



journal of biblical
perspectives
in leadership



The Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership
is a publication of the Regent University School of Business and
Leadership

1000 Regent University Drive | Virginia Beach, VA 23464 |
757.352.4550

jbpl@regent.edu | ISSN 1941-4692 | © 2026



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FROM THE EDITOR: TWENTY YEARS OF BIBLICAL LEADERSHIP SCHOLARSHIP

Paul J. Palma
Regent University
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On behalf of Regent University's School of Business and Leadership (SBL) and the editorial board of the *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership (JBPL)*, I extend my deepest gratitude for your steadfast support.

As we celebrate our 20th anniversary, *JBPL* remains committed to exploring, engaging, and extending the field of knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon of leadership as found within the context of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Driving this issue is the ongoing conversation surrounding human flourishing, examined through the lens of steward leadership. Each contribution proudly advances our two-decade heritage of innovative leadership scholarship.

It is a privilege to continue the illustrious legacy of *JBPL* leadership alongside my co-editor, Dr. Alex Wright, our distinguished editorial review team, and our dedicated production staff. We are especially grateful to Dr. Doris Gomez for her constant support since becoming SBL's dean in 2014. In addition to her oversight and encouragement, Dean Gomez designed *JBPL*'s iconic, seamlessly symmetric logo, which remains a proud fixture on the journal's 20th anniversary.

Thanks to the support of our ever-increasing readership, at two decades in, *JBPL* is well-positioned to excel for many years ahead as the standard for robust biblical leadership scholarship. Thank you for the joy and honor of serving.

Grace and peace in the name of Christ.

Paul J. Palma



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Representing a diverse group of scholars in biblical, social-science, historical, and leadership studies, the JBPL editorial board aims to provide a much-needed multi-disciplinary and global perspective on current research and interest in biblical perspectives in the study of leadership. Each member of our diverse editorial board has been selected because of their published research, practical experience, or focused interest in exploring leadership within the Christian scriptures and its application in the many varied contexts worldwide. To contact the editorial staff, please send an email to jbpl@regent.edu.

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STEWARDING THE MACHINE: IMAGO DEI, GENESIS CREATION CARE, AND HUMAN-CENTRIC LEADERSHIP IN THE AGE OF AI

Emaneli Barresi

Organizations are more commonly integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into critical workflows, processes, and as team members to partner with technology for impact. Therefore, Christian leaders must consider what faithful technology stewardship requires. This article presents an exegetical examination of the Genesis creation narratives (1:26–28; 2:15) and the principle of the *imago Dei* as theological foundations for leadership in digitally mediated environments. Through exegesis of key passages on dominion, stewardship, work, and humanity's unique identity as image-bearers of God, the article explores distinctions between human beings and increasingly intelligent technological systems. While artificial intelligence may assist, optimize, and inform decision-making, it lacks the moral agency, accountability, or spiritual interiority uniquely granted to humanity. This distinction carries significant implications for leadership theory and organizational practice. The manuscript argues that human-centric leadership may be understood as a form of steward leadership in the age of intelligent machines, requiring leaders to intentionally design, govern, and constrain technological systems to preserve human dignity, relational depth, and organizational justice. This work contributes an exegetically grounded Christian leadership framework for responsible AI stewardship that maintains humanity at the center of technological transformation.

Keywords: *imago Dei*, artificial intelligence, human-centric leadership, technology ethics

Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming the modern workplace by mediating hiring decisions, communication flows, performance assessments, knowledge creation, and strategic direction. While these technologies promise enhanced efficiency, productivity, and innovation, they also prompt profound questions regarding human dignity, moral responsibility, and the very essence of work. Contemporary discourse on

AI often privileges technical competencies, risk management, and governance architecture, yet tends to marginalize deeper inquiries into theological anthropology and humanity's divinely bestowed vocation.

Within organizational discourse, narratives surrounding AI increasingly cast technological systems as substitutes for human labor rather than as tools designed to support and amplify human capacities. Such perspectives risk collapsing human value into mere metrics of productivity and economic output. For Christian leaders, this reductionism generates tensions that move beyond questions of organizational performance to implicate core theological concerns, namely, humanity's identity, purpose, and vocation within creation.

Genesis 1 and 2 offer a robust theological framework for interrogating these questions. The principles of *imago Dei* and creation stewardship depict humanity as uniquely fashioned to mirror God's character and to exercise responsible dominion under divine authority. These teachings underscore crucial distinctions between human persons and even the most advanced technological systems, particularly in matters of moral agency, accountability, and vocational calling.

Through exegetical engagement with the Genesis creation narratives and critical dialogue with contemporary leadership and AI literature, this article contends that human-centric leadership constitutes a renewed form of steward leadership for the era of intelligent systems. Specifically, it advances the thesis that faithful technological stewardship obliges leaders to preserve human dignity, sustain moral accountability, and ensure that technological innovation continues to serve human flourishing rather than supplanting human purpose.

This article unfolds by first interrogating AI replacement narratives and their attendant theological questions regarding human purpose, then exploring biblical perspectives on work and stewardship, investigating the distinctiveness of humanity as bearers of the *imago Dei*, evaluating the boundaries of AI's moral agency, and ultimately proposing human-centric leadership as a practical and theologically grounded framework for Christian technological stewardship.

AI REPLACEMENT NARRATIVES AND RESPONSIBILITY

The AI replacement narrative in organizational marketing and advertising subtly undermines the intrinsic value of human labor, ushering in a sophisticated form of labor arbitrage. These campaigns advance their agendas through both explicit imperatives (e.g., "stop hiring humans") and more insidious, psychologically charged strategies rooted in fear, avarice, or the allure of power (e.g., "remove bias from humans," "AI won't ask for a raise," "maximize your cost-cutting," "scale without humans").

Profit-driven marketing tactics erode worker confidence in the potential for mutually beneficial human-machine collaboration, intensifying apprehensions surrounding replacement rather than augmentation (Li et al., 2025). Organizational leaders who prioritize replacement over integration adopt a myopic, ultimately unsustainable approach marked by distrust (As'ad & Al Omari, 2025; Ozturkcan & Bozdağ, 2025). When organizations elevate efficiency and cost reduction above the well-being and intrinsic worth of their workforce, they imperil the foundation of their organizational purpose.

For Christian leaders, decision-making and biblical stewardship require transcending worldly paradigms to navigate the intricate tensions among organizational efficiency, fiscal stewardship, and a profound understanding of human purpose—by pursuing spiritual discernment and wisdom through trust in God (Prov. 3:5). When leaders anchor their decisions solely in performance metrics and financial considerations, disregarding the purposeful design inherent in the *imago Dei*, the prospect for stewarding technological adoption in a way that preserves human dignity diminishes, paving the way for the dehumanization of the workforce in pursuit of transient profitability.

The literature on responsible AI emphasizes avoiding negative consequences, reducing harm, and ensuring explainability, accountability, and privacy (Mikalef et al., 2022; Radanliev et al., 2024; Rakova et al., 2021; Taylor, 2025). Ethical examinations across religious contexts offer parallel insights that are complementary to the pervasive practical recommendations for building these systems (UI Haq, 2026; Winter, 2026). However, gaps presently exist in exploring the creation calling of Genesis, the dominion focus, and human-centric leadership concepts related to AI implementation.

IMAGO DEI AND HUMAN DISTINCTIVENESS

The distinctiveness of humanity, articulated in Genesis 1:26 through the principle of the *imago Dei*, grants Christian leaders a profound lens for apprehending the sacredness and intentionality of human design. Many theologians further discern in this text an anticipatory glimpse of the triune nature of God, underscoring humanity's relational essence and representative vocation within the created order (Kristanto et al., 2024; MacArthur, 2015, p. 6). As bearers of God's image, humans transcend mere creatureliness, being vested with divinely ordained purpose and responsibility.

The vocation of humanity to create, cultivate, and labor arises organically from this divine blueprint, preceding the Fall and affirming that purposeful work and stewardship are intrinsic to God's original intent for humankind (Bethancourt, 2024, p. 23; Kristanto et al., 2024). Adam's mandate to tend and keep the garden illustrates that labor was not punitive or incidental, but integral to God's good creation (Gen. 2:15). MacArthur (2015) contends that work imbued Adam with meaning and fulfillment prior to the advent of sin (p. 16). Consequently, labor is rightly considered greater than economic exchange, in which workers actively participate in the divine purpose for humanity.

Kristanto et al. (2024) further depict the rebirth of Christians into the new creation as a summons to participate in God's restorative work within His kingdom. Within this calling, believers are invited to meaningful engagement through labor and stewardship, thereby embodying God's redemptive purposes in their work, including the use of AI (Kristanto et al., 2024; Xu, 2025). This understanding of vocation transcends personal satisfaction, framing work as a sacred act of faithful cooperation in God's ongoing creative and redemptive activity.

As technological transformation reshapes workflows and the workplace, Christian leaders are called to rigorously harmonize their theology of creation and vocation with the design and integration of AI technologies. Escalating global anxieties regarding technological proliferation only magnify this obligation (Press, 2024). In the face of both

utopian and dystopian visions of AI (Acampa, 2025), leaders must safeguard a human-centric understanding of work that affirms humanity's singular role and stewardship within creation. Preserving proper human responsibility over technological innovation is thus indispensable to ensuring that progress serves, rather than undermines, the divine calling entrusted to humanity.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF WORK AND STEWARDSHIP

Within the creation narrative, God created humanity with a singular vocation: responsibility and stewardship over all creation. Adam, as the inaugural steward, was charged with oversight of the created order and its living inhabitants, those that came before him (Gen. 1:26–28; 2:19; Bethancourt, 2024, p. 24). Unlike all other creatures, humans are uniquely fashioned in the image of God, thereby inaugurating a sacred role of representation, responsibility, and relationality within the cosmos (Wenham, 1987). This responsibility, far from sanctioning domination for self-interest, is framed as a call to faithful stewardship under God's supreme authority.

Endowed as image bearers, humans possess divinely granted faculties for creativity, intellect, and innovation. Exercising these gifts, humanity participates in the cultivation and unfolding of creation, generating technologies and systems that amplify human potential. Contemporary advancements, ranging from artificial intelligence to robotics, epitomize the extension of this God-given creativity. However, Christian leaders are entrusted with stewardship not only of God's natural creation but also of artifacts born of human ingenuity. As technological innovations increasingly emulate human faculties, including reasoning, communication, and decision-making, their evolution and application demand deepened ethical and theological vigilance.

The unparalleled distinctiveness of humanity compels a spiritually discerning approach toward anthropomorphized technologies. No created entity, regardless of its sophistication, can claim the intrinsic worth or vocation of those who uniquely bear the *imago Dei* (Wenham, 1987, p. 29). Genesis further reveals that, even in a state of original innocence, Adam and Eve were tempted to seek autonomy and wisdom apart from divine provision (Gen. 3). The fundamental concern was not knowledge per se, but the aspiration for autonomy and insight divorced from God's design and command. In the context of human fallenness, the alluring promises attached to AI—efficiency, expanded knowledge, augmented decision-making—may similarly entice leaders toward misplaced faith, the consolidation of power, or a diminishment of authentic human responsibility.

Bethancourt (2024) contends that Christians embody God's kingdom at the intersection of purpose, passion, and divine placement. Yet, as bearers of the divine image, humanity is perpetually accountable for its decisions, with obedience marking the path to alignment with God's will (Bethancourt, 2024, p. 24). Thus, Christian leaders must earnestly pursue God's guidance, rigorously interrogating the motives, presuppositions, and potential consequences that accompany technological adoption, both independently and with wise counsel for proper accountability. Ethical leadership demands vigilant scrutiny of how AI and related technologies might amplify greed, centralize power, or engender dehumanization inconsistent with biblical convictions.

THE IMAGO DEI AS HUMAN IDENTITY

The “image” and “likeness” of God, conferred uniquely upon humanity, embody characteristics and capacities that set human beings apart within creation. Scholars frequently link the imago Dei to humanity’s moral nature, relational depth, intellect, and volition (Murphy & Knight, 2010; Wenham, 1987, p. 29). While theological perspectives vary on the precise contours of the image (Peters, 2018; Rabie-Boshoff & Buitendag, 2021), Genesis affirms humanity’s distinct vocation and identity as reflecting God’s own character and purpose within the created order. Thus, humanity’s uniqueness lies not simply in human capability but in the ontological reality of being created to embody and represent the divine.

Genesis further underscores the intentionality of human creation by depicting God as shaping humanity from the dust of the earth (2:7). Wenham (1987) observes that this imagery conveys deliberate craftsmanship and divine artistry (p. 59). Humanity is thus portrayed not as a product of chance, but as the fruit of purposeful design. In parallel, human beings use their God-given faculties of creativity, intellect, and design to develop technologies and innovations. Through these endowments, leaders construct systems and tools that profoundly shape individuals and organizations. For Christian leaders, the stewardship of technological integration must be exercised under divine authority and guided by robust ethical principles.

Despite humanity’s capacity to construct sophisticated systems and technologies, Scripture delineates unequivocal boundaries between human creativity and divine prerogative. Genesis 2:7 describes God breathing the “breath of life” (*New International Version*, 2011) into humanity, animating formed dust into a living being (Phillips, 2001; Wenham, 1987). The act of imparting life remains the exclusive domain of God, and participating in creation is both foreseen by and a gift from God (Peterson, 2016; Eph. 1:4–5; James 1:17; Jer. 1:5). While humanity may engineer technologies that mimic functions like reasoning, communication, learning, and decision-making, such feats do not amount to the creation of life or the conferral of personhood.

These theological distinctions carry profound implications for Christian leadership amid technological advancement. Anthropomorphized technologies must be regarded as subordinate instruments, never as equivalent forms of life. Accordingly, Christian leaders must exercise rigorous theological discernment when encountering narratives of AI sentience, digital personhood, or artificial life. The imago Dei is uniquely bestowed upon humanity (MacArthur, 2015, p. 6; Peterson, 2016), neither transferable nor reproducible by technological means. While AI may simulate elements of human cognition, it lacks spiritual vitality, moral consciousness, and the image-bearing identity imparted solely by God.

This distinction likewise bears significant weight for leadership accountability. Responsibility for technological outcomes cannot be abdicated to algorithms, systems, or automated processes. Human accountability remains the fulcrum of technological stewardship, as humans retain ultimate control over the systems they design and deploy. Therefore, Christian leaders must oversee technological implementation in ways that uphold human dignity, sustain ethical responsibility, and ensure that technology serves rather than supplants humanity’s divinely ordained purpose within creation.

THE LIMITS OF AI MORAL AGENCY

Artificial intelligence may increasingly demonstrate capabilities that resemble human reasoning, decision-making, and communication; however, leaders should not equate these demonstrations with moral agency. Moral agency traditionally requires more than the ability to process information or generate outcomes and involves intentionality, ethical discernment, moral responsibility, and the capacity to act in accordance with an internal understanding of right and wrong (Graves, 2023; Hallamaa & Kalliokoski, 2020). While AI systems may optimize decisions based upon patterns, probabilities, and programmed objectives, they do not possess an intrinsic moral awareness through which ethical judgments are personally understood or experienced (Barbosa & Alves Costa, 2024; Telakivi et al., 2026). Their outputs remain derivative of human design, training data, and computational processes rather than emerging from an internal moral framework.

Scripture further distinguishes humanity through characteristics that extend beyond cognitive ability alone. Humanity's creation in the image of God establishes individuals as relational, accountable, and morally responsible beings (Gen. 1:26–27). Unlike human beings, AI systems lack spiritual life, conscience, or the capacity for obedience and repentance before God (Coghill, 2023; Graves, 2023; Martín-Peña, 2024). The Genesis narrative portrays humanity as uniquely accountable for choices and actions, beginning with Adam and Eve's responsibility within creation (Gen. 3). Moral accountability was assigned to humanity rather than to any created object or tool. Consequently, technological systems that imitate aspects of human cognition should not be elevated to a status that assumes equivalent moral responsibility or personhood.

The limits of AI moral agency carry significant implications for Christian leadership and technological stewardship. Organizations may increasingly be tempted to defer difficult ethical judgments to algorithmic systems in the name of speed, efficiency, or perceived objectivity. Yet transferring responsibility to technology risks obscuring the accountability that properly belongs to human decision makers (Graves, 2023; Messer, 2025). Christian leaders must therefore retain ownership of ethical outcomes arising from technological implementation and maintain active oversight of AI-assisted decisions. Human responsibility before God cannot be delegated to machine systems, regardless of their increasing sophistication. Ethical leadership requires recognizing AI as a tool that may support decision-making processes but cannot replace the moral discernment and accountability uniquely entrusted to human image bearers.

HUMAN-CENTRIC LEADERSHIP AS INFRASTRUCTURE FOR DECISION-MAKING

The theological distinctions delineated by the principles of *imago Dei*, stewardship, and the inherent limits of AI's moral agency establish the foundation for a leadership paradigm committed to preserving humanity's divinely ordained vocation amidst technological progress. Human-centric leadership thus emerges as a principled stewardship perspective for organizational decision-making in intelligent systems. This perspective foregrounds the intrinsic dignity, value, and purpose of individuals, regarding technology as an auxiliary instrument rather than a surrogate for human responsibility (Barresi, 2025). Within Christian leadership, this vision transcends concerns of employee welfare or organizational efficiency, embodying faithful

stewardship that intentionally aligns technological integration with God's creative and redemptive purposes for humanity.

Human-centric leadership perspectives also acknowledge that technological systems are never morally neutral artifacts isolated from human agency (Dorsch & Deroy, 2024; Hampton & DeFalco, 2022; Li & Kang, 2025). Technologies are imbued with assumptions, values, priorities, and objectives through human design and governance (Hampton & DeFalco, 2022). Accordingly, leaders serve not as passive recipients but as active stewards, remaining ultimately accountable for the ramifications of technological implementation. Opposing views that assign independent agency or leadership authority to technological systems are in contrast with and distort biblical anthropology by obscuring the unique moral responsibility entrusted to human beings (Billsberry, 2026; Peters, 2025). Since AI lacks authentic moral agency and spiritual accountability, ethical responsibility cannot be transferred to algorithms or automated processes. Christian leaders must therefore deliberately cultivate technological environments that promote relational depth, protect human dignity, and establish accountability structures that avert dehumanization and resist the centralization of power.

Interpreted through the lens of the Genesis creation narrative, human-centric leadership embodies humanity's foundational vocation to cultivate and steward creation under divine authority. Adam's commission to tend and keep the garden exemplifies leadership rooted not in domination but in responsible cultivation and vigilant care (Gen. 2:15). In today's technological context, this stewardship imperative summons leaders to cultivate organizational ecosystems in which innovation elevates human flourishing. Human-centric leadership thus constitutes an intentional and principled methodology for guiding and governing technological advancement in a manner that sustains humanity and coheres with God's creative and redemptive purposes.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERS

Christian leaders endeavoring to steward artificial intelligence faithfully should anchor their decisions in the theology of creation as found in Genesis, as well as in the principles of human-centric leadership. The following practical recommendations offer concrete ways to ensure that the integration of AI upholds human dignity, responsible stewardship, and the core ethical commitments of the Christian tradition.

Prioritize Human Augmentation Over Replacement

Christian leaders should prioritize assessing and deploying artificial intelligence to augment human capabilities, avoiding supplanting human contribution. Leaders should assess technological initiatives by discerning whether they truly enrich human labor or, conversely, undermine meaningful participation, agency, and contribution. While efficiency remains a valid organizational aim, Christian leaders must judiciously balance prospective gains against the potential diminishment of purpose, dignity, interpersonal connection, and opportunities for individuals to exercise their God-given capacities.

Sustain Robust Human Accountability Structures

Organizations must preserve transparent and robust frameworks of human accountability. Decisive actions, especially those about hiring, performance evaluation, healthcare, financial outcomes, or ethical risk, must remain firmly within the domain of human responsibility. While automated recommendations and algorithmic insights may inform deliberations, they must never entirely supplant prudent human judgment. Leaders should be vigilant not to abdicate ultimate authority or moral responsibility to technological systems, particularly when the stakes involve individuals' welfare, communal wellbeing, or the integrity of the organization itself.

Undertake Rigorous Theological and Ethical Impact Assessments

Prior to deploying AI systems, Christian leaders must conduct thorough theological and ethical impact assessments. Such assessments should probe the underlying assumptions of each system, discern which individuals or communities might be vulnerable to unintended harm or marginalization, and ascertain whether the proposed implementation genuinely upholds human dignity. Leaders must also reflect on whether the technology enables meaningful work or, conversely, has the potential to diminish opportunities for human participation, responsibility, creativity, and vocation with the intention to mitigate impacts. This evaluative process equips organizations to discern whether their use is consonant with ethical and theological convictions.

Design for Relational Transparency and Connectivity

Christian leaders should conceive technological processes with a view toward sustaining relational transparency and authentic human connection. They must remain cognizant of the risk of permitting technology to estrange individuals or substitute meaningful exchange; leaders must cultivate systems that encourage genuine dialogue, collaboration, and interpersonal engagement. Moments for empathy, mentorship, compassionate presence, and sincere relationships should be deliberately woven into both the design and the enactment of technological initiatives to maintain a human-centric focus.

Establish Robust AI Stewardship Practices

Organizations must establish formal stewardship protocols for artificial intelligence to ensure the principled deployment of emerging technologies. Such protocols might include articulating institutional AI charters that delineate permissible uses, accountability standards, transparency benchmarks, and the contours of human oversight. Thoughtful governance safeguards the alignment of AI systems with organizational values, ethical imperatives, and the enduring obligation to uphold human dignity.

Cultivate Spiritual and Practical Discernment among Leaders

Christian leaders are called to cultivate both spiritual and practical discernment in communal ways as they navigate the organizational complexities of AI-related decisions. Wisdom, in this context, must be pursued through prayer, attentive engagement with Scripture, and wise counsel of the faith community, avoiding an

uncritical reliance on technological prediction, data analysis, or optimization. Technological considerations should remain subordinate to higher theological and ethical priorities—such as faithfulness, wisdom, justice, stewardship, and the inviolability of human dignity.

CONCLUSION

As AI revamps organizational processes and leadership considerations, Christian leaders confront questions that transcend mere technical capability, reaching into the heart of theological identity and vocational responsibility. The Genesis creation narrative offers a foundational lens for navigating these complexities, rooting humanity's role in the principles of the *imago Dei* and stewardship. Human beings are fashioned to embody God's image through responsible cultivation, relational depth, and moral accountability.

This exegetical inquiry contends that, despite the accelerating sophistication of technological capabilities, artificial intelligence remains categorically distinct from humanity. While AI may simulate aspects of reasoning, communication, and decision support, it lacks the moral agency, spiritual interiority, and Godward accountability intrinsic to human image-bearers. Thus, ethical responsibility for technological outcomes remains firmly anchored in the domain of human leadership.

Accordingly, human-centric leadership emerges as a faithful expression of stewardship in the era of intelligent systems. Christian leaders are summoned to adopt technological innovation with spiritual discernment, ensuring that technological systems remain subordinate to humanity's God-given vocation and purpose. Ultimately, the pressing challenge for Christian leaders is how humanity will steward its creations in ways that faithfully mirror the character and intentions of the Creator. Technological progress, when severed from human dignity, risks dehumanization; by contrast, technological stewardship rooted in faithful leadership may cultivate environments in which innovation serves both human flourishing and God's redemptive purposes.

About the Author

Dr. Emi Barresi is a Doctor of Strategic Leadership, human-centric leadership expert, and future-focused digital ethicist with more than 20 years of technology development and leadership experience. With a background in industrial-organizational psychology, she has led transformation across technology-enabled environments, including Agile implementation, digital integration, and remote team development. She is the author of *The HEARTH Leadership Framework* and creator of the HEARTH Team Leadership model. Dr. Barresi also contributes to HR.com, serves on the editorial board of JBPL, peer-reviews academic research, mentors women leaders, and serves on the board of a Christian ministry.

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STEWARDED INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS: A FRAMEWORK FOR LEADERSHIP IN THE AGE OF AI

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Artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithmic decision systems are increasingly shaping organizational practices and influencing outcomes that affect human lives. From employment decisions to financial approvals and healthcare recommendations, intelligent systems now participate in domains historically governed by human judgment. This shift introduces new ethical and leadership challenges related to accountability, human dignity, and the stewardship of decision-making systems. While leadership theories such as transformational, servant, and stewardship leadership provide valuable frameworks for influence and responsibility, they were largely developed prior to the widespread integration of AI in organizational decision processes. This article introduces the concept of augmented leadership, a perspective that reframes leadership as a partnership between human judgment and intelligent systems while maintaining human accountability. Grounded in a biblical theology of stewardship (e.g., Gen. 1:28; Matt. 25:14–30) and contemporary leadership theory, this study argues that leaders must actively steward intelligent systems to ensure outcomes that promote human dignity and flourishing understood through the lens of the *imago Dei*. This article contributes a needed theological and leadership framework for guiding organizations in the ethical governance of artificial intelligence.

Contemporary leadership has historically been understood as a human-centered activity, with leaders influencing followers toward shared goals. Classical and contemporary leadership theories, including transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Burns, 1978), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), stewardship leadership (Davis et al., 1997), and authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), generally assume that decision-making authority resides primarily within human leaders who guide, direct, and inspire others. However, the rapid emergence of artificial intelligence has begun to alter this paradigm in profound ways. Today, decisions that affect individuals and organizations are increasingly shaped by algorithmic systems

embedded within everyday operations. These systems evaluate creditworthiness, recommend medical treatments, screen job applicants, detect fraud, and optimize strategic and operational outcomes. As a result, leadership is no longer confined to human-to-human influence but now exists within a broader, more complex ecosystem that includes intelligent systems acting as intermediaries in decision-making processes. These developments reflect broader technological shifts in which data-driven systems increasingly shape social and organizational life (Crawford, 2021; Zuboff, 2019).

This shift raises a fundamental question: Who is responsible when decisions are made through systems rather than solely by individuals? While algorithms can process vast amounts of data with speed and efficiency, they do not possess moral agency, ethical reasoning, or accountability. Yet their outputs increasingly shape real-world consequences for individuals and communities. This creates a tension between technological capability and moral responsibility, one that cannot be resolved by technical expertise alone.

Traditional leadership theories provide valuable guidance on influence, ethics, and responsibility, yet they do not fully address the complexities introduced by AI-driven decision-making. The delegation of decision authority to intelligent systems creates an accountability gap, one in which outcomes are produced by machines, but responsibility remains ambiguously distributed among designers, operators, and organizational leaders. This diffusion of responsibility reflects a growing concern in contemporary AI governance literature (Crawford, 2021). Without a clear framework, leaders risk either over-relying on systems or distancing themselves from the consequences those systems produce.

This article proposes that leadership must evolve to address this new reality. Specifically, it introduces Augmented Leadership, a leadership framework that re-conceptualizes leadership as the stewardship of human–AI decision partnerships, in which leaders retain moral responsibility while intentionally partnering with intelligent systems to enhance decision-making capacity. Unlike digital leadership, which focuses on leading digital transformation; human-AI collaboration, which emphasizes interaction between humans and intelligent systems; responsible AI leadership, which primarily addresses governance and ethical AI deployment; or algorithmic leadership, which examines leadership exercised through algorithms, Augmented Leadership centers on the leader's continuing moral accountability for decisions made in partnership with intelligent systems. Grounded in a biblical theology of stewardship, this perspective argues that leaders are responsible not only for people but also for the systems that shape outcomes affecting human lives. In doing so, leadership expands beyond influence to include the ethical stewardship and governance of intelligent systems in ways that uphold human dignity and promote human flourishing.

Accordingly, the primary contribution of this article is not merely the application of existing leadership theories to artificial intelligence but the introduction of a stewardship-based leadership framework that locates moral responsibility with human leaders even as intelligent systems assume an increasingly active role in organizational decision-making.

LITERATURE REVIEW: LEADERSHIP IN TRANSITION

Transformational leadership has long been regarded as one of the most influential frameworks for understanding how leaders drive organizational change and performance. Originally conceptualized by Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bass and Avolio (1994), transformational leadership emphasizes the capacity of leaders to inspire and motivate followers toward higher levels of achievement. Through dimensions such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, leaders foster environments where individuals transcend self-interest in pursuit of collective goals. This model has proven particularly effective in contexts requiring innovation, adaptability, and cultural transformation.

A central strength of transformational leadership lies in its focus on human potential and relational influence. Leaders are seen as catalysts for change who shape meaning, align values, and inspire commitment. However, the framework assumes that leadership operates primarily through direct or indirect human interaction. Decision-making authority, while influenced by systems and structures, ultimately resides within human agents. In an era where algorithmic systems increasingly shape outcomes, this assumption becomes less stable. Transformational leadership does not explicitly address how influence operates when decisions are mediated, or even initiated, by intelligent systems.

Servant leadership, introduced by Greenleaf (1977), offers a complementary perspective by emphasizing the moral and ethical responsibility of leaders to serve others. Rather than prioritizing organizational outcomes alone, servant leaders focus on the growth, well-being, and development of followers. Spears (1995) further articulated key characteristics of servant leadership, including empathy, stewardship, and commitment to the growth of people. This model aligns closely with biblical principles, emphasizing humility, service, and care for others (Keller, 2012), and reflecting broader theological understandings of leadership as stewardship before God (Wright, 2010). It provides a strong ethical foundation for leadership, particularly in contexts where human dignity and relational trust are central.

Despite its strengths, servant leadership also assumes that leadership operates within human-centered interactions. While it emphasizes care and responsibility, it does not explicitly address how leaders should engage with non-human agents such as artificial intelligence systems. As organizations increasingly rely on algorithmic tools to make or inform decisions, the question arises: how does a servant leader “serve” in a system where outcomes are shaped by machines? The framework does not fully account for the ethical responsibilities associated with designing, deploying, and overseeing intelligent systems.

Stewardship leadership provides a particularly relevant lens for examining leadership responsibility in complex organizational contexts. Davis et al. (1997) described stewardship as a model in which leaders function as caretakers of organizational resources, prioritizing long-term value and collective well-being over short-term self-interest. This perspective aligns closely with biblical teachings on stewardship, which emphasize responsibility, accountability, and faithful management of entrusted resources (Van Duzer, 2010; Wright, 2010). Stewardship leadership expands the scope of leadership beyond influence to include ethical governance and accountability.

However, like transformational and servant leadership, stewardship theory was developed in a context where decision-making authority remained predominantly human. While it emphasizes responsibility for resources and outcomes, it does not fully address the complexities introduced by autonomous or semi-autonomous systems. In contemporary organizations, leaders are not only stewards of people and resources but also of the systems that increasingly shape decision outcomes. This shift requires a reexamination of what stewardship entails in technologically mediated environments.

The emergence of artificial intelligence introduces new dynamics that challenge traditional leadership assumptions. Algorithmic systems often operate as “black boxes,” reducing transparency in decision processes (O’Neil, 2016). Accountability becomes diffused across multiple actors, including developers, data scientists, and organizational leaders, making it difficult to determine responsibility when outcomes are harmful or unjust (Crawford, 2021). Additionally, biases embedded in data can lead to discriminatory outcomes, raising ethical concerns about fairness and justice in automated decision-making (Zuboff, 2019). These challenges highlight the limitations of existing leadership frameworks in addressing the ethical and governance implications of AI. Heifetz et al. (2009) argued that adaptive leadership becomes essential when organizations face complex challenges without clear precedents. The emergence of AI-driven systems represents precisely this kind of adaptive challenge.

Taken together, transformational, servant, and stewardship leadership provide valuable insights into influence, service, and responsibility. While these theories were developed before the widespread integration of intelligent systems into organizational decision-making, their core principles remain highly relevant. However, they do not explicitly address how leaders should exercise accountability, stewardship, and ethical oversight when decision-making is increasingly mediated by intelligent systems. Rather than replacing these established theories, Augmented Leadership extends and integrates their foundational principles by incorporating the leadership responsibilities associated with governing human–AI decision partnerships. In doing so, it offers an expanded framework for leadership in organizational environments increasingly shaped by intelligent systems.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF STEWARDSHIP

The concept of stewardship is deeply rooted in Scripture and provides a theological foundation for understanding leadership as a form of entrusted responsibility under God. Rather than viewing leadership solely as authority or influence, a biblical perspective frames leadership as the faithful management of what ultimately belongs to God. This includes not only people and material resources but also the systems and structures that shape human outcomes. As technology increasingly mediates decision-making, stewardship must be reconsidered in light of these developments, expanding its scope to include the governance of intelligent systems.

Dominion as Stewardship

The foundation of stewardship is established in the creation narrative. In Genesis 1:28, humanity is commanded to “fill the earth and subdue it” (*New International Version*, 2011) and to exercise dominion over all living things. While the language of

dominion has sometimes been interpreted as permission for exploitation, a broader theological reading reveals that it reflects delegated authority under God's ultimate sovereignty. Humanity is not the owner of creation but its caretaker, entrusted with responsibility to manage it in alignment with God's purposes (Wright, 2010).

Genesis 2:15 further clarifies this role, stating that humanity was placed in the garden "to work it and keep it." The Hebrew terms used here convey both cultivation and protection, suggesting that stewardship involves both development and preservation. Leadership, therefore, is not merely about achieving outcomes but about ensuring that those outcomes reflect care, responsibility, and alignment with divine intent. This dual responsibility is particularly relevant in the context of artificial intelligence, where systems are designed to optimize efficiency but may unintentionally compromise ethical or human-centered values. Wolters (2005) emphasized that stewardship reflects humanity's participation in God's restorative purposes within creation rather than domination for self-interest. This broader theological vision challenges organizations to evaluate intelligent systems according to their contribution to restoration and flourishing.

From this perspective, dominion is best understood as stewardship exercised through accountability to God. Leaders function as intermediaries who manage resources and systems on behalf of a higher authority. This reframing challenges purely utilitarian approaches to leadership and calls for a more holistic understanding of responsibility that includes ethical and spiritual dimensions (Wright, 2010).

Accountability in Stewardship

The principle of accountability is central to biblical stewardship and is vividly illustrated in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30). In this parable, servants are entrusted with resources by their master and are later required to give an account of how they managed what was given to them. The faithful servants are commended not merely for preserving resources but for actively engaging and multiplying them. In contrast, the servant who fails to act is held accountable for neglecting his responsibility.

This narrative underscores that stewardship is not passive but active and intentional. It involves decision-making, risk, and responsibility for outcomes. Importantly, accountability is not diminished by delegation. Even though the servants were given autonomy, they remained responsible for the results of their actions.

In contemporary organizational contexts, this principle extends beyond physical and financial resources to include technological systems. When leaders deploy artificial intelligence to inform or make decisions, they are effectively entrusting part of the decision-making process to those systems. However, this delegation does not absolve leaders of responsibility. Just as the servants in the parable were accountable for how they managed their entrusted resources, leaders remain accountable for the outcomes produced by the systems they oversee.

This has significant implications for leadership in the age of AI. The presence of intelligent systems does not eliminate accountability; rather, it intensifies the need for clear responsibility. Leaders must ensure that the systems they implement are aligned with ethical principles and are continuously monitored for their impact on individuals and communities.

Human Dignity and the Imago Dei

A central theological principle that must guide leadership is the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, the belief that human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). This doctrine establishes the inherent dignity, worth, and value of every individual, independent of productivity, status, or utility. Middleton (2005) argued that the *imago Dei* is not merely an individual attribute but a vocational calling tied to humanity's responsibility to reflect God's character within creation. This perspective reinforces the ethical responsibility leaders bear when deploying systems that shape human outcomes. As such, any leadership approach must prioritize the protection and promotion of human dignity.

Christian anthropology further distinguishes human beings from intelligent systems by recognizing that, although artificial intelligence may simulate aspects of reasoning and decision-making, it does not possess moral agency, conscience, or the capacity to bear responsibility before God. Human beings alone are created in the image of God and are therefore uniquely entrusted with moral judgment, accountability, and the vocation of stewardship. Consequently, while intelligent systems may assist in analysis and decision-making, they cannot assume the ethical responsibility associated with leadership. That responsibility remains with human leaders, whose decisions must reflect wisdom, justice, and care for those affected by the systems they oversee.

From this perspective, technology should not be viewed as an autonomous decision-maker but as an entrusted resource to be cultivated, governed, and directed toward God's purposes. Like other organizational resources, intelligent systems require faithful stewardship to ensure they promote human flourishing rather than undermine the dignity of those created in the image of God. This understanding reinforces the central premise of Augmented Leadership: artificial intelligence may augment human decision-making, but it cannot replace the moral accountability that belongs uniquely to human leaders.

In the context of artificial intelligence, this principle becomes particularly significant. Algorithmic systems often operate based on patterns derived from data, which can include biases or historical inequalities (Suresh & Gutttag, 2021). When such systems produce outcomes that disadvantage certain individuals or groups, the issue extends beyond technical error to a violation of human dignity. As O'Neil (2016) argued, algorithmic models can perpetuate systemic inequities when left unchecked, reinforcing the need for ethical oversight.

From a biblical perspective, leadership must ensure that systems do not reduce individuals to data points or mere inputs in decision-making processes. Instead, leaders are called to recognize and uphold the intrinsic value of each person as an image-bearer of God. This requires intentional design, evaluation, and governance of intelligent systems to ensure that they promote justice, fairness, and human flourishing.

Ultimately, the integration of stewardship, accountability, and the *imago Dei* provides a comprehensive theological framework for leadership in the age of artificial intelligence. Leaders are not only responsible for guiding people but also for stewarding the systems that influence human lives. In doing so, they fulfill their role as stewards of

both creation and innovation, ensuring that technological advancement serves, rather than diminishes, the dignity and flourishing of humanity.

THE RISE OF INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

Artificial intelligence has transitioned from a theoretical concept to a pervasive force embedded within organizational life. Across industries, intelligent systems are now actively shaping decisions that were once the exclusive domain of human judgment. In finance, algorithms determine creditworthiness and detect fraud. In healthcare, machine learning models assist in diagnosing diseases and recommending treatment plans. In human resources, automated systems screen résumés and rank candidates for employment. Recent organizational developments further illustrate this transition. IBM reported significant efficiency gains through AI-driven HR systems capable of handling routine employee inquiries and administrative functions (Maurer, 2025). While these technologies reduced the need for some transactional HR roles, human leaders continued to retain responsibility for oversight, employee relations, organizational culture, and ethical decision-making. This distinction highlights a broader organizational reality: intelligent systems may automate processes, but they do not eliminate the need for accountable leadership. Together, these developments illustrate a broader shift in which decision-making is increasingly mediated by data-driven systems rather than solely by human deliberation. Leonardi (2021) noted that digital technologies increasingly mediate organizational relationships and decision-making processes, further expanding the leadership implications of intelligent systems.

The appeal of these systems lies in their ability to process vast amounts of information with speed and consistency. Organizations leverage artificial intelligence to improve efficiency, reduce costs, and enhance predictive accuracy. However, as reliance on these systems grows, so too does their influence over outcomes that carry significant human consequences. Decisions related to employment, financial access, and healthcare are not merely operational; they directly impact individuals' lives and opportunities.

Despite their advantages, intelligent systems introduce a range of challenges that complicate traditional understandings of leadership and accountability. One such challenge is the issue of transparency. Many advanced algorithms operate as "black boxes," producing outputs without clear explanations of how decisions are reached (O'Neil, 2016). This lack of explainability makes it difficult for leaders to fully understand or justify the decisions generated by these systems.

A second challenge is the diffusion of accountability. When outcomes are produced through complex systems involving data inputs, model design, and automated processes, responsibility becomes distributed across multiple actors, including developers, analysts, and organizational leaders (Crawford, 2021). This diffusion can create ambiguity regarding who is ultimately responsible for decisions that result in harm or inequity. Russell (2019) warned that intelligent systems must remain aligned with human values and subject to meaningful oversight. This concern reinforces the leadership responsibility to steward technological systems rather than passively defer to them.

Finally, intelligent systems can embed and amplify existing biases present in data. As Zuboff (2019) suggested, data-driven systems often reflect historical patterns,

which may include systemic inequalities. Without intentional oversight, these systems risk reinforcing disparities rather than correcting them.

Taken together, these developments signal a fundamental transformation in how decisions are made within organizations. Leadership must therefore adapt to a reality in which authority is no longer exercised solely through direct human action but through the design, deployment, and governance of intelligent systems. This shift necessitates a redefinition of leadership responsibility, one that accounts for both human and technological dimensions of decision-making. These developments also align with broader concerns regarding surveillance, data power, and the societal implications of algorithmic governance (Zuboff, 2019).

AUGMENTED LEADERSHIP: A NEW FRAMEWORK

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence into organizational decision-making requires a reexamination of leadership itself. As decisions are no longer made exclusively by human agents but are increasingly mediated through intelligent systems, leadership must evolve to account for this expanded environment. Existing leadership theories emphasize influence, service, and responsibility, yet they do not fully address the role of leaders in governing systems that actively shape outcomes. In response to this gap, this article introduces the concept of Augmented Leadership (AL).

Defining Augmented Leadership

AL can be defined as the practice of leading in partnership with intelligent systems, where partnership refers to the complementary integration of human and machine capabilities rather than shared moral agency or responsibility. Humans provide judgment, values, and accountability, while intelligent systems contribute analysis, speed, and scale. This definition emphasizes that artificial intelligence does not replace leadership but rather extends its scope. Leadership becomes a hybrid activity in which human and technological capabilities are integrated, yet moral responsibility remains firmly rooted in the human leader. This distinction is critical. While intelligent systems can generate recommendations or even automate decisions, they lack moral agency and cannot be held accountable for outcomes. As Bostrom (2014) noted, advanced systems may surpass human capabilities in specific domains, but they do not possess intentionality or ethical reasoning. Therefore, the presence of AI does not diminish the need for leadership; instead, it heightens the responsibility of leaders to ensure that systems are aligned with ethical and organizational values. Vallor (2016) argued that emerging technologies require the cultivation of moral wisdom and virtue rather than mere technical competence. AL similarly emphasizes that intelligent systems increase rather than diminish the need for ethical discernment.

Leadership as Human-System Partnership

Emerging research on Human–AI Teams (HAT) recognizes that organizational performance increasingly depends on complementary interactions between human expertise and intelligent systems. Rather than replacing human decision-makers, AI contributes computational capabilities while humans provide contextual reasoning,

ethical judgment, and accountability (Dellermann et al., 2019; Seeber et al., 2020). Similarly, sociotechnical systems theory emphasizes that organizational effectiveness depends on the joint optimization of social and technical systems rather than treating technology as an independent determinant of outcomes (Baxter & Sommerville, 2011; Trist & Bamforth, 1951). These perspectives provide an important foundation for understanding technology-enabled work but devote comparatively less attention to the theological and moral responsibilities of leaders who govern these human–AI relationships. AL reframes leadership as a partnership between human actors and intelligent systems. In this partnership, each contributes distinct capabilities. Machines excel at processing large volumes of data, identifying patterns, and generating predictive insights. Humans, by contrast, provide contextual understanding, ethical judgment, and accountability. Effective leadership emerges not from choosing between human or machine decision-making but from integrating both in a manner that enhances outcomes while preserving human responsibility.

This partnership introduces a shift in how authority is exercised. Leaders no longer act solely as decision-makers but also as designers, overseers, and interpreters of system-driven outputs. They must understand how systems function, evaluate their limitations, and intervene when necessary. This requires a new set of competencies, including technological literacy, ethical discernment, and interpretive judgment, which are increasingly recognized as essential in data-driven leadership environments (Crawford, 2021). Building on insights from Human–AI Team and sociotechnical systems research, AL extends these perspectives by locating ultimate moral accountability with the human leader, even as intelligent systems assume an increasingly active role in organizational decision-making.

Core Principles of Augmented Leadership

To operationalize this framework, AL is guided by five core principles:

1. *Human Accountability Remains Central:* Regardless of the level of automation, leaders are ultimately responsible for decisions and their consequences. Delegation to systems does not eliminate accountability; it redistributes the means through which decisions are made.
2. *Ethical Alignment of Systems:* Leaders must ensure that intelligent systems are designed and deployed in ways that reflect ethical and theological principles. This includes evaluating data sources, model assumptions, and potential biases embedded within systems.
3. *Transparency and Explainability:* Decisions influenced by AI should be understandable and defensible. Leaders must prioritize systems that allow for explanation and interpretation, particularly when outcomes affect individuals' lives.
4. *Protection of Human Dignity:* Systems must be evaluated based on their impact on individuals created in the image of God. Efficiency and optimization cannot come at the expense of fairness, justice, or dignity.
5. *Continuous Stewardship and Oversight:* Leadership is not a one-time act of implementation but an ongoing process of monitoring, evaluating, and refining intelligent systems to ensure alignment with desired outcomes.

These five principles are assessed and operationalized in Table 1.3

Table 1

Operationalizing the Core Principles of AL for AI-Mediated Environments

Core principle	Leadership behavior	Governance practice	Key decision question
Human accountability remains central	Accept responsibility for AI-assisted decisions	Maintain human oversight and approval for consequential decisions	Who is accountable if this decision causes harm?
Ethical alignment of systems	Evaluate AI against organizational and biblical values	Review data sources, model assumptions, and bias assessments	Does this system reflect our ethical commitments?
Transparency and explainability	Require understandable AI recommendations	Use explainable AI and document decision rationale	Can this decision be explained and defended to those affected?
Protection of human dignity	Consider the human impact before implementation	Conduct fairness and impact assessments	Does this decision uphold the dignity of every individual?
Continuous stewardship and oversight	Monitor system performance and intervene when necessary	Establish governance reviews, audits, and continuous monitoring	Should this system continue operating as designed, or does it require adjustment?

Note. This framework operationalizes the five core principles of Augmented Leadership (AL) for application in AI-mediated organizational decision-making environments.

Expanding the Scope of Leadership Responsibility

AL expands the scope of leadership beyond influencing people to include governing the systems that influence people. This expansion is consistent with a biblical understanding of stewardship, in which leaders are entrusted not only with resources but also with the structures and processes that shape human experiences. As technological systems become more integrated into organizational life, they effectively become part of the environment that leaders are called to steward.

This shift also addresses the accountability gap introduced by AI. Rather than viewing systems as independent actors, AL situates them within the sphere of human responsibility. Leaders are accountable not only for the decisions they make directly but also for the decisions made through the systems they design, implement, and oversee.

Rodriguez (2026) describes this emerging tension as the responsibility gap, where organizations increasingly rely on intelligent systems while accountability remains fundamentally human.

Bridging Tradition and Innovation

Importantly, AL does not replace existing leadership theories but extends and integrates them to address leadership in AI-mediated organizational environments. It extends transformational leadership by incorporating technological mediation into influence processes. It reinforces servant leadership by ensuring that intelligent systems serve people rather than diminish human dignity. It deepens stewardship leadership by expanding the concept of entrusted responsibility to include the ethical governance of intelligent systems.

In doing so, AL bridges established leadership principles with the realities of contemporary organizational life. It affirms that while the tools through which leadership is exercised may evolve, the leader's moral responsibility remains unchanged: to steward people and intelligent systems in ways that promote human flourishing.

ETHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The integration of artificial intelligence into organizational decision-making introduces profound ethical and theological challenges that extend beyond technical considerations. While intelligent systems offer efficiency and predictive capability, they also reshape the moral landscape in which leaders operate by influencing decisions that carry significant human consequences. As decision-making becomes increasingly mediated by intelligent systems, leaders are no longer responsible solely for their own judgments but also for the ethical design, oversight, and governance of the systems that contribute to those judgments. This expanded responsibility requires new forms of stewardship while preserving the leader's ultimate moral accountability. AL requires a reexamination of responsibility, agency, and the nature of ethical decision-making in environments increasingly influenced by non-human actors.

