhibit chiastic structure. Next, the opening-middle-closing structure that organized each textual unit and shaped the narrational flow is analyzed, followed by an assessment of the sensory-aesthetic elements to understand how emotional discourse intensifies the relational dynamic.

Intertexture analysis adds another interpretive layer by showing how this passage draws meaning from earlier scripture, cultural expectations, traditions, and social patterns. This approach helps clarify how the author situated their work in the broader context of the world at the time it was written. Textual interaction with the world in which the author wrote helps illuminate relational exchange, the key component of LMX theory. This study aims to trace past oral and scribal elements to examine the characters' emotional states and resoluteness, as well as cultural elements to provide context for the pericope's literary structure. I examined the social dynamics in the pericope and assessed whether any LMX relationships emerged. The wider context that intertexture provides breaks the passage down, allowing the application of LMX theory to answer the central research question. Inner-texture and intertexture analyses applied to Matthew 26:36–46 help identify the literary elements, providing the analytical foundation needed to address the research question.

ANALYSIS OF MATTHEW 26:36–46

Having established the theoretical framework of LMX and its emphasis on relational quality, I now turn to the Gethsemane narrative to examine how Jesus navigated follower failure. While the Gethsemane narrative represents a unique moment at the start of the Passion narrative (France, 2007), it also reveals relational leadership dynamics that may provide insight for contemporary leadership scholarship. However, before this, it must be carefully examined to ensure proper application. In this section, I will analyze the internal literary patterns of Matthew 26:36–46 using the inner-textual sub-patterns of repetitive, progressive, opening-middle-closing (OMC), and sensory-aesthetic patterns to identify the rhetorical and literary patterns within the passage. Then I will conduct an intertextual analysis to help grasp the broader landscape of the world and how the text fits into it.

Inner-Texture Analysis

Repetitive Patterns. The repetition Matthew used in this pericope makes it clear that Jesus is the primary actor and speaker (Davies & Allison, 1997). Jesus either spoke to His disciples or prayed to His Father. Peter, the sons of Zebedee, or “them,” recurs throughout the narrative to identify who was with Jesus. “Pray/prayed/praying” is the most used verb in this passage, with five instances, and “watch/watching” and “sleeping” follow with three uses each. Davies and Allison (1997) argued that the repetition of the three prayers of Jesus and the three encounters with the disciples is a key aspect of the pericope. The repeated verbs “pray” (*proseúchomai*), “watch” (*grēgoreō*), and “sleep” (*katheúdō*) are used in this passage consistent with their normal semantic ranges in the Greek text (Bauer et al., 2000). The phrase, “will be done,” concluded each prayer except the last, where Jesus said, “the same thing once more” (v. 44).

Progressive Patterns. The repetition of words in Matthew 26:36–46 creates progressive patterns. A chiasm occurs in this pericope to focus the reader’s attention on Jesus’s words, “your will be done” (v. 42). The chiasm, as seen in Figure 1, begins at the exposition, moves to the first prayer, then to the first instance of disciples sleeping, and culminates in the second prayer, when Jesus declared that the Father’s “will be done.” After the focus of the chiasm is delivered, it digresses with the disciples sleeping again, then Jesus’s third prayer, and finally, Jesus wakes the disciples to leave. This chiastic structure reinforces the contrast between Jesus’s submission and the disciples’ inability to remain faithful.

Figure 1**Chiasm in Matthew 26:36–46**

- A. (v. 36–38) Jesus commands disciples to sit and pray.
- B. (v. 39) First prayer: Cup to be taken.
 - C. (v. 40–41) Jesus comes to sleeping disciples.
 - D. (v. 42) Second prayer: Jesus says, “Your will be done.”
 - C’. (v. 43) Jesus comes to sleeping disciples.
- B’. (v. 44) Third prayer: same words as previous prayer.
- A’. (vv. 45–46) Jesus awakens disciples; betrayer is nearby.

Opening-Middle-Closing (OMC) Patterns. As seen in Table 1, all units noted have a clear OMC pattern. Furthermore, the OMC pattern found in Unit D further supports the focus of the chiasm in Figure 1. Jesus’s language progresses from a request in the first prayer (“as You will”) to suggesting that “Jesus now knows the answer to the request” in the second prayer (“Your will be done”) (France, 2007).

