



ENTRUSTED AUTHORITY AND HUMAN FLOURISHING: A BIBLICAL STEWARDSHIP FRAMEWORK FOR RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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This conceptual article argues that leadership is best understood from a biblical perspective as entrusted authority exercised under God and for the good of others. Drawing on a sustained reading of Genesis 1:26–28 and 2:15, the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, and the stewardship parable of Luke 12:42–48, the study develops a theological framework in which stewardship governs both the meaning and purpose of leadership. It then places leader-member exchange theory and self-determination theory in dialogue with this biblical framework to explain how stewardship is experienced through relational quality and how it supports the conditions necessary for human flourishing. Leader-member exchange theory clarifies the relational processes through which trust, respect, and developmental concern are enacted between leaders and followers, while self-determination theory explains how autonomy, competence, and relatedness shape the motivational foundations of flourishing. The article defines human flourishing as an ordered reality with a governing purpose, a relational ground, several developmental dimensions, and a structural condition, so that the concept is not reduced to well-being or performance. The distinct contribution of the study is architectural rather than additive: stewardship does not sit beside leader-member exchange and self-determination theory as one more model but subordinates and reinterprets their central constructs, so that trust, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are read as indices of faithful authority rather than as instruments of organizational performance. By integrating biblical stewardship, relational exchange, and motivational support, the study offers a framework that reframes leadership as faithful care for image-bearers within organizational life.

Keywords: human flourishing, leader-member exchange, organizational health, self-determination theory, stewardship leadership

A biblical understanding of leadership begins with stewardship because Scripture presents authority as something entrusted rather than possessed. This distinction is

foundational. In Genesis 1:26–28, humanity is given dominion, but only within the boundaries of God's prior sovereignty. Genesis 2:15 further portrays human work as the cultivation and care of what ultimately belongs to God. The doctrine of the *imago Dei* reinforces this calling by grounding human worth in bearing God's image rather than in productivity, status, or usefulness (Gen. 1:26–27). People, therefore, are never merely a means to an end. From this perspective, leadership is not grounded in trait-based charisma, positional rank, or technical management. Instead, it is the accountable care of persons whose dignity precedes their work. This biblical framework is significant because it places the moral meaning of leadership before its practical administration and directly connects authority to the responsibility to foster the flourishing of others.

Biblically understood, human flourishing refers to the faithful development of persons within rightly ordered relationships with God, others, and meaningful work, and it extends beyond well-being, healthy functioning, or outward success. Leadership, therefore, carries substantial significance because it shapes the conditions in which such development is either cultivated or hindered. Contemporary leadership research arrives at a similar practical conclusion, though from a different starting point, by demonstrating that leadership behavior influences employee psychological well-being, engagement, and job performance (Arnold, 2017; Blake et al., 2022; Montano et al., 2021). These conclusions suggest that leadership cannot be reduced to coordination or performance management alone. Leadership also helps determine whether work becomes a context characterized by trust, growth, and meaningful participation or one marked by depletion, disengagement, and relational distance (Chen et al., 2026; Kaluza et al., 2021).

Within contemporary leadership theory, leader-member exchange theory (LMX) offers a compelling explanation of how leadership is experienced relationally. LMX proposes that leaders develop varying relationships with followers that differ in levels of trust, respect, loyalty, and reciprocal obligation (Buch et al., 2014; Dulebohn et al., 2017). High-quality exchanges are commonly associated with stronger engagement, organizational commitment, and job performance, whereas lower-quality exchanges often produce less favorable outcomes (Buch et al., 2014; Zhao, 2015; Zhou et al., 2021). In this sense, relationships significantly shape leadership outcomes. Yet LMX does more than explain workplace variation; it demonstrates that leadership is fundamentally expressed through the quality of daily relational interactions, making it particularly useful for examining entrusted authority, care, and follower development.

Self-determination theory (SDT) complements this relational perspective by explaining the motivational conditions under which leadership promotes flourishing rather than mere compliance. According to SDT, individuals function more effectively and experience greater well-being when three basic psychological needs are supported: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2017; Ding et al., 2025; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Research has shown that leadership environments that support these needs strengthen motivation, engagement, and healthy functioning, while environments that frustrate these needs are associated with strain and disengagement (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Jungert et al., 2025; Olafsen et al., 2021). In other words, flourishing depends on identifiable conditions. When read alongside biblical stewardship, SDT clarifies how leaders may either support or frustrate agency, relationality, and vocational development, all of which Scripture treats as morally significant. Considered together,

stewardship, LMX, and SDT provide a coherent framework for examining how leadership relationships contribute to human flourishing within organizational contexts.

Leadership behavior significantly influences employee well-being, engagement, and job performance, as demonstrated across leadership scholarship and meta-analytic research (Blake et al., 2022; Montano et al., 2021). Scripture frames leadership as stewardship, that is, an entrusted responsibility exercised under God for the good of image-bearers (Gen. 1:26–28; 2:15; Luke 12:42–48; 1 Cor. 4:1–2). In contemporary research, LMX explains how leader-follower relationship quality shapes trust, commitment, and performance (Buch et al., 2014; Dulebohn et al., 2017), whereas SDT explains how autonomy, competence, and relatedness influence motivation, well-being, and human flourishing (Deci et al., 2017; Ding et al., 2025; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Although leadership scholarship identifies important relational and motivational workplace dynamics, it lacks a robust biblical theology of entrusted authority and human dignity. More specifically, existing research has not adequately integrated biblical stewardship with LMX and SDT to explain how leadership relationships cultivate flourishing within organizations. This leaves a conceptual gap in how stewardship, understood as accountable authority, provides the theological framework for relational exchange and motivational support in faithful leadership. The gap is not merely that these literatures have not been combined, but that no available framework subordinates the empirical constructs of relational quality and need support to a prior theological account of what authority is and whom it serves.

PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of this conceptual study is to develop a biblically grounded leadership framework that explains how stewardship leadership contributes to human flourishing within organizational contexts through relational exchange and motivational support. Drawing on Genesis, the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, and the stewardship parable of Luke 12, this study conceptualizes leadership as entrusted authority exercised under accountability to God and for the good of others (Gen. 1:26–28; 2:15; Luke 12:42–48; 1 Cor. 4:1–2).