One of the most pressing concerns is the accountability gap created by algorithmic decision-making. As organizations increasingly integrate artificial intelligence into hiring, lending, healthcare, finance, and other high-impact decision processes, leaders are relying on intelligent systems at unprecedented levels. According to the Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence (2025), AI adoption continues to expand across organizations worldwide, with businesses increasingly embedding AI into core operational and strategic decision-making. As this reliance grows, responsibility for outcomes can become diffused across developers, data scientists, vendors, organizational leaders, and automated systems. When outcomes are generated through complex systems involving data inputs, model design, and automated processes, accountability may become obscured, increasing the risk that responsibility is attributed to "the system" rather than to those who authorized, implemented, and oversee its use. However, from both an ethical and theological perspective, such displacement of responsibility is untenable. As established in biblical stewardship, accountability cannot be transferred to tools or mechanisms; it remains with those entrusted to lead. Leaders are therefore responsible not only for the

decisions they make directly but also for those produced through systems they authorize and deploy.

A second critical issue is the question of moral agency. Artificial intelligence systems, regardless of their sophistication, do not possess consciousness, intentionality, or moral reasoning. As Nick Bostrom (2014) noted, advanced systems may simulate decision-making but lack true ethical judgment. This distinction reinforces the necessity of human oversight. Leaders must interpret and evaluate system outputs rather than accept them uncritically. Ethical decision-making remains a uniquely human responsibility, requiring wisdom-based judgment rather than purely computational reasoning (Bostrom, 2014). Wright (2010) noted that ethical decision-making is ultimately rooted in character formation rather than rule compliance alone. This insight highlights the continuing necessity of human moral judgment even within highly automated environments.

Theologically, these challenges are grounded in the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, which affirms that every human being is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). This principle establishes an ethical boundary for the use of technology: systems must not reduce individuals to mere data points or instrumental variables within optimization processes. When algorithmic systems produce biased or unjust outcomes, the issue is not solely technical but moral. As Cathy O'Neil (2016) demonstrated, data-driven models can perpetuate inequality when left unchecked, disproportionately impacting vulnerable populations. Leaders must therefore ensure that systems are evaluated not only for accuracy and efficiency but also for their impact on human dignity and justice.

Additionally, the rise of intelligent systems raises questions about justice and fairness in organizational contexts. Decisions influenced by algorithms may appear objective, yet they often reflect underlying assumptions embedded within data and model design. Kate Crawford (2021) highlighted how AI systems can encode and amplify social and economic inequalities. From a biblical perspective, leadership is called to pursue justice and righteousness, particularly for those who may be disadvantaged or marginalized. This responsibility requires leaders to critically examine system outputs and intervene when outcomes conflict with ethical or theological principles. Floridi and Cowls (2019) similarly argued that AI governance must be grounded in principles such as beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, and explicability. These concerns closely parallel biblical commitments to human dignity, justice, and responsible stewardship.

Ultimately, the ethical and theological implications of AI reinforce a central truth: technology does not absolve leaders of responsibility; it intensifies it. As intelligent systems become more integrated into decision-making processes, leaders must exercise greater intentionality in ensuring that these systems align with values that uphold human dignity, promote justice, and contribute to flourishing. In this way, leadership in the age of artificial intelligence becomes not less moral, but more so, demanding deeper engagement with both ethical reasoning and theological reflection.

A PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR AI STEWARDSHIP

A Practical Framework for AI Stewardship: The FLAME Model

To operationalize AL, this article applies the previously developed FLAME Framework (Rodriguez, 2026)—a structured leadership audit and governance model for AI-mediated decision-making. While AL provides the conceptual framework for understanding leadership in partnership with intelligent systems, FLAME serves as its practical implementation model by guiding leaders in evaluating and governing decisions within intelligent environments. FLAME integrates the dimensions of Future, Leadership, Analytics, Morality, and Ethics to provide a multidimensional approach to responsible oversight. As organizations increasingly rely on artificial intelligence, leaders face complex decisions where data, responsibility, human impact, and ethical considerations intersect. In this article, FLAME is applied to demonstrate how the principles of AL can be translated into practical leadership behaviors and governance practices.

Future

The first dimension, Future, defines direction and purpose. Leadership decisions must be guided not only by immediate outcomes but by the long-term impact they create. Intelligent systems can optimize efficiency, but they cannot determine what kind of future an organization should pursue. Leaders must ask whether decisions contribute to human flourishing, expand opportunity, and promote dignity. This aligns with a stewardship perspective in which leadership is oriented toward sustaining and improving creation over time.

Leadership

Leadership establishes responsibility. Regardless of the level of automation, accountability remains with human leaders. As intelligent systems participate in decision-making, authority and control may become distributed, but responsibility does not disappear. Leaders must own outcomes, provide justification for decisions, and ensure that systems operate within appropriate boundaries. Failure to do so creates the risk of an agentic shift of accountability, in which responsibility is implicitly transferred to intelligent systems or diffused across designers, developers, vendors, and organizational stakeholders. Such displacement weakens ethical oversight, undermines trust, and erodes the leader's responsibility to steward decisions affecting human lives. This dimension reinforces that leadership is inseparable from accountability, particularly in environments shaped by automated processes.

Analytics

Analytics represents the informational foundation of decision-making. Intelligent systems provide leaders with unprecedented access to data, insights, and predictive capabilities. However, data alone does not constitute understanding. Leaders must interpret analytics within context, recognizing both the strengths and limitations of algorithmic outputs. This dimension emphasizes that while systems can inform decisions, they cannot replace human judgment.

Morality

Morality guides what is right. Within the FLAME Framework, morality refers to the internal moral principles, character, and values that shape a leader's understanding of right and wrong. Leaders must evaluate decisions not only according to organizational performance but also according to principles of justice, fairness, truthfulness, and the impact on individuals and communities. Grounded in the biblical doctrine of the imago Dei (Gen. 1:27), morality affirms the inherent dignity of every person and provides the internal compass through which data, insights, and recommendations generated by intelligent systems are interpreted. Scripture further emphasizes that moral leadership begins with the condition of the heart rather than merely outward compliance (Prov. 4:23; Matt. 15:18–20). This distinction is particularly important in AI-mediated environments, where algorithmic outputs may appear objective while reflecting hidden assumptions or embedded biases (O'Neil, 2016).

Ethics

Ethics focuses on responsible action and implementation. While morality establishes the internal convictions that guide leaders toward what is right, ethics concerns the practical application of those convictions through organizational decisions, governance structures, policies, and accountability mechanisms. Leaders must ensure that decisions can be justified, that processes remain transparent, and that safeguards are established to prevent harm and promote justice. In this way, ethics translates moral conviction into responsible organizational practice, ensuring that leadership values are consistently reflected in the design, deployment, and oversight of intelligent systems.

Applying FLAME to AI-Driven Hiring Systems

Consider an organization implementing an AI-driven hiring system designed to screen résumés and rank candidates for employment (Dastin, 2018). While the system may improve efficiency and reduce administrative workload, leaders must evaluate its use through multiple dimensions of stewardship and accountability.

From the perspective of Future, leaders must consider the long-term organizational and societal consequences of allowing automated systems to shape employment opportunities, including their impact on workforce diversity, organizational culture, and human flourishing.

Through Leadership, accountability remains with organizational leaders rather than the system itself. Leaders are responsible for approving the system's deployment, establishing governance policies, and retaining the authority to suspend or discontinue its use whenever evidence of unacceptable bias, unexplained outcomes, or ethical concerns emerges.

The Analytics dimension requires leaders to evaluate the quality, representativeness, and limitations of the data used to train and operate the system. Historical hiring data should be evaluated for demographic bias, system performance should be monitored using predefined fairness metrics, and independent audits should

be conducted at regular intervals to identify performance drift or unintended discriminatory outcomes.

Morality calls leaders to consider the dignity and fairness afforded to applicants created in the image of God. Candidates must not be reduced to algorithmic scores detached from their humanity, potential, or unique circumstances.

Finally, Ethics focuses on implementation and oversight. Organizations should maintain transparent documentation of how hiring decisions are made, provide applicants with meaningful opportunities to request human review or appeal adverse decisions, and ensure that governance committees periodically evaluate the system's continued alignment with organizational values, legal requirements, and ethical principles.

Through this framework, FLAME demonstrates how intelligent systems can be governed responsibly while preserving human dignity, organizational accountability, and faithful stewardship.

Integrating FLAME with Augmented Leadership

The FLAME Framework translates the concept of AL into actionable practice. While AL defines the relationship between human leaders and intelligent systems, FLAME provides a structured process through which AI-assisted decisions are evaluated, governed, and monitored. As illustrated in the AI-driven hiring example, leaders apply the framework by evaluating long-term organizational impact (Future), retaining accountability for decisions (Leadership), validating data quality and model performance (Analytics), protecting human dignity through moral discernment (Morality), and implementing governance mechanisms such as transparency, human review, and periodic audits (Ethics). Together, AL and FLAME provide a comprehensive model for leadership in the age of artificial intelligence that integrates purpose, responsibility, data, moral judgment, and ethical action to promote human flourishing.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As a conceptual article, this study proposes AL as a theological and leadership framework for understanding human responsibility in AI-mediated organizational decision-making. While the framework is grounded in existing leadership theory, biblical theology, and contemporary AI governance literature, it has not yet been empirically tested. Consequently, the effectiveness, usability, and generalizability of AL and its operationalization through the FLAME Framework remain areas for future investigation.

Future research should examine the framework across diverse organizational contexts and industries to evaluate its practical application and effectiveness. Empirical studies may explore whether AL improves decision quality, ethical oversight, trust in AI-assisted decision-making, leadership effectiveness, and organizational outcomes. Additional research should investigate the leadership competencies required to steward intelligent systems responsibly, the relationship between AL and existing leadership theories, and the applicability of the framework across diverse cultural, organizational, and regulatory environments. Longitudinal and comparative studies would further strengthen understanding of how leaders develop the capabilities necessary to govern

human–AI decision partnerships while preserving accountability and promoting human flourishing.

CONCLUSION

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence into organizational life has fundamentally altered the context in which leadership operates. Decisions that shape human lives are increasingly influenced by intelligent systems, creating new challenges related to accountability, ethics, and human dignity. While existing leadership theories provide valuable insights into influence, service, and responsibility, they do not fully address the complexities introduced by AI-driven decision-making. This gap necessitates an expanded understanding of leadership, one that encompasses not only the guidance of people but also the stewardship of systems.

This article introduced the concept of AL, emphasizing that leadership in the age of artificial intelligence is not diminished but expanded. Leaders must operate in partnership with intelligent systems while retaining full moral responsibility for outcomes. Grounded in biblical stewardship, this perspective affirms that authority is always accompanied by accountability, regardless of the tools through which decisions are made.

To translate this perspective into practice, the FLAME Framework was presented as a structured model for evaluating decisions within intelligent environments. By integrating Future, Leadership, Analytics, Morality, and Ethics, FLAME provides leaders with a comprehensive approach to navigating the tensions between technological capability and human responsibility. It ensures that decisions are not driven solely by efficiency or data but are guided by purpose, accountability, and a commitment to human flourishing.

Ultimately, the question is not whether machines can make decisions, but how leaders will steward those decisions. As intelligent systems continue to evolve, the need for ethically grounded, theologically informed leadership becomes increasingly critical. Leadership in this context is not about relinquishing control to technology but about guiding its use in ways that uphold dignity, promote justice, and reflect faithful stewardship. In doing so, leaders fulfill their call to serve not only organizations but humanity itself. This ensures that technological advancement remains aligned with human values rather than reshaping them without accountability (Crawford, 2021; Zuboff, 2019).

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FROM FAITH TO STEWARDSHIP: EXAMINING THE MEDIATING ROLE OF MOTIVATION TO LEAD IN THE PATH FROM GENERAL RELIGIOSITY TO FORMAL LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Alexander M. Ehms, Cole Lipiec, Dylan Apson, and Edgar De Leon

Stewardship is a calling, one that requires conviction, purpose, and a willingness to serve. Oftentimes, our religious beliefs instill a deep sense of responsibility to lead. This study examines how general religiosity influences the likelihood of holding a formal leadership position, proposing that Motivation to Lead (MTL) serves as the pathway through which faith inspires leadership. Using survey responses from working adults in the United States, our findings reveal that individuals with stronger religious beliefs are more likely to step into leadership roles, a pattern driven by two key motivational forces: Affective-Identity and Social-Normative motivations to lead. Those who see leadership as part of their identity and those who feel a moral obligation to lead are significantly more likely to occupy formal leadership positions. However, a willingness to lead without concern for personal gain, reflected in Non-Calculative motivation to lead, was not a significant predictor of leadership attainment, suggesting that leadership often requires more than just selfless intent; leadership requires a clear sense of purpose and responsibility. Our findings reinforce the biblical narrative that stewardship is a calling and a sacred duty.

Keywords: faith-based leadership, religiosity, calling to lead, Christian leadership, organizational leadership, motivation to lead

Leadership, in the Christian sense, is not a prize to be won nor a pedestal to climb. Godly leaders do not call the loudest, nor do they seek the spotlight. Instead, these leaders recognize that greater responsibility brings greater accountability before God (Luke 12:48). Leadership, therefore, is not a privilege to be pursued for personal gain but a sacred responsibility for which leaders will ultimately give an account.

Research has long established a link between general religiosity and prosocial behaviors. Ellison (1992) found that more religious individuals are more likely to exhibit interpersonal friendliness and cooperation. Similarly, Smith (1999) reported a positive relationship between religiosity and civic engagement, while Mattis et al. (2000) demonstrated that religiosity is associated with greater volunteerism. While previous research has examined the role of faith in shaping moral character and ethical decision-making, few studies have explored how religiosity influences leadership motivation and emergence in workplace settings (cf. King, 2008). Given that leadership requires guiding, mentoring, and supporting others, it is plausible that religiosity cultivates leadership aspirations and helps determine why one chooses to lead.

Although faith and religiosity are conceptually distinct, they are closely intertwined. Faith refers to an individual's theological beliefs and personal relationship with God. In contrast, religiosity reflects the extent to which those beliefs are internalized and expressed through religious commitment, identity, and practice. Because faith is inherently internal and difficult to observe directly, scholars frequently operationalize it through measures of religiosity that assess the centrality of religious beliefs in an individual's life. Accordingly, the present study examines general religiosity as an empirical indicator of lived faith, while recognizing that it does not capture all dimensions of spirituality.

Christianity offers a unique perspective on leadership, one that stands in stark contrast to the world's definition. Jesus Christ redefined greatness by teaching that true leadership is expressed through humble service to others (Matt. 20:26). Through this lens, leadership is not about rising above others but about how to lift them up. We propose that general religiosity cultivates leadership aspirations by influencing the underlying motivations that drive individuals to step forward. Motivation to Lead (MTL), as conceptualized by Chan and Drasgow (2001), is not a singular construct but a combination of three distinct forces that shape how individuals perceive and approach leadership.

For some, leadership is deeply personal. Affective-Identity MTL describes individuals who view leadership as an intrinsic part of their identity and who find purpose and fulfillment in guiding others. This motivation aligns with the Christian concept of calling, as believers are encouraged to use their God-given gifts in faithful service to others as stewards of His grace (1 Pet. 4:10). Those with strong religious convictions may naturally align with this perspective, seeing leadership not as a career move but as a divinely ordained vocation.

For others, leadership is less about personal desire and more about obligation. Social-Normative MTL reflects individuals who step forward not because they seek leadership but because they believe leading is the right thing to do. Likewise, Scripture portrays leadership as a sacred responsibility, calling leaders to faithfully care for those entrusted to them and to exercise stewardship with diligence and integrity (Prov. 27:23). Leadership, in this view, is a moral responsibility that must be taken seriously, not for personal gain, but for the well-being of others.

Finally, there are those who readily assume leadership, not because they desire power or feel obligated, but because they see an opportunity to serve. Non-Calculative MTL describes individuals who step into leadership without weighing the personal costs or benefits. Rather than asking, what do I gain from this? They ask, how can I

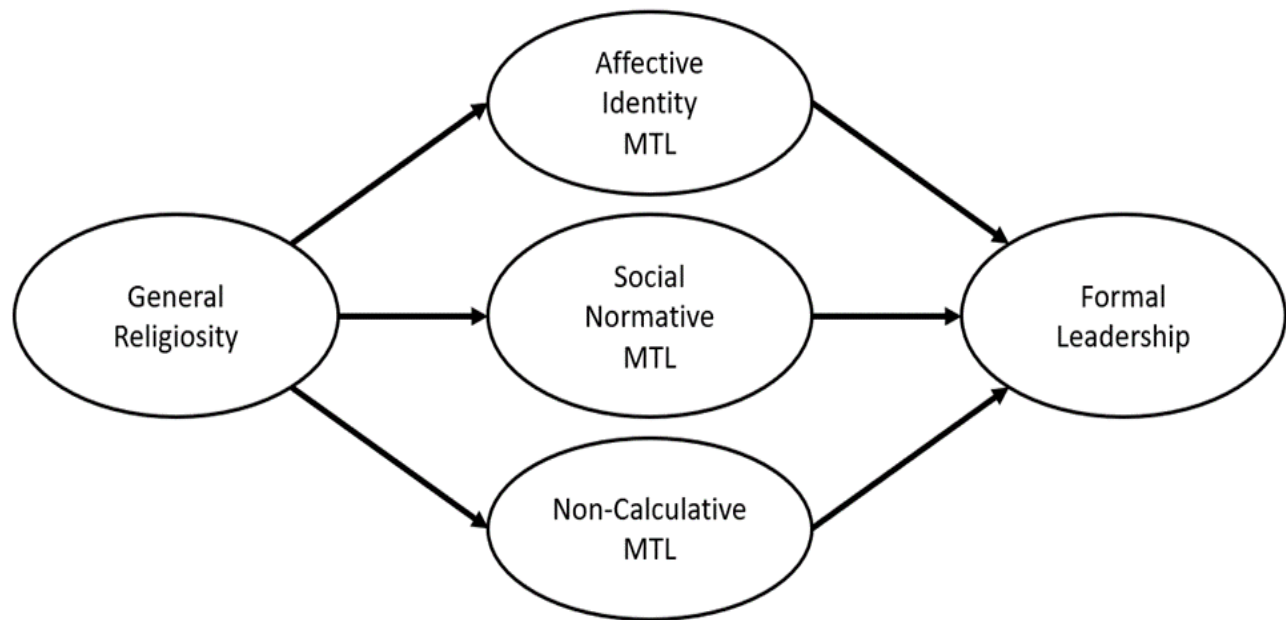
contribute? This perspective reflects the biblical call to place the interests of others above one's own, choosing humble service over personal advancement and accepting leadership without regard for personal reward (Phil. 2:3–4). Together, these motivations form a framework for understanding why people lead, whether through identity, obligation, or selfless service.

If religiosity fosters these three leadership motivations, the final question is whether religiosity ultimately translates into leadership attainment. Research suggests that those highly motivated to lead, particularly those driven by Affective-Identity and Social-Normative motivations, are significantly more likely to pursue and obtain formal leadership roles within organizations (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). This suggests that religiosity not only inspires the desire to lead but may also influence those who step into leadership positions.

This study makes three key contributions to leadership research. First, the study builds on existing scholarship on faith and leadership, examining the link between religiosity, leadership motivation, and leadership attainment, an area underexplored in organizational studies. Second, the study sheds light on how faith influences the path to leadership, showing that MTL serves as the bridge between belief and action.

Finally, this study speaks directly to the role of faith in leadership and workplace culture, offering insight into how religious values intersect with inclusion and leadership development. While cases of religious discrimination have increased (Ghumman et al., 2013), our findings suggest that religiosity should not be viewed solely as a source of division in the workplace, but as a factor that can cultivate strong, prosocial leadership. Christian values of servant leadership, humility, and moral responsibility may offer organizations a framework for developing leaders who prioritize ethical decision-making, stewardship, and the well-being of others. For our complete theoretical model, please see Figure 1.

This paper follows a structure by building the theoretical foundation, exploring how general religiosity connects to MTL and the likelihood of attaining leadership roles. We present our hypotheses and explain our methodology, including how participants were selected, the measurement instruments used, and the analytical process. The results section outlines our findings on whether MTL serves as a bridge between religiosity and leadership attainment. In the discussion, we interpret these results, considering both theoretical insights and practical applications. We conclude by outlining key takeaways for those interested in applying biblical principles to the leader selection process.

Figure 1*The Mediation Pathway Linking Religiosity to Formal Leadership*

THEORY & HYPOTHESES

Religiosity shapes self-perception and confidence in leadership roles. Identity theories suggest that individuals who see themselves as leaders are more likely to pursue and attain leadership positions (Lord & Hall, 2005). Religious individuals often integrate faith into their self-concept, viewing service, guidance, and responsibility as part of their moral duty. This internalized leadership identity may explain why some researchers are of the mindset that religiosity translates into greater leadership aspirations and actual leadership attainment (King, 2008). Thus, one observes:

Hypothesis 1:

General religiosity is positively associated with occupying a formal leadership position. Building on the proposed direct relationship between general religiosity and leadership attainment, the following examines the motivational mechanisms by which faith may translate into formal leadership roles. Drawing on the multidimensional framework of MTL, we argue that religiosity shapes leadership emergence by strengthening individuals' leadership identity, reinforcing moral and social obligations to lead, and fostering a willingness to assume leadership responsibilities without concern for personal gain. Together, these motivational pathways offer a theoretically grounded explanation for how religious commitment moves beyond values and beliefs to influence concrete leadership outcomes, forming the basis for Hypotheses 2a through 2c.

Leadership is a quiet inheritance. For those shaped by faith, leadership does not begin with a title or a formal lesson but begins in the spaces where conviction meets action. A pastor standing firm when others waver. An elder whose few words carry the weight of experience. Leadership is observed before it is understood, experienced

before it is claimed. The foundation has already been laid in ordinary moments that hardly seemed to matter at the time. These moments, repeated over time, shape an individual's sense of social norms. Social learning theory suggests that people absorb behaviors by watching others (Bandura, 1986), and in religious settings, leadership is always on display. Leadership becomes not just an aspiration but an expectation. Leadership is something that is seen, understood, and eventually embraced. Likewise, Scripture emphasizes that individuals grow through the influence and refinement of one another, reinforcing the idea that leadership in faith communities is learned through observation, mentorship, and example (Prov. 27:17).

But leadership is more than observation. It is also identity. Rooted in symbolic interactionism, role identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2022) posits that people become who they are through the roles they assume and the expectations associated with those roles. In faith communities where service is woven into daily life, leadership often emerges not as an ambition but as an instinct. Small acts like sharing special music with the congregation or volunteering to lead the intercessory prayer do not come with titles or recognition. However, these experiences shape identity nonetheless, reinforcing the quiet pull toward something greater than the self. Each act strengthens the perception of leadership as part of one's identity, weaving leadership into the fabric of the individual. Likewise, Scripture encourages believers to live in a way that reflects God's character so that their actions point others to Him (Matt. 5:16). As individuals faithfully live out their calling, leadership often emerges naturally through the influence of their example.

At its core, leadership is more than identity or the result of social normative expectations; leadership is a reflex and a willingness to act without hesitation or expectation of reward. The Meaning-Making Model (Park, 2013) suggests that people strive to align their values with their actions, reducing the tension between belief and lived experience. For religious people, leadership is not a pursuit but a response, an expression of faith that takes shape in the moments when action is needed most. Whether guiding a congregation, uniting a community, or standing for justice, these acts are not about seeking recognition. They are a way of making belief tangible, ensuring that faith is not merely professed but lived, even in a world that continually challenges our faith. This principle is reflected in Scripture, where Christian leaders are called to shepherd those entrusted to their care willingly, serve eagerly rather than for personal gain, and lead by example rather than by exercising authority over others (1 Pet. 5:2–3). As such, leadership is not an achievement or a means to an end. Leadership is an outpouring of faith; an offering made without consideration of personal cost. Leadership is not about authority but about responsibility, taken up not for self-interest but for love of others. Those who answer this call do so not because they calculate the benefits, but because they cannot imagine doing otherwise. Thus:

Hypothesis 2a

Affective-Identity MTL mediates the relationship between general religiosity and occupying a formal leadership position, such that individuals with higher religiosity are more likely to develop a strong leadership identity, which in turn increases the likelihood of holding a formal leadership role.

Hypothesis 2b

Social-Normative MTL mediates the relationship between general religiosity and occupying a formal leadership position, such that individuals with higher religiosity feel a greater sense of duty to lead, which in turn increases the likelihood of holding a formal leadership role.

Hypothesis 2c

Non-Calculative MTL mediates the relationship between general religiosity and occupying a formal leadership position, such that individuals with higher religiosity are more willing to assume leadership responsibilities without concern for personal gain, which in turn increases the likelihood of holding a formal leadership role.

METHODS

The study began with 360 participants, each recruited through Pollfish, a survey platform renowned for its vast global network of over 250 million voices spanning 160 countries. To ensure the study's relevance, only adults aged 18 and older, residing in the United States and actively employed, were invited to participate. Yet, as with any rigorous research, some participants were excluded from the final sample. Some exclusions were immediate. Twenty-six participants reported being unemployed, thereby disqualifying them from the final count. Others were subtler: 42 individuals, despite initially participating, reported disengaging toward the end of the survey, suggesting that their responses lacked the honest, accurate reflections necessary for meaningful insights. Six participants faltered on the attention checks embedded in the survey to distinguish the truly attentive from those merely clicking through.

By the end of this careful curation, 74 participants had been excluded, leaving a refined and reliable final sample of 286, with a robust 79.44% retention rate. These remaining voices spanned the full spectrum of experience, ranging in age from 19 to 79, with an average age of 40.38 years ($SD = 14.82$). Gender distribution was nearly even, with 50.35% identifying as male and 49.65% as female. Their backgrounds were equally diverse: 74.13% identified as Caucasian, 16.43% as Black, 3.50% as Asian, 2.45% as Hispanic, and the remaining 3.50% either selected "other" or preferred not to disclose their ethnicity. Furthermore, given our study's focus on leadership, 59.79% of participants identified as holding a formal leadership position in their current workplace.

Measures

All survey items were rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) unless otherwise indicated. All items were self-reported.

General Religiosity was measured by asking participants to complete a six-item scale originally developed by Shariff et al. (2008) and later refined by Ritter and Preston (2011). The scale exhibited strong internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.94$). Participants responded to items such as "I strongly believe in the teachings of my religion or faith" and "My religion or faith holds significant importance in understanding who I am as a

person.” Questions designed to go beyond religious affiliation, instead probing the extent to which faith shaped personal identity and worldviews.

MTL was measured using an abbreviated version of the scale originally developed by Chan and Drasgow (2001). Given the nature of the present study, shortening the instrument was both a methodological necessity and a strategic decision to reduce participant burden while maintaining data quality. Although shortening validated scales may reduce construct coverage, Gabriel et al. (2019) suggested that this risk can be minimized through the careful selection of items that adequately represent the underlying construct. Consistent with established recommendations for shortening validated instruments, item reduction should preserve the theoretical breadth of the construct rather than rely solely on internal consistency (Stanton et al., 2002) and should be guided by both psychometric performance and conceptual representation (Goetz et al., 2013). Because the three-dimensional structure of the MTL construct has been consistently supported in the literature (Badura et al., 2020), three items were retained for each of the original dimensions—Affective-Identity, Social-Normative, and Non-Calculative motivations—based on their theoretical relevance, psychometric performance, and ability to preserve the conceptual integrity of the original scale.

Affective-Identity MTL ($\alpha = 0.90$) was measured using the statements “I often prefer being a leader rather than a follower when working in a group,” “I usually want to be the leader of a group,” and “I tend to take charge in most groups or teams.”

Social-Normative MTL ($\alpha = 0.82$) was measured using the statements “I agree to lead whenever I am asked or nominated by other members,” “I believe in the value of leading others,” and “I volunteer to lead others if I can.”

Non-Calculative MTL ($\alpha = 0.76$) was measured using the statements “I will lead a group even if there are no clear advantages to leading,” “I never ask ‘what’s in it for me’ when deciding to lead,” and “I never expect to get more privileges for leading.”

Formal Leadership (i.e., whether participants held a formal leadership role) was measured by asking them to respond to the question: “Do you currently occupy a formal leadership position within the hierarchical structure of your organization, with responsibilities that include overseeing and managing other staff members?” While multi-item scales are typically preferred for measurement reliability, prior research supports using single-item measures in specific contexts where they effectively capture the intended construct (e.g., Conway et al., 2009).

Attention Checks were included in the study to account for the limited cognitive resources of participants and their potential to engage in satisficing instead of providing optimal responses to survey questions. Examples of these items include “Please select somewhat disagree” and “Please choose somewhat agree for your response to this item.”

Demographics such as age and gender often shape how individuals experience the workplace, subtly influencing behaviors, decisions, and interactions. In this study, these demographic factors were included as control variables, allowing for a more precise examination of the key relationships at play. Pollfish, the survey platform, had already gathered this information before participants even reached the questionnaire. This ensured that each respondent’s age and gender were seamlessly integrated into the dataset, eliminating the need for additional questioning.

RESULTS

The descriptive statistics and correlations for all study variables are presented in Table 1. As expected, general religiosity ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.69$) was positively associated with all three forms of MTL. Individuals who reported higher levels of religiosity were more likely to express a stronger leadership identity ($r = .26$, $p < .01$), a heightened sense of duty to lead ($r = .35$, $p < .01$), and a willingness to assume leadership roles without weighing personal costs ($r = .25$, $p < .01$). Religiosity was also significantly correlated with actually holding a formal leadership position ($r = .25$, $p < .01$), suggesting that faith may play a role in leadership attainment.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	40.38	14.82	(1.0)						
2. Gender	0.50	0.50	-.04	(1.0)					
3. General religiosity	4.62	1.69	-.03	.09	(.94)				
4. Affective-Identity	4.65	1.58	-.10	.14*	.26**	(.90)			
5. Social-Normative	5.14	1.33	.10	.11	.35**	.64**	(.82)		
6. Non-Calculative	4.86	1.35	.09	.06	.25**	.60**	.70**	(.76)	
7. Formal leadership	0.60	0.49	-.05	.20**	.25**	.32**	.34**	.24**	(1.0)

Note. $N = 286$. Means and standard deviations are reported in the raw metric of the variables. Cronbach's alpha is reported in parentheses in the diagonal.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Looking at the interplay between leadership motivations, Affective-Identity MTL showed a strong relationship with Social-Normative MTL ($r = .64$, $p < .01$) and Non-Calculative MTL ($r = .60$, $p < .01$), reinforcing the idea that those who see leadership as part of their identity often also feel a duty to lead and are willing to do so without concern for personal benefit. All three forms of motivation were significantly linked to the Formal Leadership position, with the strongest effects observed for the Social-Normative ($r = .34$, $p < .01$) and Affective-Identity ($r = .32$, $p < .01$) motivations.

Among the control variables, gender (coded as 0 = Female, 1 = Male) was positively correlated with holding a formal leadership role ($r = .20$, $p < .01$), indicating that men in the sample were more likely than women to occupy leadership positions. Age, however, showed no significant relationships with general religiosity, leadership motivation, or formal leadership, suggesting that leadership aspirations and attainment were not strongly tied to age differences in this sample.

Table 2 presents the regression analyses examining the effects of general religiosity on the three dimensions of MTL—Affective-Identity, Social-Normative, and Non-Calculative motivations. Across all models, general religiosity emerged as a significant predictor of leadership motivation, reinforcing the idea that faith may inspire individuals to take on leadership roles.

Table 2
Effects of General Religiosity on Motivation to Lead

	Affective identity		Social normative		Non-calculative	
Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Constant	0.00 (0.06)	0.00 (0.06)	0.00 (0.06)	0.00 (0.06)	0.00 (0.06)	0.00 (0.06)
Age	-0.09 (0.06)	-0.09 (0.06)	0.10 (0.06)	0.11 (0.06)	0.09 (0.05)	0.10 (0.05)
Gender	0.13 (0.06)	0.11 (0.06)	0.11 (0.06)	0.08 (0.06)	0.06 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)
General religiosity		0.24 (0.06)***		0.35 (0.06)***		0.25 (0.06)***
R^2	0.03	0.09	0.02	0.14	0.01	0.07
ΔR^2		0.06		0.12		0.06

Note. $N = 286$. Table presents standardized β coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

For Affective-Identity MTL, which reflects an intrinsic desire to lead, general religiosity was positively associated ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < .001$; Model 2). This suggests that individuals with strong religious beliefs are more likely to see leadership as part of their identity, supporting the notion that faith instills confidence in one's ability to guide others. A similar pattern emerged for Social-Normative MTL, which captures a sense of duty and obligation toward leadership. General religiosity was the strongest predictor in this domain ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .001$; Model 4), suggesting that highly religious individuals may feel a greater responsibility to step into leadership roles. For Non-Calculative MTL, which reflects a willingness to lead without concern for personal gain, general religiosity was again a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < .001$; Model 6). This indicates that more religious individuals are likely to assume leadership roles without focusing on personal costs or rewards, aligning with Christian principles of selfless service and humility in leadership.

Among the control variables, age and gender did not show consistent effects across the models, with no significant relationships emerging for leadership motivation dimensions. This suggests that religiosity, rather than demographic characteristics, is a more meaningful driver of leadership motivation in this sample. Taken together, these findings provide compelling evidence that general religiosity significantly influences all three components of MTL.

Table 3 presents the regression analyses examining the extent to which general religiosity and MTL predict the likelihood of occupying a formal leadership position. The results provide important insights into the direct and mediated effects of religiosity on leadership attainment.

In Model 7, gender was a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < .01$), indicating that men were more likely than women to hold formal leadership positions. In Model 8, general religiosity was positively associated with holding a formal leadership position (β

= 0.24, $p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. This suggests that individuals with higher religiosity scores were more likely to occupy formal leadership roles, even when controlling for demographic factors. Model 9 assessed the mediating effects of Affective-Identity, Social-Normative, and Non-Calculative motivations. When these variables were included in the model, the direct effect of general religiosity on leadership role occupancy weakened but remained significant ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < .05$), suggesting partial mediation. Notably, Affective-Identity MTL ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < .05$) and Social-Normative MTL ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < .05$) were both significant predictors of holding a formal leadership position, supporting Hypotheses 2a and 2b.

However, Non-Calculative MTL was not significantly associated with formal leadership role occupancy ($\beta = -0.04$, $p > .05$), meaning Hypothesis 2c was not supported. This suggests that while religiosity may encourage a willingness to lead without concern for personal gain, such motivation does not necessarily translate into obtaining a formal leadership position. Overall, these findings indicate that general religiosity influences leadership attainment both directly and indirectly through leadership motivation, particularly through the Affective-Identity and Social-Normative motivations. The non-significant effect of Non-Calculative MTL suggests that individuals who lead without weighing personal costs may not be as likely to secure formal leadership positions, possibly because leadership selection processes often reward individuals who actively seek and take ownership of leadership roles.

Table 3

Effects of General Religiosity and Motivation to Lead on Formal Leadership

Variables	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Constant	0.00 (0.06)	0.00 (0.06)	0.00 (0.05)
Age	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.05)
Gender	0.20 (0.05)**	0.18 (0.06)**	0.14 (0.05)*
General religiosity		0.24 (0.05)***	0.14 (0.06)*
Affective identity MTL			0.16 (0.07)*
Social normative MTL			0.21 (0.09)*
Non-calculative MTL			-0.04 (0.08)
R^2	0.04	0.10	0.18
ΔR^2		0.06	0.08

Note. $N = 286$. Table presents standardized β coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that higher levels of general religiosity are associated with leadership motivation and attainment. Within the Christian theoretical framework developed in this paper, these findings are interpreted as consistent with the influence of faith on leadership. When individuals report higher levels of religiosity, they are more likely to see themselves as leaders and to feel a sense of moral responsibility to lead. These are not minor psychological effects; they are identity-shaping forces that manifest into real-world leadership attainment. For administrators and particularly those in Christian institutions, this raises a compelling question: Does our leadership selection process align with the values we claim to uphold?

Too often, formal leadership roles are awarded based on visibility, self-promotion, or strategic ambition; characteristics that do not necessarily reflect the type of non-calculative leadership Christ modeled. Those motivated by faith may lead quietly, out of a deep sense of duty, not for reward or recognition, and yet, the findings of this study would suggest that this selfless motivation is not associated with leadership attainment. These individuals may be overlooked precisely because they are not pursuing leadership for personal gain. Their commitment is not rooted in what they can achieve, but in whom they serve.

This calls for a rethinking of how we recognize and elevate leaders. Administrators should begin by questioning their criteria: Are we rewarding boldness more than humility? Are we mistaking charisma for character? Are we unintentionally reinforcing secular leadership norms in spaces that should be governed by spiritual discernment?

The story of David's anointing demonstrates that God does not evaluate leaders by outward appearance but by the condition of their hearts (1 Sam. 16:7). Even the prophet Samuel initially judged Eliab by his impressive stature, yet God chose David because He saw qualities that were invisible to human eyes. In the same way, Christian institutions must develop the eyes to see leaders the way God sees them. Not by resumes or rhetoric, but by the condition of the heart. That discernment requires more than interviews or CVs; it calls for spiritual attentiveness and a willingness to elevate those who may never seek power but are already faithfully leading in quiet ways.

Scripture doesn't leave us without structure. 1 Timothy 3:1–13 outlines the characteristics of worthy leaders—integrity, faithfulness, humility, and self-control—not flashy talent or public visibility. These are measurable not through performance reviews, but through sustained relationships, community witness, and spiritual fruit. If a candidate's leadership flows from faith, that flow should be evident in how they live, not just in how they speak.

This study invites practitioners to do more than analyze. This study calls for action. Administrators need to create space for leadership to emerge organically from service. Paying attention to those who lead through example, not title. And most importantly, we need to ensure that institutional practices reflect the kind of leadership the faith proclaims; leadership that seeks not to be served, but to serve.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. Most notably, religiosity was operationalized using a general measure of religious belief and personal faith importance rather than a construct specifically designed to capture the Christian spiritual orientation. This, unfortunately, makes it difficult to assess the nuanced ways in which Christian faith shapes leadership identity, moral obligation, and stewardship. Christianity emphasizes distinct spiritual principles such as humility and sacrificial service that may not be fully captured by generalized religiosity scales. As a result, the strength and nature of the observed relationships may differ when faith is measured through constructs more closely aligned with Christian theology.

Future research would benefit from the use of scales such as the Christian Religious Internalization Scale (Ryan et al., 1993) or the Christian Spirituality Scale (Biaggi, 2018) in studies that seek to replicate these findings and provide further empirical evidence for the theoretical arguments in this paper. Such constructs may offer greater explanatory power in understanding how Christian values translate into leadership motivation and leadership emergence. By moving beyond general religiosity, scholars can better capture the mechanisms through which Christian faith shapes leadership behavior and organizational influence.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps no biblical figure better illustrates the findings of this study than Nehemiah, a man whose leadership was neither inherited nor sought for personal glory, but emerged from conviction, prayer, and deep responsibility. Nehemiah was not a priest, prophet, or military general. He was a cupbearer—a civil servant in exile. And yet, when he learned that the walls of Jerusalem lay in ruin, he did not wait for a title or commission. He wept. He fasted. He prayed. And then he acted.

What is striking is how closely Nehemiah's story mirrors the type of leadership motivation explored in this research. He is moved not by self-interest, but by duty (Social-Normative MTL). His sense of identity is entwined with his faith and his people (Affective-Identity MTL). And while he shows little concern for recognition or reward, he accepts the burdens of leadership because the work must be done (Non-Calculative MTL). At every step, Nehemiah grounds his decisions in faith, not ambition, and earns his influence through character and consistency.

For today's administrators, especially in Christian institutions, Nehemiah's story is more than an inspiring tale. Nehemiah's story is a model. The leaders worth elevating may not be the ones who campaign for visibility, but the ones who quietly carry burdens no one else will. They are often the ones praying behind closed doors, serving when no one is watching, and leading without a platform. They may not fit institutional molds, but they carry within them the very essence of biblical leadership. Like Nehemiah, they do not need recognition to lead; they need only a cause, a call, and the courage to say yes. In a world where leadership is often equated with visibility and control, this research is a reminder that in the Christian tradition, the path to leadership begins with surrender, sacrifice, and service. The challenge for administrators is to build systems that can see that path clearly and honor it.

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Together, the authors share a commitment to faith, leadership, and service.

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STEWARD LEADERSHIP AND HUMAN FLOURISHING IN CLINICAL MENTAL HEALTH SUPERVISION: A BIBLICALLY INTEGRATIVE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Margaret A. Robertson

Clinical mental health supervision is one of the most influential leadership relationships within the helping professions because supervisors shape professional competence, ethical decision-making, counselor identity development, and ultimately client welfare. Although contemporary supervision literature increasingly emphasizes competency-based education, reflective practice, and evidence-informed leadership, supervision is often conceptualized primarily as an educational or administrative responsibility rather than as an exercise of entrusted moral leadership. This conceptual article argues that steward leadership provides a biblically grounded and theoretically integrative framework for understanding clinical supervision as leadership exercised on behalf of supervisees, clients, organizations, and society. Drawing from an exegetical examination of Genesis 2:15, Matthew 20:25–28, and 1 Peter 5:2–3, the article develops a biblical theology of stewardship characterized by entrusted authority, faithful service, accountability, and the promotion of flourishing. These theological principles are integrated with stewardship theory, servant leadership, authentic leadership, transformational leadership, competency-based supervision, instructional design, and adult learning scholarship to propose the Steward Leadership Framework for Clinical Mental Health Supervision. The framework identifies four interdependent supervisory responsibilities—formation, protection, accountability, and service—that collectively foster supervisee professional growth, ethical clinical practice, client flourishing, organizational flourishing, and ultimately human flourishing. The article concludes by discussing implications for supervisor education, leadership scholarship, behavioral health organizations, and future research.

Keywords: clinical supervision, steward leadership, servant leadership, competency-based supervision, biblical leadership, human flourishing, counselor education

Clinical supervision is central to the behavioral health professions because it develops competent, ethical, and reflective clinicians. Beyond monitoring clinical performance, supervision fosters professional identity, ethical decision-making, reflective practice, and client protection through mentoring, evaluation, and competency development (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; Falender & Shafranske, 2021). As behavioral health systems face workforce shortages, expanding service demands, broader scopes of practice, and clinician burnout, the need for well-prepared supervisors has become increasingly urgent (Health Resources and Services Administration [HRSA], 2023; National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2024; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2023; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022).

Contemporary supervision has shifted from apprenticeship models toward competency-based education that emphasizes intentional instructional design, observable competencies, developmental assessment, deliberate practice, and structured feedback (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Falender & Shafranske, 2021; Kohrt et al., 2025; Ten Cate, 2017). Advances in instructional design and technology-enhanced learning further support authentic learning, guided practice, multimedia instruction, and continuous performance assessment (Clark, 2025; Clark & Mayer, 2023; Merrill, 2002, 2020; Pérez-Conde et al., 2026). Likewise, adult learning theory emphasizes that experienced professionals learn best through relevant, collaborative, and practice-centered educational experiences grounded in prior knowledge (Baumgartner & Carr-Chellman, 2024; Knowles et al., 2015).

Despite these advances, leadership remains comparatively underdeveloped as a conceptual foundation for supervision. Supervisors are commonly described as educators, evaluators, consultants, and gatekeepers, yet less attention has been given to the nature of supervisory authority and the ethical responsibilities accompanying its exercise (Association for Counselor Education and Supervision [ACES], 2011; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy [BACP], 2021; Falender & Shafranske, 2021). Although transformational, authentic, servant, and adaptive leadership contribute valuable insights into leader behavior and organizational effectiveness, each offers only a partial account of supervisors' responsibility to supervisees, clients, organizations, and the profession (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Greenleaf, 1977; Kozachuk & Conley, 2021).

Stewardship provides a broader framework by viewing leadership as the faithful exercise of delegated authority on behalf of others rather than for personal gain (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012). Its emphasis on responsibility, accountability, trust, long-term development, and organizational flourishing closely parallels the responsibilities of clinical supervisors, who simultaneously develop supervisees, protect clients, evaluate competence, promote ethical practice, and strengthen behavioral health organizations (ACA, 2014; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023).

From a biblical perspective, stewardship extends beyond organizational leadership to humanity's original vocation under God's delegated authority. Scripture

consistently portrays leadership as faithful service characterized by accountability, protection, and the cultivation of others, beginning with humanity's commission to cultivate and guard creation (Gen. 2:15), continuing through Christ's model of sacrificial leadership (Matt. 20:25–28), and culminating in Peter's exhortation to shepherd God's people willingly and by example (1 Pet. 5:2–3; Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987). This understanding aligns closely with clinical supervision, where authority exists to cultivate competence, protect clients, and advance ethical practice. Research likewise associates servant leadership, developmental mentoring, and supportive supervision with greater resilience, reduced burnout and secondary traumatic stress, and stronger supervisory relationships (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Ertl et al., 2021; Falender & Shafranske, 2021; Grunhaus et al., 2023; Hafford-Letchfield & Engelbrecht, 2018; Mahon, 2021).

The purpose of this conceptual article is to develop a biblically grounded framework of steward leadership for clinical mental health supervision by integrating biblical theology, leadership scholarship, competency-based supervision, instructional design, and adult learning theory. Specifically, the article proposes that faithful supervision is best understood as the exercise of entrusted authority through four interdependent leadership responsibilities—formation, protection, accountability, and service. Together, these dimensions foster supervisee development, ethical clinical practice, client and organizational flourishing, and ultimately human flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017).

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF STEWARD LEADERSHIP: AN EXEGETICAL FOUNDATION

Steward leadership in clinical mental health supervision is best understood through the biblical theology of stewardship. Although contemporary leadership theories often define stewardship in organizational or managerial terms, Scripture presents it as a theological reality rooted in God's sovereignty and humanity's delegated responsibility. Throughout the biblical narrative, authority is portrayed not as autonomous but as entrusted by God to cultivate, protect, develop, and serve others faithfully. This understanding provides the theological foundation for steward leadership in clinical supervision.

Three biblical passages are central to this framework. Genesis 2:15 establishes stewardship as humanity's original vocation through the complementary responsibilities of cultivation and protection. Matthew 20:25–28 redefines leadership through Christ's model of sacrificial service rather than domination, while 1 Peter 5:2–3 applies these principles to leadership by portraying oversight as willing, exemplary, and accountable before God. Together, these passages form a coherent theology of entrusted authority that closely aligns with the responsibilities of clinical supervisors to develop competent clinicians while protecting clients, organizations, and the integrity of the counseling profession (ACA, 2014; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023).

Rather than serving as isolated proof texts, these passages reveal a progressive biblical understanding of leadership that begins in creation, is redefined by Christ, and is applied to leaders within the early church. Steward leadership, therefore, is more than a

leadership style; it is a theological model of entrusted authority exercised for the flourishing of individuals, organizations, and communities.

Stewardship as Humanity's Original Vocation: Genesis 2:15

The biblical foundation for stewardship begins before the entrance of sin. In Genesis 2:15, God commissions humanity "to work it and keep it" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, Gen. 2:15), establishing stewardship as humanity's original vocation. Before leadership became associated with power or hierarchy, it was defined by faithful care for what belongs to God. Humanity received not ownership of creation but delegated responsibility for its cultivation and protection, establishing authority as entrusted rather than possessed.

The Hebrew verbs translated as "work" (*ʿabad*) and "keep" (*šāmar*) clarify this vocation. *ʿAbad* conveys cultivating, serving, and developing toward maturity, whereas *šāmar* means to guard, preserve, and protect. Together, they portray stewardship as the complementary responsibilities of development and protection (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987). These responsibilities closely parallel clinical supervision, where supervisors cultivate professional competence through instruction, reflective practice, and professional identity formation while protecting clients and the profession through ethical oversight, competency evaluation, documentation, and remediation when necessary (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023).