Table 1**OMC Patterns in Matthew 26:36–46**

Unit	Verses	Opening	Middle	Closing
A	36–38	Came to Gethsemane; withdrew with Peter and the sons of Zebedee	Grieved and distressed	Remain and keep watch
B	39	Jesus withdrew	Prayed for the cup to be taken	"As You will"
C	40–41	Came to sleeping disciples	Rebuked them for not keeping watch	Keep watch; spirit willing, flesh weak
D	42	Jesus withdrew	Prayed for the cup to be taken	"Your will be done"
E	44	Jesus withdrew	Prayed the same words	Same words, same submission
F	45–46	Came to sleeping disciples	Rebuked them for not keeping watch	Commanded them to get up and go

Sensory-Aesthetic Patterns. Jesus is the sole communicator in the pericope, and the emotionally fused thinking, expressive speech, and action revolve around Him. This passage holds an emotionally charged sensory-aesthetic pattern, using the words grieved, distressed, and betrayed. Barbour (1970) suggested that Jesus experienced “anguish” and “horror” as described in the pericope (p. 248), and Brown (1994) emphasized that the Gethsemane narrative is one of the clearest portrayals of Jesus’s internal anguish in the entire Passion narrative. The action patterns start with “sitting” and “coming,” and end with “go,” which France (2007) suggested meant a resoluteness came over Jesus to meet his betrayer. These emotional and physical expressions shape the scene’s rhetorical impact, highlighting Jesus’s resolve and the disciples’ weakness.

Intertexture Analysis of Matthew 26:36–46

Oral-Scribal Intertexture. Jesus's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane draws on prior oral and written traditions. It allows modern scholars to understand embedded meaning in the text through the recitations, recontextualizations, and reconfigurations of prior uses of the same or similar words or phrases (Henson et al., 2020). While there are no direct quotes or explicit attributions to the Old Testament, there are indirect attributions (Barbour, 1970; Davies & Allison, 1997; France, 2007).

The narrative structure recalls Abraham bringing Isaac as a sacrifice in Genesis 22 (Barbour, 1970; Davies & Allison, 1997). Jesus tells the disciples to "sit here" in verse 36, similar to Genesis 22:5, where Abraham commanded his servants to "stay here" as he took Isaac to the altar (Davies & Allison, 1997). France (2007) asked whether Jesus exhibits Abraham's faith or Isaac's sacrifice. Barbour (1970) acknowledged the parallels to Genesis 22 yet found much more to this pericope than just this reconfiguration.

One overarching theme of the narrative structure of the Gethsemane pericope draws on the Greek word *peirasmos*, which means "temptation" (Barbour, 1970; Louw & Nida, 1989). Although scholars agree that temptation is an overarching theme, they debate which temptation, or temptations, occurred in the Garden (Barbour, 1970; Brown, 1994). France (2007) argued that Jesus was so distraught that he requested deliverance from some aspect of His death. Brown (1994) argued that Jesus did not want to take the "cup," but be delivered after He took the "cup," similar to the Israelites' deliverance after they drank the cup of God's anger in Isaiah 51. The temptation may also concern the disciples' ability to remain awake and spiritually vigilant (Barbour, 1970). Brown (1994) posited that the temptation in Gethsemane subjected Jesus to a spiritual temptation beyond personal temptation. Jesus was deeply distressed, and Matthew used the adjective *perilypos* (v. 38) to explain His emotions (France, 2007). *Perilypos* pertains to being sad or deeply distressed (Louw & Nida, 1989), the same word used in Psalm 42 to describe inner turmoil (Davies & Allison, 1997). The idea of being distressed to the "point of death" in verse 38 may also draw on the Jonah story in Jonah 4:9 when Jonah was "angry enough to die" (France, 2007). France (2007) noted that the Greek expression describing Jesus's sorrow depicted overwhelming psychological and emotional pressure, revealing the depth of Jesus's internal conflict.