LMX explains how stewardship is experienced through the quality of leader-follower relationships, particularly through trust, respect, and developmental concern (Buch et al., 2014; Dulebohn et al., 2017; Zhao, 2015). SDT further explains how stewardship-oriented leadership may foster flourishing by supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Together, these perspectives position stewardship as the governing theological frame, LMX as the relational pathway, and SDT as the explanatory account of how leader-follower relationships may support human flourishing within organizational life. The study does not treat these three as equal partners. It treats stewardship as the frame that gives the other two their moral meaning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Biblical Foundations of Stewardship and Human Flourishing

A biblical understanding of leadership begins with stewardship because Scripture portrays authority as entrusted rather than possessed outright. The clearest starting point is the creation account, and it repays close reading rather than general appeal. In Genesis 1:26–28, God resolves to make humanity in the divine image and likeness and then grants dominion over the creatures of sea, sky, and land. Two features of the text establish the stewardship claim exegetically rather than by inference. First, the grant of dominion is framed by the image. The Hebrew terms translated “image” (*tselem*) and “likeness” (*demut*) situate humanity in a representative role. In the Ancient Near Eastern world from which this language is drawn, a ruler would set up an image of himself in territory he governed to signal his sovereign presence where he could not physically stand. When Genesis applies this royal image language to all humanity, it casts human beings as representatives who exercise delegated rule on behalf of the true Sovereign (Middleton, 2005). Dominion is therefore representational, not proprietary. It is authority to be exercised in a manner that reflects the character and will of the One represented.

Second, the verbs of dominion are bound by their object and by the wider narrative. The term rendered “rule” or “have dominion,” *radah*, and the term rendered “subdue,” *kabash*, are strong words, yet in context they are governed by the image that precedes them and by the goodness of the creation they concern. The mandate is not a license to exploit but a commission to govern a good creation as those accountable to its Maker (Wenham, 1987). Read this way, Genesis 1 does not merely provide a background sentiment about human worth. It defines authority itself as delegated, representative, and answerable. The moral logic of leadership is present in the grammar of the mandate.

Genesis 2:15 sharpens the point by describing the human vocation in concrete terms. The man is placed in the garden to work it and to keep it. The Hebrew for “work,” *abad*, denotes labor and service, and in other contexts it carries the sense of service rendered to God. The verb for “keep,” *shamar*, denotes guarding, watching over, and protecting. The pairing is significant. Human work in its original setting is service and protection of what belongs to another, not extraction for the self. The same verbal pair is used elsewhere in the Old Testament for the service and guarding conducted by priests, which further supports reading the human vocation as consecrated service rather than mere labor (Beale, 2004, pp. 66–80). Cultivation and guardianship, rather than consumption and control, define the vocation. When these two verbs are read together with the image language of Genesis 1, the result is a coherent theology of stewardship established from the text: authority is delegated, exercised representationally, and expressed as service and protective care of what God owns.

The doctrine of the *imago Dei* gives this stewardship framework its anthropological weight. Human beings are not valuable because they produce, comply, or perform at high levels; they possess inherent dignity because they bear the divine image (Gen. 1:26–27). This claim reshapes the moral logic of leadership. If people are image-bearers, leadership cannot be reduced to the efficient coordination of labor or the management of organizational outputs, because leaders exercise authority over persons whose dignity precedes their usefulness. The same image that authorizes human dominion over creation forbids the treatment of fellow image-bearers as instruments. This is the hinge on which the entire framework turns. The steward who

governs creation on God's behalf must also honor, and may not consume, the image-bearers placed within that creation.

Because the framework rests on a particular reading of the image, that interpretive choice should be defended rather than assumed. Three broad readings of the *imago Dei* have shaped the discussion. Substantive readings locate the image in capacities that distinguish human beings from other creatures, particularly reason, moral awareness, and will. Relational readings locate it in the human capacity for relationship, whether with God or with one another. Functional or royal readings, by contrast, locate the image in the vocation of representing God through the exercise of delegated rule. The present study adopts the functional reading, principally because it best accounts for the grammar of the text itself. In Genesis 1:26, the resolution to make humanity in the divine image is followed immediately and purposively by the grant of dominion, so that ruling is presented as the expression of the image rather than as a separate endowment added to it (Middleton, 2005). The Ancient Near Eastern background reinforces this reading since image language in that setting carried representational and royal connotations rather than descriptions of inner capacity.

This choice does not require rejecting the insights of the other readings, and Hoekema's mediating account is instructive on this point. Hoekema (1986) argued that the image involves both structure and function, that is, both the endowments human beings possess and the way those endowments are exercised, and that the image is expressed in a threefold relationship to God, to others, and to the created order. Read this way, substantive and relational accounts describe what makes representative rule possible, while the functional account describes what the image is for. The framework developed here depends on that ordering. If the image were located solely in human capacities, dominion would be an additional task assigned to beings who already bear the image, and leadership would be a matter of deploying capacity. If the image is expressed in representative rule, then the exercise of authority is itself an imaging activity, and how a leader treats those under that authority is a theological matter rather than merely an ethical one. Stewardship is therefore not one possible application of the doctrine among several. It is the category the functional reading requires.

This biblical foundation renders leadership morally weighty in ways that some contemporary frameworks only imply. Leadership shapes the conditions under which individuals live out their vocations and may either cultivate or diminish opportunities for faithful human development. Such a claim is not foreign to leadership research; contemporary studies increasingly show that leadership behavior influences employee psychological well-being, engagement, and job performance (Arnold, 2017; Blake et al., 2022; Montano et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the biblical witness introduces a sharper theological emphasis. Leaders are not simply influential actors within a social system; they are accountable stewards whose use of authority affects the well-being of those entrusted to their care. This is a more demanding claim because it gives the concept of flourishing both moral urgency and theological depth.

Stewardship as Entrusted and Accountable Authority

This study concentrates its exegetical work on two textual centers, the creation mandate of Genesis 1:26–28 and 2:15 and the stewardship parable of Luke 12:42–48. Other stewardship passages are treated as corroborating rather than constitutive, which

means they are cited to confirm the pattern these two centers establish rather than analyzed as independent foundations. This restraint is deliberate. A conceptual framework is better served by two texts read closely than by many texts surveyed briefly, and the two chosen here supply the full arc the framework requires, moving from the origin of delegated authority in creation to its exercise, abuse, and evaluation in the parable.

If Genesis establishes that authority is delegated and representational, the stewardship parables of the Gospels show what faithful and unfaithful exercise of that authority looks like in practice. Luke 12:42–48 is the fullest of these passages, and it serves well as a sustained secondary text because it draws together entrustment, care, relational conduct, and graded accountability within a single scene. In response to a question from Peter, Jesus describes a manager, an *oikonomos*, whom the master sets over the household to give the other servants their portion of food at the proper time. The steward is defined entirely by relationship to another. He owns nothing; he manages what belongs to the master, and he manages it on behalf of fellow servants. Faithfulness, in this parable, is not measured by initiative, visibility, or yield. It is measured by whether the entrusted ones are provided for at the proper time. Dependable, timely care is the mark of the faithful steward.