Genesis also distinguishes stewardship from ownership. Because creation belongs to God, human authority remains derivative and accountable. Steward leaders therefore exercise authority on behalf of another rather than for personal advancement. This understanding aligns with stewardship theory, which emphasizes trust, responsibility, shared purpose, and long-term flourishing over self-interest (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012), contrasting with agency theory's assumption of individual self-interest (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Within clinical supervision, authority is thus understood as an entrusted responsibility exercised for the benefit of supervisees, clients, organizations, and the counseling profession rather than as a source of status or control.

Genesis 2:15 also introduces a theological principle that extends throughout Scripture: faithful stewardship is measured by the flourishing of what has been entrusted to one's care. Healthy supervision develops competent clinicians who practice ethically and contribute to the well-being of clients, organizations, and society, reflecting the broader biblical vision of human flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017). Accordingly, Genesis 2:15 provides more than a creation mandate; it establishes the theological foundation for steward leadership as the faithful exercise of entrusted authority through cultivation, protection, and accountability before God. These themes become even more explicit in the teachings of Jesus, who redefined leadership through sacrificial service.

Christ's Redefinition of Leadership: Matthew 20:25–28

Although Genesis establishes stewardship as humanity's original vocation, Jesus redefines how entrusted authority is exercised. In Matthew 20:25–28, following the disciples' dispute over positions of honor, Jesus contrasts worldly leadership with the values of God's kingdom. He observes that Gentile rulers "lord it over" others and

exercise authority through domination but declares that such leadership should not characterize His followers. Instead, greatness is found in becoming a servant (*diakonos*) and even a bondservant (*doulos*), a principle ultimately demonstrated by the Son of Man, who came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (ESV, 2001/2016, Matt. 20:25–28).

Rather than rejecting authority, Jesus rejects its misuse through domination, coercion, and self-promotion. The Greek verbs *katakuriēuō* ("to lord over") and *katexousiazō* ("to exercise authority over") describe oppressive leadership, whereas *diakonos* and *doulos* redefine greatness through humble, sacrificial service modeled by Christ Himself (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987).

Applied to clinical supervision, this teaching reframes supervisory authority as relational, developmental, and service-oriented. Supervisors continue to fulfill evaluative and gatekeeping responsibilities, but these functions are exercised to develop supervisees and protect clients rather than to enhance personal status or institutional control. This perspective aligns with contemporary supervision scholarship emphasizing collaborative learning, developmental feedback, reflective practice, and competency-based education (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; Falender & Shafranske, 2021).

Christ's model also anticipates contemporary leadership theories that emphasize authenticity, empowerment, and service. Authentic leadership highlights self-awareness and ethical relationships (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), transformational leadership emphasizes shared purpose and follower development (Bass & Riggio, 2006), and servant leadership places the well-being of followers at the center of leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). Steward leadership integrates these strengths while grounding them in a theological understanding of entrusted authority, recognizing that leaders are accountable both to those they serve and to God, who entrusts them with responsibility. This relationship between authority, accountability, and faithful oversight is further developed in 1 Peter 5:2–3, where church leaders are exhorted to shepherd God's people willingly and by example.

Shepherding as Faithful Stewardship: 1 Peter 5:2–3

The stewardship principles established in Genesis and redefined by Christ are applied directly to leadership in 1 Peter 5:2–3. Peter instructs church elders to shepherd God's people by exercising oversight willingly rather than reluctantly, serving eagerly rather than for personal gain, and leading through example rather than domination (ESV, 1 Pet. 5:2–3). Although addressed to church leaders, these principles describe faithful leadership as the stewardship of people who ultimately belong to God. Leaders therefore exercise delegated authority while remaining accountable to the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4), a perspective that closely parallels the responsibilities of clinical supervisors.

Peter's model aligns closely with contemporary expectations of effective supervision. Clinical supervisors are expected to model ethical practice, demonstrate professional integrity, cultivate reflective learning environments, and mentor supervisees through guidance rather than intimidation or excessive control (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; Falender & Shafranske, 2021). Likewise, supervision scholarship recognizes that supervisors shape learning not

only through instruction but also through the professional behaviors they consistently model (BACP, 2021; Ertl et al., 2021).

Peter's emphasis on exemplary leadership also resonates with contemporary leadership theory. Authentic leadership highlights consistency between values and behavior (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), transformational leadership emphasizes moral influence and shared purpose (Bass & Riggio, 2006), and servant leadership prioritizes the growth and well-being of followers (Greenleaf, 1977). Steward leadership incorporates these perspectives while extending them through the theological conviction that all authority is delegated by God and exercised on behalf of others (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012).

Applied to clinical supervision, this perspective broadens the supervisor's role beyond evaluating counseling sessions or documenting competence. Supervisors shape professional identity, ethical judgment, clinical competence, and future practice, creating effects that extend to clients, organizations, and the counseling profession. Effective supervision therefore requires humility, integrity, courage, compassion, and accountability, fostering internalized ethical responsibility rather than mere compliance (Baumgartner & Carr-Chellman, 2024; Knowles et al., 2015). Ultimately, Peter's teaching introduces a distinctive theological dimension: steward leaders are accountable not only to professional organizations but also to God, reinforcing faithful and ethical leadership through an enduring moral framework.

Synthesis: A Biblical Theology of Entrusted Authority

Taken together, Genesis 2:15, Matthew 20:25–28, and 1 Peter 5:2–3 provide a coherent biblical theology of steward leadership that extends from creation through Christ's teaching to the life of the early church. Collectively, these passages establish four foundational principles that shape the Steward Leadership Framework proposed in this article.

First, authority is entrusted rather than possessed. Genesis portrays leadership as delegated responsibility to cultivate and protect what belongs to God, establishing stewardship rather than ownership as the basis of leadership (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987). Likewise, clinical supervisors exercise authority through professional trust, ethical standards, and organizational responsibility rather than personal entitlement.

Second, stewardship requires both cultivation and protection. The complementary responsibilities of 'ābad and šāmar are reflected in supervision through developing supervisee competence while safeguarding client welfare by ethical oversight and competency evaluation (ACA, 2014; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023).

Third, authority is exercised through service. Jesus redefines greatness through sacrificial service, making service the character of leadership rather than an additional supervisory responsibility. Formation, protection, and accountability therefore become expressions of service rather than instruments of control (Greenleaf, 1977; Mahon, 2021).

Finally, leaders remain accountable for the flourishing of those entrusted with their care. Peter portrays oversight as faithful stewardship under God's authority, reminding supervisors that their responsibility extends beyond supervisee development

to ethical practice, client welfare, organizational integrity, and the long-term health of the counseling profession (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011; Falender & Shafranske, 2021). Together, these principles provide the theological foundation for the Steward Leadership Framework. The following section examines contemporary leadership scholarship to demonstrate how steward leadership complements and extends existing leadership theories by grounding them in a theology of entrusted authority directed toward human flourishing.

STEWARD LEADERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY LEADERSHIP SCHOLARSHIP

Modern leadership scholarship has increasingly moved beyond models centered on positional authority and managerial control toward approaches emphasizing ethical responsibility, relational influence, follower development, and organizational sustainability. Transformational, authentic, servant, and adaptive leadership have each contributed important insights into effective leadership, reflecting growing recognition that leadership is measured not only by organizational performance but also by the ability to cultivate people, foster healthy organizational cultures, and promote the common good (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

This perspective is especially relevant to clinical supervision, where supervisors shape professional identity, ethical decision-making, clinical competence, and organizational culture. Effective supervision therefore requires more than technical expertise or administrative oversight; it requires leadership characterized by integrity, accountability, service, and commitment to the long-term flourishing of supervisees, clients, and organizations (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; Falender & Shafranske, 2021).

Although contemporary leadership theories provide valuable insights into these responsibilities, stewardship theory offers a distinctive perspective by viewing leadership as the faithful exercise of entrusted responsibility rather than personal power. The following sections examine these leadership traditions and demonstrate how steward leadership integrates their strengths while extending them through a biblically grounded theology of entrusted authority.

From Agency Theory to Stewardship Theory

Modern stewardship theory emerged in response to agency theory, which assumes that individuals are primarily motivated by self-interest and therefore require external monitoring and control to align their actions with organizational goals (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Although agency theory has shaped organizational governance, its assumptions only partially explain leadership in the helping professions. Clinical supervision requires accountability and evaluation, but it also depends on trust, collaboration, mentorship, and reflective learning to foster counselor development (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023).

Stewardship theory offers an alternative perspective by proposing that leaders willingly place collective welfare above personal gain. Davis et al. (1997) argued that stewardship is characterized by intrinsic motivation, shared purpose, trust, collaboration, and long-term organizational success. Hernandez (2012) further described stewardship as a psychological orientation of responsibility and accountability for preserving and

enhancing what has been entrusted to one's care. This perspective closely aligns with clinical supervision, where supervisory decisions influence supervisees, clients, organizations, and the counseling profession.

From a biblical perspective, however, organizational stewardship remains incomplete. While stewardship theory explains leadership in terms of responsibility for collective welfare, Scripture grounds stewardship in God's delegated authority. Steward leadership therefore extends organizational stewardship by emphasizing accountability before God and responsibility for promoting human flourishing.

Authentic Leadership and Moral Integrity

Authentic leadership emphasizes consistency between values and behavior, relational transparency, objective decision-making, and an internalized moral perspective (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Within clinical supervision, authenticity fosters trust, psychological safety, reflective practice, and open dialogue as supervisors model humility and ethical decision-making (Ertl et al., 2021; Falender & Shafranske, 2021). Yet authenticity alone provides limited guidance for supervisory evaluation, gatekeeping, and client protection. Steward leadership incorporates authenticity within a broader framework of entrusted authority and moral responsibility.

Transformational Leadership and Professional Development

Transformational leadership highlights the leader's ability to inspire growth, stimulate intellectual development, and motivate followers toward shared goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006). These principles closely parallel effective supervision through developmental mentoring, reflective dialogue, constructive feedback, and competency development (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023). However, transformational leadership primarily emphasizes performance and organizational effectiveness, whereas steward leadership integrates professional development with ethical accountability, client protection, and faithful oversight.

Servant Leadership and the Development of Others

Among contemporary leadership theories, servant leadership bears the strongest resemblance to biblical stewardship. Greenleaf (1977) argued that leadership begins with serving others by promoting their growth, well-being, and flourishing. Empirical studies likewise associate servant-oriented supervision with lower burnout, reduced secondary traumatic stress, greater resilience, and stronger supervisory relationships (Grunhaus et al., 2023; Mahon, 2021).

Although closely related, servant leadership and steward leadership are not synonymous. Servant leadership emphasizes the leader's orientation toward followers, whereas steward leadership broadens this focus to include entrusted authority, accountability, protection, and responsibility to clients, organizations, professional standards, licensing boards, and society (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011). Service therefore represents the character through which stewardship is expressed, while formation, protection, and accountability define its core responsibilities.

Adaptive Leadership and Developmental Supervision

Adaptive leadership emphasizes adjusting supervisory approaches to developmental needs, clinical complexity, and contextual demands (Kozachuk & Conley, 2021). This perspective aligns with competency-based education, which promotes individualized learning, formative assessment, deliberate practice, and progressive skill development (Borders et al., 2023; Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Ten Cate, 2017). Similarly, instructional design and adult learning research demonstrates that professionals learn most effectively through authentic practice, timely feedback, collaboration, and experience-based learning (Baumgartner & Carr-Chellman, 2024; Clark, 25; Clark & Mayer, 2023; Knowles et al., 2015; Merrill, 2002, 2020).

Steward leadership naturally encompasses these educational principles because faithful stewardship is inherently developmental. Rather than merely evaluating current performance, steward supervisors intentionally cultivate future competence, ethical reasoning, reflective practice, resilience, and lifelong professional growth.

Toward a Biblically Integrative Model of Steward Leadership

Contemporary leadership scholarship provides valuable insights into ethical leadership, authenticity, transformational influence, service, and adaptive supervision. Yet no single theory fully captures the comprehensive responsibilities of clinical supervisors. Stewardship theory emphasizes responsibility and organizational trust, authentic leadership emphasizes moral integrity, transformational leadership promotes growth, servant leadership prioritizes follower development, and adaptive leadership recognizes developmental differences. Each contributes important dimensions of effective supervision.

The biblical theology developed in the previous section provides the integrating framework that unites these perspectives. Scripture portrays leadership as the faithful exercise of entrusted authority through cultivation, protection, accountability, and service. This theological foundation expands contemporary leadership theories by recognizing that supervisors are accountable not only for supervisee development but also for client welfare, organizational integrity, professional standards, and ultimately the flourishing of the communities their supervisees serve.

The next section applies these leadership principles directly to clinical mental health supervision, demonstrating why supervision is most appropriately understood as an exercise of steward leadership rather than solely an educational, administrative, or managerial function.

Steward Leadership and Clinical Mental Health Supervision

Clinical mental health supervision is one of the most consequential leadership relationships in the behavioral health professions because supervisors shape clinicians' competence, ethical decision-making, professional identity, and long-term effectiveness. Their influence extends beyond supervisees to clients, organizations, and the counseling profession. Supervision is therefore more than an educational process or administrative function; it is the exercise of entrusted authority to cultivate professional growth while protecting public welfare (ACA, 2014; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders

et al., 2023).

Although supervisors are commonly described as teachers, consultants, evaluators, mentors, and gatekeepers, these roles collectively reflect a broader leadership responsibility that has received comparatively limited theoretical attention (Falender & Shafranske, 2021). Supervisors simultaneously develop competence, evaluate readiness for independent practice, protect clients, promote ethical practice, and strengthen organizations through the faithful exercise of delegated authority. Viewed through the lens of steward leadership, supervision shifts from positional authority to entrusted responsibility. Supervisors become stewards of professional formation, ethical practice, organizational integrity, and public trust, with leadership ultimately measured by the flourishing of those entrusted to their care.

Supervision as Entrusted Authority

Licensed clinical supervisors exercise delegated authority entrusted by licensing boards, professional organizations, healthcare systems, universities, and counseling agencies. They evaluate competence, determine readiness for increasing independence, recommend remediation, and, when necessary, restrict practice to protect clients and uphold professional standards (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011).

This authority is fiduciary rather than positional. Supervisors exercise authority for the benefit of supervisees, clients, organizations, and the counseling profession, carrying corresponding responsibilities of accountability, transparency, fairness, and stewardship. Consistent with the biblical model of delegated authority established in Genesis 2:15, supervisors cultivate professional competence while safeguarding clients and the integrity of the profession. Steward leadership therefore views authority as responsibility rather than privilege, distinguishing it from authoritarian approaches that emphasize compliance over professional growth and reflective learning.

Competency-Based Supervision as Stewardship

The emergence of competency-based education further supports understanding supervision as stewardship. Rather than emphasizing time-based training, competency-based models prioritize demonstrated competence, observable behaviors, formative assessment, deliberate practice, and continuous improvement (Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Kohrt et al., 2025; Ten Cate, 2017). Within counseling, supervisors intentionally develop competence through structured learning objectives, developmental progression, direct observation, feedback, and measurable outcomes (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; Falender & Shafranske, 2021).

This educational approach closely reflects biblical stewardship. Just as faithful stewards intentionally cultivate what has been entrusted to their care, supervisors intentionally design learning experiences that foster professional growth rather than merely document performance. Instructional design research likewise demonstrates that authentic learning, guided practice, structured feedback, and integration into professional practice produce meaningful competency development (Clark, 2025; Clark & Mayer, 2023; Merrill, 2002, 2020). Steward leadership provides the theological and ethical foundation for these educational practices by framing supervision as the intentional cultivation of those entrusted to the supervisor's care.

Adult Learning and Professional Formation

Adult learning theory reinforces steward leadership by recognizing that experienced professionals construct knowledge through reflection, experience, collaboration, and application to practice (Baumgartner & Carr-Chellman, 2024; Knowles et al., 2015). Consistent with these principles, effective supervision builds on supervisees' prior experience through collaborative dialogue, guided reflection, clinical consultation, and progressively challenging learning experiences rather than relying solely on didactic instruction (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022).

Steward leadership complements adult learning by viewing supervisees as developing professionals entrusted to the supervisor's care. Accordingly, supervision extends beyond teaching clinical skills to cultivating professional identity, ethical judgment, cultural responsiveness, and lifelong learning. Experiential learning further strengthens this perspective, as authentic practice environments enhance knowledge integration, confidence, and professional responsibility (Ertl et al., 2021).

Supervision as Ethical Stewardship

The ethical responsibilities of clinical supervisors further illustrate stewardship in practice. Supervisors must simultaneously support supervisees, protect clients, and uphold professional standards, requiring wisdom, integrity, and accountability. Professional codes emphasize responsibilities for client welfare, supervisee competence, informed consent, cultural responsiveness, confidentiality, documentation, and ongoing professional development (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011).

Competency frameworks similarly identify reflective practice, ethical awareness, developmental responsiveness, and collaborative learning as essential supervisory competencies (BACP, 2021). At the global level, competency-based workforce initiatives recognize supervision as fundamental to expanding high-quality behavioral healthcare (Kohrt et al., 2025; WHO, 2022). Given persistent workforce shortages and increasing demand for behavioral health services, faithful supervision represents one of the profession's most significant stewardship responsibilities (HRSA, 2023; Jordans & Kohrt, 2020; NCSL, 2024; SAMHSA, 2023).

STEWARD LEADERSHIP AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

Steward leadership also broadens the purpose of supervision beyond competence, licensure, or organizational performance to human flourishing. VanderWeele (2017) described flourishing as encompassing purpose, relationships, character, health, and contribution to the common good. Within supervision, flourishing begins with supervisee development and extends through ethical clinical practice to clients, organizations, communities, and society.

This cascading influence reflects the steward leadership model: faithful supervisors develop competent clinicians; competent clinicians provide ethical care; ethical care promotes client well-being; healthy organizations sustain quality behavioral health services; and these outcomes collectively contribute to human flourishing. Supervisory leadership is therefore measured not only by supervisee competence but also by its enduring impact on individuals, organizations, and communities.

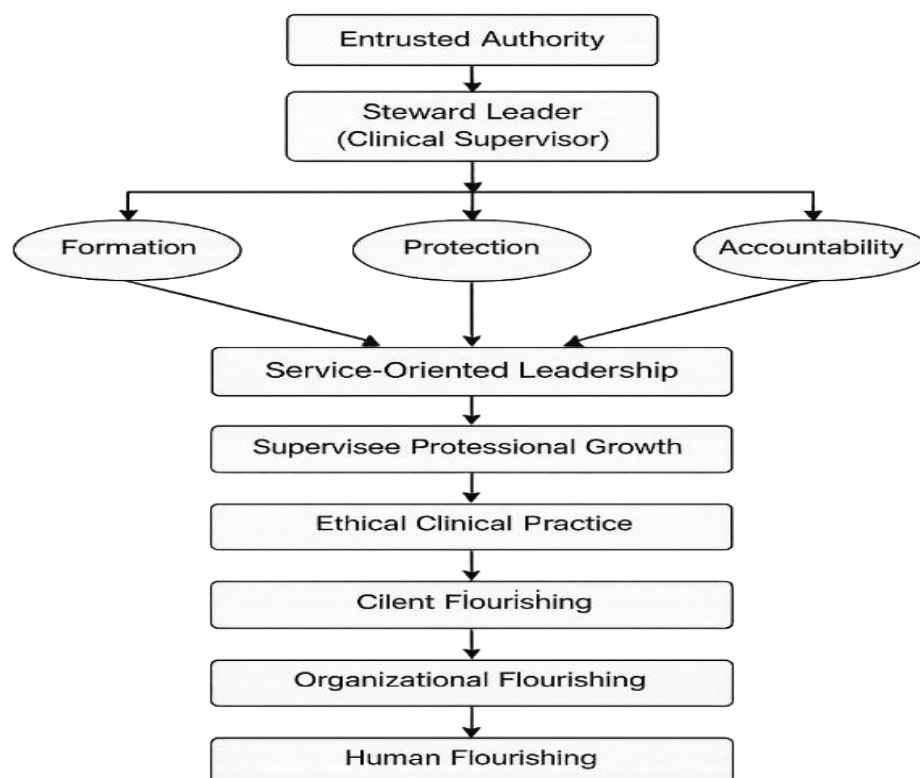
Transition to the Steward Leadership Framework

The preceding discussion demonstrates that biblical theology, leadership scholarship, competency-based education, instructional design, adult learning theory, and professional supervision standards converge on a common principle: leadership is the faithful exercise of entrusted authority for the development and protection of others. While each perspective contributes valuable insights, steward leadership integrates them into a coherent theological and conceptual framework.

The Steward Leadership Framework proposed in this article conceptualizes supervision as the faithful exercise of delegated authority through four interdependent leadership responsibilities: formation, protection, accountability, and service. Together, these dimensions promote supervisee professional growth, ethical clinical practice, client well-being, organizational health, and ultimately human flourishing. Rather than representing sequential stages, they operate simultaneously throughout the supervisory relationship, continually reinforcing one another.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual structure of the Steward Leadership Framework.

Figure 1
Steward Leadership Framework



Note. Steward leaders exercise delegated authority through four interdependent supervisory responsibilities. Formation, protection, and accountability describe the primary functions of supervision, while service represents the character through which each responsibility is exercised. Collectively, these dimensions foster professional growth and ethical practice that ultimately contribute to client, organizational, and societal flourishing.

Entrusted Authority: The Foundation of Steward Leadership

The Steward Leadership Framework begins with the theological conviction that supervisory authority is entrusted rather than possessed. Supervisors exercise delegated authority on behalf of licensing boards, professional organizations, employers, educational institutions, and ultimately society (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011). Biblically, this authority originates in God's commission to cultivate and guard creation (Gen. 2:15), is redefined through Christ's model of sacrificial service (Matt. 20:25–28), and is exemplified in Peter's call for leaders to shepherd God's people faithfully (1 Pet. 5:2–3; Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987). Organizational stewardship theory similarly emphasizes responsibility for the welfare of others rather than personal interests (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012). Together, these perspectives establish entrusted authority as the theological and conceptual foundation of steward leadership.

Four Interdependent Responsibilities. The framework proposes four interdependent leadership responsibilities—formation, protection, accountability, and service—that operate simultaneously throughout supervision rather than as isolated roles. Formation cultivates competence and professional identity (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023). Protection safeguards clients, supervisees, organizations, and the profession through ethical oversight (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011). Accountability ensures fair evaluation, constructive feedback, and responsible gatekeeping (Falender & Shafranske, 2021). Service is not a separate responsibility but the character through which all supervisory authority is exercised, shaping formation, protection, and accountability through humility, compassion, and relational commitment (Greenleaf, 1977; Mahon, 2021).

The Steward Leadership Process. Steward leadership functions as a developmental process. Faithful supervisors exercise entrusted authority through formation, protection, accountability, and service, fostering supervisee competence, ethical maturity, reflective practice, and professional identity. As clinicians develop, they provide increasingly ethical and effective care, strengthening client outcomes, organizational health, public trust, and ultimately human flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017). Because flourishing organizations cultivate future steward leaders, the process is recursive, continually developing the next generation of clinicians.

A Framework for Contemporary Behavioral Healthcare. The Steward Leadership Framework is particularly relevant as behavioral healthcare faces workforce shortages, rising service demands, clinician burnout, and increasing expectations for quality and accountability (HRSA, 2023; Jordans & Kohrt, 2020; NCSL, 2024; SAMHSA, 2023; WHO, 2022). Competency-based education addresses these challenges through structured supervision and intentional professional development (Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Kohrt et al., 2025; Ten Cate, 2017). Steward leadership complements these initiatives by providing a theological and ethical rationale for competency-based supervision, framing competence, accountability, and client protection as acts of faithful stewardship.

Formation: Cultivating Competent and Flourishing Professionals

Formation is the first responsibility of steward leadership because faithful stewardship begins with intentional cultivation. Consistent with the creation mandate of Genesis 2:15, supervisors intentionally develop supervisees' professional competence, ethical judgment, reflective capacity, and leadership potential rather than simply preparing them for licensure (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987). Steward leaders view supervisees as future colleagues, leaders, educators, and supervisors whose influence will extend far beyond the supervisory relationship.

Theologically, formation reflects the biblical concept of *‘abad*, which conveys cultivating and bringing to maturity through faithful care (Hamilton, 1990). Supervisors therefore function less as inspectors than as cultivators, creating conditions in which competence, wisdom, ethical judgment, and professional identity can flourish. This model parallels Christ's formation of His disciples through teaching, modeling, guided practice, reflection, correction, encouragement, and progressively increasing responsibility.

Contemporary competency-based supervision reinforces this developmental perspective by emphasizing observable competencies, structured learning objectives, formative assessment, and progressive skill development rather than supervised hours alone (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Falender & Shafranske, 2021; Ten Cate, 2017). Steward leadership broadens competency beyond technical proficiency to include emotional intelligence, cultural humility, ethical sensitivity, leadership capacity, and lifelong learning.

Evidence-based instructional design further strengthens formation. Merrill's (2002, 2020) *First Principles of Instruction* and subsequent instructional design research demonstrate that authentic problems, guided practice, timely feedback, and integration into professional contexts produce meaningful learning (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Clark, 2025; Clark & Mayer, 2023). Technology-enhanced learning further expands these opportunities through recorded sessions, simulations, competency tracking, and interactive learning activities (Pérez-Conde et al., 2026). Steward leadership provides the ethical rationale for instructional excellence by recognizing that those entrusted to the supervisor's care deserve educational experiences intentionally designed to maximize professional growth.

Adult Learning and Reflective Professional Development

Formation is equally informed by adult learning theory, which recognizes that experienced professionals construct knowledge through reflection, experience, collaboration, and immediate application to meaningful professional problems (Baumgartner & Carr-Chellman, 2024; Knowles et al., 2015). Adult learners bring substantial prior knowledge to supervision, requiring educational approaches that respect learner autonomy while encouraging continued professional development.

Accordingly, effective supervisors function less as lecturers and more as facilitators of professional learning. Rather than providing answers to every clinical question, steward supervisors encourage supervisees to analyze complex cases, evaluate competing interventions, examine personal assumptions, and integrate theory with clinical practice. Reflection becomes a central mechanism through which supervisees develop independent clinical judgment.

Reflective supervision also promotes self-awareness, one of the defining

characteristics of effective clinicians. Supervisees learn to recognize emotional reactions, countertransference, cultural assumptions, cognitive biases, and ethical dilemmas that influence clinical decision-making. Such reflective capacity enhances both clinical competence and professional resilience by enabling clinicians to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively to complex therapeutic situations (Falender & Shafranske, 2021).

Hands-on learning further strengthens professional formation. Ertl et al. (2021) demonstrated that experiential educational approaches promote deeper integration of knowledge, increased confidence, and greater professional responsibility within health service psychology. Similarly, supervision grounded in authentic clinical experiences enables supervisees to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical application through deliberate practice and guided reflection.

Formation of Professional Identity. Perhaps the most enduring outcome of supervision is the formation of professional identity. Professional identity extends beyond competence to encompass how clinicians understand themselves, their responsibilities, their ethical commitments, and their place within the counseling profession. Effective supervision shapes how future clinicians think, relate, lead, and serve throughout their professional lives (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023).

Professional identity develops through repeated interactions in which supervisees observe professional modeling, receive feedback, navigate ethical dilemmas, and gradually internalize professional values. Supervisors therefore influence not only what supervisees know but who they become as professionals.

Steward leaders intentionally cultivate this identity by modeling humility, ethical integrity, lifelong learning, compassion, accountability, and service. Their influence extends beyond formal supervision because supervisees often adopt supervisory behaviors that later shape their own leadership when they become supervisors themselves. Stewardship thus creates an intergenerational process of professional formation in which faithful leaders develop future steward leaders.

This developmental perspective aligns with authentic leadership theory, which emphasizes congruence between personal values and professional behavior (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). It also reflects transformational leadership, which seeks to inspire followers toward increasing maturity, purpose, and commitment (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Steward leadership integrates these perspectives by grounding professional identity within the biblical understanding of entrusted authority exercised for the flourishing of others.

Formation and Human Flourishing. Formation ultimately extends beyond individual professional development to contribute to human flourishing. Competent clinicians provide higher quality care, strengthen therapeutic relationships, improve client outcomes, and enhance organizational effectiveness. Clients who receive ethical, compassionate, and evidence-informed care experience greater opportunities for healing and well-being, creating positive effects that extend to families, communities, and society (VanderWeele, 2017).

Consequently, formation represents far more than educational preparation. It is

an act of faithful stewardship through which supervisors intentionally cultivate professionals capable of promoting the flourishing of others. Every investment in supervisee development carries the potential to influence countless future clinical encounters, making formation one of the most significant leadership responsibilities within behavioral healthcare.

Yet faithful stewardship requires more than cultivating growth. Gardens flourish only when they are also protected. Likewise, developing competent clinicians requires supervisors to safeguard clients, supervisees, organizations, and the counseling profession from preventable harm. The second dimension of the Steward Leadership Framework therefore addresses protection, the complementary responsibility that transforms professional formation into faithful stewardship.

PROTECTION: GUARDING CLIENTS, PROFESSIONALS, AND THE INTEGRITY OF THE COUNSELING PROFESSION

Formation and protection represent complementary responsibilities within biblical stewardship. The commission of Genesis 2:15 instructs humanity both to cultivate (*'ābad*) and to guard (*šāmar*) God's creation (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987). Stewardship is therefore incomplete if it emphasizes development while neglecting protection. Clinical supervisors who effectively cultivate competence but fail to safeguard clients, supervisees, or organizations have only partially fulfilled their stewardship responsibilities. Conversely, supervisors who focus exclusively on risk management without intentionally fostering growth may inhibit professional development. Faithful stewardship requires both responsibilities operating simultaneously.

Within the Steward Leadership Framework, protection is defined as the intentional safeguarding of supervisees, clients, organizations, and the counseling profession through ethical oversight, competency evaluation, risk management, remediation, and the promotion of psychologically safe learning environments. Protection is not simply reactive intervention after problems occur; rather, it is a proactive leadership responsibility that anticipates risk, strengthens resilience, and preserves the conditions necessary for professional flourishing.

Unlike authoritarian approaches that often equate protection with control, steward leadership understands protection as an expression of service. Supervisors protect because they are entrusted with the welfare of others. Their responsibility extends beyond organizational liability to encompass the well-being of clients, the development of supervisees, and the long-term integrity of the profession itself.

Protection as a Biblical Responsibility

The Hebrew verb *šāmar* means "to guard," "to watch over," "to preserve," or "to protect." Throughout the Old Testament, it describes faithful care exercised over something valuable that has been entrusted to another's responsibility (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987). Protection therefore reflects vigilance rather than control. The steward remains attentive to potential threats while actively preserving what has been entrusted to his or her care.

This theological principle extends throughout Scripture. Shepherds protect sheep

from danger. Parents protect children while preparing them for maturity. Leaders protect communities through wise governance. In every instance, protection exists for the flourishing of others rather than the preservation of authority.

Applied to supervision, protection involves safeguarding both people and processes. Supervisors protect clients from incompetent practice, supervisees from preventable professional failure, organizations from ethical violations, and the counseling profession from practices that undermine public trust. Because authority is delegated, supervisors remain accountable for exercising this protective responsibility faithfully.

Protection of Client Welfare

The primary ethical obligation of clinical supervision is the protection of client welfare. Professional ethical codes consistently identify client well-being as the supervisor's foremost responsibility, recognizing that supervision ultimately exists to ensure competent and ethical behavioral healthcare (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011).

Client protection requires supervisors to monitor clinical decision-making, review documentation, observe counseling performance, evaluate treatment planning, and intervene when supervisees demonstrate unsafe or unethical practice. These responsibilities become particularly important when supervisees work with high-risk populations or complex clinical presentations that exceed their current developmental level (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023).

Protection, however, extends beyond correcting errors. Steward leaders intentionally create educational environments in which supervisees can acknowledge uncertainty, discuss mistakes openly, and seek consultation without fear of humiliation or retaliation. Such environments promote learning while simultaneously reducing risk to clients because supervisees are more likely to disclose clinical concerns before they become ethical problems.

This balance between accountability and psychological safety reflects stewardship. Supervisors neither ignore mistakes nor create climates of fear. Instead, they respond with honesty, guidance, and developmental support while maintaining unwavering commitment to client welfare.

Protection Through Ethical Supervision

Ethical supervision represents one of the clearest expressions of stewardship because supervisors are entrusted with maintaining professional integrity while supporting supervisee development. Ethical decision-making permeates every aspect of supervision, including informed consent, confidentiality, documentation, cultural responsiveness, dual relationships, boundaries, competence, and evaluation (ACA, 2014).

Professional standards further recognize that supervisors possess responsibilities extending beyond individual supervisees. The ACES (2011) standards emphasize that supervisors are responsible for establishing clear expectations, promoting ethical practice, monitoring competence, and providing ongoing evaluation throughout the supervisory relationship. Similarly, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, 2021) identifies ethical awareness, reflective practice,

collaborative learning, and developmental responsiveness as foundational supervisory competencies.

Steward leadership provides the theological rationale underlying these professional expectations. Ethical supervision is not merely compliance with organizational policy; it represents faithful stewardship of relationships characterized by trust, vulnerability, and professional responsibility. Supervisors protect because ethical leadership requires safeguarding those who depend upon their judgment.

Protection Through Competency Evaluation

Protection also requires accurate assessment of supervisee competence. Competency-based supervision emphasizes continuous evaluation using observable behaviors, structured feedback, and developmental benchmarks rather than subjective impressions or accumulated supervision hours (Borders et al., 2023; Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Falender & Shafranske, 2021).

Within the Steward Leadership Framework, competency evaluation serves two complementary purposes. First, evaluation identifies strengths that should be reinforced and expanded. Second, it identifies developmental needs requiring additional instruction, practice, or remediation before supervisees assume greater clinical responsibility. Assessment therefore functions as both educational guidance and client protection.

Steward supervisors approach evaluation as an act of care rather than criticism. Honest assessment prevents supervisees from entering independent practice before they are adequately prepared while simultaneously providing clear pathways for continued professional growth. Avoiding difficult evaluations may temporarily preserve relationships, but it ultimately places clients, supervisees, and organizations at unnecessary risk. Consequently, faithful stewardship requires supervisors to exercise evaluative authority with both courage and compassion.

Protection Through Remediation and Gatekeeping

Few supervisory responsibilities illustrate stewardship more clearly than remediation and gatekeeping. Although these responsibilities are often perceived negatively, they represent essential expressions of faithful leadership because they prioritize public protection over personal comfort.

Remediation involves identifying deficiencies, developing structured improvement plans, providing additional educational support, and reassessing competence over time (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022). Effective remediation reflects the steward leader's commitment to formation rather than punishment. The supervisor's goal is restoration whenever possible.

However, stewardship also recognizes that some situations require restricting or terminating clinical responsibilities when supervisees remain unable to provide safe and ethical care. Such decisions demand fairness, transparency, documentation, and due process while maintaining unwavering commitment to client welfare (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011).

This responsibility often creates ethical tension because supervisors simultaneously serve as mentors and evaluators. Steward leadership resolves this

tension by recognizing that both roles exist for the flourishing of others. Supporting supervisees and protecting clients are not competing responsibilities but complementary expressions of faithful stewardship.

Protecting Supervisee Well-Being

Protection extends beyond client welfare to include the well-being of supervisees themselves. Behavioral health professionals face significant occupational risks, including compassion fatigue, burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and moral distress (HRSA, 2023; SAMHSA, 2023; WHO, 2022). Without intentional supervisory support, these challenges may impair clinical effectiveness and contribute to workforce attrition.

Recent research suggests that leadership characterized by humility, service, and relational support can reduce burnout while strengthening professional resilience. Grunhaus et al. (2023) found that supervisor servant leadership was associated with lower supervisee burnout and secondary traumatic stress. Likewise, Mahon (2021) reported that servant-oriented supervision promoted resilience among health and social care professionals by fostering supportive supervisory relationships.

Steward leaders therefore intentionally protect supervisees by monitoring workload, encouraging reflective practice, promoting healthy professional boundaries, and normalizing help-seeking behaviors. Rather than viewing resilience as an individual responsibility alone, stewardship recognizes organizational and supervisory obligations to create environments that sustain long-term professional well-being.

Protecting Organizational Integrity

Supervisors also serve as stewards of organizational culture. Their leadership influences ethical climate, professional standards, collaboration, accountability, and employee development. Organizations characterized by transparent communication, psychological safety, shared learning, and ethical leadership are better positioned to recruit, retain, and develop competent behavioral health professionals (Caldwell et al., 1990).

As behavioral health organizations confront expanding service demands, workforce shortages, and increasing public accountability, supervisory leadership becomes increasingly important for sustaining organizational effectiveness (HRSA, 2023; Jordans & Kohrt, 2020; NCSL, 2024). Steward supervisors contribute to organizational flourishing by cultivating competent clinicians, modeling ethical leadership, supporting interdisciplinary collaboration, and strengthening professional learning cultures.

This organizational perspective reflects stewardship theory's emphasis on preserving and enhancing institutions entrusted to leaders' care (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012). Supervisors therefore serve not only individual clinicians but also the organizations through which behavioral healthcare is delivered.

Protection and Human Flourishing

Ultimately, protection contributes directly to human flourishing because flourishing cannot exist where preventable harm persists. Ethical oversight, competency

evaluation, client advocacy, organizational integrity, and professional resilience collectively create conditions in which individuals and communities are more likely to thrive (VanderWeele, 2017).

Steward leaders recognize that every decision to address ethical concerns, provide difficult feedback, implement remediation, or intervene on behalf of clients represents an investment in long-term flourishing. Protection therefore complements formation by ensuring that professional growth occurs within environments characterized by safety, integrity, accountability, and trust.

Yet faithful protection requires more than vigilance and ethical oversight. Steward leaders must also accept responsibility for evaluating performance, documenting decisions, and remaining answerable for the authority entrusted to them. The third dimension of the Steward Leadership Framework therefore examines accountability, the leadership responsibility that ensures entrusted authority is exercised with integrity, transparency, and justice.

ACCOUNTABILITY: EXERCISING ENTRUSTED AUTHORITY WITH INTEGRITY, TRANSPARENCY, AND JUSTICE

The third dimension of the Steward Leadership Framework is accountability. While formation emphasizes cultivating professional growth and protection focuses on safeguarding people and institutions, accountability ensures that supervisory authority is exercised responsibly, transparently, and ethically. Steward leaders recognize that authority is inseparable from responsibility; every supervisory decision carries consequences for supervisees, clients, organizations, and the counseling profession. Consequently, accountability is not merely an administrative function but a moral obligation inherent in entrusted leadership.

Within the Steward Leadership Framework, accountability is defined as the faithful exercise of delegated authority through honest evaluation, transparent communication, ethical decision-making, documentation, and responsible stewardship of professional trust. Accountability reflects the biblical conviction that leaders ultimately answer not only to organizations or professional licensing boards but also to God, who entrusts authority for the benefit of others (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987).

Unlike punitive approaches that equate accountability with discipline or compliance, steward leadership views accountability as an essential mechanism for promoting professional growth, protecting clients, strengthening organizations, and preserving public confidence in the counseling profession.

Accountability as a Biblical Principle

The biblical narrative consistently portrays stewardship as accountable leadership. Throughout Scripture, those entrusted with responsibility are expected to give an account of how faithfully they have managed what has been placed in their care. This principle extends from the creation mandate of Genesis through Christ's teachings on faithful stewardship and Peter's instruction that leaders shepherd God's people under the authority of the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:2–4).

Within Genesis, accountability is implicit in humanity's delegated responsibility to

cultivate and guard creation. Stewardship assumes that authority remains derivative rather than autonomous; therefore, human leaders are responsible for how they exercise the authority entrusted to them (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987).

Jesus further develops this principle by consistently teaching that leadership carries corresponding responsibility. Greatness within God's kingdom is measured not by authority itself but by the faithful use of authority for the benefit of others (Matt. 20:25–28). Likewise, Peter reminds leaders that they shepherd "the flock of God," emphasizing that those under their care ultimately belong to God rather than to the leaders themselves (1 Pet. 5:2–3). This theological perspective transforms accountability from institutional oversight into an act of faithful stewardship before God.

Applied to clinical supervision, biblical accountability reminds supervisors that every evaluative decision, every supervisory recommendation, and every leadership action carries ethical significance extending beyond organizational expectations.

Accountability Through Competency Evaluation

Competency-based supervision provides one of the clearest contemporary expressions of accountability. Rather than relying upon subjective impressions or informal mentoring alone, competency-based models require supervisors to evaluate observable professional behaviors using established standards, developmental benchmarks, and structured assessment processes (Borders et al., 2023; Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Falender & Shafranske, 2021).

Effective evaluation serves multiple stewardship purposes. It provides supervisees with accurate feedback regarding current performance, identifies areas requiring continued development, informs educational planning, and protects clients by ensuring that supervisees demonstrate competence before assuming greater clinical responsibility (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022).

Steward leaders therefore approach evaluation neither as bureaucratic obligation nor personal judgment but as faithful stewardship. Honest evaluation honors supervisees by providing meaningful guidance for professional growth while simultaneously protecting clients and maintaining professional standards. Avoiding difficult conversations may preserve temporary interpersonal comfort, but it ultimately undermines stewardship by allowing deficiencies to remain unaddressed. Accordingly, accountability requires supervisors to balance honesty with encouragement, objectivity with compassion, and professional rigor with developmental support.

Accountability Through Documentation

Faithful stewardship also requires careful documentation. Documentation provides a transparent record of supervisory observations, competency evaluations, feedback, remediation plans, and significant supervisory decisions. Such records protect supervisees, supervisors, organizations, and clients by demonstrating that supervisory authority has been exercised responsibly and consistently (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011).

Documentation reflects stewardship in several ways. First, it promotes fairness by ensuring that evaluations are based upon observable behaviors rather than

subjective impressions. Second, it facilitates continuity of supervision by providing clear records of supervisee progress over time. Third, documentation strengthens organizational accountability by supporting informed decision-making regarding licensure, credentialing, remediation, and professional advancement.

Within steward leadership, documentation is therefore more than an administrative requirement. It is an ethical practice that demonstrates transparency, integrity, and respect for those affected by supervisory decisions.

Accountability and Difficult Conversations

Perhaps the greatest test of supervisory accountability occurs during difficult conversations. Supervisors frequently address ethical concerns, inadequate clinical performance, interpersonal conflicts, professional impairment, or failure to meet competency expectations. Such conversations require courage because they involve balancing compassion for supervisees with responsibility toward clients and organizations.

Steward leaders approach these conversations with clarity, honesty, and respect. Feedback is specific, behaviorally focused, timely, and developmentally appropriate rather than vague, punitive, or personally critical (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023). Supervisees are treated with dignity while being held accountable for professional responsibilities.

Importantly, stewardship rejects both extremes commonly encountered in supervision. On one hand, supervisors who avoid accountability out of fear of conflict fail to protect clients and impede supervisee growth. On the other hand, supervisors who rely exclusively on criticism or authoritarian control often undermine trust and psychological safety. Steward leadership instead seeks restorative accountability—truth communicated through relationships characterized by respect, service, and commitment to professional development.

Accountability and Organizational Trust

Accountability also strengthens organizational trust. Healthcare organizations increasingly operate within environments characterized by regulatory oversight, accreditation requirements, public scrutiny, and increasing expectations regarding quality assurance. Supervisors therefore function as organizational stewards whose leadership contributes directly to institutional credibility and effectiveness (HRSA, 2023; WHO, 2022).

Steward leaders promote organizational trust by applying standards consistently, documenting supervisory decisions accurately, encouraging ethical behavior, and fostering cultures of openness and continuous learning. Such leadership supports organizational commitment, collaboration, and professional engagement, characteristics associated with healthy organizational cultures (Caldwell et al., 1990). This organizational perspective aligns with stewardship theory, which emphasizes that leaders bear responsibility not only for immediate outcomes but also for preserving and strengthening the long-term health of the institutions they serve (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012).

Accountability and Reflective Leadership

Authentic accountability also requires supervisors to evaluate their own leadership. Stewardship is reciprocal: supervisors assess supervisees while simultaneously reflecting upon the effectiveness, fairness, and integrity of their own supervisory practices.

Authentic leadership emphasizes self-awareness, relational transparency, and ongoing self-reflection as essential characteristics of ethical leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Similarly, reflective supervision encourages supervisors to examine how their assumptions, emotions, cultural perspectives, and leadership behaviors influence supervisory relationships (Falender & Shafranske, 2021).

Steward leaders therefore ask not only whether supervisees are developing appropriately but also whether they themselves are exercising authority faithfully. Such reflective accountability promotes humility, lifelong learning, and continuous leadership development.

Accountability and Human Flourishing

Accountability ultimately contributes to flourishing because it establishes the trust necessary for healthy professional relationships. Supervisees flourish when expectations are clear, evaluations are fair, and feedback promotes meaningful growth. Clients flourish when competent practitioners provide ethical care. Organizations flourish when leadership is transparent and responsible. The counseling profession flourishes when supervisors faithfully uphold standards of competence and integrity.

Within the Steward Leadership Framework, accountability therefore functions not as an end in itself but as a means of promoting flourishing across every level of behavioral healthcare. By exercising authority transparently and responsibly, steward leaders create environments characterized by trust, justice, and professional excellence.

However, accountability alone does not fully capture the character of faithful leadership. Formation, protection, and accountability describe what supervisors do, but they do not fully explain how those responsibilities should be exercised. The distinguishing characteristic of steward leadership is that every supervisory responsibility is expressed through service. Consequently, the fourth and integrating dimension of the Steward Leadership Framework examines service as the defining character of entrusted leadership.

SERVICE: THE CHARACTER OF FAITHFUL STEWARD LEADERSHIP

Service is the fourth dimension of the Steward Leadership Framework. Unlike formation, protection, and accountability, which describe supervisory responsibilities, service describes the character through which those responsibilities are exercised. Rather than constituting another supervisory task, service is the moral posture that shapes the faithful use of entrusted authority.

Within this framework, service is the intentional use of delegated authority to promote the flourishing of others rather than personal status or organizational convenience. Supervisors continue to evaluate competence, address ethical concerns,

implement remediation, and exercise gatekeeping responsibilities, but these actions are conducted through humility, compassion, relational commitment, and long-term investment in supervisee development and client welfare. Service therefore integrates the other three dimensions into a coherent model of steward leadership.

Service as the Pattern of Christ

The biblical model for service is found in Christ's teaching that greatness is expressed through serving rather than dominating others (Matt. 20:25–28). Jesus did not abolish authority but transformed its purpose. Likewise, supervisors retain evaluative and gatekeeping responsibilities, yet exercise authority as an instrument of stewardship rather than self-interest.

This distinction is especially important in clinical supervision because supervisors hold considerable influence over licensure, evaluation, and professional advancement. Steward leadership recognizes that authority itself is morally neutral; its ethical quality depends on how it is exercised. Service therefore distinguishes faithful stewardship from authoritarian supervision.

Service Beyond Servant Leadership

The Steward Leadership Framework builds upon Greenleaf's (1977) servant leadership while extending it. Whereas servant leadership emphasizes serving followers, steward leadership also recognizes responsibilities to clients, organizations, professional standards, and society. Consequently, service is not synonymous with accommodation or conflict avoidance. Difficult conversations, remediation, and gatekeeping may all become acts of service when they protect clients and promote the flourishing of those entrusted to the supervisor's care.

Research supports this perspective by demonstrating that servant-oriented supervision contributes to lower burnout, stronger supervisory relationships, greater resilience, and healthier organizations (Grunhaus et al., 2023; Mahon, 2021).