In His distress, Jesus prays that God will take the "cup" from Him (v. 39 & 42). This recontextualization recalls the Old Testament use of "cup" as imagery of divine wrath found in Isaiah 51:17 and Jeremiah 25:15 (Davies & Allison, 1997). Earlier, in Matthew 20:22, Jesus asks the disciples, "Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" (*New American Standard Bible*, 2020), and in the Garden, their sleep shows they cannot (Davies & Allison, 1997). There are also three occasions when Matthew quotes earlier language, such as "Our Father," from Jesus's instruction to the disciples on the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 (France, 2007). France (2007) noted that this inner gospel recontextualization pointed towards Jesus's sonship. When Jesus used "My Father," it marked a clear distinction from "Our Father" and introduced an intimate element to Jesus's prayer from Son to Father (France, 2007). Barbour (1970) also pointed out that Jesus's submission to the Father's will intentionally echoes the Lord's prayer and reinforces Matthew's emphasis on faithful obedience. A final recontextualization of this pericope is evident in the parallels found in Matthew's earlier

writing, specifically the transfiguration (Kenny, 1957). Both pericopes involve Peter, James, and John, include references to Jesus's face, feature a specific moment in which Peter and Jesus address each other, and confirm the relation of Son and Father (Davies & Allison, 1997; Kenny, 1957).

Cultural Intertexture. Matthew's narrative in this pericope interacts with the cultural world of first-century Judaism through symbols, geography, and prayer practices (Barbour, 1970; Davies & Allison, 1997; France, 2007). Henson et al. (2020) explained that cultural intertexture allows the interpreter to use these interactions to understand the "cultural knowledge of the people" (p. 114) and differs from oral-scribal intertexture in that it does not reference any actual text. The narrative takes place at "Gethsemane," the "name of an olive orchard on the Mount of Olives" (Davies & Allison, 1997, p. 493), which means "oil press" (France, 2007). Davies and Allison (1997) noted that the Mount of Olives was "associated with a pagan god of death" (p. 493), and readers of Matthew's Gospel would associate the idea of death with the Mount of Olives. Daube (1959), as cited by Barbour (1970), argued that the format of prayer Jesus followed could be a Jewish tradition of pre-death prayer, expressing acknowledgment, wish, and surrender.

Social Intertexture. The social intertexture filter enables the interpreter to consider social roles, identities, institutions, codes, and relationships (Henson et al., 2020). The most obvious example of this in the Gethsemane pericope is the Father-and-Son relationship between Jesus and God. France (2007) noted that when Jesus used "My Father," it marked a clear distinction from "Our Father" and introduced an intimate element to Jesus's prayer from Son to Father. A social code is also found in this pericope when Jesus fell on His face in verse 39. As with Abraham in Genesis 17:3 and Daniel in Daniel 8:17, falling on one's face indicates the impact of a supernatural encounter and an earnest posture (France, 2007). Furthermore, as posited by Dodd (1953), there may have been militant connotations in verse 46. "Get up, let's go," may be considered an order to go and meet the enemy in the same way a soldier would in battle (Davies & Allison, 1997; Dodd, 1953).

Reciprocal Intertexture. This is the last of the five intertexture filters in SRA. It is important to examine this pericope within the broader canon of Scripture to help establish the deeper meaning of the text as it is presented across the Bible. Henson et al. (2020) considered this practice bidirectional rather than unidirectional, where the text interacts with other texts in both directions. Matthew 26:36–46 helps interpreters draw on earlier narratives, such as Abraham in Genesis 22 and Psalms 42, and can also inform later theological reflection, such as Hebrews 5:7–9.

The Gethsemane narrative parallels Abraham's testing in Genesis 22 (Barbour, 1970; Davies & Allison, 1997). Matthew also used the same vocabulary (*perilypos*) in Psalms 42 to convey the anguish Jesus experienced as He prayed for God to take the cup from Him (France, 2007). Matthew uses both instances to offer meaning to his audience. However, it becomes a challenge to read both Genesis 22 and Psalms 42 without considering the narrative of Gethsemane and the emotions and meaning of the Christ Event and the events that led up to it. Although Matthew wrote the Gethsemane

narrative after Genesis and Psalms, there is a deeper meaning to the older texts through Matthew's narrative.

Summary of the Analysis

The inner-texture and intertextual analysis of Matthew 26:36–46 reveal a structured narrative built around repeated prayer cycles. Jesus was the primary actor and speaker in the pericope, and the disciples played secondary characters who repeatedly failed to remain awake. Matthew used the verbs “prayer,” “watch,” and “sleep” to establish three prayers followed by three instances of the disciples failing to stay awake and keep watch. The narrative's tone is emotional, with vocabulary such as “grieved,” “distressed,” and “deeply grieved.”

