



Kenotic Leadership as a Theological Response to Performance-Oriented Christian Leadership

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Abstract

Contemporary Christian leadership is increasingly shaped by a performance-oriented paradigm that equates visibility, measurable success, influence, and digital flexing with spiritual legitimacy. This tendency creates a theological problem by shifting the basis of Christian leadership from Christlike self-emptying and obedience toward public recognition and organizational achievement. This study aims to reconstruct a Christological framework of leadership based on the kenosis of Christ in Philippians 2:5-8 and to propose Kenotic Leadership as a theological corrective to performance-oriented leadership in contemporary Christian contexts. The study employs a qualitative theological-literature method through theological analysis and conceptual review. Philippians 2:5-8 serves as the primary theological framework, particularly the movement of Christ from the “from of God” to the “from of a servant,” which is examined as a normative pattern for Christian leadership. The study finds that performance-oriented leadership tends to treat status, visibility, and influence as assets to be pursued and displayed, whereas Kenotic Leadership emphasizes the voluntary relinquishment of prerogatives, servant identity, humility, and obedience. It further finds that contemporary leadership models require a kenotic Christological foundation to prevent them from being absorbed into the logic of visibility, self-promotion, and digital narcissism. Kenotic Leadership provides a theologically grounded and contextually relevant response to contemporary performance-oriented and hedonistic leadership culture. True Christian spiritual authority is therefore rooted not primarily in public recognition, organizational metrics, or personal influence, but in participation in the pattern of Christ’s self-emptying, sacrificial service, and faithful obedience.

Article History:

Received: July 19, 2026

Accepted: August 26, 2026

Published: Sept 16, 2026

Keywords:

Christian Leadership,
Kenosis,
Kenotic Leadership,
Performance-Oriented
Leadership,
Philippians Hymn

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary ecclesial landscape, the definition of effective Christian leadership has increasingly reflected the metrics and values of the corporate and digital worlds. This phenomenon can be termed Performance-Oriented Leadership (POL), a leadership paradigm that prioritizes visibility, measurable productivity, influence, and public recognition as indicators of spiritual authority and organizational success. Within this framework, a leader's legitimacy may become increasingly associated with the ability to project an image of success and blessing, often mediated through social media and public branding. The conspicuous display of a luxury lifestyle has proliferated in an era where digital platforms serve as key arenas for individuals to construct and project their identities.

The problem of performance-oriented leadership, however, is not merely a matter of modern marketing, communication strategies, or the use of social media. It represents a deeper theological problem when visibility, measurable success, social influence, and material achievement become sources of spiritual legitimacy and leadership identity. When ministry is evaluated primarily through external prestige and public recognition, the foundational Christian commitments to humility, self-effacement, and service may be sidelined in favor of a form of visibility that requires leaders to be seen, heard, and admired. Thus, the central concern is not performance itself, but the transformation of performance into a standard by which Christian leadership is judged and spiritual authority is validated.

This tendency can be observed in the phenomenon of “flexing,” understood as the conspicuous display of wealth, achievement, or elite status. Hidayat et al¹. describe communication practices on social media as processes that may be oriented toward eliciting specific audience responses, including digital “likes” and comments. In some contexts, flexing is justified as a form of contextualization or testimony to God's abundant blessing. Vosburg observes that some contemporary Christian leaders and communities harmonize biblical interpretation with economic ideology, thereby justifying economic inequality through narratives of personal divine favor.² Such practices may create symbolic distance between leaders and the communities they serve, while also fostering a culture of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) among congregants. The pressure to maintain an image of success may further

¹ Dasrun Hidayat, Arismayadi Dirantika, and Ilyas Lampe, “Understanding the Role of Communication Ethics in the Flexing Phenomenon on Social Media,” *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication* 40, no. 3 (2024): 58–73, <https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2024-4003-04>.

² Dawson P.R. Vosburg, “‘I Thank God We’re Rich’: Justifying Economic Inequality in an Evangelical Congregation,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 64, no. 3 (2025): 303–16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.70001>.

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intensify the desire to satisfy the human ego and contribute to consumerist and hedonistic patterns of life that contradict the implications of the Imago Dei.