Service Through Professional Relationships

Because supervision is fundamentally relational, steward leaders intentionally cultivate trust, collaboration, psychological safety, and reflective dialogue, conditions known to support adult learning and professional development (Baumgartner & Carr-Chellman, 2024; Knowles et al., 2015). They also design authentic learning experiences that promote active engagement, meaningful feedback, and reflective practice, consistent with evidence-based instructional design (Clark, 2025; Clark & Mayer, 2023; Merrill, 2002, 2020).

Service Through Leadership Development

Steward leadership extends beyond preparing competent clinicians to developing future supervisors, educators, administrators, and professional leaders. Because supervisees often adopt the leadership behaviors they experience, supervisory

relationships have an intergenerational influence. This perspective aligns with transformational leadership's emphasis on follower development (Bass & Riggio, 2006) and authentic leadership's focus on integrity and transparency (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), while grounding leadership development in the biblical purpose of promoting the flourishing of others.

Service and Organizational Stewardship

Service also encompasses stewardship of behavioral health organizations. By fostering ethical cultures, collaboration, psychological safety, and professional development, supervisors strengthen organizational resilience and workforce sustainability (Caldwell et al., 1990). These responsibilities are increasingly important as behavioral healthcare addresses workforce shortages, clinician burnout, and growing service demands (HRSA, 2023; Jordans & Kohrt, 2020; NCSL, 2024; SAMHSA, 2023; WHO, 2022).

Service and Human Flourishing

The ultimate purpose of service is human flourishing. VanderWeele (2017) described flourishing as multidimensional well-being characterized by purpose, relationships, character, health, and contribution to the common good. Supervisors who lead through service cultivate competent and resilient clinicians whose influence extends to clients, organizations, families, and communities. Formation, protection, accountability, and service therefore function together as mutually reinforcing expressions of faithful stewardship directed toward the flourishing of others.

Integrating the Four Dimensions

The Steward Leadership Framework emphasizes that formation, protection, accountability, and service are inseparable. Formation without protection risks unsafe practice; protection without formation limits professional growth; accountability without service becomes punitive; and service without accountability fails to safeguard clients or uphold professional standards.

Faithful supervision integrates all four dimensions under the central principle of entrusted authority. Together, they cultivate professional growth, protect those entrusted to the supervisor's care, exercise accountability with integrity, and express every supervisory responsibility through service. This integrated model distinguishes steward leadership by positioning entrusted authority as the conceptual center of supervision and directing every aspect of supervisory leadership toward human flourishing. The following section examines the practical implications of this framework for supervisor education, behavioral health organizations, leadership scholarship, and future research.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPERVISOR EDUCATION

The Steward Leadership Framework suggests that supervisor education should cultivate leadership identity alongside supervisory competence. Traditional training

emphasizes supervision models, ethics, evaluation, and legal responsibilities (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023), but steward leadership encourages programs to prepare supervisors as leaders entrusted with developing clinicians, protecting clients, strengthening organizations, and advancing the counseling profession.

Competency-based education provides an effective structure for this broader goal by intentionally developing competencies related to formation, protection, accountability, and service. Authentic learning experiences—including case-based instruction, simulated supervision, reflective practice, competency portfolios, direct observation, and structured feedback—allow trainees to practice steward leadership before assuming independent supervisory roles (Clark, 2025; Clark & Mayer, 2023; Merrill, 2002; Merrill, 2020). Accordingly, supervisor education shifts from asking How do we teach supervision? to How do we develop faithful steward leaders?

Implications for Clinical Practice

The Steward Leadership Framework also provides an integrative lens for everyday supervision. Rather than viewing teaching, consultation, evaluation, documentation, crisis management, and gatekeeping as separate tasks, supervisors can evaluate each decision through the complementary responsibilities of formation, protection, accountability, and service. This perspective supplements existing ethical decision-making models by integrating educational, ethical, organizational, and relational responsibilities within a coherent stewardship framework.

Viewed through this lens, corrective feedback becomes an act of formation, remediation emphasizes restoration, gatekeeping protects clients and professional integrity, and documentation promotes transparency and organizational trust. Steward leadership therefore encourages greater consistency between supervisory philosophy and daily practice.

Implications for Behavioral Health Organizations

Behavioral health organizations increasingly rely on effective supervision to address workforce shortages, clinician burnout, quality improvement, and growing service demands (HRSA, 2023; SAMHSA, 2023; WHO, 2022). The Steward Leadership Framework therefore encourages organizations to view supervisors as leadership developers rather than solely clinical managers.

Organizations may strengthen supervision by incorporating stewardship competencies into supervisor selection, evaluation, and development. Leadership effectiveness extends beyond productivity to include developing clinicians, fostering ethical cultures, promoting psychological safety, retaining employees, and preparing future leaders. Investments in supervisor education, mentorship, leadership coaching, peer consultation, and competency-based evaluation can strengthen organizational capacity while improving employee well-being and client care (Grunhaus et al., 2023; Mahon, 2021).

The Steward Leadership Framework complements competency-based education by providing an ethical and theological rationale for competency development. Rather than pursuing competence solely to satisfy accreditation or organizational requirements, stewardship frames professional development as a moral responsibility to cultivate

those entrusted to the supervisor's care. Accordingly, competency extends beyond technical performance to include leadership, ethical reasoning, relational competence, reflective practice, and lifelong learning (Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Kohrt et al., 2025; Ten Cate, 2017).

Implications for Leadership Scholarship

The Steward Leadership Framework contributes to leadership scholarship by integrating stewardship theory (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), and competency-based education (Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Ten Cate, 2017) within a biblical understanding of entrusted authority. Rather than replacing these perspectives, the framework provides a unifying foundation that integrates educational, ethical, organizational, and theological dimensions of leadership. Although developed for counseling, it may also inform leadership development across psychology, social work, marriage and family therapy, nursing, medicine, chaplaincy, and other helping professions.

Implications for Human Flourishing

The framework's broadest contribution is its emphasis on human flourishing as the ultimate outcome of supervision. Rather than evaluating effectiveness solely through competence or organizational performance, steward leadership understands flourishing as multidimensional well-being characterized by purpose, relationships, ethical character, psychological health, and contribution to the common good (VanderWeele, 2017). Because supervisory influence extends from clinicians to clients, organizations, families, and communities, every supervisory relationship becomes an investment in future generations and the broader flourishing of society.

Future Research

Because the Steward Leadership Framework is conceptual, empirical investigation is needed to evaluate its usefulness within clinical supervision. Several research directions appear particularly promising. First, qualitative studies could explore how experienced supervisors understand stewardship within their leadership practices and whether the four dimensions of formation, protection, accountability, and service accurately reflect lived supervisory experiences.

Second, quantitative research could develop and validate measures of steward leadership within clinical supervision. Such instruments could examine relationships between steward leadership behaviors and supervisee outcomes, including professional identity, competency development, resilience, supervisory alliance, ethical decision-making, and burnout.

Third, comparative studies could evaluate steward leadership alongside servant leadership, transformational leadership, and authentic leadership to determine whether the proposed framework explains unique variance in supervisory effectiveness or organizational outcomes. Fourth, intervention studies could evaluate supervisor education programs intentionally designed around the Steward Leadership Framework.

Such research might examine whether stewardship-based training improves leadership competence, supervisory confidence, organizational commitment, or client-related outcomes.

Finally, additional theological scholarship could further examine stewardship across broader biblical themes, including wisdom literature, pastoral leadership, reconciliation, justice, and community formation, thereby enriching the theological foundations of supervision within Christian higher education and faith-based behavioral healthcare.

CONCLUSION

Clinical mental health supervision is one of the profession's most influential leadership relationships because supervisors shape the competence, ethical judgment, professional identity, and future leadership of clinicians whose work affects clients, organizations, and communities. This article addresses the tendency to view supervision primarily as an educational or administrative function by proposing the Steward Leadership Framework for Clinical Mental Health Supervision—a biblically grounded model integrating stewardship theology, leadership scholarship, competency-based education, instructional design, and contemporary supervision literature.

Grounded in Genesis 2:15, Matthew 20:25–28, and 1 Peter 5:2–3, the framework conceptualizes supervision as the faithful exercise of entrusted authority through four interdependent responsibilities: formation, protection, accountability, and service. Together, these dimensions integrate educational excellence with ethical responsibility while preserving the developmental, evaluative, and protective functions of clinical supervision.

The framework also provides a theological rationale for competency-based supervision by framing professional development as an act of faithful stewardship supported by evidence-based instructional design, adult learning, reflective practice, and meaningful feedback (Borders et al., 2023; Clark, 2025; Clark & Mayer, 2023; Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Merrill, 2002, 2020). Rather than viewing supervisory effectiveness solely in terms of competence or organizational outcomes, steward leadership positions human flourishing as its ultimate purpose, extending supervisory influence from clinicians to clients, organizations, and society (VanderWeele, 2017).

Because this framework is conceptual, empirical research is needed to examine its application, evaluate stewardship-based supervisor education, and explore relationships between steward leadership and supervisory outcomes. Nevertheless, the Steward Leadership Framework offers a coherent foundation for supervisor education, professional practice, organizational leadership, and future scholarship while advancing a distinctly Christian vision of supervision rooted in entrusted authority and directed toward human flourishing.

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ENTRUSTED AUTHORITY AND HUMAN FLOURISHING: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF LUKE 12:42–48 AND ITS REFINEMENT OF STEWARD LEADERSHIP THEORY

Matthew Hattabaugh

Steward leadership has gained increasing attention in contemporary leadership studies because it frames authority as a trust exercised for the good of others rather than as a possession used for personal gain. At the same time, the literature remains conceptually uneven in its treatment of entrusted authority, accountability, and human flourishing. In this study, the author applies Osborne's (2006) hermeneutical principles for interpreting parables to Luke 12:42–48 to address the following research question: How does an analysis of Luke 12:42–48 refine steward leadership theory's understanding of entrusted authority, accountability, and human flourishing? The analysis indicates that the parable presents authority as delegated rather than owned, accountability as morally evaluative and proportionate, and flourishing as faithful provision for others rather than leader-centered success. The setting, structure, earthly details, and theological thrust of the parable converge on a coherent model of steward leadership in which legitimacy is measured by how entrusted power is exercised on behalf of dependents under the expectation of judgment. In that respect, Luke 12:42–48 does more than illustrate stewardship. The findings refine steward leadership theory by clarifying the purpose of authority, the standards by which stewardship is judged, and the ethical content of flourishing.

Keywords: delegated trust, evaluative judgment, faithful provision, kingdom ethics, stakeholder welfare

Steward leadership has emerged as a significant framework in contemporary leadership studies because it treats authority as a trust exercised for the good of others rather than as a possession used for personal gain. Recent scholarship has connected steward leadership to governance, stakeholder responsibility, moral accountability, and long-term well-being, which makes the theory especially relevant to discussions of

human flourishing (Caldwell et al., 2008; Karns, 2011; Lawler, 2014; Tolbert, 2023). At the same time, the literature remains conceptually uneven in several important respects. Research has not consistently clarified whether authority in steward leadership is best understood as delegated trust, fiduciary obligation, organizational office, or some combination of these categories (Hernandez, 2008; Tolbert, 2023). The literature also leaves unresolved how accountability should be defined, especially whether it is primarily procedural, relational, moral, or evaluative (Keay, 2017; Torrance, 2023). A similar lack of precision surrounds flourishing. Although steward leadership is often associated with trust, sustainability, stakeholder welfare, and organizational health, the literature has not yet provided a sufficiently textured account of whose flourishing is prioritized and what moral content that flourishing includes (Karns, 2011; Till et al., 2019; Torrance, 2023). These unresolved issues establish the need for a more textually grounded study.

Luke 12:42–48 provides a particularly suitable pericope for addressing these gaps because it gathers in one parabolic unit the three categories that remain underdefined in steward leadership scholarship: delegated authority, evaluative accountability, and the welfare of those under a leader's care. Unlike broader stewardship texts that emphasize responsibility in general terms, Luke 12:42–48 concentrates authority, provision, abuse of power, delayed return, and judgment within a single and coherent discourse setting. For that reason, the passage offers an especially focused basis for refining steward leadership theory. Lukan scholarship has shown that this text should not be reduced to a generalized lesson in prudence. Rather, it belongs to a world of vigilance, accountability, and evaluative reckoning in which authority is exercised under the expectation of the master's return (Bauckham, 1983; Van Aarde, 1988). Other studies have further shown that the steward language in Luke carries concrete social and ethical force. The passage turns on the management of people and resources, the timing of provision, and the misuse of delegated authority for violence and self-indulgence (Howes, 2015; Sellev, 1992; Tooley, 1966). Read in this way, Luke 12:42–48 presents more than a religious illustration of prudent leadership. The passage offers a theologically charged account of authority as entrusted custody rather than autonomous possession.

The passage is also especially important for questions of flourishing. Work on Luke's ethics of wealth, peace, and provision has argued that stewardship in Luke cannot be separated from justice, communal well-being, and the welfare of vulnerable persons (Hays, 2012; Miller, 2014; Newberry, 2025). The faithful steward is commended not for personal security or administrative success alone, but for giving others their food allowance at the proper time (Luke 12:42). By contrast, the abusive steward converts entrusted authority into self-serving control and thereby turns leadership into harm. The passage therefore raises a significant theoretical question: if flourishing in a biblical stewardship framework is measured by faithful provision, just use of power, and accountability before the master, how should that shape contemporary steward leadership theory? For the purposes of this study, human flourishing refers to the condition in which persons under a leader's care receive faithful provision, protection from the abuse of power, and the ordered conditions necessary for their well-being before God. This working definition draws together the parable's own emphasis on timely provision (Luke 12:42) with the broader Lukan association of stewardship, justice,

and communal welfare (Miller, 2014; Newberry, 2025) and with recent scholarship arguing that accountability itself grounds rather than threatens flourishing (Torrance, 2023). Flourishing, so defined, is neither leader wellness nor organizational performance, though it may include effects on both. It is the measurable welfare of those most dependent on how entrusted authority is exercised. The remainder of the article employs this definition when assessing how Luke 12:42–48 refines steward leadership theory.

In this study, the author applies Osborne's (2006) hermeneutical principles for interpreting parables to Luke 12:42–48 to address the following research question: How does an analysis of Luke 12:42–48 refine steward leadership theory's understanding of entrusted authority, accountability, and human flourishing? The analysis argues that the parable offers a theologically grounded account of stewardship that clarifies how authority is held, how leaders are judged, and how the good of others should be measured under entrusted responsibility.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature relevant to this study falls into two closely related categories. The first category concerns contemporary steward leadership scholarship, especially its treatment of authority, accountability, and flourishing. The second category concerns biblical and exegetical scholarship on Luke 12:42–48 and its wider Lukan context, particularly where that scholarship clarifies stewardship, provision, judgment, and entrusted responsibility. Reviewing these two bodies of literature together makes it possible to identify the conceptual gaps in steward leadership theory and the interpretive resources Luke 12:42–48 offers for refining them.

Steward Leadership Scholarship

Steward leadership literature has developed around the claim that leadership involves the responsible exercise of entrusted authority for the good of others rather than the assertion of ownership, privilege, or self-protective control. Contemporary studies commonly associate the theory with trusteeship, stakeholder care, governance responsibility, and long-term obligation (Caldwell et al., 2008; Hernandez, 2008; Lawler, 2014; Tolbert, 2023). This stream of research has been especially valuable in resisting leadership models that equate authority with possession and in reframing leadership as answerable stewardship directed toward communities, institutions, and shared goods. Karns (2011) extended that conversation by linking stewardship to human flourishing in business ethics, while Till et al. (2019) connected stewardship to justice and the common good rather than to financial maximization alone. Taken together, this literature establishes steward leadership as a serious moral alternative to leader-centered and purely instrumental theories of leadership.

At the same time, the research base remains underdefined in several important respects. The first concerns the status of authority itself. Steward leadership scholarship regularly assumes that authority should be exercised responsibly, but it does not always specify whether authority in the theory is best understood as delegated trust, fiduciary office, governance role, psychological ownership transformed by moral obligation, or some integrated combination of these categories (Hernandez, 2008; Tolbert, 2023).

Lawler (2014) described stewardship in developmental and maturational terms, while Hernandez (2008) analyzed the movement from agency to stewardship through psychological and structural factors. Those contributions are useful, yet the literature still lacks a stable account of how entrusted authority differs conceptually from authority merely moderated by ethical concern. That gap matters because steward leadership claims distinctiveness not simply by commending moral behavior, but by offering a particular understanding of authority as responsibility held on behalf of others. This lack of precision in the status of authority also affects the theory's treatment of accountability, since the standards by which leaders are judged depend in part on how entrusted responsibility is understood in the first place.

A second unresolved issue grew out of this ambiguity surrounding authority and concerned accountability and its relation to flourishing. Steward leadership research consistently values responsibility and trustworthiness, yet the forms and standards of accountability are not uniformly clarified. In some studies, accountability appears largely procedural and governance-related, tied to oversight structures and fiduciary monitoring (Keay, 2017; Tolbert, 2023). In others, it is treated primarily as relational trust, ethical obligation, or fidelity to mission and stakeholders (Caldwell et al., 2008; Hernandez, 2008). Torrance (2023) sharpened this problem by treating accountability as a theological category bound to human flourishing, thereby suggesting that accountability cannot be reduced to technical compliance alone. Still, the contemporary literature has not yet fully integrated procedural, relational, moral, and evaluative accountability into a coherent steward-leadership framework. As a result, the standards by which stewardship succeeds or fails often remain thinner than the theory's moral aspirations require. These unresolved questions about authority and accountability also shape the literature's treatment of flourishing, because the meaning of leadership's "good" cannot be separated from the way power is held and the standards by which its use is evaluated.

A third unresolved issue concerns the meaning of flourishing within this larger framework of entrusted authority and accountability. Steward leadership scholarship frequently associates stewardship with trust, organizational health, sustainability, and stakeholder well-being (Caldwell et al., 2008; Karns, 2011; Lawler, 2014; Till et al., 2019). These emphases are important, but they do not yet amount to a sufficiently textured account of flourishing. The literature has not consistently clarified whether flourishing refers primarily to leader development, organizational effectiveness, stakeholder welfare, societal justice, or some integrated moral vision that orders these concerns. Till et al. (2019) moved the discussion toward justice and broader social good, while Karns (2011) treated flourishing as a central moral aim of stewardship in business. Even so, the category often remains elastic. Without greater conceptual precision, flourishing can function as a positively charged but insufficiently bounded term, one capable of absorbing multiple outcomes without clearly specifying whose good is being served and by what standards that good should be judged.

Biblical and Exegetical Scholarship on Luke 12:42–48

The biblical literature on Luke 12:42–48 provides an especially promising context for addressing these gaps. Bauckham (1983) situated the passage within the Synoptic Parousia tradition — *Parousia* (παρουσία) denoting the "coming" or "arrival" of Christ at

His return — where delayed return intensifies present ethical seriousness. Van Aarde (1988) showed that Luke's narrative point of view places readers within a world of vigilance, evaluative readiness, and responsibility. Howes (2015) illuminated the household and slavery background that informs the steward's role and clarified the practical force of delegated authority within the parable's social world. That background helps explain why provision for dependents, rather than control or self-indulgence, stands at the center of the steward's task. The term οἰκονόμος designates the "manager of a household or estate," a steward entrusted with administering the property and affairs of another (Bauer et al., 2000, p. 698). The term's ecclesial significance did not end with the New Testament era; οἰκονόμος survives to the present as an ecclesiastical rank within the Orthodox Church, where it historically designated the cleric responsible for managing ecclesiastical property under the bishop's supervision (Order of Saint Andrew the Apostle, 2024). Tooley (1966) clarified the significance of οἰκονόμος language for stewardship, and Sellew (1992) demonstrated how interior speech functions in Lukan parables to expose moral orientation, which is particularly relevant to the steward who says in his heart that the master delays. These studies collectively indicate that Luke 12:42–48 cannot be reduced to prudent administration in the abstract. The passage addresses delegated authority, treatment of dependents, abuse of power, and evaluative judgment within a tightly integrated narrative unit.

Lukan theological studies further suggest that this passage can sharpen steward leadership's account of flourishing. Miller (2014) located Luke's wealth and reversal ethics within questions of provision and justice for vulnerable persons. Newberry (2025) connected Lukan economic practices to peace, just relations, and communal well-being. Hays (2012) argued that Luke 12:35–13:9 should be read as a coherent discourse in which eschatological warning presses toward right use of possessions and care for others. These studies move the discussion of stewardship beyond efficient control or moralized administration. They suggest that flourishing in Luke is tied to faithful provision, ethical use of resources, and the welfare of those most exposed to a leader's misuse of power. That line of interpretation is especially important because it provides biblical content for a category that remains comparatively diffuse in contemporary steward leadership research.

Taken together, these unresolved issues establish the need for a more textually grounded study. Luke 12:42–48 provides a particularly suitable pericope because it gathers delegated authority, provision for dependents, abuse of power, delayed return, and moral judgment within a single parabolic unit. The contemporary literature has identified stewardship as trusteeship, accountability, and responsibility for others, but important categories remain underdefined, especially the status of authority, the standards of accountability, and the moral content of flourishing (Caldwell et al., 2008; Hernandez, 2008; Keay, 2017; Tolbert, 2023; Torrance, 2023). The Lukan literature suggests that these categories converge in the figure of the steward who is answerable for provision, abuse, and faithfulness under the authority of the master (Bauckham, 1983; Hays, 2012; Van Aarde, 1988). For that reason, this study places steward leadership in dialogue with Luke 12:42–48 to refine the theory through a more textually grounded account of leadership responsibility.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Luke 12:42–48 is treated in this study as a parable within Lukan narrative discourse. Accordingly, the author applies Osborne's (2006) hermeneutical principles for interpreting parables while remaining attentive to the Gospel setting in which the parable is embedded. Osborne (2006) argued that interpretation must allow the text itself to control the process and that the most adequate approach to parables blends historical and literary interests rather than privileging one at the expense of the other (p. 232). He also maintained that parables must remain parables in interpretation, because their force is best discerned when read within their first-century background and Gospel context rather than reduced to either subjective allegorizing or abstract moralizing (pp. 232–233). The passage is read as a parable whose setting, structure, imagery, and theological thrust together disclose its meaning.

Although Luke 12:42–48 is closely linked to Luke 12:35–41, the text itself indicates that verses 42–48 form a distinct primary unit. Verses 35–40 present a general call to readiness, but verse 41 marks a transition when Peter asks, "Lord, are You addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1995, Luke 12:41). Jesus then answered not with a direct explanation of verses 35–40, but with a new parabolic formulation: "Who then is the faithful and sensible steward...?" (Luke 12:42). That shift narrows the focus from readiness in general to entrusted authority, provision, abuse, and judgment. The internal movement of verses 42–48, from faithful stewardship to corrupt stewardship to proportional accountability, gives the passage a coherent structure and thematic center of its own. Thus, verses 35–41 remain the immediate setting, but Luke 12:42–48 stands as a discrete parabolic unit and may properly function as the primary pericope for this study.

First, the study considers the parable's setting because Osborne (2006) argued that both the immediate literary context and the intended audience significantly shape a parable's thrust (p. 233). In Luke 12:42–48, this includes the delayed-return context, Peter's question in Luke 12:41, and the broader discourse on readiness and accountability. Second, the study examines the structure of the parable, since Osborne (2006) emphasized that interpreters should trace major divisions, shifts in action, patterns of contrast, and the turning point that reveals the story's thrust (pp. 233–234). Third, the study uncovers the background of the earthly details, because Osborne held that the historical and social realities behind the steward, the household, provision, abuse, and judgment are necessary for understanding the force of the comparison (p. 234). Fourth, the analysis identifies the main points of the parable since Osborne (2006) rejected uncontrolled allegorizing while also warning against flattening the story into a single vague moral lesson (pp. 232–233). Fifth, the study relates those findings to Luke's theological presentation of stewardship, readiness, judgment, and provision, because Osborne (2006) argued that the parables must be read in light of Jesus' ministry and the Evangelist's contextual shaping of the material (p. 233). Finally, the study concludes with contextualization, since Osborne's (2006) interpretive model assumes that the meaning of the parable must be understood before its contemporary significance can be responsibly drawn out (pp. 232–233).

Not every feature of the parable yielded the same degree of distinct leadership insight. Even so, the study considered the major elements identified by Osborne (2006) so that interpretation would not be narrowed prematurely to those features most

obviously related to leadership theory. The Results section therefore presents in full the elements that yielded the clearest substantive contribution to the analysis of entrusted authority, accountability, and flourishing. The goal is not to impose steward leadership theory onto Luke 12:42–48, but to allow the parable itself to disclose its understanding of delegated authority, evaluative accountability, and faithful provision before those findings are placed in critical dialogue with contemporary steward leadership scholarship.

RESULTS

Luke 12:42–48 presents entrusted authority, accountability, and flourishing through its setting, structure, earthly details, and theological force. Applying Osborne's (2006) hermeneutical principles enables identification of how the steward's role, the household setting, the master's delayed return, and the logic of judgment shape the passage's leadership implications (pp. 233–234). The analysis, therefore, focuses on the features of the parable that most directly clarify leadership responsibility under entrusted authority.

Setting of the Parable

Osborne (2006) argued that the setting of a parable is crucial because the immediate literary context and the audience addressed often determine the thrust of the story (p. 233). In Luke 12:42–48, the immediate setting includes Jesus' discourse on readiness and watchfulness and, more specifically, Peter's question in Luke 12:41, "Lord, are You addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?" That question narrows the interpretive focus. The issue is no longer readiness in the abstract, but readiness as it bears on those who exercise responsibility over others. The parable therefore emerges within a context already charged with questions of delegated duty, privilege, and accountability.

Van Aarde (1988) showed that Luke's point of view places readers within a narrative world of vigilance, responsibility, and evaluative readiness. Bauckham (1983) likewise situated this material within the Synoptic *Parousia* tradition, in which delayed return intensifies present ethical seriousness rather than reducing it. The setting of the parable therefore yields an important leadership implication. Luke 12:42–48 does not address leadership as possession or status. It addresses leadership exercised in the interval between commission and reckoning. The steward stands under the possibility of the master's return, and that expectation defines the moral seriousness of the office.

Structure of the Parable

Osborne (2006) emphasized that interpreters must trace the structure of a parable to identify its movement, contrasts, and turning points (pp. 233–234). The structure of Luke 12:42–48 turns on a contrast between two patterns of stewardship. The first steward is identified as "faithful and sensible" and is commended because he gives the household its food allowance at the proper time (Luke 12:42). The second steward says in his heart that the master delays, then beats the servants and indulges

himself. The parable concludes with judgment that is differentiated according to knowledge and responsibility.

This structural contrast carries the interpretive weight of the passage. The story does not contrast stewardship with the absence of stewardship, but faithful stewardship with corrupt stewardship. Howes (2015) argued that provision stands at the center of the faithful steward tradition, and that observation helps clarify the structural force of the opening image. The steward's defining act is not symbolic leadership but timely provision for others. The turning point of the parable occurs when delay is interpreted not as continued obligation but as opportunity for abuse. Structure therefore yields a second leadership implication: entrusted authority is evaluated by what it produces in the lives of dependents when external oversight appears absent.

Background of the Earthly Details

Osborne (2006) argued that the earthly details of a parable must be illuminated by their historical and social background if the force of the comparison is to be understood accurately (p. 234). In Luke 12:42–48, the key earthly details include the steward, the household, the distribution of food, the beating of servants, the master's delayed return, and the differentiated punishments that follow. These are not decorative features. They are the social material through which the parable communicates its theological claims.

Tooley (1966) clarified that οἰκονόμος carries concrete administrative force and refers to real stewardship responsibilities rather than generalized moral disposition. Howes (2015) further illuminated the steward's role by locating it within household structures marked by delegated authority, social hierarchy, and answerability. These background features help explain why the steward's actions in the parable carry such ethical gravity. The steward exercises real authority over persons and resources, but that authority remains derivative. He manages what belongs to another and administers it on behalf of others. The detail about giving food "at the proper time" indicates that stewardship involves ordered provision, not simply general goodwill. By contrast, the abusive steward converts delegated authority into violence and self-indulgence. The background of the earthly details therefore yields a third leadership implication: stewardship concerns the custodial administration of people and resources under authority that remain borrowed, not owned.

Main Points of the Parable

Osborne (2006) rejected both uncontrolled allegorizing and the flattening of parables into a single vague moral lesson. Instead, he argued that interpreters should identify the major points generated by the structure and rhetorical force of the story (pp. 232–233). Luke 12:42–48 yields three main points relevant to leadership. First, authority is entrusted rather than possessed. The steward's role exists entirely within the authority and will of the master. Second, accountability is morally evaluative and proportionate. The steward is judged according to what he knew and how he used what had been entrusted to him. Third, flourishing is measured by faithful provision for others rather than by the steward's private advantage or apparent security.

These points arise from the central contrasts of the parable itself. The faithful steward provides for the household. The abusive steward exploits the household for himself. The one is commended and entrusted with more responsibility. The other is judged. Sellw (1992) is helpful at this point because his analysis of interior speech in Luke's parables shows how inner reasoning exposes moral orientation. The statement, "My master will be a long time in coming," reveals the decisive corruption in the steward: he interprets delay as release from accountability. The main points of the parable therefore converge on a clear leadership logic. Entrusted authority remains answerable, and its legitimacy is measured by whether those under care are served or harmed.

Relation to Luke's Theological Presentation

Osborne (2006) argued that parables must be read in relation to Jesus' ministry and the Evangelist's contextual shaping of the material (p. 233). In Luke 12:42–48, the theological force of the parable fits Luke's broader concern with stewardship, wealth, provision, justice, and readiness. The parable does not present authority as neutral administrative capacity. It presents authority as a trust whose moral quality is revealed by provision, violence, indulgence, and judgment.

Hays (2012) argued that Luke 12:35–13:9 should be read as a coherent discourse in which eschatological warning presses toward right use of possessions and care for others. Miller (2014) likewise located Luke's stewardship theology within questions of wealth, provision, and justice for vulnerable persons. Newberry (2025) connected Lukan economic practice to peace, just relations, and communal well-being. Read in that broader theological setting, the parable's concern with food distribution is not incidental. It reflects Luke's wider insistence that faithfulness before God includes concrete responsibility for the welfare of others. Theologically, then, Luke 12:42–48 joins authority and accountability to the welfare of dependents. At the level of the parable itself, flourishing is not defined by the steward's security, visibility, or success, but by whether the household is rightly ordered through faithful provision and right use of entrusted power. It is defined by whether entrusted power is used to maintain the household's welfare under the master's will.

Contextualization

Osborne's approach assumes that interpretation must move from meaning to responsible contemporary significance (Osborne, 2006, pp. 232–233). In Luke 12:42–48, the contextual force of the parable lies in its challenge to any model of leadership that treats authority as personal entitlement. The passage remains directly relevant wherever leaders control resources, make decisions affecting others, and function within conditions of limited oversight or delayed accountability.

Several implications follow from the results above. First, the parable defines authority as entrusted rather than owned. Second, it presents accountability as moral and proportionate rather than merely procedural. Third, it measures leadership by faithful provision for others rather than by the preservation of leader privilege. Fourth, it suggests that flourishing includes the welfare of those under a leader's care, especially as that welfare is shaped by the just use of resources and power. These implications speak directly to church, nonprofit, educational, and organizational settings in which

leadership can drift toward managerial autonomy, self-indulgence, or exploitative control. Luke 12:42–48 challenges such patterns by presenting stewardship as accountable custody exercised for the good of others.

These implications become concrete when leaders translate the parable's central image into organizational practice. The steward's task of giving the household its food allowance at the proper time (Luke 12:42) corresponds in contemporary settings to the timely and equitable distribution of whatever resources sustain those under a leader's care. In a congregation, this includes sound teaching, pastoral attention, and transparent administration of finances given in trust. In a nonprofit, it includes directing donor resources toward beneficiaries rather than institutional comfort. In a university or business, it includes fair compensation, honest communication, and the developmental investment that employees and students need to thrive. Leaders may assess their own provision by asking the questions the parable implies: whether those dependent on their administration receive what they need, whether they receive it when they need it, and whether any portion of the household languishes while the steward prospers. Provision at the proper time is therefore measurable, not sentimental. Delayed salaries, deferred maintenance of people, and hoarded information all constitute modern forms of the withheld food allowance.

Evaluative accountability likewise takes institutional form. If accountability in Luke 12:42–48 is moral, evaluative, and proportionate, then contemporary structures of oversight must examine conduct and consequences, not merely compliance (Caldwell et al., 2008; Keay, 2017). A church board practicing evaluative accountability reviews not only budgets but the treatment of staff and volunteers under the leader's authority. A nonprofit exercises it when program outcomes for beneficiaries, rather than fundraising totals alone, determine whether stewardship has succeeded. A university or business exercises it when performance review asks how results were obtained and who bore their costs, and when sanction for the abuse of position increases with the leader's knowledge and scope of responsibility, in keeping with the parable's proportionate logic (Luke 12:47–48). Torrance (2023) argued that accountability of this kind does not diminish flourishing but grounds it, and the parable supports that claim: households flourish precisely where stewards know they must answer for their care of others. Organizations that separate evaluation from morality, or that reserve consequences for subordinates while exempting senior leaders, reproduce the abusive steward's assumption that the master delays his coming.

Summary of Biblical Leadership Implications

Luke 12:42–48 presents a coherent and multi-dimensional model of steward leadership. The setting of the parable shows that leadership must be interpreted within the context of readiness, delegated responsibility, and the possibility of reckoning. The structure of the parable identifies two opposed patterns of leadership: one marked by faithful provision and one marked by abuse, self-indulgence, and exploitation. The earthly details of steward, household, food distribution, violence, delay, and punishment clarify that leadership in the passage is practical, custodial, and exercised over people and resources that belong to another. The main points of the parable indicate that the steward's role is derivative rather than possessive, that answerability increases with knowledge and obligation, and that leadership legitimacy is disclosed in the condition of

those under one's care. The theological presentation of the passage further shows that stewardship in Luke is inseparable from readiness before the master, moral evaluation, and ordered provision within the household. Taken together, these methodological results identify several leadership principles and practices: delegated responsibility, vigilance under delayed reckoning, faithful provision, non-exploitative use of power, moral answerability, proportionate judgment, and care for dependents as the concrete expression of communal well-being. In that respect, the parable presents stewardship not as generalized benevolence, but as accountable custody exercised for the good of others under the expectation of judgment.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of Luke 12:42–48 refines steward leadership theory by presenting leadership as delegated responsibility, by framing accountability as evaluative and proportionate, and by locating the welfare of others at the center of faithful stewardship. First, the analysis showed that Luke 12:42–48 aligns with steward leadership by presenting leadership as derivative responsibility exercised on behalf of others rather than as possessive control. Second, the analysis demonstrated that the parable sharpens the theory by framing reckoning as moral and proportionate, not merely structural or procedural. Third, the analysis indicated that the good secured through leadership in this text is seen most clearly in faithful provision for dependents rather than in leader success or institutional self-preservation. Luke 12:42–48 therefore does more than illustrate stewardship. It refines steward leadership theory by clarifying how delegated responsibility, evaluative judgment, and the welfare of others belong together within a single account of leadership.

One strength of the present study is that it treated Luke 12:42–48 within its immediate narrative setting rather than as a detachable leadership maxim. The logic of the passage turns on delegated responsibility under the possibility of delay, abuse, return, and judgment. Bauckham (1983) showed that this material belongs to the Synoptic *Parousia* tradition, where delayed return intensifies rather than weakens present ethical seriousness. Van Aarde (1988) likewise demonstrated that Luke's narrative point of view places readers within a world of vigilance, responsibility, and evaluative readiness. The paper's claims therefore rest on Luke's own narrative presentation of stewardship. The passage does not offer a general commendation of prudent management. It presents entrusted authority within a world in which treatment of others, use of resources, and fidelity to the master's will remain subject to judgment.

Contribution to Scholarly Literature

The present study contributes to the steward leadership literature by confirming substantial overlap with the theory while also identifying several areas in which Luke 12:42–48 sharpens and, in some respects, unsettles contemporary formulations. Steward leadership research commonly emphasizes trusteeship, stakeholder care, responsibility, and long-term obligation (Caldwell et al., 2008; Hernandez, 2008; Lawler, 2014; Tolbert, 2023). Luke 12:42–48 clearly resonates with those concerns. The steward is entrusted with real responsibility over persons and resources, and his legitimacy is measured by how he administers that trust. At the same time, the parable

places that trust under delayed reckoning, moral judgment, and real consequences for abuse. In that respect, the passage does more than reinforce a general stewardship ethic. It presses steward leadership theory to account more fully for the evaluative and disciplinary dimensions of entrusted authority.

At the same time, the passage clarifies the status and purpose of authority with greater precision than is often found in contemporary steward leadership theory. Existing literature frequently treats authority as something to be used responsibly, but it does not always specify with equal clarity whether authority is fundamentally possessed, delegated, or conditionally held (Hernandez, 2008; Tolbert, 2023). Luke 12:42–48 addresses that issue directly. The steward does not own the household, the resources, or the role he occupies. He functions within a framework of delegated trust defined by the will and eventual return of the master. Authority in this passage is therefore derivative rather than autonomous. It is not an entitlement attached to position, but a custody exercised on behalf of another. This distinction refines steward leadership theory by clarifying that stewardship is not merely a moral style of leadership. It is a specific account of authority as entrusted and answerable. This point also exposes a tension with softer forms of steward leadership discourse that emphasize responsibility and trust but leave underdeveloped the possibility of misuse, reckoning, and sanction.

The passage also refines the theory's understanding of accountability. Steward leadership scholarship regularly associates stewardship with responsibility, trust, and fidelity, but the standards by which stewardship is assessed are not always clearly distinguished. In some formulations, accountability appears primarily as governance structure or organizational answerability; in others, it appears as fidelity to mission or stakeholder welfare (Caldwell et al., 2008; Keay, 2017; Tolbert, 2023). Luke 12:42–48 sharpens these categories by presenting accountability as moral, evaluative, and proportionate. The steward is judged not only for whether he held a position, but for how he used it. Abuse of servants, self-indulgence, and failure of provision are treated as corruptions of entrusted authority. The final verses intensify this logic by tying judgment to knowledge and responsibility. Accountability in this passage therefore exceeds procedural review. It concerns whether delegated authority has been exercised faithfully or abusively and whether those under a leader's care have been provided for or harmed. This contributes greater precision to steward leadership theory by showing that accountability must include moral evaluation of conduct and consequences, not merely structural mechanisms of oversight.

The severity of the parable's climax deserves direct treatment rather than quiet translation. Luke 12:46 depicts the returning master cutting the unfaithful steward in pieces and assigning him a place with the unbelievers, and verses 47 and 48 grade the beating administered according to the servant's knowledge of the master's will. Interpreters serve the text poorly when they either export this violence directly into organizational practice or dissolve it into a mild principle of consequences. The eschatological register of the language guards against both errors. Bauckham (1983) located this material within the Synoptic *Parousia* tradition, in which the delayed return intensifies present moral seriousness precisely because final evaluation belongs to the master and not to any intermediate authority. The parable therefore does not authorize leaders or institutions to punish with severity; it warns leaders that they themselves

stand under an evaluation more searching than any institutional review. What transfers to contemporary theory is not the violence of the imagery but its structure: judgment in the parable is certain rather than hypothetical, proportionate rather than uniform, and directed with particular force at those who held knowledge and trust. Steward leadership theory can absorb that structure without domestication by acknowledging that some failures of stewardship are not performance shortfalls but moral breaches that rightly end a leader's tenure of trust. The parable's harshness thus functions as a boundary marker. It testifies that entrusted authority is not infinitely forgiving of abuse, and that a theory of stewardship without the possibility of real loss — of position, of standing, of the trust itself — has not yet taken the parable seriously (Torrance, 2023).

A further contribution concerns the meaning of flourishing. Steward leadership literature commonly associates stewardship with trust, organizational health, sustainability, and stakeholder well-being (Karns, 2011; Lawler, 2014; Till et al., 2019). Those emphases remain important, but they do not by themselves provide a sufficiently textured account of flourishing. In Luke 12:42–48, the most direct textual evidence points to faithful provision, protection from abuse, and the welfare of those dependent on the steward's administration. The faithful steward gives others their food allowance at the proper time, whereas the abusive steward exploits subordinates and indulges himself. On the level of the parable itself, flourishing is therefore tied most clearly to provision and the ordered care of the household. Luke's wider theological world expands that picture. Miller (2014) showed that Luke's stewardship theology is tied to provision and justice for vulnerable persons, while Newberry (2025) connected Lukan economic practice to peace, just relations, and communal well-being. Taken together, the parable and its wider Lukan context give steward leadership theory a stronger account of flourishing by directing attention toward faithful provision and, more broadly, toward the welfare of those most affected by the use of authority.

These findings also help clarify the relation between steward leadership and adjacent theories without allowing the discussion to drift into broader theory comparison. Steward leadership overlaps with servant leadership in its concern for others, but Luke 12:42–48 places heavier emphasis on trusteeship, delegated responsibility, and evaluative accountability than on service language alone. That distinction matters because it shows why steward leadership is the more appropriate dialogue partner for this study. The passage is not primarily concerned with the leader's posture of service in the abstract, though that concern is not absent. Its central burden is the exercise of entrusted authority under judgment for the sake of those who depend upon that authority. In this respect, Luke 12:42–48 gives steward leadership theory a more textually grounded framework for explaining why authority matters, how it is normed, and for whose good it is exercised.

The scholarly implications of these findings are direct. Research on steward leadership would benefit from treating authority more explicitly as delegated trust rather than leaving it implicit behind responsibility language. The literature would also benefit from distinguishing procedural accountability from moral accountability and from specifying more clearly the evaluative standards by which stewardship succeeds or fails. Finally, research on flourishing within steward leadership would gain precision if flourishing were defined not only in terms of positive organizational climate or leader development, but also in terms of faithful provision, justice in the use of resources, and

the welfare of those most vulnerable to misuse of power. Such refinements would not discard the strengths of current steward leadership theory. They would sharpen its conceptual boundaries and strengthen its explanatory coherence.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Luke 12:42–48 contributes more than a biblical illustration of stewardship. The parable offers a more precise account of what steward leadership entails by presenting leadership as delegated trust rather than possessive control, by treating stewardship as subject to evaluative and proportionate judgment, and by locating the common good in the faithful care of dependents rather than in the status, security, or indulgence of the leader. In that sense, the passage refines steward leadership theory by giving its central categories greater theological and ethical precision.

CONCLUSION

This paper applied Osborne's hermeneutical principles for interpreting parables to Luke 12:42–48 to assess how the passage refines steward leadership theory. The analysis indicated that the parable presents a theologically grounded account of leadership in which responsibility is delegated, misuse of power remains answerable to judgment, and the care of others stands at the center of faithful stewardship. In that respect, the passage does not merely illustrate stewardship. The findings sharpen the purpose of leadership, the standards of its evaluation, and the moral vision by which its outcomes should be judged.

This analysis also has clear limitations. It focused on a single Lukan pericope, employed one primary methodological lens, and placed the passage in dialogue with steward leadership theory specifically. That framing maintained conceptual clarity, but it may also have foregrounded those dimensions of leadership most visible within contemporary stewardship scholarship. In addition, because Luke 12:42–48 was interpreted as a distinct parabolic unit within a larger discourse on readiness, the present study necessarily gave greater attention to the steward imagery than to the broader thematic development of Luke 12:35–48 as a whole. A specific next step for future research would be to compare Luke 12:42–48 with 1 Corinthians 4:1–2 to assess whether entrusted authority, evaluative accountability, and faithful stewardship constitute a broader New Testament pattern for steward leadership. Such a study would help determine whether the refinements proposed here arise primarily from Luke's parabolic presentation or reflect a wider apostolic theology of leadership as entrusted responsibility under judgment.

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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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A BIBLICAL, SERVANT LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE FOR VENERABLE FACULTY

David Wallace

This article explores the biblical perspective of honoring aging faculty. A biblical interpretive approach is taken to tease out relevant biblical passages and truths that might assist college and university administrations in making decisions from a broad philosophical approach concerning aging faculty. The aim is to show effective and wise approaches to respect faculty while also meeting university needs.

Keywords: faculty, aging, biblical, servant leadership

Three-fourths of higher education baby boomer faculty members plan to delay retirement, or never retire at all (Fidelity, 2013). This raises the question of how to best resource education for tomorrow's students and whether there are biblical principles to help guide institutional decisions. Since the topics of aging and retirement are not specifically discussed together within a biblical passage, it is practical to take a theological approach in relation to work and aging. This article: (1) explores the biblical perspective of honoring aging faculty by teasing out relevant biblical passages and truths from a broad philosophical approach and (2) engages relevant research that offers some recommendations that align with a biblical perspective in a work-to-end approach.

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Concerning a biblical perspective of aging faculty, in the Old Testament God mandates "work." It is a gift, a fulfilling purpose which involves struggle and brings about joy, benefiting others. The opening words of Genesis describe God creatively at work for six days, ceasing on the seventh day (Gen. 1:1–2:2). God created man and woman

in his image—his representatives—to work the garden that God himself had planted and to subdue and rule the earth (Gen. 1:27; 2:15). The authority and activity that God ordained was good, but as a consequence of sin, God cursed the ground resulting in land that produced thorns and thistles (Gen. 3:18). The work for Adam would be difficult and laborious—he would work the land rather than gather produce from a garden that God had planted. Work outside the garden brought limitations and caused a dependency on God. Redekop (1983) described this reality as work limiting man's creatureliness. Even though man would sweat from the brow (Gen. 3:19), his labor would bring purpose and joy, a gift from God (Eccl. 3:12; 5:20). Redekop (1983) summarized the nature of work as good, honorable, fulfilling, and that which brings glory to God. This gift of work is not limited to an age group. For long life—gray hair—is associated with a life lived righteously and with wisdom (Prov. 16:31 and Job. 12:12). The Psalmist describes an Edenic-like state for the elderly who serve God, those who are upright—they are “green and full of sap;” they “bear fruit and flourish” (Ps. 92:10; my translation). In addition to work's intrinsic value, productive work keeps scarcity away and benefits the poor in the community who receive provision (Exod. 23:11–12; Lev. 19:10; and Prov. 24:33–34). An aging faculty member who seeks to live in accordance with God's plan will enjoy the work that God provides.

In the New Testament, particularly the Pauline Epistles, work is also presented positively. Work is an expression of faith and right living before God. A believer lives out faithfulness by providing for his family (1 Tim. 5:8–9), a responsibility that ensures nourishment (2 Thess. 3:10). Purposed labor keeps a person on a right path deterring from the temptation of idleness or stealing, and being useful with the hands leads to generosity and meeting others' needs (2 Thess. 3:12 and Eph. 4:28). Work is a means of serving and honoring the Lord with the whole heart (Col. 3:23). Believers have a high purpose as God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared in advance (Eph. 2:10). Thus, the gift of “work” is meant for life-long service.

More specifically, the Bible makes no mention of “retirement” or a phase of life where production ceases. All of the patriarchs, though being limited in eyesight or hearing, were active in their later years (Gen. 25:8; 35:28; 47:28; and 50:26). Moses began his work as a leader of Israel at age 80, and his predecessor Joshua lived and served beyond 100 years of age (Exod. 7:7; Josh. 24:29). Some of the prophets and kings of Israel continued to serve as they aged (2 Chron. 24:15; Luke 2:25–38), and the apostles—Peter, John, and Paul—continued to minister in their later years without any indication of stopping until their death (John 21:18; 2 Pet. 3; and Philem. 9). The point is not to compare life expectancies but to show that the Bible is silent concerning “retirement” and replete with explicit and implicit references to diligent service throughout life. In fact, “retirement” is a fairly new social phenomenon (Hendricks, 2000)—it was Germany's chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1889 who decided the age of 65 to be the age when the government would begin paying benefits to the old-age survivors (it was a political move since the average life expectancy was 55 at the time (Hendricks, 2000)).