Progression patterns in the passage of Jesus's prayer and the disciples' failure form a chiasmic structure, centered on Jesus's declaration, “Your will be done,” in verse 42, which serves as the focal point of the pericope. Matthew used cyclical rhythms of prayer, return, and failure in the pericope, as evidenced by the opening-middle-closing patterns across the passage. All OMC patterns noted follow the prayer, return, and failure pattern. Finally, Matthew's use of expressive statements such as Jesus falling on His face, statements of deep sorrow, and betrayal elevated the emotional dimensions of the narrative.

Together, these textual analyses reveal a structured contrast between Jesus's perseverance in prayer and the disciples' repeated failure. The contrast also underpins discussion of leaders' abandonment, as the disciples did not support Jesus in His most vulnerable moment. Taken together, the textures show that the interactions in the Gethsemane narrative function in the same way LMX describes relational exchange. Jesus offered proximity, clarity, and support, while the disciples repeatedly failed to reciprocate, leading to a progressively strained in-group dynamic.

LMX, THE GETHSEMANE NARRATIVE, AND LEADERSHIP RESPONSE TO FOLLOWER FAILURE

Peter, James, and John functioned as Jesus's in-group members in this pericope. In-group members receive greater attention from the leader, higher trust, and more responsibility (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Meier (1980) conjectured that Jesus felt distant from God as He neared His death and wanted to draw closer to these disciples. These three disciples were exclusively present with Jesus, as an in-group, separate from other disciples, at the raising of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:37) and at the Transfiguration (Matt. 17). When Jesus took Peter, James, and John aside in Gethsemane, He reinforced the in-group dynamic among them and involved them in what may have been the most vulnerable moment in His life, the emotional acceptance of the “cup,” the divine wrath (Davies & Allison, 1997; France, 2007).

Pattern of Exchange Breakdown

Matthew's repetitive pattern of Jesus returning three times to find the disciples failing reveals instances of failed relational exchange. Each prayer episode functions like a failed exchange where Jesus offers clarity, support, and presence, but the

disciples fail to respond. The progressive, chiastic structure of the narrative highlights the misalignment of the disciples' actions with Jesus's vigilance. Jesus continued to stay awake and pray, and the disciples did not. A high-level LMX relationship forms through "testing" behaviors between the leader and the follower (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The pattern highlights how repeated non-reciprocation strains even high-quality relationships. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) posited that in-group failure is more consequential because followers in high-LMX relationships should demonstrate loyalty, support, and reliability. The repeated failures of the disciples, as revealed in the inner-texture analysis, indicated a breakdown in the leader-member relationship. The inner-texture analysis revealed clear role expectations for the disciples to keep watch and pray as Jesus communed with God, and they repeatedly failed. Thus, the Gethsemane narrative operates on multiple relational planes simultaneously. While the primary theological scene is Jesus's resoluteness to the Father's will, the text also contains the horizontal leader-follower relationship between Jesus and the three disciples. Consequently, the narrative depicts a series of LMX relational tests that the disciples failed due to their lack of vigilance, even as cosmic testing was occurring simultaneously (Barbour, 1970), and even though the disciples failed the test to watch and pray, they were not left to despair in their failure for long.

Leadership Response to Follower Failure

Despite the breakdown in the relational exchange between Jesus and the disciples, Jesus demonstrated three critical leadership responses as shown in Table 2. Jesus was steadfast in the mission of God, engaged the disciples during their failure, and called them beyond failure into further opportunities of Kingdom work with Him.

Table 2

Christ-Centered Leadership Responses to Follower Failure and LMX

Leadership response	Narrative evidence	LMX relational dynamics
Steadfast to the mission	Jesus's resolve to have God's will done is strengthened through repeated prayer.	The leader maintains mission commitment and role stability despite poor reciprocity from followers.
Engagement during failure	Jesus repeatedly returns to the disciples and instructs them after he finds them asleep.	Continued engagement reflects the leader's attempt to maintain the dyadic relationship and reinforce role expectations.
Calling past failure	Jesus commands the disciples to get up after their failure and move on.	The leader reinitiates participation in the exchange relationship, creating the opportunity for relational restoration.

Steadfast to the Mission. Jesus remained steadfast in His mission despite the disciples' unreliability. The repetition of prayer language across the prayer cycles

reflects oral-scribal patterns that reinforce Jesus's role consistency in an unstable environment. Abraham was steadfast when he followed God's direction to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Abraham remained steadfast in his task even to the point of taking the knife to kill his son (Gen. 22:10). Like Abraham, Jesus was steadfast in doing God's will, despite the incredible pain He knew was to come. Jesus invited the disciples into this moment with Him, and they fell asleep. The chiastic center on "Your will be done" emphasizes Jesus's resilience even as follower reliability collapsed.