The parable then presses further by describing the steward who fails. That steward begins to beat the male and female servants and to eat and drink and get drunk. The failure is telling. It is not primarily a failure of productivity but a failure of relationship and character. Entrusted authority is abused precisely when it turns against the people it was given to serve. The steward who mistreats fellow servants has inverted the purpose of the trust. This detail matters for a leadership framework because it locates the central danger of authority not in incompetence but in the misuse of relational power. The unfaithful steward still holds the office; what he lacks is faithfulness toward those in his care.

Finally, verses 47–48 introduce a principle of graded accountability. The servant who knew the master's will and did not act receives a greater reckoning than the one who did not know, and the passage concludes that from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required. Accountability is proportional to entrustment. Greater responsibility, greater knowledge, and greater capacity all raise the standard to which the steward is held. For leadership, this establishes that authority is never a neutral possession. It is a trust that increases obligation as it increases in scope. Read as a whole, Luke 12:42–48 supplies four elements at once: entrustment of what belongs to another, the mandate of timely care, the relational integrity that distinguishes faithful from unfaithful stewardship, and accountability scaled to the trust received.

The Pauline witness confirms and compresses this logic. In 1 Corinthians 4:1–2, Paul describes himself and his fellow workers as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, and he states the governing requirement directly: it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. The steward manages what belongs to another and is evaluated by faithfulness rather than by outcomes alone, a principle Luke 16:10–12 corroborates in linking faithfulness in small matters to trustworthiness in greater ones. Faithfulness therefore emerges as the defining mark of stewardship, and it involves far more than administrative competence. It is entrusted authority exercised on behalf of another, subject to evaluation, and measured by reliability, integrity, and care.

Two clarifications follow. First, stewardship so understood carries both responsibility and direction since leaders are accountable to God and oriented toward the good of others. Second, the parable's concern with how the steward treats fellow servants guards the framework against a familiar distortion, namely the reduction of stewardship to benevolent hierarchy, a guard that Jesus' redefinition of greatness through service reinforces elsewhere (Mark 10:42–45). Service is an essential part of faithful authority rather than a decorative addition to it.

These texts also clarify why stewardship serves as the most appropriate theological center for the present study. Stewardship situates authority within a moral framework shaped by divine ownership, delegated responsibility, and the obligation to care faithfully for others. Recent stewardship-oriented leadership scholarship takes a related approach by linking leadership with trustworthiness and responsibility toward others (Caldwell et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the biblical witness remains more comprehensive because it grounds stewardship not only in ethics but also in divine accountability and the dignity of image-bearers. Leadership is therefore about responding faithfully to what has been entrusted by God, rather than exclusively about producing results.

Defining Human Flourishing

Because the framework treats flourishing as the aim toward which faithful stewardship is directed, the concept requires a sharper definition than a list of desirable outcomes. That definition should be drawn from the same texts that establish stewardship rather than imported from elsewhere and attached to them. The creation account does not offer a formal definition of flourishing, but it does display flourishing in the pattern of blessing, commission, vocation, and community that it sets out, and that pattern yields the structure of the concept.

Genesis 1:28 begins with blessing and moves directly to commission. God blesses the man and the woman and then charges them to be fruitful, to multiply, to fill the earth, and to rule. Blessing and mandate are joined rather than sequential, which indicates that human well-being in the creation account is not a condition separate from the vocation given to humanity but is bound up with the faithful exercise of that vocation. This is the textual root of the claim that participation in God's purposes functions as the governing purpose of flourishing. The blessing is also given to humanity as such, in the plural, rather than to a favored portion of it, which establishes that the goods of the mandate are meant to be commonly held.

The ground of flourishing appears in the preceding verses. Humanity is blessed and commissioned as image-bearers, so the relationship to God is prior to and constitutive of everything that follows (Gen. 1:26–27). Hoekema (1986) captured this ordering by describing the image as expressed in a threefold relationship, to God, to others, and to the created order, in which the vertical relationship orders the horizontal ones. Flourishing in the creation account is therefore never first a description of internal states. It is a description of life rightly ordered before God, from which rightly ordered life with others and with work follows.

The developmental dimensions likewise arise from the narrative rather than from later theory. Genesis 2:15 gives vocation, since the human being is placed in the garden to work and to keep it, which is a calling to cultivate and protect rather than merely to

occupy. Genesis 2:18 gives relational belonging, since the first condition in the account declared not good is the man's aloneness, and the remedy is a fitting counterpart rather than an additional task. The garden setting itself, with its provision of food, beauty, and meaningful labor, gives the ordinary well-being of the person. Vocation, belonging, and well-being are therefore textual features of the created order rather than borrowed categories, which is why they can be treated as genuine goods without being mistaken for the whole.

Read together, these observations produce an ordered rather than a list-like concept. Biblical flourishing is not a single quality but a structured reality, and its coherence comes from the way its elements are arranged rather than from any one of them in isolation. Four levels may accordingly be distinguished: a governing purpose, a relational ground, several developmental dimensions, and a structural condition.

At the highest level, the governing purpose of flourishing is participation in the purposes of God. To flourish is ultimately to take a rightful and faithful part in what God is doing in creation, work, and community. This is the *telos* that gives the other elements their direction, and it is what distinguishes biblical flourishing from any account that terminates in individual satisfaction. Beneath this purpose lies the relational ground of flourishing, which is right relationship with God. Flourishing is not first a psychological state but a rightly ordered life before its Creator; the vertical relationship orders all the horizontal ones. Without this ground, the remaining dimensions may still yield forms of well-functioning, but they do not amount to flourishing in the biblical sense (Hoekema, 1986).

From this purpose and ground follow the developmental dimensions through which flourishing is expressed in ordinary life. These include vocational development, that is, growth in the faithful exercise of one's calling and gifts; relational belonging, that is, meaningful connection and mutual regard within community; and psychological well-being, that is, the healthy functioning of the person. These dimensions are genuine goods and are the aspects of flourishing most visible within organizations. They are best understood, however, as expressions and signs of flourishing rather than as its essence. Psychological well-being should be read as a correlate of flourishing, not its definition, which is why a person may enjoy comfort while failing to flourish and may flourish while enduring hardship. This ordering preserves the study's resistance to reducing flourishing to well-being while still giving the concept concrete content.