Against this background, Philippians 2:5-8 offers a radical theological corrective. The passage, often identified as the Carmen Christi or Philippians Hymn, presents the kenosis of Christ as a foundational paradigm for Christian identity and practice. The text calls believers to adopt the phronesis, or mindset, of Christ, who, although existing in the form of God (*morphē theou*), did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped or exploited for personal advantage (*harpagmos*). Instead, Christ “emptied himself” (*heauton ekenōsen*) and took the “form of a servant” (*morphē doulou*). This kenotic movement stands in direct tension with a performance-oriented model in which leadership identity is constructed through visible achievement, recognition, and public success. While the modern leader may be pressured to fill a public profile with accolades, influence, and visible signs of blessing, Christ’s movement is characterized by self-emptying, servanthood, humility, and obedience. The theological tension addressed in this study is therefore between the performative self of contemporary leadership culture and the kenotic pattern of Christ revealed in Philippians 2:5-8. According to Loru and Stevanus, although the concept of servant leadership has been examined from a theological perspective, kenosis (self-emptying) in Philippians 2:6–8 functions as a transformative paradigm for contemporary Christian leadership ³

The problem of Performance-Oriented Leadership (POL) in contemporary Christian contexts, therefore, requires more than an ethical appeal for leaders to become humble. It requires a reconstruction of the theological basis of leadership itself. The question is not simply how Christian leaders can become more effective within contemporary organizational and digital environments, but how leadership can remain genuinely Christological when those environments reward visibility, influence, public recognition, and measurable achievement. This study focuses on the theological problem of how Christian leadership can be reconstructed in response to this performance-oriented logic.

Existing models of Christian leadership provide important contributions to this discussion. Servant Leadership emphasizes service rather than positional authority; Transformational Leadership emphasizes vision, influence, and change; Authentic Leadership emphasizes consistency between personal values and leadership practice; and Shepherd Leadership highlights guidance, care, protection, and responsibility toward the community. Nevertheless, when these approaches are detached from a robust Christological foundation, their practices may remain vulnerable to the same

³ Ariance Loru and Kalis Stevanus, “Dari Kenosis Ke Kepemimpinan Hamba: Filipi 2:6-8 Sebagai Model Teologis Bagi Transformasi Gereja Masa Kini,” *Angelion : Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristen* 6, no. 2 (2025): 123–39.

performance-oriented logic they seek to address. Servanthood, for example, may become a functional management technique, while influence and authenticity may be absorbed into personal branding and public image. Leadership may consequently be reduced to a set of functional behaviors rather than understood as participation in the life and pattern of Christ.

A notable research gap therefore remains. Although existing studies have explored kenosis as a Christological doctrine and have also examined Christian leadership through various practical and organizational models, the specific application of the kenotic pattern of Philippians 2:5-8 as a theological corrective to the visibility and performance demands of contemporary Christian leadership remains underdeveloped. Nyland argues that leadership should be understood as a continuous process of kenosis that seeks to empty the self of greed, pride, and insecurity.⁵ Similarly, Mdingi identifies kenosis, including suffering and sacrifice, as a significant starting point for Christian leadership. However, there remains a need to synthesize these insights into a coherent theological framework that directly addresses performance-oriented leadership, particularly within contemporary digital and hedonistic cultures.

This study therefore focuses specifically on the reconstruction of Christian leadership through the kenotic pattern of Christ in Philippians 2:5-8. The study examines how Christ's self-emptying, servant identity, humility, and obedience can function as the theological foundation for Kenotic Leadership and as a corrective to Performance-Oriented Leadership. It argues that Kenotic Leadership is not merely another leadership technique or behavioral model, but a Christological foundation through which existing Christian leadership models can be reoriented toward self-giving service, humility, and faithful obedience.

This article argues that Kenotic Leadership is the authentic theological ground upon which Christian leadership models can be constructed and evaluated. It contends that models such as Servant Leadership, Shepherd Leadership, Transformational Leadership, and Authentic Leadership find their theological coherence when understood through the self-emptying pattern of Christ in Philippians 2:5-8. Kenotic Leadership consequently requires a deliberate rejection of the performance mandate as the primary basis of spiritual legitimacy, replacing it with a commitment to humility, servanthood, and obedience. By reclaiming the kenotic paradigm, Christian leaders can move beyond the superficiality of public recognition and return to a form of leadership that reflects Christ not primarily through visibility, but through faithfulness to the cruciform pattern of His life.