Engagement During Failure. Jesus did not abandon the disciples even in their failure. High-quality leadership requires continued engagement, clear expectations, and opportunities for restored contribution even when followers fail; the leader's ongoing investment stabilizes the relationship over time (Greguras & Ford, 2006). Jesus continually returned to the disciples to wake them up, ask them to pray, and to watch. Rather than ignoring or abandoning them, Jesus returned multiple times to find that the disciples failed in their task and worked to realign them to His expectation to stay awake. Despite the disciples' failure, Jesus maintained their role expectations. Jesus's continued engagement reflects a leader who invests in followers during moments of relational strain and follower failure.

Calling Past Failure. Jesus's command, "Get up, let's go" (v. 46), closed the period of prayer; the time for watching had passed. Davies and Allison (1997) and Dodd (1953) noted that the command mirrored the order to a soldier to meet enemy forces. The relational significance of this moment is that Jesus pushed through follower failure rather than severing the relationship and called the disciples to meet their foe as they continued their role in the mission of God, and taken together, it is evident Jesus did not leave the disciples because of their failure. Thus, Christlike leaders in high-quality LMX relationships may maintain relational commitment, direction, and shared purpose even when follower reliability collapses. This pivotal moment in the pericope not only ended the Gethsemane narrative but also revealed a leadership pattern for reengaging failed followers. Jesus required action after failure and gave the disciples what looked like another chance to perform and even to mend the relational failure.

What Gethsemane Teaches Leaders

The Gethsemane narrative demonstrated a Christocentric approach to follower failure; even the closest followers fail, and leaders must remain steadfast in the mission, continue relational engagement, and call followers into renewed participation. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) explained that LMX theory operates through the social exchange that takes place between a leader and a follower; thus, the natural human response of a leader who experienced the failure Jesus experienced at Gethsemane would be relational deterioration or even out-group reassignment of those who failed them. However, the divergence between conventional LMX predictions and Jesus's response introduces a grace-based exemplar that forgoes immediate reciprocity to sustain the relationship. Graen and Uhl-Bien noted that higher quality relationships often have longer reciprocity cycles, and in this narrative, Jesus chose to continue the relationship when natural tendencies called for retribution. Admittedly, this grace-forward model is grounded in Jesus's character and is an example leaders can work toward, but it may

prove challenging to transfer to many organizational contexts. Even so, the analysis makes it evident that Jesus models a leader who is steadfast in the mission, engages followers during failure, and calls followers past failure. Jesus faced real temptation in anticipation of taking the “cup,” and His closest followers failed Him. Follower failure does not negate leadership responsibility; instead, it shows the leader’s depth of integrity and conviction.

The results provide leaders with a Christ-centered framework for navigating follower failure. The Gethsemane narrative demonstrated that leadership responsibility continues even when relational support from followers breaks down, and Jesus modeled a leadership posture grounded in His conviction to do God’s will rather than focus on His followers’ performance. Christ-centered leadership engages followers during failure and invites them forward after failure rather than rejecting them. The integration of inner-texture, intertexture, and LMX theory revealed that Jesus’s response showed a multidimensional framework for leading through follower failure.

CONCLUSION

This study is limited by its focus on a single biblical pericope and may not fully represent broader leadership dynamics across scripture. Even with the exegesis of this pericope with SRA, the use of LMX as an interpretive lens may also skew results towards relational constructs that are not explicitly present in the text. These insights may be furthered through future research on Peter, James, and John’s lives after this moment of failure, to grasp the magnitude of Jesus’s decision to continue engaging them in His ministry, and to ascertain if there is a lasting impact of Jesus’s actions towards the disciples. This study contributes to biblical leadership by proposing a Christ-centered leadership approach for navigating follower failure, grounded in an analysis of Matthew 26:36–46. While the primary theological purpose of the Gethsemane narrative is Christological and not organizational, examining Jesus’s interaction with His closest disciples through the lens of LMX theory demonstrates how the biblical narratives frame leadership dynamics in terms of relational breakdown. The Gethsemane narrative offers a powerful approach to leadership that remains mission-centered, relationally engaged, and restorative even when followers fail.

About the Author

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