Finally, organizational justice functions as a structural condition of flourishing rather than as one of its dimensions. Fair processes, honest dealing, and the just distribution of opportunity and correction do not by themselves constitute flourishing, but they create the conditions under which the developmental dimensions can be realized for all members rather than for a favored few. Injustice frustrates flourishing structurally by ensuring that the goods of development, belonging, and well-being are unevenly available. Wolterstorff's (1983) account of *shalom* is instructive here, since he argued that there is no *shalom* without justice and yet that *shalom* exceeds justice. Justice is necessary but not sufficient, which is precisely the relation the present framework assigns to organizational justice. Taken together, these four levels answer the question of how the various senses of flourishing relate. Participation in God's purposes is what flourishing is for; right relationship with God is what flourishing rests on; vocational development, relational belonging, and psychological well-being are how flourishing

appears; and organizational justice is what allows flourishing to be shared. Leadership contributes to flourishing when it honors this ordering rather than collapsing it into performance or comfort.

Relational Leadership and Leader-Member Exchange

In contemporary leadership theory, LMX offers a valuable relational lens because it explains how authority is experienced in everyday organizational life. LMX proposes that leaders do not develop identical relationships with all followers. Instead, these relationships vary in quality according to levels of trust, mutual respect, loyalty, and reciprocal obligation (Buch et al., 2014; Dulebohn et al., 2017). High-quality exchanges are associated with stronger job performance, greater engagement, and deeper organizational commitment, whereas lower-quality exchanges tend to produce less favorable outcomes (Buch et al., 2014; Zhao, 2015; Zhou et al., 2021). Meta-analytic evidence further suggests that these effects persist across cultural settings, strengthening the theory's relevance for broad organizational analysis (Rockstuhl et al., 2012). Employees frequently experience leadership most directly through the person immediately above them, and LMX captures this reality.

For this study, however, LMX is important not simply because it explains relational variation, but because it clarifies where stewardship becomes visible in practice. Stewardship is enacted through relationships characterized by trust, support, fairness, correction, and developmental opportunity. A leader who understands authority as stewardship would be expected to cultivate relationships marked by reliability, respect, and genuine concern for followers' growth rather than neglect, opportunism, or manipulation. LMX provides a framework for understanding relational quality, while stewardship supplies the moral direction toward which that relational quality should be ordered.

LMX also possesses an important limitation that necessitates theological integration. Although the theory describes relational quality effectively, it does not fully explain the moral purpose that should govern those relationships. Exchange alone is morally thin. It can identify how trust and obligation emerge between leaders and followers, yet it offers less guidance regarding why leaders are morally obligated to use relational influence faithfully. For this reason, LMX is often interpreted alongside ethical, servant, and transformational leadership frameworks, each of which seeks to introduce normative content into leadership discussions (Banks et al., 2018; Hoch et al., 2018). Ethical leadership highlights fairness and moral consistency, servant leadership emphasizes follower growth and well-being, and transformational leadership stresses inspiration toward shared purpose and change (Bedi et al., 2015; Eva et al., 2019; Hoch et al., 2018; Liden et al., 2015). Although this literature moves in a constructive direction, stewardship extends it by grounding relational responsibility in authority entrusted by God.

Biblical leadership patterns reinforce this relational emphasis. Jesus did not lead solely from a distance. Instead, He personally called disciples into relationship and entrusted them with meaningful responsibility. Although He called individuals such as Simon, Andrew, James, and John directly from their occupations, this process differs significantly from modern LMX and should not be treated as a direct parallel (Chen et al., 2026). Nevertheless, the example suggests that biblical leadership is relational,

developmental, and grounded in trust rather than merely positional authority. The quality of the relationship matters because relationships function as a means of formation. In that sense, LMX can serve as a helpful interpretive lens within a biblical leadership framework, provided it remains subordinate to the theological claim that authority is fundamentally a form of stewardship.

Self-Determination Theory and the Conditions of Flourishing

Whereas LMX explains the relational channel through which leadership is experienced, SDT helps explain the conditions under which leadership contributes to human flourishing rather than simple compliance. SDT proposes that individuals function more effectively and experience greater well-being when three basic psychological needs are supported: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2017; Ding et al., 2025; Ryan & Deci, 2020). These needs are not temporary preferences but enduring dimensions of healthy human motivation and development. Within organizational settings, leaders shape environments that either support or frustrate these needs through the ways they direct, evaluate, communicate, and distribute opportunities. Research grounded in SDT consistently shows that need-supportive environments are associated with stronger motivation, greater engagement, and healthier functioning, whereas need-frustrating environments are associated with strain, disengagement, and diminished well-being (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Jungert et al., 2025; Olafsen et al., 2021).

In this context, autonomy does not imply radical independence or freedom from all authority. It refers instead to purposeful agency and the experience of acting with a sense of volition rather than coercion. Competence refers to the development of capability and confidence, whereas relatedness refers to meaningful connection and belonging. Leadership that supports autonomy enables individuals to act as responsible participants rather than passive instruments (Slemp et al., 2018). Leadership that supports competence creates conditions for growth, learning, and faithful vocational engagement rather than stagnation or helplessness (Ding et al., 2025). Leadership that supports relatedness fosters inclusion and mutual regard rather than alienation (Deci et al., 2017). These factors help determine whether work becomes a context for development or diminishment.

SDT is particularly valuable for the present study because it gives practical substance to the concept of flourishing without reducing it to psychological well-being alone. Although the theory does not emerge from biblical theology, its emphasis on agency, development, and meaningful relationships aligns productively with biblical anthropology. Scripture presents human beings as created in God's image, entrusted with meaningful responsibility, and called to responsible participation in communities characterized by mutual edification and care (Gen. 1:26–28; Eph. 4:11–16). The correspondence is not accidental. The needs SDT identifies as conditions of healthy functioning map closely onto the developmental dimensions of flourishing defined earlier, so that autonomy corresponds to responsible participation, competence to vocational development, and relatedness to relational belonging. Accordingly, SDT functions in this study as a valuable explanatory partner that describes, in motivational terms, the conditions under which stewardship-ordered flourishing becomes possible.

Stewardship as the Integrative Frame

Stewardship leadership serves as the integrating framework for this study because it unites the biblical, relational, and motivational strands of the literature in a way that neither LMX nor SDT can accomplish alone. Stewardship gives moral direction to authority. In biblical terms, the steward exercises delegated authority under accountability to God and with responsibility for the good of others (Luke 12:42–48; 16:10–12; 1 Cor. 4:1–2). Relationally, this means that leaders should cultivate exchanges characterized by trust, respect, fairness, and developmental concern. Motivationally, leaders should create environments that support agency, growth, and belonging rather than fear, dependency, or exploitation. Within this framework, relational quality and motivational support are not merely efficient leadership techniques; they are expressions of faithful leadership.