By refocusing the lens from success to kenosis, this study seeks to provide a theological corrective to contemporary Christian leadership problems, offering a framework in which Christian leaders can remain relevant without making visibility the source of their authority or identity. In this

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framework, relevance is not achieved through self-promotion or public recognition, but through participation in the downward, cruciform movement of Christ. Kenotic Leadership therefore contributes to the ongoing discussion of New Testament Theology and Christian Leadership by asserting that genuine spiritual authority is grounded not primarily in organizational metrics, public influence, or visible success, but in conformity to Christ's self-emptying love, sacrificial service, and faithful obedience.

The problem of Performance-Oriented Leadership (POL) in contemporary Christian contexts therefore extends beyond the use of modern communication strategies or digital media. The deeper theological problem emerges when visibility, measurable success, social influence, and material achievement become sources of spiritual legitimacy and leadership identity. When these indicators become central to evaluating Christian leadership, ministry may shift from Christ-centered service toward the pursuit and preservation of public recognition. The central problem addressed in this study is therefore how Christian leadership can remain genuinely Christological within environments that reward visibility, influence, public recognition, and measurable achievement.

Existing models of Christian leadership provide important contributions to this discussion. Servant Leadership emphasizes service rather than positional authority; Transformational Leadership emphasizes vision, influence, and change; Authentic Leadership emphasizes consistency between personal values and leadership practice; and Shepherd Leadership emphasizes guidance, care, protection, and responsibility toward the community. However, when these approaches are detached from a robust Christological foundation, their practices may remain vulnerable to the same performance-oriented logic they seek to address. Servanthood may become a functional management technique, while influence, authenticity, and even pastoral responsibility may be absorbed into personal branding, organizational performance, or public image. Leadership may consequently be reduced to a set of functional behaviors rather than understood as participation in the life and pattern of Christ.

This limitation reveals a research gap in the application of kenosis to contemporary Christian leadership. Although existing studies have explored kenosis as a Christological doctrine and have examined Christian leadership through various practical and organizational models, the specific use of the kenotic pattern of Philippians 2:5-8 as a theological corrective to the visibility and performance demands of contemporary Christian leadership remains underdeveloped. Nyland argues that leadership should be understood as a continuous process of kenosis that seeks to empty the self of greed, pride, and insecurity, while Mdingi identifies suffering and sacrifice as significant dimensions of kenotic leadership. However, these insights require further synthesis into a coherent framework that

directly addresses performance-oriented leadership within contemporary digital and hedonistic cultures.

Accordingly, this study focuses on the reconstruction of Christian leadership through the kenotic pattern of Christ in Philippians 2:5-8. It examines how Christ's self-emptying, servant identity, humility, and obedience can provide the theological foundation for Kenotic Leadership as a corrective to Performance-Oriented Leadership. The study argues that Kenotic Leadership should not be understood merely as another leadership technique or behavioral model, but as a Christological foundation through which Christian leadership is reoriented from performance, visibility, and self-promotion toward self-giving service, humility, and faithful obedience.

By positioning kenosis as the theological foundation of Christian leadership, this study contributes to the discussion of New Testament Theology and Christian Leadership by proposing a framework in which leadership legitimacy is grounded not primarily in organizational metrics, public influence, or visible success, but in conformity to the cruciform pattern of Christ. In this sense, Christian leadership is reoriented from performance to faithfulness, from visibility to servanthood, and from the pursuit of recognition to obedience.

RESEARCH METHOD

Method

This research employs a **qualitative theological-literature approach** to examine Kenotic Leadership as a theological response to performance-oriented Christian leadership. The **object of the research** is the concept of kenosis in Philippians 2:5-8 and its implications for contemporary Christian leadership, particularly in relation to visibility, self-presentation, digital flexing, and performance-oriented leadership culture. The primary textual focus is Philippians 2:5-8, with particular attention to the terms *phroneō*, *morphē theou*, *harpagmos*, *ekenōsen*, and *morphē doulou*. **Data collection** is conducted through literature study by gathering and reviewing biblical texts, exegetical and theological literature, academic journal articles, and scholarly works related to kenosis, Christian leadership, servant leadership, transformational leadership, digital self-presentation, and flexing. The **research instruments** consist of textual analysis and a conceptual framework developed from the kenotic pattern of Christ. The **data analysis** is carried out in three stages: first, grammatical-historical and theological analysis of Philippians 2:5-8; second, thematic and conceptual analysis of relevant academic literature; and third, critical-comparative analysis between Kenotic Leadership and Performance-Oriented Leadership. Through these procedures, the study constructs Performance-Oriented Leadership as an analytical category and evaluates its assumptions and practices in light of