God's nature is to reward those who work, a principle he expects to be followed by owners, managers, and leaders. For example, Paul instructs believers concerning a spiritual principle based on a natural reality of God's creation, “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap” (*English Standard Version*,

2001, Gal. 6:7–9; see also 2 Cor. 9:6 and Hos. 10:12). And the reaping in some sense is exponential in relation to the measure used in sowing (Luke 6:38). And even more so, with the Lord's blessing, the work of the harvest becomes bountiful (Gen. 26:12). Since the Bible seems to advocate a life of service to God, work that God rewards, it would be appropriate to reward those who have invested their lives—hearts and minds—in service to God with continued opportunity to do so.

Another Old Testament principle confirms this reasoning. For God's law reveals his care for his creation: "Do not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain" (*New International Version*, 2011, Deut. 25:4). The animal working the grain ought to be able to eat from what he is helping produce. Since the ox was made for man, Bruce (2000) explains that the ox is not to be deprived of his work so that both man and the animal working the field may benefit. God's design is for Christian workers to get appropriately paid for their work (Mounce, 2000). And while Paul quotes this verse from Deuteronomy to instruct the Corinthian believers that those who preach the gospel have a right to gain a living by the gospel (1 Cor. 9:9–14), the principle of remuneration can be applied to employment in general. Aging faculty have been given a gift to work, to flourish, and to receive reward. Yet this principle of reward does not speak to the aging faculty member whose production has become limited. In this case, honor and care are needed.

The aging person who walks with God is one whom the Lord cherishes. To honor an elderly person is a means of demonstrating one's reverence to God (Lev. 19:32). Just as fathers and mothers are to be honored—a timeless commandment for all generations (Exod. 20:12; Lev. 19:3; and Eph. 6:2)—so also an older man is not to be rebuked but treated as a father (1 Tim. 5:1). Since honoring the elderly honors the Lord, it makes sense that the Lord God honors those who honor him. But when aging faculty no longer produce in ways that benefit the university, it is the family, church, and community who assist.

Biblical instruction indicates that aging adults who need assistance are to first receive help from their adult children and grandchildren—to be honored by them. Charlie Trimm (2017) review biblical texts and related ancient literature concerning the command to honor parents. In sum, honoring parents includes both the physical care of parents as well as a proper attitude toward them (Trimm, 2017). In the New Testament, Jesus confronts the religious leaders' lack of prioritizing the provision for one's parents (Mark 7:9–11). Also, Paul instructs Timothy to direct believers in Ephesus to take first care for their widowed mother or grandmother, which is pleasing to God—before the widow would come to the church for assistance (1 Tim. 5:4). The Christian university is not a benevolence ministry (though a well-administered benevolence fund or team would be an appropriate means to honor employees in need).

Based on Scriptural truths, it seems that lifelong vocation and supporting continued purpose for faculty at work is honorable, that God-given calling spans one's lifespan and is not limited by age. Both Old and New Testament principles emphasize faithful stewardship in service to others, and institutions ought to create opportunities for aging faculty to remain engaged in teaching, mentoring, and service roles based on their capacity and contribution to institutional mission. It would seem, then, that when aging faculty cannot serve productively, the biblical model supports a meaningful way to show respect and dignity, but the family and community are to play a significant role. This raises a practical concern as to what actions an academic institution might take to

honor aging faculty. Below is scholarly discussion and support that align with the above general biblical principle of showing honor.

WORK-TO-END VIEW

For the individual, it is important to recognize the value of this stage of life. Davies (2008) defined the purpose and value for the aging person. To glorify God is the common theme of individuals, and according to Davies (2008), the last third of one's life can amplify the uniqueness of glorifying God, and the biblical perspective intimates that all human life is "precious and sacred" (p. 275). Chronological age does not deteriorate the value of an individual as "aging provides opportunity for increased growth toward spiritual maturity and wisdom" (Davies, 2008, p. 276). The distinctive triumph of those aging is to recognize the beauty at this stage and understand God as faithful and find delight in continued "fruitfulness"—a joy age can bring with greater meaning and "wisdom" (Davies, 2008, pp. 289–91).

Hendricks (2000) asks the question, "How, then, does a modern twenty-first-century believer fit a retirement plan into a work-to-end view?" (p. 134). Hendricks (2000) answers: (1) choose self-determination rather than passivity; (2) choose God's design rather than retirement and glorify him with fulfilling work; and (3) accept the challenge of change as a means of exercising a vibrant faith (pp. 135–37). One of the beneficial ways to show self-determination and faith is to plan for the final career phase by gaining financial education, setting new research goals, keeping up with new teaching methods, looking for ways to mentor new faculty, and working with the administration on areas that help the university, such as pursuing research grants or serving on committees where the faculty member has expertise.

In other words, the aging faculty member represents a valuable and often overlooked resource. As institutions work through questions of workforce transitions and retirement plans, aligning decisions with a more theologically grounded perspective is needed beyond policymaking to respect faculty who have dedicated years of faithful service. It seems that universities often lack the intentional frameworks and trained personnel to develop a culture of values to steward senior faculty well. Investigating practical strategies to honor faculty in a work-to-end approach that benefits the university would be a wise investment.

How, then, does a modern twenty-first-century Christian university fit a retirement plan into a work-to-end approach? Since meaningful work is a gift from God, the faculty member who can produce ought to be honored with continued work in areas where the faculty member contributes. Since God honors those who honor him and since God honors aging faculty who have faithfully served him, it is in the best interest of the university to find appropriate means to honor aging faculty. Yet, it is not the university's responsibility to continue to financially support an aging faculty member who does not contribute in meaningful employment to the institution. Thus, assessment and communication among faculty and administration as well as proper planning are needed for a productive outcome for both.

Concerning aging faculty and production, interestingly, in most fields, journal article publication rates do not decline substantively with age, and in some cases, article publication rates are higher among senior scholars (Savage & Olejniczak, 2021).

Specifically, researchers find that book and chapter publication rates increase markedly with age (Savage & Olejniczak, 2021). The reason seems to be that senior scholars maintain publishing activity levels and tend to shift their focus to the development and evolution of ideas through the publication of longer-format works more so than conference presentations (Savage & Olejniczak, 2021). In addition, student evaluations of teaching in correlation with age of tenured faculty raise no major concerns regarding any deterioration in teaching effectiveness, and teaching evaluations for tenured faculty in the humanities and social sciences improve as they approach retirement (Kinney & Smith, 1992, p. 299). Universities may benefit from viewing aging academics not as employees exiting the workforce, but as those who continue to contribute to teaching, research, and institutional culture, with added value for mentoring (Altman et al., 2020; Teixeira da Silva, 2024). Retaining current high-quality faculty members who provide value-added performance to the institution would be an important aim (Harrison & Hargrave, 2006). Similarly, aging teachers are “persons of authority” who deserve honor for their contribution (LaFosse, 2023, p. 209).

In a qualitative study that examined the retirement decisions and late-career trajectories of 45 baby boomer academics across four countries (USA, UK, Spain, and France), researchers found that almost three-fourths of the aging academicians participating planned to work full-time or in some type of reduced capacity (Altman et al., 2020). Less than one-tenth of the participants planned to fully retire. The findings show that the aging faculty members enjoyed the intellectual engagement in their academic pursuits, they appreciated collegial interaction, and they did not want to give up their role in mentoring younger scholars (Altman et al., 2020). This indicates that supporting faculty members’ desires to continue their engagement would be honoring rather than seeking to move faculty along to full retirement. Senior academicians provide experience in research and teaching and valuable opportunity for early-career colleagues to gain assistance in their own academic pursuits. This requires institutions making an assertive effort to redesign pre-retirement programs which might include phased retirement, or a work focus through a bridge employment opportunity, or emeritus roles—rather than treating retirement as a single endpoint (Altman et al., 2020).

Porter (2014) outlined another avenue for productivity for aging faculty by supporting semi-retirement in a manner where the faculty member increases faculty research (pp. 23–26). Porter (2014) suggested a possible option: the university can reduce teaching and administrative responsibilities, and a professor can focus on research activities with continued access to campus resources, work with graduate students on research projects, or possibly seek grant funding—it seems that the idea is to “make semi-retirement more attractive for the graying faculty” (2014, p. 26). Porter (2014) emphasized that some form of criteria is important before deciding on which aging faculty members could support the university in this way through continued research, and the university would need to develop written policies concerning this process and communicate this process well. It is common sense that aging faculty with decades of experience in their field would bring value to the university before active retirement. And this approach would also allow for younger scholars to be mentored well. The question seems to be a matter of priority.

Kaskie et al. (2017) encouraged universities to recognize aging faculty as institutional assets rather than burdens. Senior faculty provide valuable mentorship, evidence productivity in research, and benefit the institution in a way that brings continued favorable reputation. From this perspective, older faculty are seen as contributors worthy of specific support. In a study based on 187 colleges and universities across the United States, responses were gathered concerning the aging academic workforce by surveying human resource specialists to assess policies and programs, and found that most institutions did not prioritize aging faculty (Kaskie et al., 2017; see also Jonte-Pace & Strage, 2019). In fact, less than 5% of Human Resource specialists made this a top concern, and only one in four Human Resource specialists received any training on aging-related issues (Kaskie et al., 2017, pp. 230–31). The assumption here is that training in this area of aging faculty would provide impetus for relevant programs that benefit faculty and the university. Some institutions do currently provide wellness programs and relevant accommodations for aging faculty as well as counseling and phased retirement options that respect autonomy and faculty experience rather than seek forced retirement (Kaskie et al., 2017). In essence, trained Human Resource staff would serve as a catalyst for honoring aging faculty; rather than inaction as a dishonoring choice, prioritizing the concerns of aging faculty who have served for decades would be a better university investment (Kaskie et al., 2017).

Craigsmiles et al. (2014) listed the various responsibilities, compensations, and benefits that can be considered in phased retirement to reach a positive solution for faculty and institution. These areas include responsibilities of a faculty member (teaching, availability and office hours, institutional committees and faculty meetings, and honorary events), and faculty benefits (compensation, professional funds and sabbaticals, health care and primary benefits, perks and soft benefits). Some of the ways to honor aging faculty include: listen to the faculty as to what issues are most important to them (since what may seem minor to administrators may be of principle concern for a faculty member, and what might not be on the faculty member's mind beyond teaching load and salary might be missed—tax implications, office space, and community engagement), make expectations clear for this phase of employment in the faculty handbook, provide clarity in advance concerning eligibility for phased retirement options to allow for financial planning for the faculty member, provide options for phased retirement such as teaching flexibility, freeing up from administrative responsibilities, mentoring younger faculty, etc. Craigsmiles et al. (2014, pp. 71–71) stressed that institutions can gain by retaining senior faculty who have served well: (1) faculty with whom students are eager to study, (2) faculty who have wisdom and insight that cannot be readily gained from newly hired faculty, and (3) faculty whom alumni wish to renew relationships with, resulting in continued alumni support for the university.

The above strategies counter an approach of forcible retirement of a productive faculty member. But this does not mean that the organization is responsible for rescuing an individual from lack of planning. In this regard, an institution could honor faculty by making available to the faculty quality retirement planning services, such as financial planning and elderly health care planning. The university could also increase matching funds by a certain percentage after a certain time period of employment, such as 10 years and again after 15 years, etc.

CONCLUSION

A biblical perspective concerning aging faculty with respect to "work" provides guiding principles for faculty and administration in taking a work-to-end approach. Both the Old and New Testaments see "work" as a gift that brings about struggle, joy, and fulfillment in a manner that glorifies God. The Bible does not mention "retirement" and instead seems to maintain the view that persons work as long as they are productive in a way that pleases God. Since the Bible advocates a life of service to God, the university can honor God by honoring faithful faculty. While the university is not a benevolence ministry nor responsible for the individual's decisions, it is in the best interest of the university to cooperatively plan and to reward faithful and productive faculty with opportunities to work as long as faculty contribute and produce in line with the institution's mission and goals rather than according to a fixed age. According to current research, most universities lack the intentional framework and trained personnel to develop a culture to steward senior faculty well. But universities would benefit by prioritizing the honoring of venerable faculty by implementing practical strategies in a work-to-end approach—such as phased retirement options, clear written policies, trained human resource staff, and meaningful accommodations—that together reflect a deeper institutional commitment to stewarding those who have given their careers in faithful service to God and the academic community.

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AN EXPLORATION OF MINISTERIAL TRANSITIONS IN THE AGE OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Evelyn M. Cardenas

Although we can fill libraries with thousands of books, articles, and periodicals on the topic of leadership, an unsolved challenge of successful leadership is a successful transition. Servant leaders are charismatic and trustworthy. They inspire and elicit loyalty through their service and people-focus. Rather than prioritizing power, money, and personal success, servant leaders work to enable their people to succeed and empower them to meet the needs of the organization through their own self-realization. An interesting question arises in the exploration of servant leadership and succession planning. Are servant leaders better at planning their succession? In the United States, 84% of churches lack a succession plan for their senior leader (Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2020, p.30). In any 12-month period, there are approximately 30,000 U.S. pastors in transition, with more senior pastors older than 65 years of age than those under 40. Although leadership succession is expected (Sanou, 2021, p.29), inevitable (Olusegun, 2021), and a fact (Adkins, 2017), transition planning continues to be more of a reactive process (Blythe, 2005, p.14) and an afterthought. This article explores leadership succession through the lens of servant leadership and the transitions between Moses and Joshua, and Elijah and Elisha, and the working relationship between Paul and Timothy.

Keywords: servant leaders, leadership transitions, succession planning

Dave Travis defined pastoral succession as “the intentional transfer of power, leadership, and authority from one primary leader to another” (Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2020, p. 20). Leadership “succession is a process not an event” (p. 43). Of all the things successful leaders must do, succession planning may be one of the most difficult. As the chief executive officer of the church, the senior pastor is the fundraiser, administrator, and visionary; the *persona Christi capitis*—God’s representative on earth. The pastor has three main duties: “teaching, sanctifying, and governing” (Pope Benedict XVI, 2010, April

14). As God's visionary, the leader is responsible for the mission of the church and the organization's "cultural, ethnic, and theological traditions" (Lovelace, 2014, p. 257). The pastor is entrenched in church administration, rooted in the hearts and minds of the congregation, and embedded in the soul of the community in ways that are hard to explain, difficult to assess, and complex to separate when the time for succession has arrived. Because of this, the general belief may be that "pastors don't retire" (Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2020, p. 31). However, churches are confronted with the reality that "every pastor is an interim pastor" and that what organizations call succession planning is "replacement planning," which is more of a risk mitigation strategy (Adkins, 2017, p. 1). The reality is that it is risky and ill-advised not to have a succession plan (Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2020).

Thinking about what is next before it is required is a leadership imperative and a key attribute of extraordinary leaders (Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2020). Rather than proactive changeovers, leadership transitions are disruptive and complicated for several reasons. The first concern is having qualified candidates, followed by budgetary worries and role clarity. Then there are issues with timing, strategic direction, and the expectations of the incoming leader. Finally, executional variations, competing priorities, and misplaced transition anxiety can hinder leadership changes and obstruct the new leader's success. For churches, the "personal relationships... and the spiritual dimensions" complicate separating the reasons for the transitions from its impacts (Dollhopf & Scheitle, 2013). Transitions upset the inner workings of the organization from their effects on the "attitudes, emotions, and behaviors of all individuals involved" (Ballinger & Marcel, 2010), and because they trigger strategic shifts, human capital changes, relationship differences, and swings in the workflow (Lee & Tsai, 2024). Leadership transitions are about more than just passing the proverbial baton. Good intentions and hard work may lay the foundation for succession planning, but they do not ensure its success.

Vanderbloemen and Bird (2020) stated that wise pastors start thinking about what is next before it is required. This suggests servant leadership. Servant leaders are charismatic and trustworthy. They inspire and elicit loyalty through their service and people-focus. Rather than prioritizing power, money, and personal success, servant leaders work to enable their people to succeed and empower them to meet the needs of the organization through their own self-realization. An interesting question arises in the exploration of servant leadership and succession planning—are servant leaders better at planning their succession? Through an exegetical analysis of the transitions from Moses to Joshua (Num. 27:18–20) and Elijah to Elisha (2 Kings 2:12–14), this article will explore how servant leaders prepare for their successors and how successors are empowered to continue the ministerial mission. Through the life of these two great servant leaders, the goal is to understand if servant leaders demonstrate a better ability for succession planning.

LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

The current research around transitions agrees that they are challenging, chaotic, conflict-ridden, and risky. Successions require leadership formation, but according to Johnson (2022), "leadership development is treated as a luxury" rather than a need, and money is not allocated for this luxury (p. 3). Dollhopf and Scheitle

(2013) stated that most transitions are unplanned or ill-planned successions, but asserted that transitions that are planned have a positive impact on the new leader's success and the organization's success under the new leader's guidance. They further highlighted that while transitions are disruptive, their impact is felt prior to the actual event as the change can intensify "congregational conflict," which can be the reason for the change and a consequence of it (p. 676). Church transition can lead to membership decline or create opportunities. These opportunities can come from a more focused organizational direction, better defined roles, and better-established identities of the new leader and the organization (pp. 676–677).

Other challenges can arise with staffing changes, the background of the new leader, or the competitive landscape. For example, human capital and social capital are crucial elements in post-transition success (Lee & Tsai, 2024, p. 628). The new leader may bring their own executive team at the cost of internal human resources. This can further the unease from the transitioning out of the current beloved leader. The next area of concern arises with a possible open door to "competitor attacks" (p. 634) surfacing as an unintended consequence of CEO changes. For churches, this would be akin to other houses of worship capitalizing on the disruption of a church under a leadership transition. A third element Lee and Tsai deemed significant was that of the insider versus outsider successor and how it can impact the strategic direction of the organization (p. 628). Similarly, Dollhopf and Scheitle mentioned the successor's origin (internal or external), but added organizational context and culture as influencers in leadership transitions (p. 679). Like most corporate successions, churches see transitions as an event, possibly like a light on-and-off switch rather than a dimmer switch. Turning the lights on and off are "abrupt and obvious;" successions should be more of a deliberate and conscientious "dimming down" and "brightening up" (Jethani, 2005, p. 52).

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Greenleaf (1977) proposed that the reason for the existence of "all human organizations" is to serve (p. 91). With respect to leadership, he promoted the idea that the desire to serve emerges first, then the desire to lead (p. 5). For Greenleaf (1979), servant leaders serve their people, help them dream bigger, aim higher, stand taller, and strive to serve others (p. 92). Eva et al. (2019) found that servant leaders are sometimes seen as trustees responsible for cultivating and growing the organization's people and resources (p. 114). For Contreras (2016), servant leadership is a "moral and inspirational" model that is a strategic need for organizations today, and a way through which organizations can achieve their strategic and social goals (p. 22). A strategic goal of organizations is planning for the future and should include succession. However, as the data indicates, secular and spiritual organizations struggle with succession planning (Vanderbloemen and Bird, 2020).

Currently, the literature lacks sufficient data on the topic of successful transitions (Siambi, 2022) or on data providing a defined path toward smoother transitions. There is an absence of recommendations to address the concerns, issues, and obstacles that are present before, during, and post transitions. Whether by commission or omission, the current literature on transition fails to answer the questions of how leaders and congregations should prepare for their successors and how successors should be

empowered to continue the ministerial mission. With the added focus on the success of servant leadership, the question arises as to whether they are better at planning succession than other types of leaders. These questions are the gaps and limitations in the literature. While there is research discussing the challenges and providing guidance and biblical analyses to inform the transitions, the theoretical and practical answers as to how to prepare predecessors and successors for successful transitions with minimal conflict, chaos, and risks remain an open quandary.

ALL PASTORS ARE TEMPORARY PASTORS

Olusegun (2021) underlined the inevitability of leadership succession for every organization (p.107). The fact is that all pastors will retire. Most pastoral transitions occur by happenstance, and 90% of the 480,000 expected pastoral transitions over the next 10 years do not have a succession plan (Expand Consulting Partners, 2024). Watkins (2003) cautioned that during times of transition, small actions can impact results much more than usual. While Ciampa and Watkins (1999) reminded organizations to be mindful of the loitering spirit of past leaders. Therefore, the discussions from this exegetical analysis can provide noteworthy insight for ministry leaders starting out in their careers, mid-career professionals, and those planning to transition soon.

Transitions by their very nature are disruptive (Ballinger & Marcel, 2010) and require close collaboration between the predecessor and successor (Ciampa & Watkins, 1999). Rarely does the “Spirit of Elijah” inhabit the successor (Elisha) as it did in 2 Kings 15, and seldom has there been a leadership style and direction like that of these two men (Klem, 2023). Although there is not a one-strategy-fits-all approach, this exegetical investigation can help lay the foundation for additional research and provide guidance for a godly servant leadership transition process. This exegetical analysis examines the current research and biblical texts on the leadership transitions of Moses and Joshua (Num. 27:18–20) and Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2:12–14) to offer guidance on planned successions.

SUCCESSION PLANNING GAP

The literature on succession planning discusses the lack of planning for a succession, the availability of leaders for succession, the decisions about internal versus external successors, and pre-succession preparation. Where succession planning guidance is provided, the guidance focuses on overtly high-level approaches, missing the practical nuances required to ensure a proper and godly transition of power and authority from one generation to the next.

The research suggests that preparing for the next leader is a challenge for both secular and faith-based organizations (Sanou, 2021, p. 28); and that although most senior leaders believe that succession planning is important, very few do it (Adkins, 2017; Barna, 2023; Ciampa et al., 1999; Hunter & Decker-Pierce, 2021; Sanou, 2021, p. 32; Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2020).

Exploring organizational planning, Hunter & Decker-Pierce (2021) found that only 45% of boards had a replacement in development, 28% were internal promotions, and 19% of the successions were the result of a planned retirement (p. 38). Vanderbloemen

and Bird (2020) stated that senior leaders need to recognize “that there is no success without a successor. No one wins when transitions don't go well” (p. 39). Dollhopf and Scheitle (2013) stated that a misunderstood fact of transitions is that “the impact... is often felt before the transition even occurs” (p. 676); actions during transition tend to produce “disproportionate results” (p. 676), and conflict “can be both cause and effect of congregational leadership transition” (p. 678). Dollhopf and Scheitle’s investigation made several key contributions regarding decisions around internal versus external or male versus female candidates. First, they found that an external leader may be “a less polarizing force” and receive more grace than an internal leader who may face higher expectations (p. 693). Vanderbloemen and Bird (2020) also mentioned support for an external successor: “One trend we've noticed is that the right person to succeed is often the one who has been prepared elsewhere” (p. 36). The choice of an internal candidate when accompanied by the current leader continuing as a member of the congregation can also lead to transitional issues (Dollhopf & Scheitle, 2013, p. 693) and issues from the “ghosts of leaders past” (Ciampa & Watkins, 1999). Next, they found that gender can result in greater conflict; specifically, female leaders faced more conflict than their male counterparts. Finally, the short-term decline and shifts in the size of the congregation were not meaningful, and their effects dissipated over the long term.

Another issue with succession planning is the availability of successors to choose from. Johnson (2022) compared succession planning to buying life insurance, as it is rare for someone to enjoy the process of buying life insurance or the reason for it. In this study, Johnson looked at the reasons for the impending “exodus” of nonprofit organization executives (NPOs): retirements, job transitions, burnout, or remote work (p. 3). These reasons, plus the need for higher wages and for operational improvements, were also echoed by Rendon (2022). Johnson stated that organizations need to understand the issues around the necessity for succession planning and the importance of a leadership development program. While organizations may perceive leadership development as a luxury, it is a necessity that requires business funding (p. 3). NPOs ought to face succession processes and decisions head-on; decisions such as internal versus external candidates, leadership development, and succession goals (p. 3). Next, boards, HR departments, and current executives should work collaboratively to define roles and responsibilities among them, allocate resources toward leadership development and mentoring, discuss succession strategies, assign tasks with owners, and create processes. Johnson’s recommendations provide useful guidance for the role of the three bodies (HR, executive, board) and elements necessary for succession, which lead to a discussion about the role of the board.

Stewart et al. (2021) stated that a wealth of information exists on the practice of how successful transitions should be executed, but little attention is paid to the role of the board (p. 527). The existing research demonstrates the need for boards to do more; currently, 75% of board members do not complete the best practices found in the literature (p. 540).

Lovelace’s (2014) review of an effective pastoral succession in California was grounded in the letter of the Apostle Paul to Timothy, where Paul carefully instructs his pastoral apprentice that the gospel and the testimony of Jesus Christ must continue beyond his imminent physical departure. Paul embraces the idea that his ministerial assignment includes that of assuring a continuity and perpetuation of the church’s

teachings. Paul addresses the need for faithfulness, sustainability, and impartation (p. 258).

Paul is a biblical example of a servant leader. In this assessment, Lovelace uses Paul's analogies of the good soldier, the athlete, and the farmer (p. 259–260). With the soldier analogy, Lovelace makes the case that Paul wanted Timothy to be prepared for war and to be responsive to God's authority and the legacy of his predecessor. With the athlete, Paul wanted Timothy to care for his own physical health, the health of his team, to foster a team environment, and to understand the strategies that lead to successful team outcomes (p. 259). Using the farmer analogy, Lovelace claims that Paul's intention was to "embrace the stewardship mantle of the farmer" with the responsibility to "sow for a future harvest," understanding that the product of the harvest benefits those beyond the church walls (p. 260). The process that Lovelace provides includes six phases: the Holy Spirit's affirmation of the new leader as in the laying on of hands (1 Tim. 5:2), confirmation that the candidate has been vetted, communication of the timeline and the process, edification of the relationship of the outgoing and the incoming leader, ratification of the new leader, and finally the celebration (p. 265–266). Lovelace states that through this process the congregation can emotionally detach from the old leader and celebrate the new one. Based on 1 Timothy 5:17–22, the objective is to honor the outgoing leader and the incoming pastor (p. 266). Through an analysis of the pastoral letters, and similar to Lovelace (2014), Hock (2006) explored succession planning from the perspective of the apostles (1 Tim. 1:9–10; 6:4–5; 2 Tim. 3:2–4; Titus 3:3). Via the admonitions in each letter regarding false teachers, sins, and ethics, Paul wanted his successors to be well equipped to combat false teachings and false teachers "with patience and competence" (p. 88). Paul wanted his successors to be authentic leaders who reflected on, taught, and exemplified Godly virtues (p. 98). Unlike Lovelace, Hock does not provide a process for a proper succession. The focus of this study was a more exegetical look at the pericope versus an exploration with the goal of finding a strong transition process.

In the book *The Succession Principle: How Leaders Make Leaders*, McKenna (2014) stated that the leaders' legacies "will be written not in the good things (they have) done as Christian leaders, but in the greater things that (their) successor will do" (p. 123). Martin (2024) promoted the idea that the leader's succession plan is his legacy. McFarlan (1999) stated that selecting a new chief executive officer (CEO) is the most important job of the board and that "simple formulas and standard practices don't always work" (p. 68). Sometimes an unconventional method such as cross-training along with the current leader and the second-in-command switching roles can lead to finding the perfect successor (p. 69). McFarlan's suggestion does not negate the need for succession planning and due process, but it can provide a solution to finding a successor for a volunteer board who may have limited abilities in the nonprofit area they serve.

Succession research suggests that there is a need for more guidance on practical transition planning. The current research only addresses the process from a high level or points to a general strategy that misses the intermingling role of the board, the responsibilities of the outgoing and the incoming leader, and duties of the congregation. Therefore, a close look at how servant leaders like Moses and Elijah

planned for their transitions may shed some light on this complex and often ignored topic.

MOSES' JOURNEY ENDS

During Moses' time, Israel had left Egypt, crossed the desert, and identified the Promised Land. It was now time to seize it. At this junction, Moses is around 120 years old. He had spent one third of his life enjoying the comforts of the palace; the second third of his life as a fugitive in the desert getting to know God from afar; the last 40 years sharing a very personal, intimate relationship with God, building the foundation for Israel's future and humanity's fate while earning his badge as God's chosen leader.

The last 40 years had been the toughest of Moses' life, but if asked, he might say that they were the best years of his life. He accomplished something he did not know was possible. This stuttering fugitive led God's people out of horrible multi-generational bondage and into freedom- training, equipping, and forming them in the process.

ELIJAH'S TIME IS UP

Elijah had completed his mission. He knew his time was up. He was pensive and refrained (2 Kings 2). A lot had happened to him and through him. His passion commandeered God's biggest moments despite his doubts and his flailing self-esteem. In his highs, he had seen God's glory and, in his lows, he felt God's love. Now, Elisha walks beside him attentive to his every move.

Martin (2024) suggested that part of the challenge of succession planning is the outgoing leader's loss of purpose, personal identity, and belonging to the community that has looked to him for leadership for many years. Ronald A. Heifetz believed that the fear of loss was the real fear and not the fear of change (Cormode, 2020).

An exegetical review of Numbers and 2 Kings may help highlight how neither change nor loss should be feared but embraced. Moses and Elijah not only accepted the end of their ministries but planned for it. They took ownership, closing their journey and helping their successor commence theirs.

EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS NUMBERS AND 2 KINGS

Texture Analysis Summary

An inner texture analysis of Numbers 27:18–20 (NIV) reveals the unique progression of Israel, a Hebrew nation, in the process of being birthed. The opening-middle-closing pattern begins with Moses and Eleazar the priest, preparing Joshua for the succession ceremony. In the opening (v. 18), God tells Moses how to perform the succession and installation ceremony. In the middle (v. 19), Joshua stands before the Priest and in front of the Israelites for the public anointing. The closing happens in verse 20, where the transition culminates with Moses' authority publicly transferred to Joshua.

A sensory aesthetic pattern is evident in the text in the form of phrases that express vibrant, palpable actions such as "the Lord said," "Take Joshua," "lay your hand on him," "have him stand before," "commission him," "give him." These action phrases

focus on the past (taking Joshua), the present (anointing Joshua), and direction for the future (Joshua leading the people).

Looking further at Numbers 27 through the intertexture lens, Moses, under God's direction, follows a public process that is intentional and methodical, and in line with his Hebrew heritage. Moses takes Joshua out from the group, places him in front of the priest and before the Israelites, lays his hands on Joshua, publicly commissions him, and transfers the authority necessary to be the next leader of Israel. The leadership transition was public, symbolic, and included all the rituals, garments, elements, and traditions of the time. For example, the laying on of hands was used during Moses' time for rituals including healing and ordination (Foakes-Jackson & Lake, 1954). Olusegun (2021) stated that Numbers 27:12–23 is a prototype for leadership transitions.

The succession process includes a laying on of hands by Moses. This laying on of hands represents the transfer of power from Moses to Joshua while Moses was still alive to forestall any doubt as to the legitimacy of Joshua's leadership among the people. This public investiture will give Joshua the authority to lead the people, and they will follow him in obedience. The use of "of your authority" in verse 20 suggests a release of Moses' weight, power, splendor, or authority on Joshua, which enables him to lead the people successfully.

Through a sacred texture analysis, God's role is revealed as the process proceeds to describe Joshua as a man who had "the spirit of leadership" or the *Ruach HaKodesh*, the "Spirit of the Holy One" (Num. 27:18, *Orthodox Jewish Bible*, 2002). As mentioned in the intertexture analysis, there is divine history in the laying on of the hands, commissioning, and transfer of authority. Joshua's commitment shows up as the aspect of human commitment prevalent in sacred texture analysis.

In 2 Kings 2, a different but similar transition process takes place. Elijah is publicly removed from earth; his cloak, similar to and symbolic of the royal robes of kings, falls and ends up in the hands of Elisha. As Elisha assumes his predecessor's authority, Elisha stands at the bank of the Jordan River performing a similar miracle to Elijah. The conclusion of this event with the crossing over completes the transition of power, and the acceptance of authority marks the beginning of Elisha's ministry.

An analysis of the words describes constant movement: "walking," "talking together," "suddenly," "separated," "saw," "cried," "took," "tore," "picked up," "went back," "asked," "struck," and "crossed over" (2 Kings 2:11–14, *New International Version*, 2011). Within the descriptors and action phrases, there is a more familial relationship that emerges in the way that Elisha cries out upon Elijah's removal, "my father my father" (2 Kings 2:12). The focus of the pericope is the public and extraordinary removal of the current leader and the transition of the new leader. The cloak of the current leader (Elijah) falls from the sky (heaven is the place of ministerial selection) and is caught by Elisha (the new Elijah for that generation). To continue the ministry and with the cloak in hand, Elisha performs a similar miracle to Elijah and parts the waters.

There are certain things here that differ from the transition in Numbers. In these verses, there is a conversation between Elijah and Elisha. No conversation is referenced in Numbers. The taking up of Elijah is described as "sudden," although the text suggests that it was expected. While no "assembly" of people is apparent in these verses, the prior and following verses mention the 50 prophets nearby.

The sacred texture analysis of 2 Kings does not mention God (deity) or a spirit being, but God's presence and his Spirit are evident in the chariots of fire, horses of fire, the whirlwind, and the act of rapturing Elijah (2 Kings 2:11–14). Looking at the Holy Person perspective, Elijah emerges as the prophet working on God's behalf with Elisha as the prophet in waiting. The divine history is found in the symbolic process of using the cloak to validate Elisha's leadership and in the parting of the Jordan River. Elisha's human commitment is demonstrated through his consistency in walking and talking with Elijah, keeping an eye out for his rapture, taking the cloak, and parting the waters. Here again, since there was no "assembly" or religious community presented in the text, the verses prior to and post the pericope chosen reference 50 prophets nearby.

Key Information from the Biblical Passages

Several things stand out from both succession stories. In Numbers, Moses has a defined, structured, and ordered process for presenting the successor, demonstrating that Joshua was chosen, and then transferring to him the authority that Moses had. The process was done in the presence of God, the priest, and the people: "Moses . . . decided that it was time for him to begin relinquishing power to a successor, and he asked for one, making sure that he did all that is necessary to transfer leadership to this successor" (Olusegun, 2021). Rather than desiring to hold on to power, Moses wanted the transfer of power to happen. As a servant leader, Moses was focused on his people and God's mission, and not himself.

In the story of Elijah and Elisha, a similar process takes place. While it does not appear to be as structured and ordered as compared to Moses and Joshua, there is a structure and an order to the succession. Elijah's departure is known and expected, although no one is talking about it. The text states that Elijah and Elisha are "walking and talking together" shortly before the transition process begins. The transition officially begins when "a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them" (2 Kings 2:11). The chariots appear with the purpose of removing Elijah: "Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind." This taking-up begins with the public, supernatural, and extraordinary changeover. While Elisha is startled by the chariots, horses, fire, and the whirlwind, the surprise is not due to the transition process. Elijah had reiterated to Elisha the need to witness the removal to receive the answer to the double-portion request. Now, the time had come, and the changeover was taking place in a very supernatural manner. As this is happening, Elijah's cloak falls from heaven, and Elisha grabs it. The text then states that "Elisha saw him no more." Here, the transition process ends, signaling the culmination of the public ministry of Elijah. The void left by Elijah is ready to be filled by his successor.

Klem's (2023) analysis of the transition of Elijah to Elisha reveals a structural pattern in the form of "a loyalty test in a prophetic succession." Elijah asks Elisha to stay behind, and the successor refuses. The script is flipped when Elisha asks Elijah for a double portion (2 Kings 2:9–10), which he gets upon Elijah's removal.

While Elijah's transition is more extraordinary in execution than what is presented in Numbers between Moses and Joshua, it follows a similar pattern and sequence. Elisha is chosen publicly, cloaked publicly, and rewarded with the first public miracle after the "anointing" as successor. Joshua is anointed publicly, validated publicly by the

priest, accepted as the successor publicly, and ready to take the Promised Land after his official installation.

Interpretation Support

Sanou (2021) stated that whether "planned or unplanned, changes in the organizational, societal, or political landscape are an ever-present, unavoidable reality" (p. 29). Lovelace (2014) further affirmed the need for a strong plan as the best way to ensure a successful transition (p. 260). Moses was keenly aware of the limited time remaining. The clock was winding down; Israel has left its bondage behind and the entrance to the Promised Land draws near. Moses is intentional about identifying the successor. Lovelace (2014) stated that the "understudy . . . must be willing to assume the discipline of a soldier . . . (and accept) a position of submission to the One (God) who has called those to serve" (p. 259). In Numbers, Joshua was the understudy and a soldier. Through a process of years, as a servant leader, Moses invested time and resources into developing Joshua and included him in key moments of the Israelites' journey (Adkins, 2017, p. 2). Moses was deliberate about the process from an operational standpoint and from the spectrum of power transfer. Elijah was also deliberate about the transition. When the younger leader asks Elijah for double anointing, as a servant leader, Elijah patiently provides the answer to Elisha's query. Klem (2023) stated that Elisha must "be tenacious in staying with Elijah to the end" to complete the transition (p. 517). There is an action that Elisha needs to take for his request to be fulfilled. Adkins (2017) stated that the legacy of the leader is dependent not on the success of the organization or ministry led, but on "the quality of those you develop and your ability to transition out of your role . . . with little drama or disruption" (p. 3). Of the various leadership styles, developing leaders is a focus of servant leadership. When a transition is properly planned, it will undergo several iterations through implementation to achieve the desired outcome (Sanou, 2021, p. 29). Both Moses and Elijah achieved their desired outcomes and fulfilled God's plan.

LESSONS LEARNED

There are several lessons learned from this exegetical analysis that serve as advice for proper succession planning. The first lesson is that both transitions were planned; there was a request from the current leader for a successor (1 Kings 19:14–17; Num. 27:15–17). There was also a God-ordained planning process followed by the current leaders. Chen (2024) mentioned that emotional attachment and the fear of losing control are two reasons for the lack of succession planning. Similarly, Martin (2024) suggested that part of the challenge of succession planning is the outgoing leader's loss of purpose, personal identity, and belonging, while Heifetz believed that the fear of loss was the real fear and not the fear of change (Cormode, 2020). These fears may be less common in servant leaders who are others-focused. Ogden and Wood (2008) stated that beliefs about "personality, ego, power, and... mortality" hinder succession planning. Neither of these two reasons nor the beliefs mentioned by Ogden and Wood appear in the books of Numbers or 2 Kings. Moses and Elijah understood their purpose, their mortality, and the need to train a successor. As servant leaders, they knew that change was "an ever-present, unavoidable reality" (Sanou, 2021, p.29)

that required a transition plan that was well prepared for it to achieve the needed result (Lovelace, 2014, p. 260)—a leader to succeed them.

The second lesson is that both transitions were organized, structured, and deliberate. While the account in Numbers appears to be intentional and structured from the description of the sequential process and ceremonial elements, and the account in 2 King appears to be haphazard from the spectacular air and lights show of the fiery horses, the fiery chariot, and the whirlwind sweeping up Elijah, the exegetical texture analysis demonstrates that both are consistently planned and organized in diverse ways, and that both followed a similar sequence. In Numbers, Moses followed a defined process provided by God; in 2 Kings, God swept up Elijah. In one account, the human is leading the transition; in the other account, God himself separates the current leader from the incoming one. What can appear to the casual observer as unplanned, through an exegetical analysis can be revealed as planned and intentional. An additional clue to the establishment of a succession plan is that the successors had been identified. Moses knew that Joshua would lead the people into the Promised Land (Num. 27:18) and Elijah knew that Elisha would continue the ministry (2 Kings 2:3). In both accounts, there was a leadership void and a trained servant leader equipped to fill the void.

Third, is that the successors were prepared for the transition process. Sanou (2021) stated that ill-planned or unplanned successions produce “devastating consequences” and end with the “ill-preparedness of up-and-comers” (p. 29). Lovelace (2014) reiterated the need for transition planning, citing the Apostle Paul’s words that the “testimony of Jesus Christ must continue beyond his imminent physical departure.” To further support the biblical imperative for succession planning, Lovelace also echoed Jesus’ charge in Matthew 28:19–20 for disciples to continue making disciples, alluding to the perpetual need for leading, leadership, and leadership formation (p. 258). Both successors accepted the call (Ex. 33:11; Deut. 34:9; 1 Kings 19:19–21) and underwent a process of mentoring and training to prepare for their future leadership (Deut. 3:28; 2 Kings 2:1–11). Elisha was able to succeed Elijah because his leader had trained him to do so (Olusegun, 2021). The same mentoring happened with Joshua. Joshua and Elisha came to the “ceremony” ready and by their own volition. Without their willing participation, the transition process could not have taken place. Without their servant leaders’ investments, their transitions would have failed.

A fourth lesson can be found in the similarities of the location and the conditions of the transitions. They both occurred in the desert and in public. Both occurred during demanding political and economic times. Both occurred at the “entrance” or at the “bank” of a miracle. Both required a heading-forward or crossing-over into another land. Both signaled an end of one era and the beginning of the next. Both transitions were public. There was a proper transfer of power and authority. In one instance, there was the vital and final exit of the current leader with the completion of the journey for the Israelites, while in the other, there was the continuation of the ministry. In both instances, there was not a leader hanging around to fuel the “ghost of leaders past” (Ciampa & Watkins, 1999).

The public nature of the events also supports the followers’ awareness and endorsement of the incoming leader. Neither transition appeared to be a surprise to the Israelites nor to the school of prophets. From the sequence of events, it can be deduced that the followers were aware of the succession plan, as they were aware of the

planned successor. For pastors, this points to the need for the congregation to be aware of the upcoming transition plan.

Another key lesson hidden in the text is the resulting peaceful transition of power. Sanou (2021) stated the absence of a strong succession plan for a senior leader's departure can "trigger a chain of power struggles" between other internal leaders who believe that they are good contenders for the upcoming leadership opportunity (p. 30). In the case of Joshua, there were a potential between 78,600 and 262,000 (Ex. 18:20–27; Deut. 1:9–18; Num. 26:51) acting leaders among the Israelites who could have entertained the idea and lobbied for the position of succeeding Moses (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Israel's Leadership Structure Under Moses

LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

Hierarchy= Steep pyramid

Moses and Jethro Ex. 18:20-27; Dt 1:9-18; Num. 26:51= 601,730

Leadership structure advice

Divide into 10s, 50s, 100s, 1,000s

SCENARIO 1

LEADERS

Population size- Men, women, and children **2,000,000**

$(2,000,000/10)+(2,000,000/50)+(2,000,000/100)+(2,000,000/1,000)$ **262,000**

Population size- Men, women, and children **1,000,000**

$(1,000,000/10)+(1,000,000/50)+(1,000,000/100)+(1,000,000/1,000)$ **131,000**

Population Size- Men only? **600,000**

$(600,000/10)+(600,000/50)+(600,000/100)+(600,000/1000)$ **78,600**

SCENARIO 2 TWELVE TRIBES

Population size- Men, women, and children **2,000,000**

$(2,000,000/12)= 166,667$

$(166667/10)+(166667/50)+(166667/100)+(166667/1,000)$ **21,833**

X Twelve Tribes **262,001**

Population size- Men, women, and children **1,000,000**

$(1,000,000/12)= 83,334$

$(83334/10)+(83334/50)+(83334/100)+(83334/1,000)$ **10,917**

X Twelve Tribes **131,002**

Population Size- Men only? **600,000**

$(600,000/12)= 50,000$

$(50,000/10)+(50,000/50)+(50,000/100)+(50,000/1000)$ **6,550**

X Twelve Tribes **78,600**

In the case of Elijah, outside of Elisha, there were at least 50 prophets under his guidance (2 Kings 2:3, 5, 7, 15, 17). A key insight into the power struggles that could have occurred with Elijah can be deduced from the fact that Elisha was chosen to be part of Elijah's ministry as an outsider (1 Kings 19:19–21). Elisha was not part of the school of prophets. This is akin to an external hire. When he was chosen, Elisha, "was plowing with twelve yokes of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair" (1 Kings 19:19). Since Scripture does not mention a revolt by any of the leaders in the assembly or that the leaders were questioned about their successors, the assumption is that this was a planned, executed, and God-ordained succession process.

IMPLICATIONS

The aim of this analysis is to explore the query as to whether servant leaders are better at planning their successions versus other types of leaders. Using Moses and Elijah as servant leader models, this exegetical analysis provides several implications for pastors and ministry leaders. First, it is a reminder that all pastors are "interim pastors" (Adkins, 2017) who retire (Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2020, p. 31), and that leadership succession is an "unavoidable reality" (Sanou, 2021, p. 29), inevitable (Olusegun, 2021, p. 107) and a fact (Adkins, 2017). Moses and Elijah had a clear start and stop to their respective ministries. As great as they were, and as irreplaceable as people may have believed them to be, they were human and mortal.

The next implication is that there needs to be intentional planning with time and resources allocated to the preparation of the leadership succession plan. Leaders should prioritize training the next generation, prevent ministerial silos, and work collaboratively in faith formation so that the Spirit of the Lord can lead the incoming generation to do God's work after the leader's departure (Martin, 2024). There also needs to be an identification of the key stakeholders and their roles in the transition planning, execution, and sustainability process. The current leader, the stakeholders, and the incoming leader need to be conscious of the idea that the pastor is rooted in the hearts and minds of the congregation and embedded in the soul of community in ways that are hard to explain, difficult to assess, and complex to separate when the time for succession has arrived. Leaders and stakeholders do well to remember that a misunderstood fact of transitions is that "the impact . . . is often felt before the transition even occurs" (Dollhopf & Scheitle, 2013, p. 676); actions during transition tend to produce "disproportionate results" (p. 676), and conflict "can be both cause and effect of congregational leadership transition" (p. 678). The "ghosts of leaders past" should also be a consideration during and after the transition period (Ciampa & Watkins, 1999).

Another implication is that there needs to be a public identification and endorsement of the successor followed by a public anointing, a public transfer of power, a public legitimization of that power, and a public exit of the outgoing leader. This should include the cultural rituals important to the organization. In Numbers, God provided Moses directions to a ceremony and a process that was important to the Israelites. In 2 Kings, God swept up Elijah in the company of the School of Prophets. In one account, the human is leading the transition; in the other account, God begins the transition process. In both accounts, ceremonial elements are used that are important and relevant to the "congregation."

CONCLUSION

Greenleaf (1977) proposed that “all human organizations” exist to serve and that the desire to serve emerges first, then the desire to lead (p. 5). Servant leaders serve their people, help them dream bigger, aim higher, stand taller, and strive to serve others (p. 92). Servant leaders are sometimes seen as trustees responsible for cultivating and growing the organization's people and resources (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114). Servant leadership is a “moral and inspirational” model that is a strategic need for organizations today, and a way through which organizations can achieve their strategic and social goals (Contreras, 2016, p. 22). Moses and Elijah were servant leaders whose focus was to fulfill God's plan through their calling and the employment of God's people in His service. Part of their call was to ensure continuity after their departure. Both prepared their successors in private and in public and empowered them to continue the ministerial mission.

This analysis aimed to explore the query as to whether servant leaders are better at planning their successions versus other types of leaders. This exegetical investigation into the successions of servant leaders like Moses and Elijah provides several lessons for the proper execution of today's ministerial and leadership transitions. The accounts demonstrate a prior leadership formation process followed by a public identification and endorsement of the successors, a public anointing, a public transfer of power, and a public legitimization of that power. This was followed by the public exit of the current leader. There were cultural rituals involved. The protagonists leading the process were different but influential and key to the succession and the legitimization of power and authority. In Numbers, God provided Moses directions; in 2 Kings, God swept up Elijah. In one account, the human is leading the transition; in the other account, God begins the transition process. Prevalent through both transitions is the fact that God works in diverse ways, but in an orderly manner, with intentionality, planning, and purpose. What can appear to the casual observer as unplanned or haphazard, through an exegetical analysis, can be revealed as planned and intentional. God occupied a key part in both succession plans, and God still has a role to play in the leadership successions of today's faith-based organizations.