The distinct contribution of the framework is best understood as architectural rather than additive, and stating it precisely answers the concern that the argument might read as a synthesis of compatible ideas. The claim is not simply that stewardship, LMX, and SDT are agreeable and can be combined. The claim is that stewardship functions as a governing frame that subordinates two well-validated empirical theories and, in doing so, reinterprets their central constructs. Under a stewardship frame, LMX's trust and reciprocity are no longer read primarily as relational resources that improve performance; they are read as indices of whether entrusted authority is being exercised faithfully. Likewise, SDT's autonomy, competence, and relatedness are no longer read primarily as levers of motivation and engagement; they are read as conditions a faithful steward is obligated to support because the persons in question are image-bearers, not instruments. This reinterpreted move is the study's contribution. It changes what the constructs mean, not merely how they are arranged.

The claim also requires positioning against the existing stewardship literature, which spans both organizational and theological registers. In organizational scholarship, Block (1993) advanced stewardship as an alternative to patriarchy and control, arguing for the redistribution of power, privilege, and accountability so that service replaces self-interest as the governing logic of institutional life. Caldwell et al. (2010) developed a parallel account tying leadership to trustworthiness and ethical obligation toward stakeholders. Both are valuable, and the present framework is consistent with them, but each locates the warrant for stewardship in organizational ethics or governance philosophy rather than in a claim about who owns the authority in question.

The theological register is closer to the present study and therefore requires more careful differentiation. Rodin (2000) developed a sustained steward theology in which the steward is defined by relationship across four levels—to God, to self, to others, and to creation—and in which stewardship describes the whole of the Christian life rather than a discrete set of duties. That account shares this study's central conviction that ownership belongs to God and that the steward manages what is another's. Two differences distinguish the present contribution. First, Rodin's project is a theology of the steward's life in general, whereas this study is concerned specifically with the exercise of organizational authority over other image-bearers, which narrows the question from how a Christian should live to how a leader should hold power over people. Second, and more consequentially, the present study carries the theological claim into contact with empirical leadership theory. Rodin establishes what stewardship

means; this framework additionally specifies the relational mechanism through which it becomes visible and the motivational conditions under which it produces flourishing, and it does so in terms that existing organizational research can recognize and eventually test. Situating the contribution this way also clarifies its relation to the wider Christian leadership literature. Themes of entrusted authority, delegated responsibility, and accountability are well established there and are not claimed as novel. What this study offers is the integration of that theological inheritance with leader-member exchange and self-determination theory into a single frame in which the theological claim governs and reinterprets the empirical constructs.

This architectural claim also distinguishes stewardship from the leadership theories nearest to it. Servant leadership and ethical leadership both emphasize service, moral conduct, and follower well-being (Bedi et al., 2015; Eva et al., 2019; Hassan et al., 2023), and both are compatible with the present account. Yet neither performs the reinterpetive move described above. Servant leadership commends an orientation toward service, and ethical leadership commends fair and principled conduct, but each remains a description of leader disposition or behavior rather than a claim about the ontological status of authority itself. Stewardship theory in the management literature moves closer by tying leadership to trustworthiness and responsibility (Caldwell et al., 2010), yet it typically develops these themes in ethical and organizational terms without the theological ownership claim that anchors the present framework, and without the integration of LMX and SDT that gives the framework its explanatory reach. The distinctive of this study, therefore, is not the theme of entrusted authority in general, which it shares with other steward-ship work, but the specific integration of biblical stewardship with leader-member exchange and self-determination theory into a single frame in which the theological claim reinterprets the empirical constructs.

Synthesis of Literature

Taken together, the literature provides a more comprehensive account of leadership and flourishing than any single framework can offer. The biblical witness presents leadership as stewardship exercised under divine accountability and directed toward the good of image-bearers. LMX explains how leadership is experienced through the quality of leader-follower relationships, whereas SDT explains how leadership either supports or frustrates the motivational conditions vital for flourishing. Each framework contributes important insight, yet each also remains incomplete in isolation. LMX explains relational processes effectively but is limited in theological normativity. SDT offers a compelling account of motivation and well-being but does not provide a biblical understanding of leader responsibility or human purpose. Stewardship is rich in theological meaning but benefits from engagement with contemporary leadership theories that describe organizational dynamics more precisely.

The present study therefore integrates these strands to argue that stewardship leadership provides the theological framework, LMX supplies the relational mechanism, and SDT offers the motivational explanation for how leadership relationships contribute to human flourishing within organizational life. The next section develops this argument into the study's conceptual framework.

APPROACH TO CONCEPTUAL INTEGRATION

This study adopts a theological-conceptual approach that places biblical stewardship at the center of the analysis and incorporates LMX and SDT into the framework. Scripture provides the governing account of authority, with the stewardship texts in Genesis, Luke, and 1 Corinthians establishing leadership as entrusted responsibility exercised under God and for the good of others (Gen. 1:26–28; 2:15; Luke 12:42–48; 16:10–12; 1 Cor. 4:1–2). LMX is then employed to explain how such authority is experienced relationally through trust, respect, and developmental concern between leaders and followers (Buch et al., 2014; Dulebohn et al., 2017; Rockstuhl et al., 2012). SDT explains how these relationships may either support or frustrate the conditions necessary for human flourishing through autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2017; Ding et al., 2025; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Rather than blending equivalent theories, this approach establishes a hierarchy of interpretation in which stewardship provides the theological framework, LMX clarifies the relational mechanism, and SDT explains the motivational conditions that make flourishing more or less likely within organizational life. The hierarchy is deliberate. It ensures that the empirical theories serve the theological account rather than displacing it.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The central claim of this study is that stewardship leadership contributes to human flourishing when entrusted authority is exercised through high-quality leader-follower relationships that support the basic psychological conditions necessary for growth, agency, and belonging. This claim begins with Scripture rather than organizational theory. Within the biblical witness, authority is neither self-grounding nor autonomous; it is received, bounded, and accountable. Humanity's creation mandate in Genesis 1:26–28 and 2:15 frames dominion as delegated responsibility within creation rather than autonomous possession, while Luke 12:42–48 and 16:10–12 and 1 Corinthians 4:1–2 portray the steward as one who manages what belongs to another and is evaluated according to faithfulness. Taken together, these texts establish that leadership, rightly understood, is a matter of trust. That trust carries both direction and limitation, with authority given for care, cultivation, and responsible oversight rather than for control, efficiency, or personal advantage. Within this framework, human flourishing is an indication that leadership is being exercised faithfully toward image-bearers.