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Results and Discussions

Within the ecclesial context, this manifests as a pressure on leaders to maintain an image of perpetual "blessing" and "success." Vosburg observes that in certain evangelical circles, there is an effort to harmonize biblical interpretation with economic ideologies, effectively justifying material wealth as a sign of divine favor ⁴. This creates a framework where leadership is performed rather than lived. The leader becomes a "communicator" who uses visual language to elicit specific responses from an "audience," typically in the form of digital "likes" and public recognition. This communication process often bypasses traditional ethics of humility, focusing instead on the immediate gratification of the leader's ego and the satisfaction of the audience's desire for aspirational content ⁵.

A significant symptom of POL is the phenomenon of "*flexing*", a slang term derived from the idiom "flex your muscles," meaning to show off one's power or status. Flexing is being defined as excessive self-promotion intended to create an impression of greatness ⁶. While flexing is often associated with material wealth, such as premium fashion or luxury vehicles. It also encompasses the "flexing" of spiritual achievements and ministry growth.

The theological danger of this visibility logic is the creation of a "symbolic distance" between the leader and the community. When leaders prioritize their public image, it can foster a culture of "Fear of Missing Out" (FOMO) among other people ⁷. In church-term, the congregants, who may feel pressured to imitate the leader's high-status lifestyle rather than the character of Christ. This digital narcissism contradicts the *Imago Dei* and shifts the focus of ministry from the "self-emptying" of the cross to the "self-filling" of public acclaim. The need to produce content that demonstrates success can lead to consumerist behaviors that undermine the leader's spiritual integrity ⁸.

For decades, the field of Christian leadership has been dominated by models such as Servant Leadership, Transformational Leadership, and other modern Leadership models. While these models

⁴ Vosburg, "'I Thank God We're Rich': Justifying Economic Inequality in an Evangelical Congregation."

⁵ Hidayat, Dirantika, and Lampe, "Understanding the Role of Communication Ethics in the Flexing Phenomenon on Social Media."

⁶ Raihana Sakdiyah and Alemina Br. Perangin-angin, "The Phenomenon of Flexing Behaviour on Social Media Effects," *Mufarizuddin*, +236. *Jurnal_JRPP_- Raihana* (1)[1] 6 (2023): 4224–25.

⁷ Alton Endarwanto Hadi Susanto et al., "Lifestyle: Flexing Behavior in Social Media," *International Journal of Economics (IJEC)* 2, no. 1 (2023): 27–31, <https://doi.org/10.55299/ijec.v2i1.410>.

⁸ Roida Pakpahan and Donny Yoesgiantoro, "Analysis of the Influence of Flexing in Social Media on Community Life," *Journal of Information System, Informatics and Computing* 7, no. 1 (2023): 173, <https://doi.org/10.52362/jisicom.v7i1.1093>.

have provided valuable insights, their application in a performance-oriented culture often reveals a significant weakness, a lack of robust and genuine Christological grounding.

Servant Leadership, initially proposed by Robert Greenleaf⁹, emphasizes the principle that a leader should first understand himself or herself as a servant. This approach resonates strongly with Christian leadership because it shifts attention from authority and position toward service. Nevertheless, within a Performance-Oriented Leadership environment, servant leadership can be reduced to a functional management technique aimed at improving organizational efficiency, employee engagement, or even the reputation of the leader. In such a context, acts of service may themselves become part of the leader's performance. Without the radical self-emptying implied in *kenosis*, servanthood can become a way of appearing humble while the leader continues to preserve control, status, or personal influence.