There is not a lot of succession research specific to servant leaders (Siambi, 2022). What the literature is clear about is that servant leaders are not self-focused; rather, they find joy in the success of their teams. In Scripture, we see that Moses and Elijah were servant leaders who were people-focused and were intentional in training and mentoring their teams; qualities necessary for preparing successors to lead. These transitions suggest that servant leaders may be more prescient in planning for their succession. They also help expand the understanding about how leaders should prepare for their successors and how successors should be empowered to continue the ministerial mission. The processes of Moses and Joshua (Num. 27:18–20) and Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2:12–14) provide two different, structured transitions that demonstrate a strong process worthy to be duplicated today.

About the Author

Dr. Evelyn Cardenas is a multilingual professional with rich experience in the private for-profit and nonprofit sectors in North America, Europe, and Asia. She has led multimillion-dollar endeavors through multicultural, geographically dispersed teams in software development, engineering, and education. She has taught at the graduate level for over a decade in both secular and religious institutions. She has served in ministry for many years alongside her family. Her experience in leadership is both practical and theoretical. In her first PhD from Northcentral University, she contributed to the body of knowledge on marketing strategies to multicultural American consumers. In her second PhD from Southeastern University, she expanded the understanding of the dynamics of control in self-driven faith leaders who espouse belief in God Control.

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INTRODUCING THE CONCEPT OF LEADER SERVANTSHIP AS DEMONSTRATED BY JESUS CHRIST

Josphert N. Kimatu

Servant leadership has been regarded as a transformative approach to leadership because it places service to others at the center of influence. However, a reflective biblical analysis of its application proposes the concept of “leader servanthship” as the inward servant identity of the leader. This leader servant concept is not in any sense a rival theory to servant leadership or a leader-first claim to authority. Drawing on reflective qualitative inquiry from a six-month Africa Servant Leadership Development Institute (ASLEAD) certificate experience, relevant servant leadership literature, and biblical texts from the *King James Bible*, this paper argues that leader servanthship under divine submission precipitates motives, humility, love, integrity, and the accountability that sustain authentic service. The discussion distinguishes outward servant leadership behaviors from the inner posture that purifies and stabilizes those behaviors. It further demonstrates, through the example of Jesus Christ, that legitimate Christian leadership is strengthened rather than diminished when the leader remains consciously submitted to God and committed to serving others. Leader servanthship does not mean abandoning leadership to become passive or subordinate. It means exercising genuine leadership authority through humility, service, stewardship, and accountability to God and to those being led. The article concludes that leader servanthship can be used as a careful conceptual lens for demonstrating Christ’s leadership service practice in the Church, organizations, and community contexts.

Keywords: Jesus Christ, humility, servanthood, servant leadership, biblical leadership, mentorship

Servant leadership, popularized by Robert K. Greenleaf, refers to leadership in which the desire to serve precedes the desire to lead and in which the needs, growth, and flourishing of followers receive priority over the leader’s personal ambition (Greenleaf, 1977). This model challenges the traditional power pyramid by presenting the leader as one who shares power, builds trust, develops people, and uses authority for the good of others rather than for self-promotion. Contemporary scholarship has associated servant leadership with ethical influence, follower development, community

building, trust, and positive organizational outcomes (Eva et al., 2019; Sendjaya et al., 2008; Spears, 2004).

In Christian thought, servant leadership is especially compelling because it reflects the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught that greatness is expressed through service and declared that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Mark 10:45). He also washed the disciples' feet and instructed them to follow his example (John 13:14–15). These biblical foundations show that leadership is not weakened by humility; rather, leadership becomes morally credible when authority is exercised through service, love, and obedience to God.

At the same time, the language of servant leadership can be misused. Harding (2022), for example, used the phrase “leader servanthship” negatively to describe the danger that a person who claims to be a servant leader may slowly drift into arrogance and demand service from others. This caution is important because the expression can sound like a leader-first formulation if it is not carefully defined. Greenleaf's central insight was that the servant comes first in the leader's identity and motivation, not merely in the leader's public language.

For that reason, this article uses the phrase “leader servanthship” with deliberate caution. It does not propose leader servanthship as a replacement for servant leadership, as an excuse for leader-centered authority, or as a competing theory. Rather, leader servanthship is proposed here as a conceptual descriptor for the leader's inward servant posture. In this article, leader servanthship refers to the leader's sustained commitment to humility, accountability to God, love for people, and willingness to serve before, during, and through the exercise of leadership. The word “leader” names the subject being examined; it does not place the leader above the servant identity that Greenleaf emphasized.

The purpose of this article is therefore to explain how leader servanthship can reinforce servant leadership by focusing attention on the spiritual and moral condition of the person who leads. The article integrates servant leadership scholarship, biblical reflection, Christian leadership writings, and lessons from the author's participation in the ASLEAD servant leadership program. Its contribution lies in clarifying that authentic servant leadership requires more than outward acts of service; it requires an inward conversion of motive so that the leader serves from a genuine servant heart.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This article used a reflective qualitative design that combined autoethnographic reflection, theological reflection, and literature-based analysis. The experiential basis was the author's participation in a six-month Servant Leadership certificate program offered by the Africa Servant Leadership Development Institute (ASLEAD). During the program, the author engaged in journaling, reflective exercises, group learning, and applied leadership activities. These materials provided first-person evidence of how servant leadership concepts were understood, tested, and internalized in practice.

The literature component focused on foundational and contemporary servant leadership scholarship, including Greenleaf (1977), Spears (2004), Sendjaya et al. (2008), Patterson (2003), and Eva et al. (2019). Biblical passages were drawn from the *King James Bible* and cited with common Bible-book abbreviations. Christian leadership

sources, especially Nee (1972), were used to explore the relationship between authority, submission, humility, and service.

Analysis proceeded through reflective integration. First, recurring themes were identified from the author's reflections, including humility, service, motive, accountability, love, stewardship, and submission to divine authority. Second, these themes were compared with servant leadership literature and biblical texts. Third, the emerging concept of leader servanthship was clarified in relation to servant leadership so that it would not be confused with a leader-first distortion of Greenleaf's model. No additional human participants were studied; therefore, formal ethics approval was not required. The account remains limited by its reflective nature, but it offers a conceptually grounded and practice-informed contribution to faith-integrated leadership studies.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AS OUTWARD PRACTICE

Modern servant leadership theory provides a framework of values and behaviors that distinguish it from conventional top-down leadership. Spears (2004) identified listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and community building as central characteristics of servant leaders. Sendjaya et al. (2008) further emphasized service orientation, holistic concern for followers, and moral-spiritual responsibility. These traits show that servant leadership is not weak leadership; it is disciplined leadership directed toward the growth and well-being of others.

Motives are central to this discipline. Leadership is not only about what a leader does but also about why the leader does it. A leader may perform public acts of service while still seeking admiration, control, or reputation. Such behavior imitates servant leadership outwardly but fails to embody it inwardly. Eva et al. (2019) observed that servant leadership depends on leaders who place followers first, act ethically, and build follower development. Patterson (2003) similarly located servant leadership in virtues such as love, humility, altruism, trust, empowerment, and service.

Therefore, a leader's servant behavior must be interpreted alongside the leader's character, consistency, and effect on others. Servant leadership is most credible when followers experience the leader as one who listens, shares power responsibly, develops people, and practices stewardship over resources and authority (Block, 1993). Without that consistency, the language of service becomes rhetorical. With that consistency, servant leadership becomes a reliable pattern of influence that builds trust and community.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF LEADER SERVANTSHIP

The proposed concept of leader servanthship begins where servant leadership scholarship already places great emphasis: the servant identity of the leader. It is introduced here not as a separate or superior construct but as a reinforcing conceptual lens. If servant leadership asks how leaders should serve followers, leader servanthship asks what servant posture must be sustained within the leader so that service remains authentic.

For this article, *leader servanthship* is defined as a leader leading and serving at the same time, being sustained by an inward posture of humility, accountability to God,

love for people, and willingness to serve that precedes, purifies, and stabilizes servant leadership behaviors. This definition acknowledges Greenleaf's servant-first principle while focusing specifically on the inner condition of the person who occupies a leadership role. Leaders can serve, but servants cannot lead.

Table 1 clarifies the central claim. Servant leadership has been established in theory and practice. However, leader servanthship identifies the leader who inwardly aims to serve as a leader and not as a servant who wants to lead. It is this inward posture that keeps servant leadership from becoming a technique, rhetoric, or self-serving performance. The expression does not reverse Greenleaf's servant-first order. Instead, it identifies the leader as the person in whom servanthship must be formed and sustained.

Table 1

Comparison of Servant Leadership and Leader Servanthship

Aspect	Servant Leadership	Leader Servanthship
Conceptual status	An established leadership philosophy and practice that prioritizes serving followers and enabling their growth (Greenleaf, 1977).	A proposed reinforcing lens that names the leader's inward servant identity and motive; it is not a rival theory or leader-first claim.
Primary focus	Outward behaviors: listening, empowering, mentoring, stewardship, community building, and service to followers.	Inner posture: humility, love, accountability to God, surrender of ego, and readiness to serve before and while leading.
Guiding question	How should the leader serve followers and the community?	What kind of servant must the leader become so that leadership service remains authentic?
Biblical grounding	Jesus (a leader) washed the disciples' feet and taught them to serve one another (John 13:14–15; Mark 10:45).	Christ (a leader) humbled himself, took the form of a servant, and acted in obedience to the Father (Phil. 2:5–8; John 5:19).
Possible distortion	It may become rhetoric, people-pleasing, or image management if not rooted in character.	It may be misunderstood as leader-first entitlement if the term is not clearly defined.
Reinforcing value	It shows service in visible leadership practice and builds trust among followers.	It strengthens servant leadership by purifying motive and keeping authority accountable to service.

This distinction also answers the concern that leader servanthship may merely repeat servant leadership. The two are inseparable but not identical in emphasis. Servant leadership is visible in what the leader does for others. Leader servanthship focuses on the inward condition from which those actions arise. When the inner posture is absent, outward service can become manipulation. When the inner posture is present, outward service becomes more consistent, humble, and resilient.

JESUS CHRIST AS THE ULTIMATE LEADERSHIP SERVANT MODEL

The life and teaching of Jesus Christ provide the central biblical model for the unity of service and leadership. Jesus (as a leader) repeatedly redefined greatness as service. He taught that whoever desired to be chief should become a servant (Matt. 20:27), and he described his own mission as service and sacrifice (Mark 10:45). These teachings reveal that Christian leadership is not primarily a search for status but a calling to serve under God's authority for the good of others.

John 13 presents one of the clearest demonstrations of this model. On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus, acknowledged as “Lord” and “Master” (leader), washed the disciples' feet and then told them that they also ought to wash one another's feet (John 13:14–15). The act was not a theatrical performance of humility; it was a visible interpretation of divine authority. Jesus knew who he was (a leader), yet he chose the task of a household servant. His service did not erase his leadership; it revealed the character of his leadership: leadership servanthood.

The same pattern appears in Paul's account of Christ's self-emptying. Christ took the form of a servant and humbled himself in obedience (Phil. 2:5–8). This passage provides a strong theological basis for leader servanthood because it links authority, humility, obedience, and service. Jesus' servant posture flowed from his relationship with the Father. He did not act independently for personal honor, but in obedience to the Father's will (John 5:19).

For Christian leaders today, this model means that leadership must be practiced as stewardship. A leader may possess authority, responsibility, and decision-making power, but those gifts are to be exercised under God and for people. Blanchard and Hodges (2005) similarly presented Jesus as the supreme model for leadership shaped by love, humility, and service.

SERVANTHOOD AND LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICAL UNITY

Jesus' model shows that servanthood and leadership are not opposites. He did not stop leading when he served; rather, his service gave moral weight to his leadership. After washing the disciples' feet, he affirmed that he was their Lord and Master and then instructed them to follow his example (John 13:12–15). Authority and humility therefore worked together. Leadership was not rejected; it was redeemed through service.

This unity is important for organizations, ministries, schools, and communities. A leader who accepts responsibility without humility may become controlling, while a person who values humility without responsibility may become passive. Leader servanthood helps hold the two together. It calls the leader to accept responsibility while continually submitting motives, methods, and power to the discipline of service. In practice, this posture produces approachability, patience, integrity, and willingness to perform tasks that advance the good of others even when those tasks do not increase the leader's public status.

INSIGHTS FROM CHRISTIAN AUTHORITY AND LOVE

Watchman Nee's reflections on spiritual authority provide useful support for this argument. Nee (1972) argued that legitimate spiritual authority is inseparable from submission to God. Authority, in this view, is not personal possession to be used for ego or control; it is delegated responsibility exercised under God's character. This perspective strengthens the idea of leader servanthood because it places the leader first under divine authority before placing the leader over people in any administrative or ministerial sense.

Nee's emphasis also guards against the danger identified by Harding (2022), namely the possibility that servant leadership language may conceal arrogance. If authority is treated as stewardship under God, the leader is less likely to confuse position with superiority. Such a leader remains accountable for the effect of decisions on followers, colleagues, and the wider community.

Love is equally important. Hagin (1994) emphasized that Christian conduct must be motivated by the love of God. In servant leadership terms, love protects service from becoming performance, manipulation, or mere image management. Patterson (2003) also identified love and humility among the core virtues of the servant leader. However, they should be based on a recognition of higher Divine authority.

REFLECTIVE APPLICATION FROM THE ASLEAD LEADERSHIP JOURNEY

The ASLEAD servant leadership experience provided a practical setting for testing these ideas. The most important lesson was that it is easier to describe servanthood than to practice it consistently. Reflecting on Jesus washing the disciples' feet challenged the author to examine areas where leadership duties had quietly become associated with status rather than service.

One practical example involved willingness to participate personally in ordinary support tasks that would normally be delegated. Rather than treating such tasks as beneath leadership time, the author began to view them as opportunities to model the values being taught. Participating directly in a cleanup effort with junior colleagues became a simple but memorable exercise in humility. It demonstrated that no honest act done in love is beneath a leader who desires to serve.

The result was not a loss of authority but a strengthening of trust. Colleagues noticed that service was not being demanded from a distance but modeled in practice. Such moments helped discern the leader's heart attitude of service. Repeated acts of humble participation made service more natural and reduced the tendency to protect status.

The reflective journey also showed that lapses into ego, impatience, or status-conscious decision-making produced tension, while leader decisions approached as service and stewardship produced peace, cooperation, and stronger relationships. The leader remains firm where responsibility requires firmness, but firmness is moderated by humility, listening, and love.

CONCLUSION

This article clarified leader servanthship as a reinforcing complement to servant leadership. It argued that leader servanthship should not be understood as a leader-first distortion, a demand that others serve the leader, or a competing leadership theory. Instead, it is a conceptual lens for naming the inward servant posture that makes leader servanthship authentic, consistent, and spiritually grounded.

The biblical model of Jesus Christ showed that leadership and servanthood can exist in perfect unity. Our Lord Jesus Christ, as the supreme leader, exercised authority through humility, obedience, love, and sacrificial service. His example demonstrates that the way to credible Christian leadership is not the pursuit of status but the faithful acceptance of responsibility under God and for the good of others.

The implications for this leader servanthship practice are significant. Organizations and communities need leaders who can exercise authority without arrogance, make decisions without selfish ambition, and serve without seeking applause. Leader servanthship contributes to this need by emphasizing the being behind the doing. It calls leaders to cultivate the character from which servant leadership behaviors can flow with integrity.

In contexts marked by mistrust, competition, and abuse of authority, leader servanthship offers a healing alternative. It encourages leaders to wash feet rather than wash their hands of responsibility. It invites leaders to serve while leading and to lead while remaining servants before God. Such leadership is not merely effective; it is faithful to the example of Christ and capable of transforming people, institutions, and communities.

About the Author

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author acknowledges the support of the ASLEAD Virtual Class 2025, led by Dr. Peter Mulinge, Teacher Kangedo Kitutu, and Teacher Sapphire, for valuable insights into servant leadership. The author also acknowledges family support and the encouragement received from Mrs. Stephanie Nguhi during the development of this reflective work.

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

Melaku Mamo Beyene

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

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

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

Biblical Scholarship, Commandment, and Leadership

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

Ethics for Leadership Theory and Practice

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

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

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

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

Exegesis of Love-Thy-Neighbor

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

Theological Interpretation of Commandment

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

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

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

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

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

PRIOR STUDIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

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

Exegetical Analysis

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

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

Theological Reflection

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

EMPIRICAL COMPONENT OF THE STUDY

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

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

Survey Data Analysis Results and Discussion

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

Table 1

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

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

Source: Computed from survey data using SPSS 27.0

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

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

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

Source: Computed from survey data using SPSS 27.0

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

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

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

Source: Computed from survey data using SPSS 27.0

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

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

Table 4

Impact of Love-Thy-Neighbor on Leadership Effectiveness

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

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

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

Biblical Insight and Empirical Confirmation

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

Leadership as Relational Influence

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

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

Ethical Integrity as a Leadership Effectiveness Driver

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

Relational Engagement and Formation

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

Embodied Practice and Consistency

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

Integrating Theology and Leadership

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

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

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

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

SYNTHESIZING

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

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

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

IMPLICATIONS

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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WASHING FEET, TRANSFORMING LEADERS: A SOCIO-RHETORICAL READING OF JOHN 13:1–17

Juliana Craig

This study examines John 13:1–17 as a model of transformational leadership using socio-rhetorical analysis, with particular attention to intertextual and ideological textures. Grounded in transformational leadership theory as described by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), the research investigates how the foot-washing narrative engages biblical servant traditions while simultaneously challenging Greco-Roman honor-based conceptions of authority. Intertextual analysis demonstrates that the pericope is embedded within broader biblical motifs, especially Isaiah's Servant Songs and ritual purification texts, which collectively frame leadership as humility, obedience, and self-sacrificing service. Ideological analysis reveals that the narrative actively destabilizes hierarchical assumptions about status by redefining greatness as enacted service rather than positional authority. Findings indicate that John 13:1–17 functions as a foundational model of transformational leadership in which identity formation, ethical reorientation, and behavioral imitation are central mechanisms of change. The pericope reflects key dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized concern. It extends these concepts into a theologically grounded framework of sacrificial service. This study concludes that John 13:1–17 offers an ethical model of leadership in which transformation occurs at the level of identity and communal practice, thereby enriching contemporary leadership theory through biblical exegesis.

Keywords: biblical leadership, ideological analysis, intertextuality, leadership identity formation

Transformational leadership is one of the most widely researched leadership models of successful leadership in contemporary leadership studies (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leadership theory started with the foundational work of Burns (1978) and describes a process in which leaders and followers raise each other to

higher levels of motivation, ethics, morality, and purpose. This framework was further developed by Bass (1985), who operationalized transformational leadership theory into measurable components including idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Collectively, this body of work has significantly shaped both academic research and leadership practice across organizational contexts (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Despite its empirical strength, transformational leadership theory has been critiqued for its limited engagement with deeper moral, narrative, and theological foundations of leadership transformation (Tourish, 2013). While the theory effectively explains behavioral influence and organizational outcomes, it is less explicit in addressing how leadership identity is formed, how moral meaning is constructed, and how transformation is sustained within broader ideological or narrative frameworks (Ciulla, 2004). This limitation has led scholars to explore complementary perspectives, including servant leadership, ethical leadership, and identity-based leadership theories (Greenleaf, 1977).

Within this evolving discourse, biblical texts have been recognized as valuable sources of insight on leadership theories and characteristics, especially when analyzed through rigorous exegetical methods (Wright, 2018). The socio-rhetorical approach developed by Robbins (1996) and applied in leadership research by Henson et al. (2020) provides a multidimensional framework for analyzing biblical texts. This method emphasizes the “textures” of a text, including its intertextual relationships and ideological structures, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of how meaning is constructed within sacred narratives (Robbins, 1996).

Among New Testament narratives, John 13:1–17, which discusses the account of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, offers rich context for examining transformative leadership (Köstenberger, 2004). This passage illustrates a reversal of conventional leadership norms, as Jesus performs an act associated with the lowest social status to instruct His followers in the nature of true greatness (Keener, 2003). This pericope raises important questions about the relationship between authority, service, identity, and transformation. John 13 also serves as the opening movement of the Farewell Discourse (John 13–17) in which Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure by emphasizing love, mutual indwelling (“remain in me,” *New International Version*, 2011, 15:4), obedience, and participation in his ongoing mission. Consequently, the foot washing functions not as an isolated ethical episode but as the narrative introduction to John’s broader vision of embodied discipleship and communal identity (Carson, 1991; Köstenberger, 2004).

John 13:1–17 is often cited in discussions of servant leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1977), but relatively few studies have analyzed the pericope through the dual lenses of intertextual and ideological textures to create a coherent model of transformational leadership theory (Henson et al., 2020). Existing information is known to isolate ethical principles from narrative and theological contexts, thereby limiting the depth of leadership insight that the text may offer.

To address this gap, this study employs socio-rhetorical analysis examining how John 13:1–17 constructs a model of transformational leadership through its engagement with biblical traditions and its subversion of dominant cultural ideologies (Robbins, 1996). By analyzing the pericope’s intertextual connections, including the servant

themes of Isaiah 52–53, and its ideological restructuring of power and authority, this study seeks to demonstrate that the foot-washing narrative offers a robust, textually grounded framework for understanding transformational leadership as identity transformation, ethical reorientation, and embodied service.

This study asks: how does John 13:1–17 construct a model of transformational leadership through intertextual and ideological textures?

John 13:1–17 functions as a transformational leadership model in which leadership is redefined through intertextual servant traditions and the ideological reversal of power structures, producing identity-based and imitative leadership transformation.

STATE OF THE SCHOLARSHIP

Scholarly engagement with transformational leadership has been dominated by the work of Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), who conceptualized leadership as a process where leaders elevate their followers' motivations, ethics, values, and moral commitments. Transformational leadership emphasizes vision, moral development, and the reorientation of follower identity toward a collective purpose (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Recent interdisciplinary studies have sought to integrate transformational leadership with biblical studies, especially through exegetical methodologies. The work of Henson et al. (2020) applied socio-rhetorical analysis to derive leadership frameworks and characteristics directly from scriptural texts rather than imposing external theoretical frameworks. This approach prioritizes textual, contextual, and theological coherence (Robbins, 1996).

Biblical leadership studies consistently highlight servant leadership as a central model, often rooted in Gospel narratives such as Mark 10:42–45 and Matthew 20:25–28, where leadership is defined in opposition to hierarchical domination (Blanchard & Hodges, 2003; Greenleaf, 1977). These studies emphasize the reversal of power structures and the redefinition of greatness as service. At the same time, Pauline texts such as Philippians 2:5–11 have been interpreted as theological foundations for transformational processes, especially in their articulation of self-emptying and subsequent exaltation (Fee, 1995; Wright, 2013). Such passages suggest that leadership transformation is not merely behavioral but ontological, involving a fundamental reorientation of identity and purpose.

Despite these developments, a gap is found in the literature regarding integrating socio-rhetorical analysis with specific pericopes that explicitly connect intertextual and ideological textures to transformational leadership theory (Henson et al., 2020; Robbins, 1996). This study addresses that gap by examining John 13:1–17 as a model text for leadership transformation.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

Transformational leadership has been one of the most extensively studied models in leadership research, originating with the work of Burns (1978), who defined leadership as a process in which leaders and followers elevate each other to a higher level of motivation and morality. This was later expanded by Bass (1985), who

operationalized transformational leadership into measurable components, including idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Further empirical research has validated the effectiveness of transformational leadership across organizational contexts. For example, the study by Podsakoff et al. (1990) demonstrated that transformational leader behaviors significantly enhance follower trust and organizational citizenship behaviors. Meta-analytic work by Judge and Piccolo (2004) further confirms the strong relationship between transformational leadership and follower performance, while broader reviews (Wang et al., 2011) highlight its consistent predictive validity across diverse settings.

Despite its empirical strength, transformational leadership theory has been critiqued for its relative lack of grounding in broader philosophical or theological frameworks, often emphasizing outcomes and behaviors without sufficiently addressing the deeper moral and identity-based dimensions of leadership transformation (Ciulla, 2004; Tourish, 2013).

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AS A PARALLEL MODEL

Running parallel to transformational leadership is the tradition of servant leadership, first discussed by Greenleaf (1977), who proposed that effective leadership begins with a commitment to serve others. Servant leadership shifts the focus from leader-centric authority to the development of the follower while emphasizing humility, empathy, and ethical and moral responsibility.

Contemporary research has further refined this model. For example, van Dierendonck (2011) provided a comprehensive synthesis of servant leadership, identifying core dimensions such as empowerment, accountability, and stewardship. Similarly, Liden et al. (2008) developed a multidimensional measurement scale, reinforcing the construct's empirical viability.

While servant leadership shares significant overlaps with transformational leadership, especially in its focus on follower development, it places more emphasis on ethical orientation and relational dynamics (van Dierendonck, 2011). Much of the literature treats servant leadership as a contemporary organizational construct; this is often without engaging deeply in its historical and biblical foundations (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). This creates an opportunity to explore how biblical texts may provide a more robust grounding for servant-oriented leadership models.

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the need to clarify the theoretical and conceptual foundations of servant leadership while distinguishing it from related leadership constructs such as transformational and ethical leadership (Eva et al., 2019). Although many studies acknowledge biblical influences on servant leadership, the construct is most often investigated through organizational or psychological frameworks rather than through sustained exegetical analysis of specific biblical texts. This study contributes to that emerging conversation by examining John 13:1–17 through socio-rhetorical analysis, arguing that servant leadership in the Johannine context is not merely an ethical orientation, but a theological identity grounded in the revelation of Christ and enacted through embodied service. In doing so, the study provides an

exegetically grounded account of servant leadership that complements and extends contemporary organizational scholarship.

AUTHENTIC, ETHICAL, AND IDENTITY-BASED LEADERSHIP

Recent developments in leadership theory have increasingly emphasized the role of identity, authenticity, and ethics in the process of leadership. Authentic leadership theory, advanced by Avolio and Gardner (2005), highlights self-awareness, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective as essential components of effective leadership. Similarly, ethical leadership research (Brown et al., 2005; Treviño et al., 2003) underscores the importance of normative behavior and moral management in shaping organizational culture.

Identity-based approaches deepen this perspective by examining how leadership influences followers' self-concepts. For example, Shamir et al. (1993) argued that charismatic and transformational leaders motivate followers by linking organizational goals to their self-identity. Likewise, Lord and Brown (2001) suggested that leadership effectiveness is closely tied to the alignment between leader values and the self-concepts of followers, and Howell and Shamir (2005) emphasized the active role of followers in the leadership process.

Together, these perspectives suggest that leadership is not just behavioral but also deeply transformational at the level of identity and values (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Lord & Brown, 2001). However, while these theories acknowledge moral and psychological transformation, they often lack a coherent account of how such transformation is grounded in a broader narrative or worldview (Ciulla, 2004).

GAPS IN BIBLICAL-EXEGETICAL INTEGRATION

Although leadership studies have increasingly incorporated ethical, rational, and identity-based elements (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Brown & Trevino, 2006), there remains a significant gap in the integration of biblical exegesis and leadership theory (Banks & Ledbetter, 2004; Clarke, 2012). Much of the existing literature either applies contemporary leadership frameworks to biblical texts superficially or extracts isolated principles from the scriptural context, especially the meaning as it relates to the original author (Osmer, 2008; Vanhoozer, 1998).

The work by Henson et al. (2020) addressed this limitation by employing socio-rhetorical analysis to derive leadership constructs directly from biblical texts. This approach emphasizes the importance of examining intertextual connections and ideological frameworks to understand how leadership is constructed within biblical narrative itself (Robbins, 1996). However, few studies have applied this methodology in a focused and systematic way to specific pericopes, especially to articulate a model of transformational leadership (Clarke, 2012). In particular, the pericope of John 13:1–17, which depicts Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet, has not been fully explored as a transformational leadership text through the combined lenses of intertexture and ideological analysis (Keener, 2003; Köstenberger, 2004).

In summary, the leadership literature demonstrates strong empirical and theoretical support for transformational, servant, and ethical leadership models (Bass &

Riggio, 2006; Brown & Trevino, 2006; Greenleaf, 1977), each of which emphasizes aspects of follower development, moral orientation, and identity transformation. However, an important gap remains in validating these frameworks within a tightly rigorous and theologically informed framework (Banks & Ledbetter, 2004; Clarke, 2012). This study addresses that gap by employing socio-rhetorical analysis to examine the pericope John 13:1–17, thereby contributing to a more integrative understanding of transformational leadership rooted in biblical exegesis.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative exegetical research design to examine leadership models within John 13:1–17. Qualitative textual analysis was appropriate for this study as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of meaning embedded within biblical texts, especially as it relates to leadership theory and theological interpretation (Osmer, 2008). The research integrated biblical exegesis with leadership studies by utilizing a socio-rhetorical analytical framework to derive theoretical insights inductively from the text.

This study adopted socio-rhetorical analysis (SRA) as developed by Robbins (1996) and applied in leadership research by Henson et al. (2020). SRA is a multidimensional interpretive methodology that examines the various textures of a text to uncover its rhetorical, cultural, and theological meanings. While SRA includes multiple layers of analysis, this study focused on two primary textures: intertexture and ideological texture.

Intertexture refers to how a text interacts with other texts and cultural narratives. This includes explicit citations, implicit allusions, and thematic echoes across the biblical canon. In this study, intertextual analysis was used to identify connections between John 13:1–17 and prior scriptural traditions, especially the Servant motifs in Isaiah and ritual purification practices found in the Pentateuch. These connections were analyzed to determine how the Johannine narrative constructed meaning through continuity and reinterpretation.

Ideological texture examines the systems of belief, values, and power dynamics embedded within the text. This dimension explores how the text reflects, reinforces, or challenges prevailing social norms and structures. In this study, ideological analysis focused on how John 13:1–17 redefines leadership by challenging hierarchical and honor-based frameworks characteristic of the Greco-Roman world and replacing them with a model grounded in humility and service.

The primary unit of analysis for this study was the pericope John 13:1–17, which described Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet. This pericope was selected due to its narrative coherence, theological significance, and explicit instructional component, "you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15), making it especially suitable for leadership analysis. The study was limited to this pericope to maintain analytical depth and methodological clarity. While the analysis focuses on this discrete pericope, it also recognizes that John 13 inaugurates the Farewell Discourse (John 13–17), whose themes of love, abiding, obedience, and mission provide the immediate theological context for interpreting Jesus' act of foot washing.

This analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. Textual elimination: the pericope was examined in its literary context to identify key themes, narrative structure, or rhetorical features relevant to leadership behavior and instruction.
2. Intertextual analysis: the study identified and analyzed connections between the focal text and related biblical pericopes, including Servant traditions, leadership teachings in the Gospels, and ritual purification texts. These intertextual links were evaluated for their contribution to the understanding of leadership meaning.
3. Ideological analysis: the ideological assumptions embedded in the text were examined, with special attention to how the narrative challenges dominant cultural norms regarding authority, status, and power. This stage explored how the text constructed an alternative leadership model and how the model aligns with transformational leadership theory.

Following exegetical analysis, findings were interpreted in dialogue with transformational leadership theory as discussed by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985). This integration allowed for a comparative framework in which biblical insights were examined alongside established leadership constructs such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation.

To ensure methodological rigor, this study employed several strategies consistent with qualitative research standards:

- Textual grounding: all interpretations were rooted in close reading of the biblical text.
- Intertextual validation: connections between texts were supported by established canonical and thematic relationships.
- Theoretical triangulation: findings were examined in relation to both biblical theology and contemporary leadership theory.

The study was limited by its focus on a single pericope and two specific textures of SRA. While this allowed for depth, it did not encompass the full range of SRA dimensions such as social-cultural and sacred texture.

DATA ANALYSIS

Intertextual Analysis of John 13:1–17

The intertextual texture of John 13:1–17 reveals that the foot-washing episode is deeply embedded within broader biblical traditions that inform its meaning as an act of transformational leadership (Henson et al., 2020; Robbins, 1996). Rather than functioning as an isolated narrative, the pericope draws on and reconfigures multiple scriptural motifs, particularly those related to servant leadership, spiritual cleansing, and covenantal identity (Beale, 2012).

A primary intertextual connection is found in the servant traditions of Isaiah (42:1–4; 49:1–7; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12). These passages construct a theological image of leadership grounded in obedience, humility, and redemptive suffering (Goldingay, 2005; Watts, 1997). In John 13, Jesus' action of washing the disciples' feet functions as

a performative embodiment of this servant identity (Keener, 2003; Köstenberger, 2004). The act is not just symbolic humility but a reenactment of a long-standing biblical narrative in which authority is exercised through self-giving service rather than domination (Wright, 2013). This intertextual link establishes continuity between prophetic servant theology and Johannine Christianity, positioning Jesus as the fulfillment and reinterpretation of the servant paradigm (Beale, 2012).

Additional intertextual resonance emerges through ritual purification texts such as Exodus 30:17–21 and Leviticus 16:4, where washing functions as a prerequisite for priestly service (Milgrom, 1991). In John 13, foot washing similarly signifies readiness for participation in divine mission (Carson, 1991). However, the Johannine narrative reconfigures this ritual logic: instead of priests washing themselves before approaching God, the divine figure himself performs the washing of followers (Köstenberger, 2004). This reversal intensifies the theological meaning of cleansing as an act initiated by divine leadership rather than human preparation (Keener, 2003).

Beyond these canonical intertexts, the foot-washing narrative must also be interpreted within the theological framework of the Fourth Gospel itself. Throughout John, Jesus' mission is consistently portrayed as the self-revelation of the incarnate Logos who makes the Father known (John 1:1–18). Consequently, the foot washing is more than an ethical demonstration of humility; it is a revelatory act that discloses the character of God through embodied service. Jesus' actions therefore function christologically before they function ethically. The disciples are called to imitate the foot washing because it manifests the divine identity revealed in the incarnate Son. Leadership, in Johannine perspective, is thus grounded not merely in exemplary behavior but in participation in God's self-giving life as disclosed through Jesus.

Further intertextual support is found in the prophetic promises of internal purification, especially in Ezekiel 36:25–27 and Psalm 51:7, where cleansing is associated with spiritual renewal and the transformation of the human heart (Block, 1997; Brueggemann, 1997). These texts reinforce the idea that washing in John 13 symbolizes not only external service but also internal transformation, aligning closely with transformational leadership theory's emphasis on value and identity change in followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Finally, New Testament parallels such as Mark 10:42–45 and Luke 22:24–27 reinforce the continuity of Jesus' teaching on servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Wright, 2013). These pericopes establish a consistent narrative trajectory in which greatness is redefined as service, thereby situating John 13 within a broader canonical discourse on leadership inversion (Keener, 2003).

IDEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF POWER AND LEADERSHIP REVERSAL

The ideological nature of John 13:1–17 reveals a deliberate subversion of dominant cultural assumptions regarding authority, status, and leadership. In the Greco-Roman world, leadership was typically associated with honor, hierarchical position, and the maintenance of social distance between leaders and followers (Malina, 1993; Neyrey, 2008). Within this ideological framework, the act of foot washing was associated with the lowest status within the household service structures, and was typically reserved for slaves (Keener, 2003).

Against this backdrop, Jesus' assumption of the role of a foot washer constitutes a radical ideological inversion. The narrative explicitly destabilizes conventional honor-shame structures by presenting the highest possible authority figure voluntarily adopting the lowest social position (Koester, 2008). This inversion is not just symbolic but pedagogical, as Jesus explicitly instructs the disciples to imitate his action: "you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15). Leadership, therefore, is redefined as an enacted ethic rather than a positional status (Greenleaf, 1977).

This ideological shift aligns closely with transformational leadership theory, especially the dimension of idealized influence (Bass, 1985). However, the Johannine text extends beyond behavioral modeling to reconstitute the very ontology of leadership. Authority is no longer derived from social rank but from embodied service that transforms both leader and follower identity (Wright, 2018).

Moreover, the passage introduces a reciprocal transformation dynamic. The instruction that followers are "not greater than their master" (John 13:16) does not reinforce hierarchy but instead establishes a flattened moral structure in which leadership is reproduced through imitation rather than control. This aligns with identity-based leadership theories that emphasize the internalization of leader values within followers' self-concepts (Lord & Brown, 2001; Shamir et al., 1993).

The ideological outcome of the passage is therefore a redefinition of greatness itself. Leadership is no longer measured by authority over others but by the capacity to engage in sacrificial service that produces communal transformation. This constitutes a direct ideological challenge to both ancient hierarchical systems and contemporary leadership models that prioritize influence without sufficient ethical grounding (Greenleaf, 1977).

JOHN 13:1–17 AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF LEADERSHIP AUTHORITY

Integration of Intertextual and Ideological Findings

When intertextual and ideological textures are considered together, John 13:1–emerges as a coherent model of transformational leadership grounded in narrative theology (Culpepper, 1983; Koester, 2008). The intertextual analysis demonstrates that Jesus' actions are rooted in and reshape existing servant and purification traditions (Exod. 30:17–21; Isa. 52:13–53:12; Keener, 2003), while the ideological analysis reveals that the actions actively reconstruct prevailing assumptions about leadership and authority (Malina, 1993; Neyrey, 2008).

This dual movement—continuity with Israel's servant tradition and ideological reconfiguration of power—produces a leadership model characterized by identity transformation, ethical reorientation, and embodied imitation (Greenleaf, 1977; Wright, 2004). Within Bass' (1985) framework, Jesus exercises idealized influence by personally embodying the values He commands, inspirational motivation by calling the disciples into a new communal vision of servant leadership (13:15–17), and intellectual stimulation by overturning accepted assumptions about authority through the paradox of the master becoming the servant (13:6–12). In transformational leadership terms, the pericope simultaneously functions as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and

intellectual stimulation, while also building upon these constructs into a theologically grounded framework of sacrificial service (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978).

Integration of Findings with Transformational Leadership Theory

The findings of this study demonstrate that John 13:1–17 functions as a foundational model narrative for transformational leadership theory when examined through intertextual and ideological textures. The intertextual analysis revealed that the foot washing is deeply embedded within Servant traditions found in Isaiah, ritual purification texts, and broader New Testament teachings on leadership and humility (Isa. 52:13–53:12; Keener, 2003). These connections position Jesus' action not as an isolated ethical gesture but as the culmination and reconfiguration of a long-standing biblical theology of servant leadership.

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When viewed alongside transformational leadership theory as described by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), the passage reflects all four core dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. However, the Johannine narrative extends beyond behavioral influence by embedding leadership transformation within a theological and ideological redefinition of authority itself. Leadership is not merely a set of observable behaviors but a reconstruction of identity that is grounded in embodied service. Within the broader Johannine narrative, however, this identity transformation is sustained through relational participation rather than imitation alone. The command to follow Jesus' example (13:15) anticipates the Farewell Discourse, where disciples are instructed to "abide" (or "remain") in Christ (John 15:4–5). The ability to reproduce Jesus' pattern of servant leadership therefore arises from continued participation in his life rather than from moral effort alone. In Johannine theology, leadership transformation is relational before it is behavioral.

Intellectual stimulation is enacted not merely through Jesus' command to imitate but through the pedagogical sequence that precedes it. Jesus first disrupts the disciples' conventional assumptions about authority, purity, and social status by assuming the role of a household slave (John 13:4–5). Peter's resistance ("You shall never wash my feet," vv. 6–8) exposes the incompatibility of Jesus' action with prevailing expectations of leadership. Rather than immediately explaining the act, Jesus allows the tension to remain until asking, "Do you understand what I have done for you?" (v.12). This rhetorical question invites the disciples to reinterpret leadership itself before they are instructed, "You also should do as I have done to you" (v.15). Thus, the imperative to imitate follows cognitive and interpretive transformation, closely paralleling Bass's

(1985) conception of intellectual stimulation, in which leaders challenge followers to reconsider established assumptions and adopt new ways of understanding reality.

Ideological Reconfiguration of Leadership and Power

The ideological analysis demonstrated that John 13:1–17 actively disrupts Greco-Roman hierarchies of honor, status, and authority (Malina, 1993; Neyrey, 2008). In contrast to dominant cultural models that equate leadership with social elevation and separation from subordinates, the text presents leadership as a voluntary descent into the lowest social role. The act of foot washing thus functions as a symbolic inversion of power, redefining greatness as a service and authority as self-given action (Keener, 2003).

This finding aligns with servant leadership theory as described by Greenleaf (1977) and further developed by van Dierendonck (2011) and Liden et al. (2008). However, the Johannine account intensifies this model by grounding it in divine agency rather than organizational ethics. In this sense, leadership is not simply moral behavior but participation in a divinely initiated pattern of sacrificial service.

The ideological shift identified in this study also extends identity-based leadership theories (Lord & Brown, 2001; Shamir et al., 1993), which emphasize the transformation of the follower self-concept. In John 13, identity transformation is explicitly commanded: followers are instructed to replicate the embodied behavior of Jesus. This establishes leadership as a reproducible identity system in which followers internalize and reenact the leader's values.

Contribution to Leadership Theory

This study expands the current understanding of transformational leadership theory by demonstrating that transformational leadership theory is enriched and redefined when it is interpreted through biblical exegesis. While Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) emphasized moral elevation and follower development, John 13:1–17 introduces a deeper dimension of being and identity in which leadership transformation involves the reconstitution of status, identity, and meaning through embodied service.

Furthermore, the integration of intertextual and ideological analysis reveals that transformational leadership is not merely a psychological or organizational process but can also be understood as a narrative-ethical construct grounded in theological tradition (Culpepper, 1983; Koester, 2008). The Johannine account further suggests that transformational leadership is rooted in relational participation. Throughout the Fourth Gospel, identity is expressed through mutual indwelling: the Father is in the Son, the Son is in the Father, and believers are invited to participate in that same relationship (John 14:10–11, 20; 15:4–7; 17:21–23). Within this theological framework, servant leadership becomes the visible expression of an identity already constituted through communion with Christ. Transformation therefore proceeds from participation to imitation rather than from imitation to participation. This expands existing leadership models by introducing the possibility that transformational leadership is sustained through behavioral and symbolic actions that are rooted in sacred narrative frameworks.

Relationship Between Servant and Transformational Leadership

The findings also clarify the conceptual relationship between servant leadership and transformational leadership. While prior research identifies substantial conceptual overlap between the two constructs, particularly in their shared emphasis on follower development and ethical conduct, the Johannine narrative presents servant identity as the theological and ideological foundation from which transformational leadership emerges. Socio-rhetorical analysis therefore complements contemporary servant leadership scholarship by demonstrating how biblical narrative provides not merely illustrative examples of servant leadership but an interpretive framework through which the construct itself may be more fully understood.

In John 13, transformational leadership is not presented as influence toward organizational goals but as transformation toward a servant identity. This reframing challenges the assumption that leadership effectiveness is primarily outcome-driven and instead positions effectiveness as fidelity to a model of sacrificial service (Greenleaf, 1977).

Theological and Practical Implications

From a theological perspective, the passage affirms that leadership is grounded in divine self-revelation that is expressed through humility and service (Keener, 2003). The foot-washing narrative becomes a theological statement about the nature of authority within the community of followers. This suggests that leadership development grounded in this model should emphasize skill acquisition and identity formation, moral formation, and embodied practice. Leadership training informed by this framework would prioritize experiential learning that reflects humility, service, and relational engagement rather than hierarchical authority structures (Wright, 2004).

Although this study is exegetical rather than programmatic, the Johannine model of leadership developed in John 13:1–17 suggests several implications for leadership formation within churches and other values-based organizations. Rather than centering leadership formation primarily on technical competencies, administrative effectiveness, or positional authority, organizations informed by John 13:1–17 may benefit from structuring leadership development around practices that cultivate servant identity through embodied participation. Such practices could include mentoring relationships in which experienced leaders intentionally model humility and service, opportunities for leaders to engage in acts of service alongside those they lead, and guided theological reflection that encourages participants to examine assumptions about power, status, and authority in light of Jesus' example. These practices reflect transformational leadership's emphasis on modeling, moral development, and follower growth (Bass & Riggio, 2006), while also aligning with research that views leadership development as a relational and identity-forming process rather than simply the acquisition of individual competencies (Day, 2000). In this framework, leadership formation becomes not merely the acquisition of managerial skills but the intentional cultivation of character and communal practices that enable leaders to embody the values they seek to reproduce in others (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Greenleaf, 1977).

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by its focus on a single pericope, John 13:1–17, which restricted the generalizability of findings across the broader Johannine narrative and biblical canon. Additionally, while socio-rhetorical analysis provides a robust interpretive framework, the emphasis on intertextual and ideological textures excluded other potentially relevant dimensions such as social-scientific or sacred texture analysis (Robbins, 1996). Furthermore, the integration of transformational leadership theory with biblical exegesis is interpretive in nature and did not establish a historical linkage between contemporary leadership models and ancient textual intent.

Summary of Findings

The analysis demonstrates that John 13:1–17 creates a model of transformational leadership through two primary mechanisms. First, intertextual engagement with Isaiah and related biblical traditions situates Jesus' actions within a broader servant theology that redefines authority through humility (Isa. 52:13–53:12; Keener, 2003). Second, ideological restructuring of Greco-Roman honor-based systems establishes a counterculture model of leadership grounded in enacted service and follower imitation (Malina, 1993; Neyrey, 2008).

Together, these findings support the conclusion that the foot-washing narrative provides a foundational model for transformational leadership, in which leadership is defined not by positional authority but by the capacity to generate identity change through embodied service.

Further, these findings suggest that John 13:1–17 provides a rich and underutilized framework for understanding transformational leadership as a process of identity reconfiguration, ideological inversion, and embodied service. When read through intertextual and ideological lenses, the pericope reflects and expands transformational leadership theory by grounding it in a narrative of sacrificial leadership that challenges conventional assumptions about authority and influence.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine John 13:1–17 as a transformational leadership text through the application of socio-rhetorical analysis, with particular emphasis on intertextual and ideological textures. By integrating biblical exegesis with transformational leadership theory as described by Burns and Bass, the study has demonstrated that the foot-washing narrative functions as a foundational model of leadership transformation grounded in identity reconfiguration, ethical inversion, and embodied service.

The intertextual analysis revealed that the passage is deeply embedded within broader biblical traditions, especially the Servant model of Isaiah, ritual purification practices, and New Testament teachings on humility and leadership. These connections demonstrate that Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet is not an isolated symbolic gesture but a theologically rich reenactment and redefinition of established service traditions. The ideological analysis further showed that the narrative actively subverts

Greco-Roman conceptions of authority by redefining greatness as service and leadership as sacrificial action.

Taken together, these findings support the conclusion that John 13:1–17 offers a robust and textually grounded model of transformational leadership. However, unlike conventional leadership frameworks that emphasize behavioral influence and organizational outcomes, this model situates transformation at the level of identity, moral orientation, and communal reproduction. This framework shows that leadership is not primarily positional but performative and imitative, requiring followers to internalize and enact the values embodied by the leader.

This study contributes to leadership and biblical scholarship in three key ways. First, it demonstrates that transformational leadership theory can be meaningfully enriched through socio-rhetorical biblical exegesis, especially when applied to narrative texts. Second, it advances the integration of servant leadership and transformational leadership by showing that servant identity functions as the ideological foundation of transformational change in the Johannine context. Third, it illustrates the value of intertextual and ideological analysis as a methodological approach for uncovering leadership models embedded within sacred texts.

The findings suggest that leadership development grounded in this framework should extend beyond skill acquisition and performance metrics to include identity formation, ethical development, and embodied practices of service. Leaders are not merely agents of influence but are also symbolic actors whose behavior shapes organizational values and follower self-understanding. Leadership education informed by this model should prioritize humility, relational engagement, and the intentional modeling of service-oriented behavior.