This theological framework gives moral substance to the relational dimension of leadership. LMX becomes particularly important at this point because it explains how authority is experienced within everyday organizational life. Organizational behavior research suggests that leadership is most often experienced through daily supervisory interactions rather than through abstract leadership claims. Employees experience leadership through the quality of their relationship with the person who evaluates, guides, supports, and corrects them. LMX shows that these relationships vary in trust, respect, reciprocity, and obligation, and that such variation influences engagement, commitment, and performance (Buch et al., 2014; Dulebohn et al., 2017; Zhao, 2015). High-quality exchanges are associated with stronger outcomes because they create relational environments in which followers feel recognized, supported, and valued rather

than merely managed (Chen et al., 2026; Zhou et al., 2021). Within the present framework, however, LMX is not the governing theory; it functions as the relational mechanism through which stewardship leadership becomes visible. A stewardship-oriented leader would therefore be expected to cultivate high-quality exchanges precisely because entrusted authority requires relationships characterized by trustworthiness, developmental concern, and moral responsibility toward followers.

The framework then turns to the internal conditions necessary for flourishing. SDT explains why some leader-follower relationships promote growth while others leave employees diminished or disengaged. According to SDT, individuals are more likely to function effectively when autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2020). These needs are foundational conditions of healthy motivation and human development. When leaders provide meaningful discretion, developmental feedback, and relational security, employees are more likely to internalize organizational goals, remain engaged, and experience work as a context for growth rather than control (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Hart, 2025; Slemp et al., 2018). Conversely, when leaders frustrate these needs through coercion, neglect, or relational distance, motivation weakens and opportunities to flourish diminish (Jungert et al., 2025; Olafsen et al., 2021). Within the present framework, SDT explains how stewardship-oriented relationships may foster developmental outcomes not simply because leaders are benevolent, but because they cultivate motivational conditions in which individuals can act, grow, and belong.

Accordingly, the framework unfolds in a coherent sequence. Biblical stewardship provides the theological foundation for leader responsibility. That responsibility shapes how leaders relate to followers, as explained through LMX. The quality of those relationships then influences whether the followers' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported, which in turn affects the extent to which human flourishing becomes possible within organizational life. Importantly, stewardship does not emerge from relational exchange or motivational theory; it precedes and governs them, with LMX clarifying the relational form through which stewardship is practiced. Likewise, SDT does not determine the theological meaning of flourishing; it explains the motivational processes through which flourishing is either fostered or hindered within organizations. This sequencing preserves the biblical center of the framework while allowing contemporary leadership theories to provide meaningful explanatory insight. Table 1 summarizes the framework by setting out, for each layer, its source, its core claim, the leadership expression it produces, and the characteristic failure that occurs when the layer is neglected.

Table 1*A Biblical Stewardship Framework for Relational Leadership and Human Flourishing*

Layer	Source	Core claim	Leadership expression	Failure mode
Theological frame	Genesis 1:26–28; 2:15; Luke 12:42–48; 1 Cor. 4:1–2	Authority is entrusted and accountable, exercised under God for the good of image-bearers.	The leader governs as a representative steward, answerable for the persons and resources placed in trust.	Ownership: authority is treated as a possession to be used for the leader's own ends.
Relational pathway	Leader-member exchange theory	Stewardship is experienced through the quality of daily leader-follower relationships.	The leader cultivates trust, respect, fair correction, and developmental concern with each follower.	Neglect and favoritism: relationships marked by distance, manipulation, or unequal regard.
Motivational conditions	Self-determination theory	Flourishing is supported when autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met.	The leader extends meaningful discretion, invests in development, and builds belonging.	Need frustration: coercion, stagnation, and isolation that diminish motivation.
Outcome	Integration of the three layers	Leadership becomes faithful care for image-bearers within organizational life.	Followers develop, participate meaningfully, and belong, as signs of faithful authority.	Compliance without care: results secured while persons are diminished.

A second implication of the framework is that stewardship leadership reshapes how common leadership outcomes are interpreted. Trust, engagement, commitment, and development remain important, but they are no longer understood merely as variables that enhance organizational performance. Instead, they become indicators of whether entrusted authority is being exercised faithfully. A leader may secure compliance without stewardship and may even achieve short-term performance outcomes without relational depth, yet such outcomes remain theologically insufficient because they fail to reflect the care, accountability, and developmental concern required by biblical stewardship. Within the present framework, the quality of relational exchange and the support of psychological needs matter because they reveal whether leadership aligns with its moral purpose. The framework therefore possesses both explanatory and evaluative power. It explains how flourishing may emerge and provides a basis for assessing whether leadership is being exercised faithfully.

Taken together, the conceptual framework may be stated succinctly: stewardship leadership supports human flourishing when entrusted authority is exercised through high-quality leader-follower relationships that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Stewardship provides leadership with its theological purpose, LMX explains the relational pathway, and SDT clarifies the motivational processes involved. By integrating these strands, the framework offers a biblically grounded explanation of

why leadership relationships matter, how they influence followers, and under what conditions they may contribute to flourishing within organizational life. The following sections examine the implications of this framework for leadership scholarship and Christian leadership practice.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The conceptual framework developed in this study contributes to leadership scholarship by repositioning stewardship as the governing category through which relational and motivational leadership mechanisms should be interpreted. In much of the contemporary literature, leader effectiveness is inferred from outcomes such as engagement, trust, commitment, and performance, and these outcomes are often treated as evidence that leaders have managed relationships successfully (Buch et al., 2014; Zhao, 2015; Zhou et al., 2021). While acknowledging the importance of these outcomes, the present framework reorders them. Within a stewardship framework, trust and engagement are not valued solely because they improve organizational functioning. They matter because they indicate whether authority is being exercised faithfully toward persons whose dignity is rooted in the *imago Dei* rather than in organizational utility (Gen. 1:26–27; Caldwell et al., 2010). This shift moves leadership scholarship beyond a narrow concern with effectiveness toward a richer account in which leadership is evaluated alongside faithfulness, care, and developmental responsibility.

This framework also clarifies the role of LMX within Christian leadership scholarship. LMX has long been valued for explaining how differences in relationship quality influence employee attitudes and performance, yet its explanatory strength also reveals an important limitation: the theory is more descriptive than normatively robust (Buch et al., 2014; Dulebohn et al., 2017). Exchange theory can explain how trust and reciprocity function within leader-follower relationships, but it cannot independently explain why leaders are morally obligated to cultivate such relationships. Stewardship provides the normative foundation that LMX lacks. By grounding authority in divine entrustment and accountability, stewardship supplies the moral logic through which relational leadership practices become meaningful. The relational qualities identified by LMX, including trust, mutual regard, and developmental concern, therefore become intelligible not merely as exchange resources but as expressions of faithful leadership (Luke 12:42–48; 1 Cor. 4:1–2). In this respect, the present study extends relational leadership theory by providing a theological rationale for why high-quality leader-follower relationships matter beyond organizational performance outcomes.