A similar concern applies to **Transformational and Authentic Leadership**. These approaches emphasize the leader's capacity to inspire change, influence followers, communicate vision, and remain consistent with personal values. Ramirez argues that these models require a kenotic foundation that provides the moral and relational depth necessary for reconciliation and authentic relationships¹⁰. Without such a foundation, however, the language of authenticity can easily be absorbed into the contemporary culture of personal branding. The leader's "authentic self" may become another carefully constructed public identity intended to attract attention, strengthen influence, or maintain a particular image. Kenosis therefore challenges transformational and authentic leaders to move beyond the projection of self toward the voluntary relinquishment of self-interest for the sake of others.

Shepherd Leadership provides a more explicitly biblical image of leadership, emphasizing guidance, care, protection, and responsibility toward the community. Yet even the shepherd metaphor can be distorted when pastoral authority is used to justify excessive control, authoritarian protection, or the accumulation of status under the language of spiritual responsibility. Ayers argues that biblical leadership must be fundamentally relational, mimetic, and Christological¹¹.

This relationship between Shepherd Leadership and Kenotic Leadership becomes clearer when

⁹ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership : A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power & Greatness*, 2002nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1977).

¹⁰ Andrea R. Ramirez, "The Impact of Kenosis on the Transformational Authentic Leader," in *True Leadership, Christian Faith Perspectives in Leadership and Business*, ed. David P. Peltz and John H. Wilson (Virginia Beach, VA: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 119–35, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46660-2_8.

¹¹ Michale Ayers, "Toward a Theology of Leadership," *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 1, no. 1 (2006): 3–27.

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leadership is understood not only in terms of function, but also in terms of the posture from which authority is exercised. Shepherd Leadership describes the responsibility of guiding, caring for, protecting, and taking responsibility for the community, while Kenotic Leadership provides the Christological orientation that determines how these responsibilities are to be carried out. In this sense, kenosis does not eliminate pastoral authority; rather, it transforms the manner in which authority is exercised. The shepherd leads not from the accumulation of status or the assertion of control, but from the self-giving posture of Christ, who “emptied himself” and took the “form of a servant” (Phil. 2:7). Thus, the authority of the shepherd is legitimate precisely when it becomes an instrument of service rather than self-preservation, domination, or personal recognition.

From this perspective, Shepherd Leadership cannot be defined merely by the leader’s authority to guide or protect the community, but must be shaped by the character and pattern of Christ. Its legitimacy therefore comes not from secular dynamics of power and control, but from leadership that reflects Christ through relational service, self-giving, and faithful responsibility toward those being led.

The current literature suggests that while these models are useful, they are often standing alone, and without being connected to the specific theological corrective of Philippians 2:5-8. There is a tendency to treat leadership as a set of functional behaviors rather than a participation in the *kenosis* of Christ.

The theological response to POL must move beyond moralism to a reconstruction of leadership through the lens of Philippians 2:5-8. *Kenosis* is not simply for being humble, it is the voluntary act of emptying oneself of prerogatives and status for the sake of the mission and the community. Peltz and Wilson define kenotic leadership as “emptying oneself in the form of humility and altruism,” taking on a posture of “no power, no position, no title.”¹²

Bekker introduces the concept of Mimetic Christology, which posits that Christian leaders must “imitate” the radical humility and self-emptying of Christ¹³. This *mimesis* is the direct opposite of the *mimesis* found in performance-oriented culture, where leaders imitate public figures or digital influencers. According to Nyland, leadership should be viewed as a continuous “process of kenosis”

¹² David P. Peltz and John H. Wilson, “True Leadership : Leadership Styles and the Kenotic Relationship,” 2020, <http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/15425>.

¹³ Corne Bekker, “Sharing the Incarnation : Towards a Model of Mimetic Christological Leadership,” *Biblical Perspectives*, no. May (2007): 5–11.

that seeks to empty the self of greed, pride, arrogance, and insecurity¹⁴. This process is essential because, *kenosis*-which involves suffering and sacrifice-is the true starting point for all Christian leadership¹⁵.

Despite extensive research on leadership styles and the doctrine of *kenosis*, a gap exists in the literature regarding how *kenosis* specifically addresses the modern crisis of performance and visibility. Most studies either treat *kenosis* as a purely Christological dogma or focus on leadership as a practical discipline. There is a lack of synthesis that applies the *Philippians Hymn* or *Carmen Christi* as a critical framework to correct the performance-oriented behaviors prevalent in the digital and hedonistic cultures of the 21st century. This article seeks to fill that gap by arguing that Kenotic Leadership is the necessary theological foundation that rescues models like servant or shepherd leadership from being co-opted by the "visibility logic" of contemporary culture.