This study was limited by its focus on a single biblical pericope, John 13:1–17, and by its emphasis on intertextual and ideological textures within the socio-rhetorical framework. Future research should expand this analysis to additional Johannine pericopes as well as other New Testament narratives to determine the consistency of transformational leadership themes across broader canonical contexts. Empirical studies may also explore how biblically grounded leadership models influence contemporary organizational outcomes in practice.

In conclusion, John 13:1–17 presents a compelling and theologically grounded vision of transformational leadership in which authority is redefined through humility, service, and identity transformation. The transformational leadership presented in John 13 is therefore grounded not simply in ethical instruction but in Johannine theology, where the revelation of God in the incarnate Son creates a community whose identity is sustained through abiding participation in Christ and expressed through acts of sacrificial service. When interpreted through socio-rhetorical analysis, the passage reflects key principles of transformational leadership and extends them into a deeper moral and narrative framework that challenges conventional assumptions about power, leadership, and influence.

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

Cole Herring

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

STATE OF THE TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP FIELD

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

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

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

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

TL's Empirical Reach and Explanatory Power

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

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

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

The Leader-Centered Gap: Where TL Theory Falls Short

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

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

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

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

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

Leadership Continuity and the Research Gap

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

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

RESEARCH DESIGN

The Case for Qualitative Textual Analysis

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

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

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

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

Reading Leadership in Layers: The Socio-Rhetorical Method

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

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

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

Delimiting the Study: Inner Texture and Intertexture

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

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

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

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

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

Context of the Farewell Discourse

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Tradition Behind the Text: Intertextual Dimensions of Leadership

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Integrated Interpretation: A Post-Charismatic Leadership Continuity Model

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

Table 1
Post-Charismatic Leadership Continuity Model

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Transformational Leadership and Moral Credibility

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

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

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

Leadership Transition and the Limits of Leader-Centered Models

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

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

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

Communal Stewardship and Distributed Leadership

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

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

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

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

Mission Anchoring and Organizational Identity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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

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MORAL COMPASS IN MANAGEMENT: WHY EVERY MODERN ORGANIZATION MUST HAVE A CHIEF ETHICS OFFICER, A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Hershey H. Friedman and Joshua Krausz

This paper explores the governance of Israel's first four rulers: Saul, David, Solomon, and Rehoboam. It highlights the tradition of righteous kings consulting a higher authority, such as a prophet or the high priest, on pivotal decisions. Prophets played a vital role, providing moral guidance and correction to the king. Today, it is crucial for business leaders to have a chief ethics officer to navigate ethical decision-making. The consequences of CEO choices can be dire, with innumerable lives affected by prioritizing profit over human safety and reputation. Just as King David sought advice on significant matters, modern corporate executives should also rely on the counsel of those who understand the ethical implications of their decisions.

Keywords: Bible, leadership, ethics, chief ethics officer, King Saul, King David, King Solomon.

There are various approaches to exploring the impact of ethical leadership. Traditionally, ethics instructors rely on case studies and the analysis of works by various moral philosophers, such as Kant, as primary teaching tools for ethics, including in business contexts. Some scholars propose incorporating literature into ethics education (Clemens & Mayer, 1999; Freeman et al., 2015; Friedman et al., 2023; Shepard et al., 1997; Singer & Singer, 2005). Literature and films have the power to evoke strong emotions. For instance, consider the profound impact of a work of fiction such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Literature can be a credible medium for conveying ethical principles and dilemmas. While it would be an exaggeration to say that Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel directly caused the Civil War, there is no doubt that *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by helping to shape public opinion in the 1850s, was a significant factor in the war (McNamara, 2014).

Recently, there has been growing recognition of the significance of storytelling as a powerful communication tool and an invaluable skill for professionals to develop. Narratives can captivate audiences, explain complex concepts, and foster stronger connections between organizations and stakeholders. As Peter Guber eloquently stated, "Stories have a unique power to move people's hearts, minds, feet, and wallets in the storyteller's intended direction" (Gallo, 2016, pp. 56–57). It has been noted that TED talks stand out because they present big ideas through personal stories (Gallo, 2016, p. 63). The accounting and consulting firm KPMG recognized storytelling's effectiveness as a means for managers to communicate their company's vision and values to employees. This strategic use of storytelling helped reduce employee turnover and increase engagement (Knowledge@Wharton, 2016).

USING THE BIBLE TO TEACH ETHICS AND ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

When examining the foundations of leadership and its potential pitfalls, the rich tapestry of biblical narratives and characters offers a valuable wellspring of insights, as recent academic works have begun to recognize (Feiler, 2004; Friedman, 2024; Friedman & Fischer, 2021; Friedman & Friedman, 2019; Friedman & Herskovitz, 2019; Friedman & Hertz, 2016; Friedman & Langbert, 2000; Hazony, 2000; Maxwell, 2002; Wildavsky, 1984; Woolfe, 2002). This is a well-founded perspective, given the Bible's unparalleled influence: estimates suggest up to 6 billion copies are in circulation, making it the most widely distributed book in history. It is a repository of narratives, analogies, and scenarios that are invaluable for imparting leadership principles, particularly given that over half of the world's population adheres to the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all of which trace their origins to the Hebrew Scriptures.

For individuals not actively seeking leadership roles, examining the actions and shortcomings of biblical figures can provide valuable insights into the importance of ethical conduct. The principles of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1983; Greenleaf, 1991), covenantal leadership (Pava, 2003), and spiritual leadership (Fry, 2003) all trace their origins back to biblical teachings. Lynch and Friedman (2013) illustrate how integrating a spiritual dimension into servant leadership, such as fostering personal development and incorporating social justice principles into the workplace, enriches the paradigm and enhances its efficacy as a leadership model.

The biblical system of checks and balances, where prophets challenged kings and high priests provided divine guidance, offers a timeless model for corporate governance. In ancient Israel, no leader, regardless of wisdom or power, operated without accountability. Nathan's confrontation of David over the Bathsheba affair demonstrates the critical importance of having advisors with the authority and courage to speak truth to power. Today's chief ethics officers must occupy a similar role: independent voices with direct access to the CEO and board, protected from retaliation, and empowered to halt decisions that conflict with organizational values.

The absence of such mechanisms leads to predictable disasters: the Volkswagen emissions scandal, Wells Fargo's fake accounts scheme, the opioid crisis driven by Purdue Pharma's deceptive marketing, Facebook's mishandling of user data, FTX's multi-billion-dollar fraud that deceived investors and customers, the Theranos

blood-testing deception, and the 2008 financial crisis precipitated by reckless mortgage lending and derivatives trading all occurred in environments where ethical guardrails were either absent or easily circumvented. The United States has filed lawsuits against Southern California Edison Co. (SCE), alleging the utility's gross negligence sparked the devastating Eaton and Fairview fires. These fires ravaged tens of thousands of acres of National Forest System lands, claimed 21 lives, and resulted in the destruction of thousands of buildings.

This paper examines the concept of ethical leadership through the lens of biblical narratives, highlighting the importance of leaders having ethical advisors to provide counsel on specific decisions. Some organizations employ corporate ethics officers who guide chief executives in considering ethical factors in critical business decisions. However, the effectiveness of these positions varies dramatically based on their structural authority and organizational culture, key issues that the biblical model directly addresses.

We demonstrate that even the most revered biblical figures required counsel to navigate ethical dilemmas. This need is exponentially greater in today's complex business environment, where decisions impact millions of stakeholders across global supply chains. The tale of King Solomon is particularly instructive, illustrating that the absence of an ethical advisor can lead even the most sagacious ruler astray, ultimately leaving a legacy marred by poor leadership. Similarly, modern executives face vulnerabilities, as exceptional intelligence and business acumen provide no immunity against ethical blind spots, conflicts of interest, or the corrupting influence of unchecked power and wealth accumulation.

Furthermore, we posit that the prophetic and priestly accountability structures surrounding ancient Israel's monarchy provide a clear biblical analog for independent ethical authority in contemporary organizations. The argument develops in three stages. First, the paper examines the biblical structures themselves, tracing how prophets and high priests functioned as independent moral counsel to Saul, David, Solomon, and Rehoboam, and how the fortunes of each reign rose or fell with the ruler's willingness to seek and heed that counsel. Second, it then connects these structures to contemporary scholarship on organizational ethics and governance, which has documented both the role-performance conditions facing ethics officers and the broader antecedents, outcomes, and moderators of ethical culture in organizations (Adobor, 2006; Roy et al., 2024). Finally, it distills both the biblical and organizational evidence into a six-element model for structuring the chief ethics officer role.

RULES FOR KINGS

In antiquity, it was common for monarchs and emperors to exhibit arrogance, with some even claiming divinity. Humility was a rare trait among rulers. The Torah (Pentateuch) addresses the dangers of a king's pride and avarice, mandating that he always carry a copy of the Torah to prevent his heart from becoming haughty "above his brethren" and to ensure he does not deviate from the commandments, thereby securing a long reign (Deut. 17:20). The Torah scroll had to be in the monarch's presence, and he was supposed to read it daily throughout his life and reflect upon it constantly (Deut. 17:19; Josh. 1:8). The Torah cautions that arrogance poses a significant risk for those in

authority. To curb such pride, restrictions were placed on the king's accumulation of wealth, the number of his wives, and the number of horses he owned (Deut. 17:16–17).

Sacks (2020) underscores that the Torah established the principle that even kings were bound to obey its laws and that any ruler who failed to behave correctly could be challenged, as evidenced by numerous examples of kings, such as Saul, David, Solomon, and Ahab, who were reprimanded by prophets for disobeying God's commands. Thus, the midwives Shifra and Puah refused to commit infanticide because they "feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them" (Ex. 1:17). The servants of Saul refused to annihilate Nob, the city of priests, because they knew it would be a crime against God to kill innocent people (1 Sam. 22:17). The prophet Nathan rebuked David for his adultery with Bathsheba and the killing of Uriah (2 Sam. 12). Elijah boldly admonished King Ahab for having Naboth murdered to steal his vineyard, asking rhetorically, "Have you murdered and also inherited?" (1 Kings 21:19). All of the above examples highlight that those who believe in the laws of the Torah understand that might does not make right and that even the most powerful leaders are accountable to a higher moral authority.

The Torah's design for governance in ancient times, as depicted in the Hebrew Bible, intentionally distributed power among three separate roles: the king, the high priest, and the prophets. This tripartite structure ensured a balance of power, with each role serving a distinct purpose: the king for political leadership, the high priest for religious duties, and the prophets for their foresight and moral guidance (Sacks, 2012). The high priest and prophets played a crucial role in advising the king, ensuring that his decisions aligned with the Torah's ethical teachings.

The high priest used the *Urim V'Tumim* ("lights and perfections"), a parchment likely bearing God's name, placed in the *choshen* (breastplate of judgment) and securely fastened to the *ephod* (a vest-like garment), to function as an oracle for the Jewish king or high court. By entering deep contemplation, the high priest would receive a divine response.

This paper will examine the dynamics of this system and its role in maintaining ethical governance. It will also demonstrate how the high priest in ancient Israel served a purpose that extended beyond performing religious rituals. He served as a conduit between God and the leadership, offering guidance on intricate ethical matters and quandaries. The prophet's role was pivotal in holding the monarch accountable. Regarded as the voice of God, prophets fearlessly faced rulers who deviated from divine commands. They admonished the sovereign, calling them to repent and exhorting them to govern the people with truth, justice, and righteousness.

KING SAUL

Samuel, the prophet, was Saul's principal ethical advisor; Samuel crowned Saul as the first king of Israel. Sadly, Saul made several serious blunders that ultimately led to his losing the throne. Saul was instructed to wait seven days for the prophet Samuel to arrive before offering sacrifices to God, in preparation for a battle with the Philistines. Saul's impatience led him to sacrifice the burnt offerings to God himself. The following verses indicate what Samuel told him:

Samuel said to Saul, "You have acted foolishly! You have not kept the commandment the Lord, your God, commanded you; if you had, the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, but now your kingdom shall not endure." (1 Sam. 13:13–14)

Saul persisted in his sinful ways, displaying arrogance and failing to obey God's directives. Although commanded to annihilate the Amalekites and their animals, Saul defied these orders. He chose to spare Agag, the king of the Amalekites, along with the finest livestock. Saul later rationalized, likely as a feeble justification, that the prime animals were saved to be sacrificed to God. In response, Samuel conveyed to Saul the following message:

But Samuel replied, "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than a choice offering, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of sorcery, and insubordination is like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has rejected you as king." (1 Sam. 15:22–23)

Saul appeared contrite and admitted to Samuel that he had sinned and transgressed the Lord's word (1 Sam. 15:24). After the incident with Agag, Samuel never visited Saul again. However, he did call him up after he died with the help of a sorceress. Saul did go to see him once in Ramah (1 Sam. 19:23). Saul may have stopped consulting the prophet but became a temporary prophet himself after the "Spirit of God came on him" (1 Sam. 19:23–24). It was so incredible that the question "Is Saul also among the prophets?" became a proverb. Unfortunately, Saul continued his unjust attempt to kill David even after experiencing this amazing transformation.

Saul's intense envy of David led him to conspire against his own son-in-law. Discovering the deep friendship between his son Jonathan and David, Saul attempted to harm Jonathan with a spear (1 Sam. 20:33). Furthermore, Saul ordered the destruction of Nob, the priestly city, for aiding David, who was fleeing from Saul's wrath. The priests, unaware of the strife between Saul and David and knowing that David was the king's son-in-law, aided David in good faith. The only one Saul consulted about what to do to the Nob priests was the evil Doeg the Edomite, who slandered the high priest Ahimelech and made it seem as if the priest was helping David the fugitive. Saul ordered his guards to kill the priests of Nob, but they refused, knowing it was wrong (1 Sam. 22:17). Doeg then went and killed the residents of Nob—men, women, children, and even the livestock. It is ironic that Saul, who showed compassion for Agag and the best cattle, showed no mercy to the inhabitants of Nob.

Saul's transgressions culminated in his consultation with a medium to summon the spirit of the late Samuel, a violation of Torah law (Lev. 19:3). The apparition of Samuel prophesied that the Philistines would triumph over Israel and that Saul, along with his son, would perish in battle (1 Sam. 28). Interestingly, while evading Saul's pursuit, David came to the aid of Keilah's inhabitants when they faced an assault from the Philistines. Saul heard that David was in Keilah, a walled city; he thought he could trap and kill him there. Unlike Saul, David consulted with Abiathar, son of Ahimelech,

the lone survivor of Nob, who was now serving as a high priest. David inquired whether he should rescue Keilah (1 Sam. 23:4). After rescuing Keilah, David asked Abiathar whether Saul would attack and whether the people of Keilah would hand him over to Saul. He was told the inhabitants would hand him over to Saul, so David left Keilah.

KING DAVID

Even when fleeing Saul, David often consulted the prophets Samuel and Gad, as well as Abiathar, the high priest. David understood the importance of having someone around to challenge him when he committed a misdeed and the necessity of consulting the high priest for divine authorization. For example, David asked Abiathar, son of Ahimelech, to bring the *ephod* so he could ask God whether to pursue the Amalekite marauders who had attacked Ziklag and captured the women in it. He was told to "Pursue, for you will surely overtake them and you will surely rescue" (1 Sam. 30:7–8).

After Saul's death, David consulted with God and asked whether he should go to one of the cities of Judah and reign as king. After being told to go, David asked which city and was told Hebron (2 Sam. 2:1). Before fighting the Philistines, David also inquired of God whether he should go to war (2 Sam. 5:19). When David planned to construct a temple for God, Nathan informed David that he had not been chosen to build the First Temple. Instead, it would be David's son, Solomon, who would be tasked with this sacred undertaking (2 Sam. 7:1–17).

David's sin with Bathsheba (and triggering the death of her husband, Uriah the Hittite, by arranging to have him sent to the front) is well known and described in 2 Sam. 11. The prophet Nathan rebuked him using a parable involving a rich man, a poor man, and an ewe. David confessed, repented, and admitted (2 Sam. 12:13), "I have sinned against God." One of the most eloquent Psalms concerning repentance is Psalm 51: "A Psalm of David when Nathan came to him after he had gone in [i.e., committed adultery] to Bathsheba." David acknowledged his wrongdoing and said, "For of my transgressions I am cognizant, and my sin is before me always" (Ps. 51:5).

The Babylonian Talmud (Shabbos 56a) asserts that soldiers who served in King David's army divorced their wives. This was because if they went missing in action or were captured, their wives would be allowed to remarry. According to this view, David was not guilty of the sin of adultery. Everyone, however, agrees that David's repentance was sincere and accepted by God.

David consulted with God during a three-year famine to discover its cause (2 Sam. 21:1–2). David was told that it was a punishment for Saul's killing of the Gibeonites.

The Torah permitted a census to be conducted indirectly by asking everyone to donate a half-shekel (Ex. 30:12); otherwise, a plague would occur. David decided to take a census using a direct count for no apparent reason (2 Sam. 24). Joab, his general, attempted to get David to reconsider conducting a census, but "Nevertheless, the king's order prevailed against Joab and the officers of the army" (2 Sam. 24:4). For some reason, David did not consult with the high priest or a prophet, asking whether a census should be taken.

Some commentators posit that an unnecessary census is also a sin, even if done indirectly with a half-shekel. This census was unnecessary and was done directly.

After the census was completed, David realized he had sinned and asked God to forgive him (2 Sam. 24:10). The prophet Gad presented David with three options for punishment. David chose a plague lasting for three days. He said, "Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for His mercies are great; but do not let me fall into the hand of man" (2 Sam. 24:14).

When David was old and sick, his fourth-born son, Adonijah, declared himself crown prince and successor to David. Knowing that God wanted Solomon to succeed David, the prophet Nathan advised Bathsheba, the queen, to approach David and inform him of Adonijah's plot. Afterward, Nathan approached David and supported Bathsheba's claim. David ensured Solomon was proclaimed the next ruler (1 Kings 1).

The events mentioned above underscore that David relied on the counsel of the high priest and the prophets Samuel, Gad, and Nathan to make crucial decisions. Moreover, David was receptive to criticism, an essential trait for a leader.

KING SOLOMON

One of King Solomon's first major decisions was deposing Abiathar as high priest for supporting Adonijah and banishing him to Anathoth (1 Kings 2:26). Tzadok, who anointed Solomon as king and was always loyal to him (1 Kings 1:34), becomes the high priest (1 Kings 2:35). It is reasonable to assume that Tzadok was afraid he would be removed as high priest, so he became reluctant to criticize David.

God appeared to Solomon in a dream when he was young and offered him anything he wanted (1 Kings 3). Solomon prayed to God for "an understanding heart to judge people and the ability to discern between good and evil; for who can judge this formidable people of Yours?" (1 Kings 3:9). Solomon understood that a leader must possess intelligence, a strong sense of fairness, and empathy for others. For him, this held greater significance than riches or power. God recognized that Solomon understood what leadership was really about and promised to bestow on him tremendous wisdom in addition to riches and fame (1 Kings 3:10–13).

King Solomon constructed the First Temple, which was an extraordinarily elaborate structure that took seven years to complete. It was not a simple task. A *corvée* of 30,000 men was required to construct it (1 Kings 5:27). These men were dispatched to Lebanon monthly, in shifts of 10,000. In addition, Solomon required 3,300 supervisors to oversee the labor, 70,000 men to act as transporters, and 80,000 stonecutters to hew the mountains (1 Kings 5:29). This was a noteworthy accomplishment essential to the monotheistic faith. Private altars that might easily be set up for pagan deities would no longer be permitted; all sacrifices to God had to be done in the Temple.

The prophet's name is not mentioned, but it is assumed to be Ahijah the Shilonite (Nathan is another possibility), who spoke to Solomon during the construction of the Temple.

Then the word of the Lord came to Solomon, saying, "Concerning this temple which you are building, if you follow My decrees, execute My judgments, and observe all My commandments, to follow them, then I will uphold My word with

you, which I spoke to your father, David. And I will dwell among the Israelites and will not abandon My people Israel (1 Kings 6:11–12).

Solomon made his first mistake when he lost sight of the fundamentals of moral leadership. A leader should not be preoccupied with personal gain and comfort. Solomon ought to have built himself a modest palace after embarking on such a massive project as constructing the Temple. An individual given so much wisdom by God should have had the insight to realize that it was wrong to spend so much money and time on an extravagant palace. He forgot that leadership was not about achieving status, wealth, or power, but about spiritually and physically elevating people. Indeed, it took 13 years to complete this project, whereas the Temple took only seven. It is no accident that he spent more time building his palace than the Temple. Scripture alludes to his error, ultimately resulting in grave issues for his son and heir, Rehoboam. His preference for his own house over the Temple was evident when he devoted more time to the former. Admittedly, one might argue that he rushed the building of the Temple because of its greater importance.

Solomon did not find a magnificent palace sufficient. He also crafted "an immense ivory throne and overlaid it with glittering gold." Twelve golden lions, one on each side of the six steps that led up to it, graced the stunning throne (1 Kings 10:18–20). One might wonder why a person of such wisdom would prioritize chasing after material comforts.

His desire to accumulate wealth became almost compulsive. According to the *Babylonian Talmud* (Sanhedrin 70b), his mother, Bathsheba, rebuked him for indulging in worldly pleasures, including extravagant feasts, rather than behaving as a righteous king. Proverbs 31:1–5 records how Solomon (called Lemuel) was chastised by his mother. The job of a king is to "judge righteously and defend the rights of the poor and needy" (v. 9).

Annually, Solomon received 666 talents of gold and became so prosperous that gold and silver became nearly valueless to him (1 Kings 10:21). Solomon had at his disposal 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen (1 Kings 10:26). He harbored a passion for amassing horses, leading him to import the finest steeds from Egypt (1 Kings 10:28). Moreover, he married numerous women, totaling 300 concubines and 700 wives of royal birth (1 Kings 11:3).

As detailed in Deut. 17:16–17, the Torah outlines several commandments intended to prevent a king from accumulating excessive wealth, marrying multiple wives, or acquiring a large number of horses. These restrictions ensured that the king remained humble, focused on serving the people, steadfast in his adherence to the Torah, and uncorrupted by power and luxury. A king was always expected to have a copy of the Torah readily available and to study it regularly. By doing so, he would extend his reign and that of his descendants in Israel, as stated in Deut. 17:20.

The absence of ethical and moral advice obtained by consulting a prophet or priest is clearly evident. Despite his enormous personal fortune, Solomon did not use it to benefit the populace. Instead, his extravagant spending put a heavy tax load on the people and ultimately created severe problems for his son and successor, Rehoboam. King Solomon's enormous expenditures could explain the following:

At the end of twenty years, during which Solomon built these two buildings—the temple of the Lord and the royal palace—King Solomon gave twenty towns in Galilee to Hiram, king of Tyre, because Hiram had supplied him with all the cedar, juniper, and gold he wanted (1 Kings 9:10–11).

Several commentators have found it challenging to reconcile the biblical account of King Solomon giving away 20 towns, which could be seen as diminishing the size of the Holy Land. One interpretation offered by the Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi; 1160–1235) suggests an alternative explanation. Citing 2 Chronicles 8:2, where it states that Hiram also provided Solomon with cities in his kingdom, he avers that King Hiram and King Solomon traded towns to cement their agreement; thus, the size of Israel remained constant. Many disagree with this explanation.

As previously mentioned, Solomon had 1000 wives and concubines. It is reasonable to suggest that some of these marriages were politically motivated. Given that no other monarch had as many, it seems unlikely that Solomon's multitude of wives was for any reason other than self-aggrandizement. Moreover, this action violated the Torah's directive in Deut. 17:17, which warns kings against accumulating numerous wives to prevent their hearts from turning away. According to the biblical account, this exact consequence came to pass.

King Solomon loved many foreign women, including the daughter of Pharaoh. They included Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites. They were from nations where the Lord warned the Israelites, "Do not intermarry with them, for they will surely sway your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon clung to them in love. He had 700 wives who were noblewomen and 300 concubines, and his wives swayed his heart. Unlike his father, David, who maintained a steadfast faith, Solomon wavered in his devotion to the Lord in his later years because he permitted his many wives to worship foreign deities. He went after Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom, the abomination of the Ammonites. Scripture states explicitly that he did not wholeheartedly follow the Lord, as his father David did, because of his wives (1 Kings 11:1–5).

The repeated use of the term "loved" indicates that Solomon's marriages were not solely for political alliances. These women practiced idolatry, yet they were the object of Solomon's affection. Marrying an idol worshipper was prohibited, especially for a monarch whose duty included abolishing idolatry and promoting monotheism globally. Solomon's act of constructing shrines for foreign gods in Jerusalem, the same city where he built the Temple, was a grave violation of Jewish law. This action suggested the validity of all gods, not just the God of Israel, which was contrary to his religious obligations. Solomon's punishment was the division of the mighty kingdom he had built.

God told him, through a prophet (unnamed but thought to be Ahijah), about the consequences of his behavior:

So God was angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. Although He had commanded him about this matter not to follow the gods of others, he did not obey what the Lord had commanded. Therefore, the Lord told Solomon, "Because you are guilty of this and have not kept My covenant and My statutes

that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom away from you and give it to your servant. Nevertheless, for the sake of your father, David, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son (1 Kings 11:9-12).

According to the *Babylonian Talmud* (Shabbos 56b), Solomon was not deemed an idolater. Instead, because he allowed his wives to engage in pagan practices, Scripture views it as though he also worshipped these pagan deities. The marriage to all these foreign idol-worshipping women had the opposite effect of what God wanted. Instead of propagating ethical monotheism, Solomon was responsible for helping spread paganism.

As a divine punishment, Solomon had two adversaries in the last few years of his life: Hadad the Edomite and Rezon. They joined forces and ruled over Aram (1 Kings 11:14–25). They made trouble for Solomon until his death. Because Solomon focused on his own needs and sinned before God, he was punished when Hadad and Rezon were able to break the long peace: "Rezon was Israel's adversary as long as Solomon lived, adding to the trouble caused by Hadad. So Rezon ruled in Aram and was hostile toward Israel" (1 Kings 11:25).

Given his many wives and concubines, one would assume Solomon would have a large family. We only know of three: Rehoboam and two daughters, Taphath and Basemath, who married two of Solomon's regional commissioners (1 Kings 4:11–15). It is quite likely that Solomon had many more children from his wives, but they are not mentioned because they did not identify as Jews.

It is curious that, despite his wisdom, Solomon did not understand the importance of consulting the prophets. God spoke to him twice through a nameless prophet, but it had no impact, unlike the effect of Nathan's rebuke of David. One would expect Solomon to repent upon hearing that the empire would be divided because of his wrongdoing. There is no evidence that Solomon divorced his wives or destroyed their pagan shrines. It could be that he, the wisest of all rulers, erroneously thought he was beyond the need for prophetic guidance. Additionally, he did not seek insights from the *Urim V'Tumim* through the high priest. The Bible's message is unmistakable: even the most sensible leaders require something akin to a chief ethics officer, not necessarily a prophet, but an unbiased advisor capable of discerning the wisdom and morality of decisions.

The prophet Ahijah the Shilonite encountered Jeroboam as he was leaving Jerusalem and informed him that the kingdom would be divided, with Jeroboam ruling over 10 tribes (1 Kings 12:29–39). Jeroboam, son of Nebat, was from the tribe of Ephraim and worked as a tax collector for Solomon. Solomon never consulted with this great prophet, who could have provided him with counsel so that the great empire built by David and Solomon would have remained intact. The division made Israel vulnerable, and, according to tradition, the Assyrians ended the Northern Kingdom in 556 BCE. The Babylonians terminated Solomon's Temple and the Southern Kingdom in 423 BCE (Kantor, 1989).

REHOBOAM, SOLOMON'S SUCCESSOR

Following Solomon's death, the populace petitioned Rehoboam to reduce the heavy taxes imposed to support Solomon's excesses (1 Kings 12:4). Rehoboam consulted two groups of advisors. The senior advisors, who were elderly, recommended a lenient and kind approach to win the people's lasting allegiance (1 Kings 12:7), recognizing that a ruler's role is to serve, not to burden, the people. In contrast, Rehoboam's younger advisors urged him to adopt a stern, authoritarian stance. Ignoring the advice of the elders, Rehoboam told the people (1 Kings 12:14): "My father made your yoke heavy, and I shall add to your yoke! My father chastised you with sticks; I shall chastise you with scorpions!" This led the people to rebel against him and join Jeroboam, a member of the tribe of Ephraim.

Following in his father's footsteps, Rehoboam did not consult with the high priest or any prophet.

After that, Israel was split into two kingdoms: the Southern Kingdom of Judah, comprising the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (David, Solomon, and Rehoboam were from the tribe of Judah), and the Northern Kingdom, comprising the other 10 tribes. Jeroboam became the king of the Northern Kingdom and established idol worship so his people would not go to Jerusalem to make sacrifices in the Temple (1 Kings 12).

By the fourth year of Rehoboam's reign, the people of Judah also "did evil in the eyes of the Lord" and worshipped pagan deities (1 Kings 14:21–29; 2 Chronicles 12:1). In the fifth year of Rehoboam's reign, King Shishak of Egypt attacked Jerusalem and looted the treasures of the Temple and the king's palace (1 Kings 14:25). The great wealth accumulated by Solomon ended up in Egypt. Eventually, the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom and dispersed the 10 tribes of Israel. The 10 tribes disappeared and were probably assimilated into other nations. All this would not have happened had Solomon not deviated from his original mission of being concerned with righteousness and justice and living a simpler life rather than a sybaritic and extravagant one.

DISCUSSION

Many prophets, including Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Huldah, Ezekiel, Amos, Jonah, and Micah, prophesied. Prophets delivered their messages to various audiences, speaking to the rulers of the Northern Kingdom, the monarchs of the Southern Kingdom, the Jewish exiles in Babylon, as well as to Edom and Nineveh. Additionally, some prophecies were directed to Governor Zerubbabel. Many fought for social justice and warned monarchs and kings that disobedience to God's law would lead to disaster.

The prophets delivered their messages from God, unapologetically and courageously, and frequently at significant personal risk, to guide the powerful rulers they confronted towards a path of moral integrity. Indeed, the prophet Zechariah was stoned to death in the courtyard of the Temple (2 Chronicles 24:21). Jeremiah was beaten and placed in the stocks (Jer. 20:2). Amaziah, the false priest, sent word to Jeroboam II that Amos was conspiring against him and telling the people that

"Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will be exiled from the land" (Amos 7:10–11).

Some of the memorable rebukes from the great prophets include the following:

Elijah confronted King Ahab with the Lord's message in 1 Kings 21:19, accusing the monarch of murdering Naboth and seizing his vineyard. He said, "Have you murdered and also taken possession?" Isaiah warned the people of Judah about the consequences of their actions, particularly their social injustices and meaningless religious rituals (Isa.1).

Woe to those who make unjust laws and who issue oppressive documents to deprive the destitute of their rights and to rob of their rights the needy of My people, making widows their prey and orphans their booty. What will you do on the day of reckoning when the calamity comes from afar? To whom will you flee for help? Where will you leave your wealth? [There will be nothing to do] except cringe among the captives or fall among the slain (Isa. 10:1–4).

Jeremiah also warned the leaders what would happen if they abandoned the Torah.

Woe to him who builds his house without righteousness and his upper rooms without justice; who uses his neighbor's services without payment and does not give him his wages (Jer. 22:13) . . . If one does justice to the poor and needy, then it is good; Is that not what it means to know Me? declares the Lord (Jer. 22:16).

Amos, known as the prophet of social justice, prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II in the Northern Kingdom and Uzziah in the Southern Kingdom:

Listen to this, you who devour the needy, annihilating the poor of the land, saying, When will the month pass so that we can sell grain; the Sabbatical year, so that we can open the stores of grain; using an *ephah* that is too small and a shekel that is too large, and distorting dishonest scales so that we may purchase the poor for silver and the needy for shoes and sell the refuse of grain as grain. The Lord swears that He will never forget their deeds (Amos 8:5–7).

Micah believed that the essential virtues of leaders were justice, kindness, and humility—leaders lacking these qualities were undeserving of their positions:

Listen to my message, you leaders of the House of Jacob, you chiefs of the House of Israel, who abhor justice and who twist all that is straight, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity. Her leaders judge for bribes, her priests give rulings for a fee, and her prophets divine for pay . . . Therefore, because of you, Zion shall be plowed over as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of rubble, and the Temple Mount will become like a stone heap in the forest (Mic. 3:9–12).

De Jong (2023, pp. 148–166) highlighted the dangers of leadership that prioritizes strict adherence to rules over fulfilling core objectives. In today's world, simply claiming to "follow protocol" is no longer an adequate justification. This disconnect between regulations and ethical behavior has created a moral vacuum. De Jong, along with other forward-thinking individuals, envisions a new leadership paradigm emerging.

These emerging leaders will play a crucial role in addressing global challenges, including climate change, poverty, economic disparities, and racial discrimination. Driven by increasing pressure from consumers, employees, the general public, and governmental bodies, the traditional profit-focused executive model is becoming obsolete. CEOs do not have prophets or high priests to guide them, but it is "crystal clear that companies need a chief ethics officer" (p. 162).

A Model for the Chief Ethics Officer

The biblical and organizational evidence presented above can be consolidated into a model comprising six elements, each with a scriptural warrant and a corporate application:

- **Independence:** Nathan's authority derived from a source outside the royal household, which is why his rebuke of David succeeded. The chief ethics officer should likewise stand outside the executive structures being overseen, reporting to the board rather than to management.
- **Access:** David consulted Abiathar and the ephod before pursuing the Amalekites, not after. The ethics officer requires direct, unmediated access to the chief executive and the board while decisions are still open.
- **Authority:** The prophets held an explicit mandate to challenge the king. The ethics officer must be empowered to pause a decision pending ethical review, not merely to comment upon it.
- **Protection:** Zechariah was stoned and Jeremiah beaten for delivering unwelcome truths. Protection from retaliation must therefore be codified in corporate bylaws rather than left to executive goodwill.
- **Transparency:** The prophetic rebukes were public and preserved in Scripture for all generations. Ethics recommendations and management responses should similarly be disclosed to the audit committee and documented.
- **Integration:** David's consultations were routine, occurring before battles, appointments, and successions, rather than exceptional. Ethical consultation must be embedded in the ordinary rhythm of strategic decision-making rather than treated as after-the-fact compliance. Recent evidence indicates that ethics and compliance programs are most effective when embedded in organizational culture and supported by leadership, data-driven evaluation, and employee-centered training (Divers, 2024).

The case of Solomon demonstrates that these elements are jointly necessary. Solomon enjoyed access to prophets, yet without integrating their counsel into his actual decisions, that access accomplished nothing.

The Limits of the Biblical Analogy

The analogy proposed here has limits that should be acknowledged. A chief ethics officer is not a prophet. The prophet's legitimacy rested on divine revelation, whereas the ethics officer's legitimacy rests on professional expertise, a corporate charter, and law. The prophet stood entirely outside the royal payroll. The ethics officer, by contrast, remains a salaried employee of the very organization whose conduct they are charged with reviewing. This is a structural tension that no reporting arrangement can fully dissolve (Adobor, 2006).

Furthermore, ancient Israel was a covenantal community with a shared religious framework, whereas the modern corporation operates in a pluralistic legal environment and serves stakeholders with divergent moral commitments. Moreover, the prophet could invoke ultimate divine sanction, while the ethics officer must persuade through argument, evidence, and procedure.

The analogy is therefore functional rather than theological. What the two roles share is their essential function: truth-telling before power, moral accountability for the person at the top of the hierarchy, and institutionalized resistance to unchecked executive authority. It is this function, not the prophet's metaphysical standing, that modern governance must replicate.

CONCLUSION

This study focused primarily on the reigns of Israel's initial four monarchs: Saul, David, Solomon, and Rehoboam. Traditionally, a king would seek counsel from the high priest for critical decisions. Prophets also played a role, admonishing the king, who was open to condemnation if he deviated from virtuous conduct. The biblical governance model reveals a sophisticated understanding of human psychology and organizational behavior that remains profoundly relevant to modern business leadership.

Three critical lessons emerge from these ancient narratives that directly address contemporary corporate governance failures:

First, let us consider the inevitability of ethical drift when institutional accountability is absent. The story of King Solomon offers a clear historical parallel: he began as a wisdom-seeking young leader but ultimately became an extravagant ruler whose excesses bankrupted the kingdom. This mirrors the lifecycle of numerous modern corporations. Initial success breeds hubris, which in turn erodes ethical guardrails, allowing destructive practices to metastasize in the absence of effective challenge mechanisms.

Modern examples abound: the 2008 mortgage crisis revealed a striking paradox. While major institutions like Lehman Brothers collapsed and Countrywide Financial was acquired at a fire-sale price due to its high-risk lending, executives at the center of the disaster prospered. Most notably, Angelo Mozilo, the CEO of Countrywide, amassed a massive personal fortune by aggressively pushing questionable mortgages that ultimately led to the firm's downfall and contributed to the subsequent financial meltdown. General Electric's accounting scandals, as well as the downfall of once-admired companies like Arthur Andersen. All followed a similar pattern. Just as

Solomon's gradual moral compromise was enabled by his failure to consult prophets or the high priest, modern executives operating without robust ethical oversight inevitably drift toward decisions that prioritize short-term gains over long-term sustainability and stakeholder welfare.

Second, we should affirm the structural necessity of independent ethical authority. The biblical prophets possessed several characteristics that made them effective: they operated independently of royal patronage, they had the explicit mandate to challenge authority, and they faced no retaliation for delivering unwelcome truths. Compare this to many modern chief ethics officers who report through the very executive structures they are meant to oversee, whose budgets can be cut by those they monitor, and who can be marginalized or dismissed for being too assertive. The prophet Nathan's ability to confront King David over his adultery and murder plot succeeded precisely because Nathan's authority derived from God, not David. Today's ethics officers require analogous structural protections, including board-level reporting relationships, guaranteed access to audit committees, protection from retaliation codified in corporate bylaws, and transparent disclosure of ethics recommendations and management responses.

Third, consider the catastrophic consequences of leadership isolation and self-deception. King Rehoboam's refusal to heed wise counsel and King Saul's descent into paranoia both demonstrate how leaders, deprived of honest feedback, make increasingly destructive decisions. Modern business is replete with parallel examples: the Sears bankruptcy under Eddie Lampert, who isolated himself from operational realities while pursuing a failed hedge-fund strategy; Elizabeth Holmes's Theranos fraud, enabled by a culture that suppressed dissenting voices; and the sexual harassment scandals at companies like Uber and Fox News, where powerful executives operated in environments where accountability mechanisms had been systematically dismantled. Just as the biblical kings needed prophets to pierce through sycophancy and self-justification, modern executives require ethics officers who can challenge prevailing assumptions and articulate uncomfortable truths.

In contemporary times, leaders must have a chief ethics officer to guide them toward ethical choices, but the position must be appropriately structured and empowered. Similar to Ezekiel's portrayal of prophets as watchmen alerting people to looming threats (Ezek. 33:1-9), corporate executives and their ethics officers serve as guardians, safeguarding an organization's moral integrity against ethical perils. The moral ramifications of CEO decisions are profound, with countless lives lost or affected by corporate prioritization of profit over safety (Friedman & Clarke, 2022). The Boeing 737 MAX crashes, which killed 346 people, stemmed from a corporate culture in which engineers' safety concerns were overruled by executives prioritizing competitive pressures and cost containment. This is precisely the kind of disaster that unfolds when ethical oversight mechanisms are sidelined or neglected.

Appointing a chief ethics officer is essential to seamlessly integrating ethical considerations into an organization's decision-making processes. Without this centralized role, ethical practices related to areas such as diversity, environmental responsibility, quality control, advertising, and pricing may become erratically dispersed across the company. This fragmentation can obscure the fact that these various practices all stem from a common ethical foundation (De Jong, 2023, p. 161).

Consider Johnson & Johnson's handling of the Tylenol crisis in 1982 versus its more recent talc powder litigation. In the former case, strong ethical leadership led to an immediate, costly recall that ultimately strengthened the brand; in the latter, the company fought transparency for years, resulting in far greater reputation and financial damage. The difference lay not in the ethical principles involved but in whether those principles were integrated into actual decision-making processes.

When cost-cutting measures compromise the integrity of infrastructure, such as buildings, bridges, or dams, the consequences can be catastrophic for innocent people. The 2021 Surfside condominium collapse in Florida, which killed 98 people, and the 2018 Genoa bridge collapse in Italy, which killed 43, both resulted from deferred maintenance and ignored engineering warnings. These organizational failures are rooted in the same ethical compromises that led King Solomon to prioritize his palace over his people's welfare. Lacking ethical oversight, executives may be inclined to prioritize financial gains, potentially neglecting the moral aspects of their decisions.

Indeed, it does not take a prophet to make a leader recognize that while profit maximization can yield short-term gains, it may have long-term consequences, such as a diminished reputation for quality and integrity. Yet history demonstrates that without institutional mechanisms to amplify ethical voices, even obvious long-term risks are routinely discounted. Wise decision-making strikes a balance between financial success, ethical standards, and long-term sustainability. Two quotes attributed to Warren Buffett say it all: "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently." "Lose money for the firm, and I will be understanding. Lose a shred of reputation for the firm, and I will be ruthless" (Schwantes, 2021).

The biblical model offers modern organizations a proven framework: just as ancient Israel's governance required prophets to challenge kings and high priests to provide divine guidance, contemporary corporations need chief ethics officers with genuine authority, structural independence, and organizational cultures that reward rather than punish ethical courage. The failures of Saul, Solomon, and Rehoboam were not inevitable. They resulted from rejecting ethical counsel or failing to seek it, turning potential for enduring leadership into lasting cautionary tales.

Modern corporate disasters are not random misfortunes. They are the foreseeable outcomes of governance systems that neglect ethical oversight. Organizations that internalize the wisdom of ancient texts and establish strong ethical accountability before a crisis strikes will not only prevent catastrophic failures but also cultivate the trust, legitimacy, and enduring stability that marked the best of King David's reign. The question is no longer whether such mechanisms are necessary; the question is whether they are effective. That has been answered by centuries of human experience, from the courts of ancient Israel to the boardrooms of today. The real question is whether today's leaders will demonstrate foresight and act now or wait until the next avoidable tragedy forces their hand.

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THE LEGACY OF THE WALDENSANS FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: RESILIENCE LESSONS IN TURBULENT DAYS

Karla A. C. Oliveira, Elon Gomes de Souza, and Jean de Jesus da Silva

This qualitative study, grounded in bibliographic and documentary research, explores the educational legacy of the Waldensian movement as a historical exemplar of faith and leadership formation amid persecution. Drawing from their experiences in hostile contexts, it identifies core pedagogical principles and practices that sustained a resilient Christian community and its leaders. Key findings reveal an approach centered on the primacy of Scripture, holistic and missionary-oriented formation, communal solidarity and resistance, and ethical integrity in living out faith. These principles were embodied in practices such as Scripture-based teaching and memorization, practical training for leadership, clandestine educational networks, and consistent witness between belief and daily conduct. The study concludes that the Waldensian legacy offers a valuable biblical-historical model for contemporary Christian education and emerging leadership development, equipping believers with persevering faith and adaptive resilience to resist adversity and endure in turbulent or hostile environments.

In a context marked by rapid transformations and social instability, resilience has emerged as one of the most relevant competencies for human development. In this study, the definition proposed by Cyrulnik (2004) is adopted, where resilience corresponds to the capacity to face adversity, adapt to change, and reorganize oneself positively after critical experiences—an ability considered essential in the 21st century. In this sense, this competence promotes the development of coping strategies and personal strengthening in the face of the challenges imposed by the complexity of the contemporary world (Stover et al., 2024).

According to Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000), the development of resilience is strongly influenced by protective contexts, such as the school and family environments. The school, in this regard, represents a privileged space for the formation

of resilient individuals, as it provides structured experiences, socioemotional support, and opportunities for the reconstruction of meaning. Nevertheless, it is within the family that the deepest foundations for the development of resilience are established through stable affective bonds, balanced discipline, spiritual values, and the daily practice of ethical living.

Despite this, intolerance to frustration—defined as the difficulty in accepting the discrepancy between desire and reality—has recently been identified as a factor that contributes to giving up in the face of obstacles (Ruiz-Ortega & Berrios-Martos, 2025). As said by Andrade and Romanholi (2023), this condition may lead to emotional fragility, compromising both personal development and collective coexistence. In a contemporary scenario marked by emotional instability and the loss of ethical references, the formation of resilient individuals has become an urgent challenge for education.

In this context, education constitutes an essential instrument in promoting individuals capable of dealing with contemporary challenges in a critical, emotionally balanced, and ethically grounded manner. Christian pedagogy, by valuing integral formation—intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual—offers an approach that favors the development of resilience. The American writer Ellen G. White (2021), in the book *Education*, affirmed that the challenges of life, when faced with faith and purpose, are essential instruments in the educational and formative process. From this perspective, it becomes vital to teach future generations that:

This world is not a parade ground, but a battlefield. All are called to endure hardness, as good soldiers. They are to be strong and quit themselves like men. Let them be taught that the true test of character is found in the willingness to bear burdens, to take the hard place, to do the work that needs to be done, though it brings no earthly recognition or reward. (White, 2021, p. 295)

Among the examples recorded in history, the Waldensians emerged as a resilient group that preserved the truth of the Bible during the Middle Ages, facing persecution and resisting the influence of the Roman Catholic Church (White, 2017). According to Wylie (1860), the Waldensians, who arose in the 12th century, constituted a Christian movement with a strong pedagogical orientation, whose commitment to the teaching of the Scriptures and to the moral formation of their members made them a historical example of resistance and faithfulness. Even in the face of the most severe persecutions, the Waldensians preserved the practice of education by maintaining schools and cultivating biblical reading as the foundation for the formation of their children.

Although studies exist on the historical trajectory of the Waldensians and their religious resistance, research that systematically analyzes the contribution of this group to Christian education and to the formation of resilient individuals in contexts of persecution remains limited. This lack of investigation reveals an academic gap regarding the understanding of the pedagogical elements that sustained the continuity and religious identity of this movement over time. Considering this, the following research problem emerges: what was the contribution of the Waldensians to Christian

education in the formation of resilient individuals capable of resisting persecution without renouncing their religious convictions?

The purpose of this study, grounded in bibliographic and documentary research, is to analyze the legacy of the Waldensians for Christian education, with particular attention to the principles that sustained faithful leadership under persecution, to identify educational practices that may inspire the formation of resilient individuals in contemporary contexts of instability and crisis. To achieve this objective, three specific goals are proposed: (1) to describe the origin and development of the Waldensians, considering the historical circumstances that shaped their trajectory; (2) to examine the educational practices that contributed to the formation and continuity of the Waldensian Christian community, especially during periods of persecution; and (3) to analyze the lessons drawn from the Waldensian experience for contemporary Christian education, highlighting strategies that promote the formation of faithful and resilient individuals in the face of the challenges of secularization.

The relevance of this theme lies in the recovery of this model of resistance and faith, proposing an educational reflection on how historical experiences may offer insights for confronting contemporary challenges. Furthermore, this research enables the articulation between education, theology, history, and psychology, fostering interdisciplinary approaches to human and collective resilience in contexts of oppression. A study of this nature contributes to enriching educational, historical, and ethical debates by highlighting a tradition that expresses resilience through faith, education, and community life. In addition, it may offer the academic literature new perspectives on alternative pedagogies and provide readers with elements for a deeper reflection on dignified and hopeful resistance in the face of adversity. Finally, it is expected that the results will contribute to strengthening Christian pedagogical practice by inspiring educational initiatives that promote not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the consolidation of principles and values in turbulent times.