The framework further contributes by clarifying how human flourishing may be theorized within leadership scholarship without resorting to vague language about well-being. Human flourishing is often affirmed more readily than it is carefully defined. SDT helps address this challenge by identifying autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core motivational conditions associated with healthy functioning and stronger engagement (Deci et al., 2017; Ding et al., 2025; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Yet SDT alone does not explain why these conditions possess moral significance. The present framework addresses this limitation by situating SDT within a stewardship-based understanding of leadership and within the ordered definition of flourishing developed earlier. Under this perspective, autonomy reflects responsible participation, competence reflects faithful vocational development, and relatedness reflects meaningful connection

among image-bearers entrusted to one another's care (Gen. 2:15; Eph. 4:11–16). Flourishing therefore gains moral depth because these conditions are treated not merely as psychological needs but as aspects of faithful human development before God and others. As a result, the study does more than combine theories. It shows how motivational research can be integrated into a biblically grounded account of leadership without sacrificing theological substance or conceptual precision.

A final theoretical implication concerns the relationship between stewardship leadership and adjacent leadership constructs such as servant leadership and ethical leadership. These constructs have rightly emphasized service, moral conduct, and follower well-being, and the present study builds on those contributions (Bedi et al., 2015; Eva et al., 2019; Hassan et al., 2023). Nevertheless, stewardship advances a distinct theological claim that should not be reduced to neighboring models. Servant leadership emphasizes the leader's orientation toward service, whereas ethical leadership prioritizes moral behavior and fairness. Stewardship, by contrast, emphasizes the ontological status of authority itself: authority is not possessed but entrusted. This distinction is significant because it situates leadership within a stronger framework of obligation and accountability. Leaders are not simply encouraged to serve well or behave ethically; they are accountable for what has been placed under their care. This more rigorous account of obligation helps explain why stewardship leadership functions as a fruitful integrative category for Christian leadership scholarship and why it may offer a more durable theological foundation for discussions concerning flourishing, development, and relational accountability.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

The framework developed in this study has important implications for Christian leadership practice by reframing the everyday exercise of leadership as stewardship rather than as control or personal influence alone. Consequently, leadership practice should be evaluated not only by visible outcomes but also by the quality of care that leaders extend to those under their authority. A leader may secure compliance, maintain order, and even achieve strong short-term performance while still failing in stewardship if followers are treated as expendable, unseen, or developmentally neglected. Biblical stewardship texts resist such a possibility by insisting that faithfulness is measured through entrusted care and trustworthy oversight (Luke 16:10–12; 1 Cor. 4:1–2). In organizational contexts, this suggests that Christian leaders should attend carefully to the relational climate they cultivate, since followers often experience the moral reality of leadership not through formal statements but through whether they are respected, developed, and treated as persons rather than instruments.

To make these commitments concrete, it is useful to trace how stewardship reshapes the ordinary domains in which leaders operate. Table 2 maps seven common leadership domains against the stewardship logic that should govern them, the relational expression each takes in LMX terms, the psychological need each primarily serves in SDT terms, and the unfaithful practice that stewardship rules out. The point of the table is not to add procedures but to show that stewardship is enacted or forfeited in precisely these everyday decisions.

Table 2*Stewardship-Oriented Leadership Behaviors Across Common Organizational Domains*

Domain	Stewardship logic	Relational expression (LMX)	Need served (SDT)	Unfaithful contrast
Performance reviews	The leader accounts for a person's growth, not only output.	Honest, respectful, two-way conversation grounded in trust.	Competence and relatedness.	One-way judgment used to rank and sort people.
Delegation	Authority is shared as trust, with fitting support.	Assignments matched to capability and followed with backing.	Autonomy and competence.	Dumping tasks or hoarding control.
Mentoring	The leader invests in the formation of those entrusted.	Ongoing developmental relationship, not episodic contact.	Competence and relatedness.	Neglect of development beyond immediate need.
Conflict resolution	Correction protects the person and the community.	Direct, fair, and restorative rather than punitive.	Relatedness and autonomy.	Avoidance, favoritism, or public shaming.
Employee development	Growth is owed to image-bearers, not granted as reward.	Access to learning distributed fairly across the team.	Competence.	Development reserved for favorites or high status.
Decision-making	Choices weigh the good of those affected, not convenience.	Transparent rationale and genuine voice for followers.	Autonomy and relatedness.	Opaque, unilateral decisions that treat people as means.
Organizational culture	The leader stewards a climate of dignity and trust.	Consistent, reliable conduct that models faithful care.	All three needs.	A climate of fear, spin, or expendability.

These domains illustrate why high-quality leader-follower relationships should be cultivated not merely because they improve engagement or organizational performance, although the literature argues that they frequently do (Buch et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2021). Such relationships should be cultivated because trustworthy and developmental interactions are integral to faithful stewardship. Christian leaders must therefore address how trust is built, how feedback is communicated, how opportunities are distributed, and how correction is administered (Hart, 2025). These are among the ordinary contexts in which stewardship becomes visible. A leader who withholds development, operates with relational distance, or treats followers instrumentally may still occupy a position of

authority, yet such a leader is not practicing biblical stewardship. By contrast, leaders who cultivate respect, reliability, and developmental concern embody the moral character of entrusted authority in ways that followers can tangibly experience.

A single domain, worked through in detail, shows how much the difference matters in practice. Consider two versions of the same annual performance review with an underperforming employee. In the first, the leader assembles the metrics in advance, delivers a rating, documents the gap against target, and closes by stating the consequence if the number does not move. Nothing in that meeting is dishonest or even unkind, and it satisfies most organizational requirements for the exercise. Its logic, however, is evaluative in one direction only. The employee is an input whose output has been measured, the leader's role is to render judgment, and the relationship is the medium through which the judgment travels rather than something the meeting is meant to build.

In the second version, the leader treats the same shortfall as information about a person whose development has been entrusted to him. The conversation still names the gap plainly, because withholding an honest assessment would itself be a failure of stewardship, and confusing kindness with vagueness serves no one. What changes is what surrounds the assessment. The leader has prepared by asking what obstacles are within his own control, since a steward is accountable for the conditions he creates and not only for the results others produce. He asks the employee to diagnose the shortfall first, which supports autonomy by treating him as a responsible participant in his own development rather than the passive object of a verdict. He commits to specific instruction, resources, or coaching, which supports competence by making growth an obligation the leader carries rather than a burden the employee bears alone. He states plainly that the person's standing is not in question even though the performance is, which supports relatedness by separating the worth of the image-bearer from the adequacy of the output. He then schedules the next conversation, because faithfulness is expressed through timely and continued provision rather than through an annual verdict, which is the pattern of the steward in Luke 12:42 who gives the household its portion at the proper time.