In summary, the transition from performance to *kenosis* requires a shift from seeking *glory* (*doxa*) through visibility to receiving *glory* through obedience, suffering, and servanthood. The "cross must precede the crown", and the leader's identity must be built on "emptying" rather than "performance."

The Philippians 2:5-8 reveals a condition that fundamentally undermines the logic of POL. In the performance-driven model, the movement is always upward, from obscurity to visibility, from low influence to high prestige. In the Philippians Hymn's *Kenosis* model, the movement is downward, from status to servanthood, from prerogatives to the cross.

The contrast between Performance-Oriented Leadership and Kenotic Leadership can be seen in three related dimensions. First, there is a contrast between **identity and image**. Christ's identity was secure in His *morphē theou*, yet He did not use that status to preserve or project an image of superiority. Instead, He willingly took the *morphē doulou*, the form of a servant. In contrast, Performance-Oriented Leadership can become preoccupied with constructing and maintaining a public image of blessing, influence, and success, particularly when a leader's sense of worth becomes dependent on external recognition. Second, there is a contrast between **exploitation and altruism**.

Christ refused to regard His status as *harpagmos*, something to be grasped or exploited for personal advantage. Performance-Oriented Leadership, however, risks treating spiritual achievements, ministry growth, influence, and even giftedness as resources for personal branding and social

¹⁴ Amy L Nyland, "Kenotic Leadership: A Model for Clergy" (Duke University, 2021), <https://hdl.handle.net/10161/24453>.

¹⁵ Hlulani Msimelelo Mdingi, "Who, Being in the Form of God, Did Not Consider It Robbery to Be Equal with God: *Kenosis* of Leadership," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.5844>.

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recognition. Kenotic Leadership redirects these assets away from self-promotion and toward service for the benefit of others. Third, there is a contrast between **visibility (*doxa*) and kenosis**. Performance-Oriented Leadership tends to seek glory through appearance, recognition, and public acclaim, whereas Kenotic Leadership follows the pattern of Christ in which glory is not pursued through self-display but is associated with obedience, suffering, humility, and servanthood. In this sense, kenotic leadership replaces the pursuit of visible greatness with faithfulness to the downward, cruciform pattern of Christ.

In conclusion, Philippians 2:5-8 establishes that Christian leadership is not a platform for the display of personal greatness, but a space for the imitation of Christ's self-emptying love. The "mind of Christ" is a radical rejection of the ego-driven demands of performance culture. By "emptying themselves," leaders do not lose their true spiritual influence; rather, they ground their authority in the only source of power that the New Testament recognizes as legitimate sacrificial service of the servant-king.

At its core, Kenotic Leadership is being defined as emptying oneself in the form of humility and altruism for the sake of mission, followers, or both. Unlike POL, which relies on the accumulation of social capital, visibility, and measurable success, the kenotic paradigm operates through a "visibility of absence", the absence of the ego and the demand for recognition. Kenotic leaders must learn the "act of emptying oneself and taking on a posture of no power, no position, no title."¹⁶ This posture is the absolute antithesis of the "heroic leader" model prevalent in performance-driven cultures.

This definition shifts the focus of leadership from competency to character, and from projection to participation. In the POL framework, the leader is a communicator who uses visual and digital language to elicit specific responses from an audience. In contrast, the kenotic leader is a participant in the life of Christ, whose authority is derived not from their performance but from their degree of "emptiness." Nyland asserts, leadership must be understood as a "process of *kenosis* that continually seeks to empty itself of characteristics such as: greed, pride, arrogance, insecurity."¹⁷ These internal "fillings" are often the primary drivers of POL; the performance is a means to satisfy the insecure ego's need for public validation.

The constructive framework of Kenotic Leadership is essentially mimetic. Bekker introduces the concept of *Mimetic Christology*, suggesting that Christian leadership is a form of *Christological Mimesis* where the leader imitates the radical humility and self-emptying of Christ. This is not a superficial imitation of behaviors but a deep-seated adoption of the *phronesis* (mindset) described in

¹⁶ Peltz and Wilson, "True Leadership : Leadership Styles and the Kenotic Relationship."