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE WALDENSIAN MOVEMENT

In the 12th century, a period marked by profound social and religious transformations in medieval Europe, the Roman Church consolidated itself as the hegemonic institution in the West, holding political, spiritual, and economic power. Within this context, movements of dissent emerged in search of a more authentic spirituality aligned with the Scriptures. Among them, the Waldensians stood out, advocating a Christian practice that differed from the ostentatious practices of the institutionalized Church. As Sofia V. Bompiani (1897) reported in *A Short History of the Italian Waldenses*,

In the valleys of the Cottian Alps, between Mount Cenis and Mount Viso, a Bible-loving people have lived from "time immemorial." They have been persecuted and exiled by the Bible-hating power which has its seat in Rome. . . . They refused to acknowledge the Roman pontiff as the Vicar of Christ; to bow down to the wafer and believe it the body of Christ; to confess to priests, or to give up the Bible. (p. 1–2)

There is historical debate regarding when and how the Waldensians first emerged. Early Protestant historians believed that the movement began as early as the apostolic period—that is, in the first centuries of Christianity—which would grant the Waldensians a very ancient origin independent of the Roman Church. The Protestant historian Antoine Monastier (1859) argued that Peter Waldo was not the founder of the Waldensian movement but rather someone who joined an already existing Christian group. He bases this claim on three main points: first, Waldo's preaching began only around 1180, while there are records of the movement predating this period; second, documents such as the poem "The Noble Lesson," dated approximately to the year 1100, indicate that Waldensian doctrine was already established prior to Waldo's activity; and finally, sources from the 12th century refer to these Christians as "Waldensians" not because of Peter Waldo, but because they lived in mountainous valleys. These indications suggest that the movement originated before Waldo, although he later became one of its most prominent figures.

Consistent with Collins (1996), the various names used throughout history to designate the Waldensians—such as *Vaudois*, *Valdesi*, and *Waldenses*—reflect linguistic and cultural variations. During the Middle Ages, names often indicated geographic origin or occupation rather than family lineage. For this reason, it is possible that the name "Waldo" arose from Peter's association with the "men of the valleys," rather than the valleys being named after him, which strengthens the idea that the Waldensian movement existed before his involvement.

Catholic historians, on the other hand, maintain that the Waldensians were founded by Peter Waldo, a wealthy merchant from Lyon who converted during the 12th century (Lambert, 1992). Waldo lived in a city in southern France and experienced his conversion around 1173 after a profound awareness of the vanity of wealth. Devoting himself to the reading of the Scriptures, he made a firm decision that transformed not only his own life but also the lives of many who chose to follow his example. He dedicated himself to preaching in favor of evangelical simplicity, renouncing material possessions and financing the translation of the Scriptures into the vernacular—the language of the common people—specifically the Romaunt dialect (Audisio, 1999; Monastier, 1859).

Although spiritually transformative, this initiative was perceived by the Catholic hierarchy as subversive since the reading of the Bible in commonly spoken language was considered a threat to ecclesiastical authority. As Kienzle (1998) observed, the mere act of laypeople preaching publicly was interpreted as a direct challenge to the clerical monopoly over the sacred. Consequently, ecclesiastical authorities expressed discomfort with the fact that Waldo lacked formal theological training and, especially, that he used a translation of the Bible in the vernacular rather than the traditional Latin version (the Vulgate), which was reserved for the clergy.

In 1179, Waldo participated in the Third Lateran Council in Rome, where his vow of poverty was acknowledged by Pope Alexander III. On that occasion, he presented his *Profession of Faith*, a document affirming his adherence to the principles of Christian orthodoxy, like those required from individuals accused of heresy. Despite this, Waldo did not obtain ecclesiastical authorization to continue preaching. Nevertheless, he and his followers—known as *Pauperes* ("the Poor")—continued their evangelistic activities. In response, the Archbishop of Lyon condemned him, and later Pope Lucius III issued

the bull *Ad abolendam* during the Synod of Verona in 1184, officially prohibiting the activities of the Waldensians (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

The crucial point of Waldensian theology was evangelical simplicity. Waldo argued that the true Church was not identified by pomp, but by faithfulness to the Word of God. Thus, the practice of itinerant preaching, discipleship, and the refusal to swear oaths or resort to violence marked their identity (Stephens, 1998). In Audisio's (1999) view, this ascetic ideal—understood as the exercise of faith and commitment to spiritual life—represented not only a protest against clerical luxury, but also an attempt to reconstruct the experience of the early Christian church, referring to the example of the apostles. Nevertheless, the movement quickly came into conflict with the Church, leading to various actions of persecution and repression. The Waldensians were classified as heretics, and their refusal to submit to ecclesiastical authority and the official dogmas of the Roman Church motivated campaigns of marginalization and condemnation, often resulting in social exclusion, physical violence, and even death.

In Luke 21:12–17, Jesus declares: “But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you . . . You will be hated by all for My name’s sake” (*New King James Version*, 1982). Before describing the eschatological events, Jesus prepares His disciples for the reality of persecution that will accompany their mission.

In this text, opposition is presented not as a sign of divine abandonment but as the context in which faithful witness is rendered. Jesus assures His followers that persecution will provide opportunities to testify before rulers and authorities (Luke 21:13) and promises to grant them wisdom that their adversaries will be unable to withstand (Luke 21:15). As Bruce explains, the emphasis is not on escape from suffering but on God's sustaining presence and sovereign care, even when persecution results in imprisonment or death (Bruce, 1990).

Biblical scholars have observed that Luke's description intentionally echoes Old Testament passages such as Micah 7:6, Zechariah 13:3, and Daniel 11–12, placing the disciples' experience within the broader biblical pattern of the faithful remnant who endures hostility while remaining loyal to God (Pao & Schnabel, 2014). Read against this biblical background, the Waldensians' commitment to preserving and proclaiming Scripture despite persecution reflects a historical experience that resonates with the pattern of faithful witness described by Luke.

This biblical perspective provides an interpretive framework for understanding Waldensian leadership. Like the disciples described in Luke 21, Waldensian leaders conducted their ministry in contexts of persecution, relying on Scripture and remaining faithful despite social exclusion, imprisonment, and the threat of death.

The Waldensians eventually separated from the Roman Church and came to follow the Bible alone as the authority for faith and practice (Collins, 1996). As said by Charles Beard (1883),

The Waldensians were among the earliest biblical Christians. They translated the Holy Scriptures into their own language and explained them according to their natural sense. They defended the universal priesthood of believers. They delivered a second blow to sacerdotal doctrine by denying the validity of sacraments administered by an impious priest. Their only sacraments were Baptism and the Eucharist; they rejected purgatory, indulgences, prayers for the

dead, and the invocation of saints. Their moral conduct was considered irreproachable. (p. 24)

In 1184, the Waldensians were condemned as heretics by the Council of Verona. Brooke (1975) emphasized that, despite persecution, the Waldensians were not extinguished but instead developed a resilient communal structure, spreading throughout France, Italy, and regions within the Alpine valleys of Piedmont—a remote area that favored the preservation of their faith in secrecy and isolation. This resistance was possible because, as Kaelber (1995) perceived, the movement not only rejected clerical hierarchy but also established its own discipline based on communal life and asceticism.

Persecution against the Waldensians was intense. Wylie (1860) recounted episodes in which entire communities were massacred in the Alpine mountains. Muston (1866) referred to the Waldensians as the “Israel of the Alps,” highlighting the parallel between the resistance of a persecuted people and the biblical narrative of Israel’s survival. Mitchell (1853) and Monastier (1859) added that, despite human and material losses, the Waldensians maintained their faith firmly, sustained by the conviction that the Bible was the only rule of faith and practice.

Waldensian theology also engaged with the medieval context. Pita (2014), in a comparative study, demonstrated that between the 12th and 14th centuries the Waldensians developed a view of history as a struggle between the true Church—an invisible body faithful to the Scriptures—and the institutionalized Church, corrupted by power. This understanding later influenced Protestant theology by anticipating ideas concerning apostasy and the restoration of biblical faith.

White (1883) described the Waldensians as guardians of truth during times of spiritual darkness, emphasizing their fidelity to the Scriptures and their commitment to preaching. For Tourn (1999), although this perspective is confessional, it coincides with historical analyses that recognize the Waldensians as a unique movement of biblical preservation and spiritual resistance.

Thus, the Waldensian legacy is multifaceted: at once a form of religious resistance, a social protest, and a testimony of faith. Stephens (1998) observed that their history reveals a people who, despite marginalization and persecution, survived through communal cohesion and their trust in the Scriptures. From a sociological perspective, Kaelber (1995) suggested that their asceticism was not merely renunciation but a means of redefining identity within a society marked by clerical centralization and violence.

As Lambert (1992) pointed out, the Waldensians constituted one of the most remarkable medieval lay movements that, inspired by the reading of the Scriptures, challenged ecclesiastical authority by claiming the centrality of preaching and a life modeled after the apostles. Other scholars, such as Gabriel Audisio (1999), also recognized the Waldensians as precursors of the Protestant Reformation, since centuries before Luther they were already defending principles such as the use of the Bible in the vernacular, criticism of clerical hierarchy, and a return to evangelical simplicity. Euan Cameron (2000) reinforced this perspective by interpreting the Waldensians as an expression of reformist rejection prior to the formal Reformation.

Led by Peter Waldo in the 12th century, the Waldensians translated significant portions of the New Testament into the Romaunt dialect, a form of vernacular language derived from Vulgar Latin and spoken in southern Europe. This initiative aimed to make the Scriptures accessible to the common people, thereby challenging the Church's exclusive control over the reading and interpretation of the Bible. The translation and preaching in the vernacular were viewed as subversive by ecclesiastical authorities, leading to the official prohibition of such texts at the Council of Toulouse (1299). Despite persecution, manuscripts of this translation survived and were preserved in locations such as Lyon, Zurich, and the University of Cambridge, thanks to the collection conducted by Sir Samuel Morland in the 17th century (Froom, 1946).

At the beginning of the 13th century, part of the Waldensian movement began to reintegrate into Catholic orthodoxy, drawing closer again to the doctrines and practices of the Roman Church. At the same time, persecutions against the movement became increasingly severe, to the point that in many regions the group was nearly extinguished by the end of that century. To ensure survival, the remaining Waldensians adopted strategies of concealment, such as abandoning their distinctive clothing—such as the *sabots*—to avoid identification by ecclesiastical or civil authorities. Historical records indicate that during conferences held in 1207 some Waldensian leaders, including Durand of Huesca, reconciled with the Church and founded the order of the “Poor Catholics,” whose purpose was to convert Waldensians who still resisted returning to the official faith (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

A new chapter in Waldensian history began in 1526, when the French reformer Guillaume Farel presented the teachings of the Protestant Reformation to their leaders (called *barbes*). During a conference held in Cianforan, the Waldensians accepted important doctrinal changes: they recognized only two sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper), adopted the doctrine of predestination, and allowed voluntary celibacy for their ministers (Audisio, 1999; Stephens, 1998). By drawing closer to the Reformed tradition of Geneva, they came to be regarded as a Protestant church.

Nevertheless, persecutions continued for centuries, and only in 1848 did the Waldensians obtain civil recognition and religious freedom. During this long period, they endured severe persecutions and massacres due to the opposition of religious and political authorities, who viewed their doctrine and practices as a threat to the control of the Roman Church.

According to Froom (1946), the Waldensians reentered the broader European Christian scene through the Protestant Reformation. Rather than remaining isolated, they sought theological and practical alliances with the Reformers, recognizing in them the same search for a faith grounded in the Scriptures and in apostolic simplicity. Monastier (1859) clarified that by the end of the 15th century, the Waldensians were mainly confined to the Alpine valleys between France and Italy.

In the 16th century, however, the Waldensian movement faced several difficulties. As Johann Lorenz von Mosheim observed in *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History* (1841), although they adhered to the Protestant Reformation, they preserved many of their traditional practices for more than a century. Nevertheless, the devastating plague of 1630 caused great losses, including among their religious leaders, which required internal reorganization. As a result, they began to adopt more systematically the models of the French Reformed Church. According to Lemmo (2011),

after joining the Protestant Reformation, the Waldensians adopted many of its virtues but also fell into the same doctrinal conformism that affected Lutherans and Calvinists. Over time, they became attached to fixed interpretations of the Reformers, ceasing to pursue new understandings of the faith, even though they had historically been characterized by openness and resistance.

In the 17th century, the Waldensians living in the Piedmont Alps were harshly persecuted by local rulers who sought to force them to abandon their Protestant faith, bringing them close to total extermination. In 1655 they suffered a brutal massacre known as the “Piedmontese Easter,” which provoked international outrage and attracted the attention of writers such as John Milton. After this attack, they received support from European Protestant countries, which helped restore some of their rights. Toward the end of the century, in 1686, they were expelled once again, but in 1689, led by Pastor Henri Arnaud, they managed to return secretly to their valleys, reclaiming their lands through courage and armed resistance. Throughout the 18th century, the Waldensians continued to suffer persecution but preserved their traditions and were influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment (Stephens, 1998).

At the beginning of the 19th century, with the French Revolution, they gained temporary freedom but later faced renewed repression. This context stimulated a religious revival supported by European reform movements. In 1848, through liberal reforms, the Waldensians obtained civil recognition and religious freedom in the Kingdom of Sardinia—an essential milestone for their institutional reorganization and missionary expansion. Between the 19th and 20th centuries, this new status enabled migrations to other regions such as the Americas and Australia, promoting the global expansion of the Waldensian movement (Cameron, 2000; Knight, 1983). According to Audisio (1999), the Waldensian case reveals the persistence of minority religious communities capable of resisting repression and preserving their traditions.

In brief, since their origin, the Waldensians faced intense persecution and massacres, particularly during the periods of religious wars in Europe. Despite this, they preserved their faith and gradually restored their communities. The Waldensian movement was not merely a peripheral episode in the history of medieval Christianity. On the contrary, it represented an experience that anticipated central issues of the Protestant Reformation, such as the authority of Scripture, the centrality of personal faith, and criticism of the opulence of the institutional Church.

EDUCATIONAL PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF THE WALDENSANS AMID ADVERSITY

Bible-Centered Instruction

One of the central pillars of Waldensian pedagogy was the strong emphasis on the reading and memorization of the Bible. From the earliest centuries of their history, they translated the Scriptures and other Christian texts into local languages, promoting direct access to biblical content for everyone, including children. Many of them memorized the Gospels, the Psalms, the Epistles, and other significant portions of the Bible—a practice that proved vital, especially in times when books were confiscated or destroyed (Broadbent, 1931; Knight, 1983). They taught their children to read the Bible for themselves (Bompiani, 1897), something profoundly countercultural at the time. This

biblical instruction stood at the center of the formation of new generations, not only to preserve religious identity, but also to prepare them to face hostile contexts (Audisio, 1999). This practice was considered a fundamental requirement, and Waldensian children and youth, according to White (2021):

Were able to repeat large portions of both the Old and the New Testament. Thoughts of God were associated alike with the sublime scenery of nature and with the humble blessings of daily life. Little children learned to look with gratitude to God as the giver of every favor and every comfort. (p. 68)

Wylie (1860) supported this argument with the following statement:

The youth who here sat at the feet of the more venerable and learned of their barbes used as their textbook the Holy Scriptures. And not only did they study the sacred volume; they were required to commit to memory, and be able accurately to recite, whole Gospels and Epistles. (p. 10)

The Waldensian faith did not represent a doctrinal rupture but rather the preservation of a Christian tradition that dates to the apostolic era. According to White (2021), this spiritual legacy was characterized by simplicity, fervor, and unwavering fidelity to the Scriptures, even under persecution. Within a medieval context marked by the clerical monopoly over the Bible, the Waldensians carried out a countercultural act by translating the sacred text into the vernacular, challenging ecclesiastical authority and democratizing access to the Word of God.

This initiative represented a genuine “spiritual revolution,” insofar as it placed direct access to the Scriptures into the hands of the common people, thereby subverting the interpretative monopoly exercised by the Catholic clergy. By allowing individuals to learn from God through personal Bible reading, the Waldensians broke with the dominant hierarchical structure, fostering a spirituality grounded in the autonomy of faith and in individual responsibility before the Word of God.

More than merely teaching these truths, the Waldensians lived them faithfully, which earned them such a remarkable moral reputation that, at the time, any person known for honesty and piety could be accused of being a Waldensian. Wylie (1860), in his description of “The Noble Lesson” (*La Nobla Leyçon*), presented the following statement regarding the perception of the Waldensians:

If there be an honest man, who desires to love God and fear Jesus Christ, who will neither slander, nor swear, nor lie, nor commit adultery, nor kill, nor steal, nor avenge himself of his enemies, they presently say of such a one he is a Vaudes, and worthy of death. (p. 8)

Wylie (1860) further explained that Waldensian theology, developed in the Alpine valleys between the 12th and 15th centuries, was firmly grounded in the Bible, with the atoning death of Christ and justification by faith as its central points. This doctrine, clearly expressed in documents such as the poem “The Noble Lesson,” also encompassed fundamental Christian beliefs such as the Trinity, the Fall of humanity,

the incarnation of Christ, the enduring validity of the Ten Commandments, the necessity of divine grace for the practice of good, holiness of life, the institution of the ministry, the resurrection of the body, and eternal life. In this poem, dated approximately to the 12th century and attributed to the Waldensians, it is stated:

O brothers, listen to a noble lesson:
We must always watch and pray,
For we see this world approaching its end.
We must strive to perform good works,
Seeing the end of this world drawing near.
One thousand and four hundred years have now fully passed
Since it was written thus: we are in the last times.
We must desire little, for we are at the final extremity.
We see daily the signs that must be fulfilled
In the increase of evil and the decrease of good.
These are the dangers that the Scripture mentions:
In the Gospels and in the writings of Saint Paul.
No living person can know the end.
Therefore, we must fear all the more, since we are not certain
Whether we shall die today or tomorrow.
(Montet, 1888, pp. 42–43)

This Waldensian poem reveals a profound awareness of the moral and spiritual urgency arising from a world perceived as approaching its end, emphasizing vigilance, prayer, the practice of good works, and humility in the face of uncertainty about the final time. Its message resonates with contemporary concerns, in which social and political crises intensify the sense of global instability and ethical urgency.

Emphasis on the Formation of Missionary Leaders

The educational formation of the Waldensians was also mission-oriented; in other words, mission constituted the central axis of Waldensian identity and education (Wylie, 1860). The preachers, known as *barbes*, were trained for years in clandestine schools located in the Alpine valleys. Their leadership training included biblical doctrine, interpretation of the Scriptures, communication skills, and the defense of the faith, as well as strategies for resistance under pressure. Many also learned medicine and manual trades, which allowed them to travel in disguise, provide useful services to communities, and avoid raising suspicion. This combination of deep biblical education and practical training made them truly resilient missionaries (Audisio, 1999; Beard, 1883).

Wylie (1860) emphasized that, for the Waldensians, education was an act of missiological resistance: the formation of new generations aimed not only to preserve religious identity but also to equip them to operate in hostile contexts with discernment and faithfulness. As part of this preparation, according to White (2022), every candidate for ministry was required to dedicate three years to missionary service before assuming any position in the church.

To evangelize amid hostility, Waldensian missionaries traveled disguised as merchants, carrying portions of the New Testament translated into the vernacular language (*Romaunt*), often copied by hand. This approach combined profound biblical education with contextualized ministerial practice, making the *barbes* resilient and effective missionaries, even under the threat of imprisonment or death. Their objective went beyond merely preserving the faith in the Alpine valleys; it was a proactive movement of evangelization throughout Europe—from France to Poland, from Germany to Rome itself—driven by a biblical theology and a comprehensive commitment to the gospel (Beard, 1883; Wylie, 1860).

According to White (2022), the Waldensian missionaries were required to “serve three years in some mission field before taking charge of a church at home” (p. 70). This indicates that practical work preceded the leadership of a church. Pastoral ministry in that period required sacrifice, dedication, and a willingness to face dangers. Missionaries were sent out in pairs, usually with a more experienced mentor guiding a younger worker, fostering a process of leadership formation. They also met regularly for prayer and counsel, strengthening one another in the faith. Such a requirement reveals the dedication and preparation of these missionaries, who demonstrated total commitment to the cause of God. As the author further described:

They secretly carried about with them copies of the Bible, in whole or in part; and whenever an opportunity was presented, they called the attention of their customers to these manuscripts. Often an interest to read God’s word was thus awakened, and some portion was gladly left with those who desired to receive it. (White, 2022, p. 71)

The formation of Waldensian missionaries was therefore a rigorous, clandestine, and deeply spiritual process that combined biblical instruction, practical training, and real missionary experience. Inserted within a context of persecution, this training aimed not only to preserve the faith but also to advance it with courage, humility, and wisdom. It was a model that united theological conviction, emotional preparation, and practical resilience—forming leaders capable of evangelizing amid opposition without compromising the integrity of their faith.

Community Actions and Family Education

Mitchell (1853) also observed that the Waldensian educational structure was guided by principles of simplicity, discipline, and fidelity to faith—factors that contributed to its longevity and cultural resilience. Waldensian education was not individualistic in nature but lived out in fraternity. There was a clear centrality of family education, reinforced by a strong communal network. In the Alpine villages and refuges, entire families participated in the transmission of the faith.

The Waldensian community functioned as a cohesive system of spiritual and material support. Families shared common values, lived in proximity, and received itinerant preachers with hospitality, providing shelter and logistical assistance (Cameron, 1984; Cameron, 2000).

In addition, the Waldensians developed rudimentary and secret schools—the so-called “forest schools” or “mountain schools”—hidden in regions such as the Angrogna

Valley. In these clandestine centers, children were taught, preachers were trained, and theological knowledge was preserved. Oral tradition also played an essential role: narratives, hymns, and oral traditions transmitted the values and doctrines of the movement, keeping the faith alive even when access to written texts was impossible. Thus, spiritual formation was not limited to doctrinal instruction but was integrated into everyday life, characterized by discipline, fraternity, and commitment to education (Audisio, 1999; Bompiani, 1897).

Strategies of Resistance

The survival of the Waldensians throughout centuries of persecution was made possible by a set of practical strategies for survival. In practical terms, they created secret routes through the Alps that allowed the movement of people and the circulation of biblical manuscripts. These routes connected villages and refuges, sustaining the network of teaching and preserving the faith. Geography itself became an ally: valleys, caves, and mountains served as natural refuges against the armies of the crusades. This geographical resistance, combined with spiritual strength, explains why the Waldensians managed to survive while many other dissident movements were eliminated (Monastier, 1859; Wylie, 1860).

Even under constant threats, the Waldensians continued copying portions of the Bible by hand and training new generations of believers prepared to endure suffering. As Mitchell (1853) observed, the maintenance of clandestine schools and the dissemination of the Scriptures, even under intense persecution, reveal that for the Waldensians teaching went beyond mere religious instruction—it was a form of active resistance against oppression and an essential element for the survival of the movement. In this context, education assumed both a strategic and spiritual character, functioning as a means of preserving identity, faith, and communal cohesion.

In this regard, Pita (2014) explained that:

The Waldensians had an articulated and complex theological system that hinged around a self-appraisal as a chosen remnant, a peculiar conception of eschatology, the dismissal of Fathers' writings as authoritative, and the prophetic role assigned to the Roman Church as becomes apparent from juxtaposing the surviving documents. By necessity the Waldensian theology in general and of history in particular was not a mere speculative construct but rather a source of meaning and endurance to resist the persecutions throughout centuries. (p. 66)

Spiritually, the Waldensians cultivated hope in divine providence and viewed obedience to Christ as superior to obedience to the institutional Church. This conviction was expressed in their hymns, sermons, and teaching rituals, which conveyed courage and consolation to persecuted communities (White, 2021). Even in the face of massacres such as that of Mérindol (1545) and the "Piedmontese Easter" (1655), in which entire villages were destroyed, the Waldensians persevered. Faith was experienced as communal support, in which each person sustained the other through prayer, discipleship, and encouragement. Waldensian spirituality, therefore, was not merely theoretical but intensely lived in times of crisis and persecution.

In short, the spiritual resilience of the Waldensians was firmly grounded in the conviction that the Scriptures constituted the sole rule of faith and practice. This certainty provided not only spiritual direction but also a profound sense of mission, sustaining the belief that they possessed a divinely appointed purpose in the world. Even amid severe persecution, this Bible-centered faith motivated them to persevere—teaching, preaching, and living according to evangelical principles with courage and fidelity. This commitment placed them in direct opposition to the Roman Church, particularly because they promoted the reading of the Scriptures in the common language, thereby challenging the clerical monopoly over religious knowledge.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE WALDENSIAN EXPERIENCE FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Although contemporary Western society does not face physical persecution as intense as that experienced by the Waldensians during the Middle Ages—when they endured extreme and violent repression for religious reasons—the growing process of secularization poses significant challenges to confessional Christian education. In the present context, this marginalization occurs in more subtle ways, assuming cultural and institutional forms, particularly within academic environments marked by the predominance of secular perspectives (Glanzer, Carpenter, & Lantinga, 2011; Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012).

This phenomenon does not manifest through coercion but through social and normative pressures that weaken the public expression of faith. For example, Fosnacht and Broderick (2020) demonstrated that students from minority religious traditions experience higher levels of discrimination on university campuses, indicating a form of concealed marginalization rooted in cultural perceptions. Similarly, Dalziel (2022) showed that secular-oriented universities often neglect theological reflection, demonstrating limited appreciation for academic contributions grounded in religious perspectives. Such attitudes constitute a less explicit but effective form of institutional exclusion that contributes to the marginalization of confessional thought within contemporary academic spaces.

These findings resonate with a statement attributed to Martin Luther, who warned:

I fear much that the universities will be found to be great gates leading down to hell, unless they take diligent care to explain the Holy Scriptures, and to engrave them in the hearts of our youth. I would not advise anyone to place his child where the Holy Scriptures are not regarded as the rule of life. Every institution where the word of God is not diligently studied, must become corrupt. (White, 1883, p. 3)

As Benne (2001) emphasized, higher education institutions that succeed in maintaining their religious identity authentically and consistently do so through three fundamental pillars. The first is the adoption of a comprehensive theological vision that understands faith as a complete interpretive narrative of reality, permeating all areas of knowledge. The second is the presence of a coherent institutional ethos, in which practices, symbols, and structures reflect and reinforce the confessional identity of the

university. The third and essential pillar is the presence of a representative group of members—faculty, students, and administrators—committed to practicing a biblical worldview. This model provides a practical and inspiring response to the contemporary challenges faced by confessional education within a pluralistic and secular environment.

The spiritual and intellectual heritage of the Waldensians offers valuable insights. Their emphasis on the centrality of Scripture and on direct engagement with the Bible highlights the necessity of solid, accessible, and personal biblical formation. Such formation enables Christians to ground and defend their faith critically and consciously, even in the face of cultural and ideological pressures prevalent in academic contexts. Contemporary apologetics (Frame, 2015; Mamosey & Maramis, 2025) likewise emphasizes that the defense of Christian faith must be grounded in divine revelation and provide a coherent framework for responding to intellectual challenges to Christianity.

It is important to note that within secular critical thought, reason, experience, and empiricism are the primary sources used to evaluate truth, often adopting a naturalistic and skeptical approach that does not depend on religious presuppositions. Christian critical thought, by contrast, also values reason, experience, and empirical evidence, but always in subordination to biblical revelation and the Christian tradition. In this framework, the Bible is considered a normative source of truth that guides and interprets the understanding of reality (Knight, 2010).

Contemporary studies have also identified the reading and study of Scripture as important facilitators of emotional and psychological resilience. Krause and Pargament (2018), for example, demonstrated that frequent engagement with the Bible—whether through individual reading or group study—acts as a coping strategy during crises. It promotes mental well-being by providing transcendent meaning to suffering, moderates the relationship between stressful events and hope, encourages benevolent forms of religious coping, and contributes to higher levels of hope in the face of adversity.

Moreover, the Waldensian emphasis on family and community education reaffirms that the transmission of faith cannot be delegated exclusively to institutions but must be lived out within the daily life of families and small communities. Such practices ensure the continuity and vitality of belief in the face of the spiritual emptiness often produced by secularization. George Knight (2010), a recognized scholar of the history of Christian education, emphasized the importance of family and community education as foundational to spiritual formation. He argued that effective confessional education transcends formal institutions and must be rooted in the home and the local community.

This perspective closely aligns with Waldensian practices, which viewed family and community as the primary agents of transmitting faith. Knight (2010) also noted that in times of increasing secularization, such community networks are essential for cultivating resilient spirituality by fostering mutual discipleship and continuous support—characteristics that ensured the survival and vitality of the Waldensian movement.

The educational practices developed by the Waldensians in contexts of persecution and institutional exclusion remain relevant for contemporary Christian formation, particularly in environments where faith is marginalized or relegated to the private sphere. Strategies such as home education, Bible study groups, and contextualized missionary training represent approaches that strengthen the lived experience of faith outside traditional institutional structures. According to Wang et al.

(2023), spiritual formation plays a central role in the development of emotional and vocational resilience among theology students, being strengthened by intentional practices such as prayer, biblical meditation, and collective discipleship.

In a contemporary context characterized by fragmented attention, excessive digital stimuli, and social instability, such practices reemerge as indispensable tools for strengthening both spiritual and mental resilience, creating solid foundations capable of sustaining Christian witness in times of crisis.

The Christian home is not merely an environment for instruction but the primary center of spiritual and moral formation, where character is shaped by considering the Scriptures and communion with God. Practices such as family worship, intentional biblical instruction throughout daily life, and family involvement in mission constitute strategies that not only strengthen faith but also cultivate spiritual resilience in the face of adversity. White (2013) highlighted that families firmly grounded in Christian principles are equipped to resist the pressures and corruptions of the world, preserving a faithful witness even in contexts of apostasy and opposition—realities that have marked and will continue to mark the journey of the true Christian.

Another study conducted by Dolcos et al. (2021) involving more than 200 participants demonstrated that religion provides important cognitive tools that help individuals become stronger when facing challenging situations. Stressful contexts may affect cognitive processes, leading to feelings of deep sadness, lack of motivation, or even emotional crises. Religious practice and involvement help individuals reinterpret such problems, regulate emotions more effectively, employ coping strategies, and strengthen self-confidence. In practical terms, this underscores the importance of prioritizing a solid biblical education that encourages both individual and communal study of Scripture, enabling students to ground their faith with critical and profound understanding.

In this regard, Roszak et al. (2025) noted that during crises and periods of profound instability, religion frequently serves as a resource that helps individuals remain connected to what is most crucial. Their findings also indicate that religiosity contributes to greater resilience by allowing individuals to adapt more effectively to stressful conditions. As the authors stated,

This enhanced resilience is achieved through a unique cognitive position rooted in faith, which serves as both its fruit and outcome. Such resilience highlights religion's pivotal role not merely as a coping mechanism but also as a source of profound psychological and existential stability in the face of adversity. (Roszak et al., 2025, p. 7)

Waldensian education was not restricted to formal institutions; the transmission of faith occurred in the daily life of families and small communities. For the contemporary context, this suggests that Christian education should actively involve and strengthen families and local communities, creating networks of spiritual support that promote the daily practice of faith. In this regard, the perspective of White (2007) is particularly illuminating:

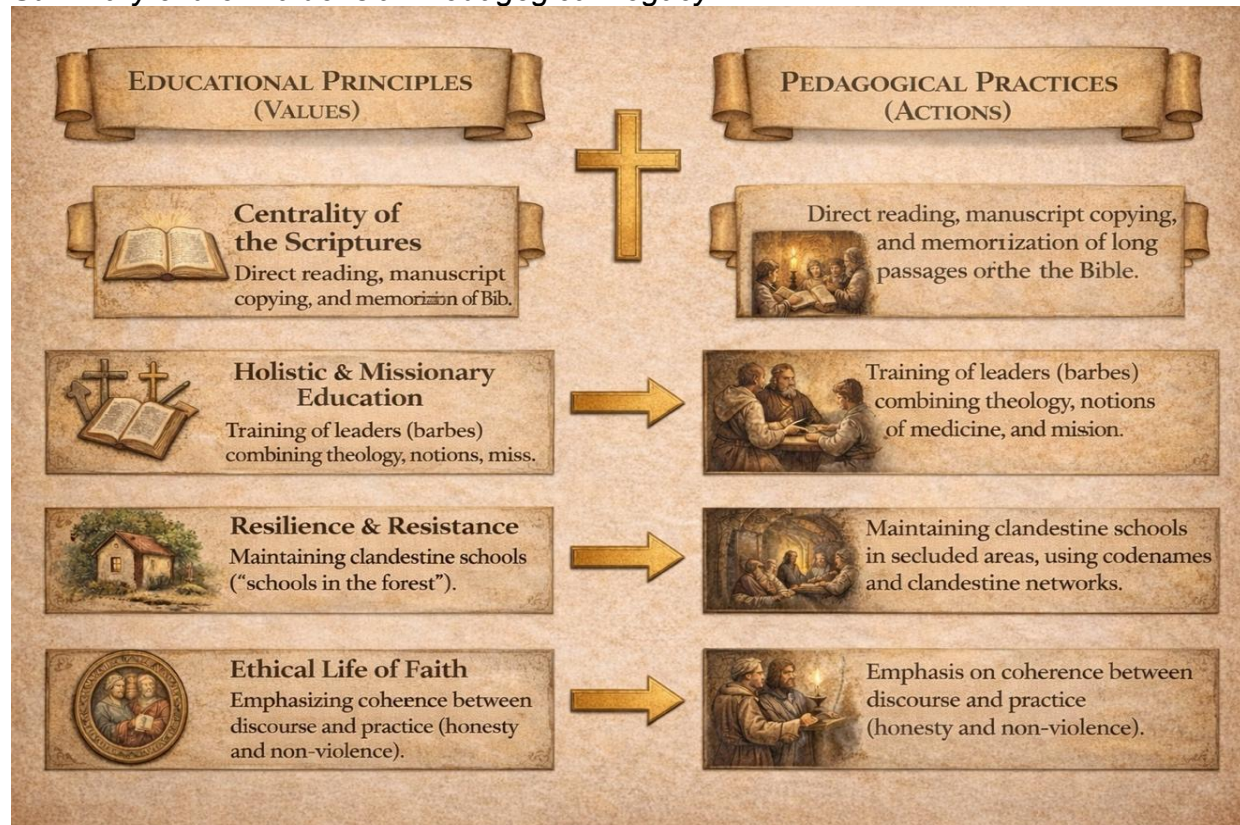
Restoring and uplifting humanity begins in the home. The work of parents underlies every other. Society is composed of families and is what the heads of families make it. Out of the heart “spring the issues of life” (Proverbs 4:23). The heart of the community, of the church, and of the nation is the household. The well-being of society, the success of the church, and the prosperity of the nation depend upon home influences. (p. 197)

From this perspective, White (2007) argued that the home is not merely a component of Christian education but its fundamental foundation. By positioning the family as the “heart of the community, the church, and the nation,” it becomes evident that the spiritual vitality and success of any faith community depend directly on the quality of spiritual life cultivated daily within households. Thus, the Waldensian model is validated as a timeless principle: a robust faith within the community reflects a faith authentically lived in the home.

Another relevant aspect concerns pedagogical practices that encourage autonomy and critical thinking. By translating the Bible into the language of the people, the Waldensians fostered a responsible and autonomous faith. This implies that contemporary Christian education should promote critical thinking and research as essential tools for expanding human understanding of the natural world and, consequently, of God. Such an approach helps students develop a conscious and well-grounded faith. Research, therefore, should be conducted with the awareness that ultimate truth is revealed by God and that human reason must remain in harmony with this divine revelation (Taylor V, 2020).

Figure 1 summarizes the main educational principles of the Waldensian movement and their corresponding pedagogical practices, highlighting the relationship between formative values and concrete actions that contributed to the preservation of faith, community identity, and resilience in contexts of persecution.

Figure 1
Summary of the Waldensian Pedagogical Legacy



Although the Bible is now widely accessible in many languages and formats—something the Waldensians longed for and for which many of them risked their lives—many contemporary Christians do not actively make use of this privilege. While the Waldensians copied the Scriptures by hand and concealed them within their garments to distribute them in secret, many today neglect the regular reading of the Bible, even though it is readily available on their phones, bookshelves, and digital platforms. This reveals a historical paradox: what was once scarce and precious is now abundant yet often ignored. Encouraging the intentional reading of the Bible in the common language, both as a personal and communal practice, remains an essential formative act—not only for preserving faith but also for strengthening spiritual resilience in times of crisis and moral confusion.

CONCLUSIONS

In revisiting the course of this research, we return to the question that guided the study: would it be possible to find, within Christian history, a formative model capable of inspiring the development of resilience in times of spiritual and moral instability? The analysis of the Waldensian movement demonstrates that this experience represented not merely an episode of religious resistance, but an ongoing educational process through which faith, life, and daily practice became inseparable.

The historical trajectory examined reveals that the Waldensians anticipated debates that would later shape the Protestant Reformation, particularly by affirming the authority of Scripture and questioning the growing distance between religious institutions and authentic Christian life. Their resistance was sustained not merely through external opposition but, above all, through a consistent internal formation in which access to Scripture, communal life, and missionary commitment nurtured a spirituality capable of surviving even under constant persecution.

The contrast with the present reality becomes inevitable. While Waldensian communities risked their very lives to preserve and transmit the biblical text, today the abundance of resources and translations does not necessarily guarantee a consistent practice of reading and spiritual formation. Ease of access paradoxically coexists with indifference, revealing that the mere availability of the text cannot replace intentional commitment to its lived practice. In this sense, the Waldensian legacy reminds us that Christian formation requires discipline, communal commitment, and coherence between professed faith and daily life.

The contribution of this study, therefore, lies in demonstrating that the strength of the Waldensian movement did not reside solely in resistance to persecution but was grounded in a pedagogy that integrated biblical knowledge, moral formation, and practical mission. The resilience demonstrated by these communities cannot be reduced to a psychological capacity to endure hardship; rather, it emerged as a spiritual virtue cultivated through an education guided by Scripture and sustained by communal life. Because the Waldensian experience unfolded under persistent persecution, this study also considers Luke 21:12–19 as a biblical framework for understanding faithful witness under adversity.

It must be acknowledged, however, that this investigation presents limitations inherent to its scope. The focus on the period prior to the Waldensians' more intense contact with the Protestant Reformation does not allow for a full observation of the later transformations of the movement. Furthermore, the bibliographic nature of the research limits the analysis to available sources, without including direct examination of original historical documents. These limitations, however, also point to relevant avenues for future studies—whether through comparisons with other pre-Reformation movements, investigations into the pedagogical transformations of the Waldensians over the centuries, or the practical application of their educational principles in contemporary Christian contexts.

In conclusion, the Waldensian experience demonstrates that a faith sustained by intentional formation and coherent communal life can endure even in hostile environments. The pedagogy developed by this movement, forged amid persecution and clandestinity, does not belong solely to the past; rather, it casts a light of hope and issues a call to courage for the formation of a resilient faith and persevering practice—qualities that remain profoundly necessary for the challenges of the present and the future.

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

Caleb Mobley

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). McClane (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.
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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 chiasmic 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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Review of Palma, P. J. (2025). *Beyond the Evangelical Gender Roles Gridlock: Reimagining Paul's Views on Women, Marriage, and Ministry*. With a Foreword by D. Gomez. Lexington Books. (ISBN 9781666940077), xviii + 266 pp., hb \$120.

Few contemporary topics are as inflammatory as gender roles within the church. The decades-long culture wars, featuring two mediating positions pitted against one another, have led to widespread damage, particularly to the reputation of the church. It is self-evident that (as the title suggests) a gridlock has emerged that warrants the assistance of an external party to clear the way so that a destination can be reached. Palma's work is an attempt at clearing such a blockade. Though some may scoff at the notion of (yet) another reevaluation of Paul's writings, given the gridlock, this work warrants attention, even from the strongest critic. Given the scope and speed of social change, there is an inevitable necessity to reevaluate historical interpretations and ideals.

Despite many such attempts originating from one side or the other of the debate, the uniqueness of the work is the mediating stance of the author (e.g., a moderate egalitarian attending a complementarian church). The tone is non-combative, and his kind and thoughtful engagement with his local ministry contacts supports his ethos. Recent cultural studies about the changing landscape of women in the church and in the culture at large are sufficient grounds for a fresh reappraisal of the historically difficult texts. The author's primary purpose is to demonstrate "how complementary contrasts in marriage and ministry echo God's design in creation, implying reciprocity defined not chiefly by roles or functions but by relationality" (14).

Chapter 1 attempts to set the historical stage for the issues facing the church today. Palma notes that, particularly, the second-wave feminists' debates surrounding second-wave feminism gave rise to the two groups—evangelical egalitarians and complementarians—and the subsequent debates that ensued. He gives a charitable overview of both views, highlighting how much the two groups share in comparison to the other groups on the fringes of the spectrum. He also highlights the increased challenges associated with Christian patriarchy, given the results of the past few decades.

The second chapter introduces a novel contribution of this book by the term "parity." Parity, as depicted in Genesis, the author argues, trumps all conversations

about the differing roles constituting so-called biblical manhood and womanhood. He says, “Any ensuing explanation about gender is enclosed within the broader realization of the permanence of men and women’s shared identity as the apex of creation and representatives of divine rule over the earth. Only with this foundational parity in view can one comprehend the purpose of creating humanity in kind as ‘male’ and ‘female.’” (46).

Chapter 3 offers a detailed evaluation of the controversial 1 Corinthians 11:3–12 text, with particular attention paid to head coverings in both ancient and modern contexts. Chapter 4 continues the theme of external adornment in its reevaluation of 1 Timothy 2:9–10, with a focus on contemporary modesty codes among religious groups. Chapter 5 addresses the household codes in Ephesians 5, including the ever-contentious *kephalē* debate. Chapters 6–7 shift the focus from the household to the home in their reevaluation of the “silencing” texts” (1 Cor. 14:34–35 and 1 Tim. 2:11–15, respectively). The author argues that women speaking (at the very least in the forms of prayer and prophecy) was the norm and the silencing instructions are exceptions, though some may disagree with the author’s position on authorship and the interpolation debate. He also examines the possibility and scope of women in leadership roles within the earliest churches and how the contemporary church should view and respond to women’s ordination.

Chapter 8 offers perhaps the best contribution of the book. In this, even the term “complementarity” is given a healthy reevaluation, detached from its perennial problems with power struggles. Palma argues against both “roles” and “functions,” rather favoring “relationality” stemming from the parity inherent in the *imago Dei*. Through the novel idea of harmonious differentiation, the author continues his quest to bridge the chasm between the two perspectives while avoiding deconstructive consequences. Finally, given the developments of the past few decades, there is a revised spectrum of gender role perspectives in Appendix B, which is quite helpful.

Overall, the tone and style are accessible to nearly all readers. There is an impressive well of sources, both ancient and contemporary, supporting the author’s propositions. The overall purpose seems to illuminate the truth that “despite notable differences, there is an opportunity, whether one is egalitarian or complementarian, to cross the aisle and pursue positive, cooperative interpretations of challenging passages” (35). The author’s desire for greater unity in the church is interspersed throughout, evidenced by the near absence of polemical or otherwise inflammatory partisan language. His solution to the gridlock calls for everyone, regardless of where he or she may fall on the spectrum of gender role perspectives, to lay down his or her weapons and engage in the warfare of love and humble service to one another through servant leadership—something that should unite all Christians. Palma’s hope seems to be that everyone can take steps towards one another in the middle to encourage and empower healthy ministry relationships so that the church can be effective, both locally and globally. In sum, this is a well-researched and worthy contribution to the broader evangelical gender debate, which deserves an objective listen.

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Crisp, B. (2026). *Strengthening the Church and Its Leaders: Paul's Blueprint in 1 Corinthians*. Wipf & Stock. (ISBN 9798385272136), xii + 132 pp., pb \$23.00.

This highly readable 16-chapter book has formative value for church leaders and pastors in the early phases of their ministry. Each chapter contains an expository summary, three to four key takeaways, and three reflective questions: this structure could fit in a 16-week Sunday school class on the Apostle Paul's practical nuggets on church leadership. The author's encouragement to church leaders is to depend on "God's metrics" as instructed in the 1 Corinthians Epistle for leading God's church and for dealing with church issues rather than relying on either the "bottom-line metrics of nickels and noses in ministry" (p. 121) or the "speculative, humanistic approaches" (p. xi).

Crisp's presupposition is twofold: 1) Scripture is reliable instruction for today, and the challenges and the sins facing the church of Corinth "mirror contemporary difficulties" and "cultural sinfulness in the contemporary church," and thus, 2) the insights from 1 Corinthians are like antidotes to contemporary church problems (p. 7).

According to Crisp, "Church leadership is tethered to Scripture's divine counsel" (p. xii). Popularity and large following are not the goals of church ministry (p. 19). Rather, the lasting fruits of the simple gospel simply communicated are (p. 21). Thus, leaders who "attempt to sanitize" or "change" the message of the Cross to make the gospel more palatable to contemporary ears will see the gospel "stripped of its innate power that provides salvation" (pp. 16–17). Spiritual growth depends on following the mind of Christ and the holy spirit's guidance instead of "structural forms" of "assimilation and discipleship tracks" (pp. 28–29).

Receiving and giving corrections that neither condemn nor shame are crucial in the practice of leadership (p. 38). The Pauline argument for liberty is not to be used for "pleasure and self-gratification": to act otherwise is to distort Christ's sacrifice and to set up "an idol" and a "fetter" (pp. 52–53). Godly leaders ask, "what are we willing to inconvenience ourselves for the salvation and growth of those God [has] entrusted to us?" (p. 64).

To church leaders who seek "relevance, appearance and cultural acceptance" as well as "eloquence," they can expect "the lessening of God's power in the churches"

(pp. 42–43). They have after turned their focus away from what is right: “the focus has shifted from God’s presence to stage production . . . from pastoral shepherding to congregational spectating . . . from missional living to occasional attending . . . from the gospel’s power to self-help . . . from supernatural solutions to natural accommodations . . . from faithful exposition of the Scriptures to communicative creativity” (p. 42). And following the “cultural mindsets of tolerance,” they will invariably “view accountability as judgmental, authoritarian and unloving,” thereby moving further away from godly sorrow and true repentance which are necessary for our individual and collective covenant with God (pp. 48–49).

Are we “running the race” set by God? Crisp warned that leaders disqualify themselves when they “are zigzagging around by focusing on metrics, social media, and human technologies,” and preaching with group opinion as a gauge of their performance (p.71). The focus has to be Jesus!

The overall message found in *Strengthening the Church and Its Leaders* is hermeneutically sound. And as needed, Crisp cites biblical commentaries and scholarly periodicals to support his claim. However, several assertions are unconvincing. Crisp claims that “God invalidates attempts to figure things out with our intellect Guard your heart against human wisdom, training, metrics, and formation that instruct you to adopt ‘proven’ methodologies that ‘work’” (p. 18). Now, if the author’s interpretation is right and fair, one would wonder why God gave humans intellectual faculties. Also, why is using “proven” approaches necessarily a movement away from authenticity with God and with oneself? Surely reinventing the wheel cannot always be the right move. Crisp also writes that “Human wisdom, which rules more on techniques, skills, marketing and consulting, is wood, hay, and straw,” and it is unlike the “humble service through the preaching of and reliance upon the cross’s message;” the latter produces gold, silver and precious stones” (p. 34). While the principles of leaning on God and the corollary of depending on the Cross lie at the heart of discipleship, ministry, and service, I wonder if Crisp has set up the juxtaposition of “human wisdom” and “humble service” all too neatly. In life, people tend to find God and discern God’s ways in overlapping states of our messiness, and so, who can insist that seeking wise counsel from mentors, trainers and consultants is evidence that one is not relying on God? I am also curious how Crisp would put into action his identified 15 actions of love (cf. 1 Cor. 13) to resolve toxicity, rivalry and conflicts for truth/orthodoxy and unity in churches and denominations? How would his claim that humble leaders depending on God’s grace will accomplish more and “function at a higher level” than the “prideful self-reliant” leaders hold up in reality (p. 11)?

With that said, the book could be the start of a conversation among leaders for improving their local church or denomination.

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