The two meetings may produce the same rating and may address the same deficiency. They differ in what the leader understands himself to be doing. The first manages an underperforming resource. The second exercises entrusted authority over a person for whom an account will be given. This is what it means to say that stewardship reinterprets rather than replaces ordinary leadership practice, and the same analysis could be extended to each of the domains in Table 2. Delegation becomes the sharing of trust rather than the shedding of tasks, correction becomes protective rather than punitive, and the distribution of developmental opportunity becomes a matter of justice rather than of preference.

The framework further suggests that Christian leadership practice should intentionally cultivate the conditions necessary for flourishing rather than assume that goodwill alone will produce them. SDT is particularly valuable in this regard because it identifies concrete conditions that leaders may either support or frustrate. Supporting autonomy provides followers with meaningful opportunities for responsible action rather than constraining them through unnecessary control (Slemp et al., 2018). Supporting competence invests in development, instruction, and feedback so that individuals may

grow into the responsibilities entrusted to them (Ding et al., 2025; Hart, 2025). Supporting relatedness fosters relational environments in which individuals are known, respected, and connected rather than isolated or treated as interchangeable (Deci et al., 2017). When interpreted through the lens of stewardship, these practices are both practical expressions of care for persons created in the image of God and patterns confirmed by organizational research. Christian leaders should therefore ask not only whether individuals are producing results but also whether they are growing, participating meaningfully, and experiencing belonging within the organization.

This perspective is particularly relevant for leaders in churches, schools, nonprofit organizations, and commercial institutions where Christian commitments may be professed but not consistently embodied within leadership relationships. The risk of inconsistency is significant. Leaders may articulate the language of mission while exercising authority in ways that diminish trust, suppress initiative, and hinder the development of others. The stewardship framework presented in this study addresses this tension by prioritizing leadership rooted in accountability, relational faithfulness, and the flourishing of those entrusted to one's care, while also illuminating the relational dynamics described in LMX within a biblical context (Stone & Patterson, 2023). In practical terms, this means that Christian leaders should view their role less as controlling outcomes and more as cultivating environments in which individuals can develop responsibly before God and alongside others. This is a demanding vision of leadership that requires patience, discernment, and moral consistency. Yet this form of leadership most faithfully reflects the logic of stewardship found in Scripture and offers a credible witness within both sacred and secular organizational contexts.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is conceptual rather than empirical, so it offers a framework to be examined rather than findings to be generalized. Its propositions about the relationship between stewardship-oriented leadership, relational quality, and need support are theoretically grounded but remain untested in this form.

The framework also rests on interpretive commitments that others may weigh differently. It adopts a functional reading of the *imago Dei* and defends that choice, yet substantive and relational readings remain live options within the literature, and a different starting point would yield a different account of what leadership images. The definition of flourishing developed here is likewise offered as a coherent ordering rather than as the only defensible one. In addition, the biblical texts examined are drawn from a Protestant interpretive tradition, and readers working from other traditions may weigh the same passages differently.

A further limitation concerns scope. The framework was developed with organizational leadership in view, particularly settings in which leaders hold formal authority over the development and evaluation of others. Its application to peer relationships, volunteer associations, and highly decentralized structures is plausible but has not been examined here. The framework also does not address what stewardship requires when organizational demands and people's good genuinely conflict, which is among the more difficult problems facing leaders who accept its premises.

These limitations suggest several directions for future research. Empirical work could examine whether leaders who hold a stewardship understanding of authority differ measurably in the relational quality they cultivate and the psychological needs they support, which would require developing a measure of stewardship orientation distinguishable from existing servant and ethical leadership scales. Qualitative work could examine how employees actually experience stewardship-oriented leadership, since the framework claims that followers perceive the moral character of authority through ordinary interactions, and that claim is testable. Comparative work could examine whether the framework holds across sacred and secular organizational settings, and cross-cultural work could examine whether the relational and motivational pathways operate similarly where authority itself is understood differently. Finally, longitudinal work could examine whether the developmental dimensions of flourishing identified here strengthen over time under stewardship-oriented leadership, which is the framework's most consequential and least tested claim.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that a biblically grounded understanding of leadership must begin with stewardship because Scripture presents authority as entrusted rather than possessed. The creation narrative frames human responsibility as delegated care exercised under God's sovereign rule, and a close reading of its language shows that dominion is representational and that human work is service and protection of what belongs to God (Gen. 1:26–28; 2:15). The stewardship parable of Luke 12 and the Pauline requirement of faithfulness identify faithfulness as the central measure of entrusted authority and scale accountability to the trust received (Luke 12:42–48; 16:10–12; 1 Cor. 4:1–2). Viewed through this lens, human flourishing is not merely a secondary byproduct of effective leadership but an indication that leadership is being exercised faithfully toward image-bearers (Gen. 1:26–27). Contemporary leadership scholarship reinforces the practical significance of this claim by showing that leadership behavior substantially influences employee well-being, engagement, and performance (Arnold, 2017; Blake et al., 2022; Montano et al., 2021).

This study has proposed a biblical stewardship framework for leadership, arguing that entrusted authority should be understood through its relational and motivational effects on human flourishing, and that flourishing itself is an ordered reality with a governing purpose, a relational ground, several developmental dimensions, and a structural condition. LMX clarifies the relational pathway through which stewardship is experienced in trust, respect, and developmental concern between leaders and followers (Buch et al., 2014; Dulebohn et al., 2017; Rockstuhl et al., 2012). SDT explains the motivational conditions through which flourishing becomes more or less likely, particularly through the support or frustration of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2017; Ding et al., 2025; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Stewardship gives these relational and motivational dynamics their moral direction and, more than that, reinterprets their central constructs as indices of faithful authority. Within this framework, relational quality and motivational support are not only effective leadership practices; they are expressions of faithful leadership because they reflect whether entrusted authority is being used to cultivate growth, dignity, and belonging among persons under a leader's care.

Taken together, this framework contributes to Christian leadership scholarship by showing that stewardship provides the theological foundation, LMX supplies the relational mechanism, and SDT offers the motivational explanation for how leadership relationships may foster human flourishing within organizational life. It also contributes to Christian leadership practice by reframing the leader's role as the faithful care and development of others rather than as the management of organizational outcomes alone. The central conclusion is that if authority is entrusted by God and exercised by those who bear God's image, then leadership cannot be evaluated by effectiveness alone. It must also be evaluated according to faithfulness to the flourishing of those entrusted to one's care.

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