¹⁷ Nyland, "Kenotic Leadership: A Model for Clergy."

Philippians 2:5¹⁸. In this mimetic framework, the leader's "downward" movement mirrors Christ's journey from the form of God to the form of a servant.

Constructing Kenotic Leadership requires addressing the interior life of the leader, specifically the "performative self." POL thrives on the "self-presentation" of achievements and status. To move toward a kenotic model, the leader must engage in a deliberate divestment of the need to be "seen." This is the theological application of *heauton ekenōsen* (He emptied Himself).

The process of "emptying" in Kenotic Leadership involves several interconnected dimensions. First, it requires an **emptying of prerogatives**. Just as Christ did not regard equality with God as *harpagmos*, something to be exploited for His own advantage, Christian leaders are called to resist using their titles, influence, authority, or spiritual gifts as instruments for personal branding or social recognition. Leadership position is therefore not treated as a privilege to be leveraged for self-promotion, but as a responsibility to be exercised for the sake of others. Second, kenosis involves an **emptying of security**. Performance-oriented leadership often locates a leader's sense of worth and legitimacy in measurable indicators such as organizational growth, numbers, followers, public approval, or visible achievements. Kenotic Leadership challenges this dependence on external validation by grounding the leader's identity and security in their relationship with Christ rather than in the success of their public performance. Third, kenosis requires an **emptying of the "abundant life" narrative** when abundance is interpreted primarily in terms of visible material prosperity and lifestyle. In performance-driven contexts, wealth and outward success can easily become symbols of divine favor and leadership legitimacy. Kenotic Leadership reconstructs this understanding through the lens of the cross, where abundance is expressed not primarily through accumulation or conspicuous consumption, but through sacrificial service, generosity, obedience, and the willingness to give oneself for the benefit of others.

A central component of Kenotic Leadership is its relational and reconciliatory nature. Ramirez argues that the ultimate goal of *kenosis* in leadership is reconciliation in relationships¹⁹. POL often creates a symbolic distance between the leader and the led, as the leader's performance of success can make them appear unattainable or elitist. This distance can foster "Fear of Missing Out" (FOMO) and social jealousy within the community.

Kenotic Leadership bridges this gap. By taking on the posture of a servant, the leader removes the barriers of status that prevent authentic connection. This active humility and missional obedience

¹⁸ J. Bekker, Corne, "Philippians Hymn (2:5–11) as an Early Mimetic Christological Model of Christian Leadership in Roman Philippi," *Servant Leadership Research Roundtable*. Virginia Beach, VA, 2006.

¹⁹ Ramirez, "The Impact of Kenosis on the Transformational Authentic Leader."

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make the leader accessible and relevant, not through their influence but through their shared vulnerability.

It is important to clarify that Kenotic Leadership does not seek to replace models such as Servant Leadership or Authentic Leadership. Instead, it serves as their foundational ground. Servant leadership, without the radical self-emptying of *kenosis*, risks becoming a mere management technique—a way to perform servanthood to achieve organizational goals.

The construction of Kenotic Leadership can be summarized as a movement from Success to Faithfulness. While POL asks, "How can I be more visible and effective?" Kenotic Leadership asks, "How can I more fully empty myself to reflect the character of Christ?". It is a model that accepts glory only through the path of obedience, suffering, and servanthood, asserting that the cross of Christ must precede our fame, not the other way around.

In this framework, the leader's legitimacy is not found in the performance of their ministry but in their mimesis of the Crucified One. By reconstructing leadership through Philippians 2:5-8, the church is offered a model that is theologically robust, ethically rigorous, and practically relevant. By moving from the "theology of glory" to the "theology of the cross," leaders can reclaim a form of spiritual authority that is authentically Christological rather than merely organizational or digital.

The theological implication is that Kenotic Leadership demands a radical "hiding from public." This does not necessarily mean an absence from public life, but a refusal to let public visibility become the source of one's identity or authority. When a leader empties themselves, they reject the digital narcissism that seeks glory (*doxa*) through appearance and instead seek a glory that is received only through obedience and servanthood. Bekker argues that this "active humility" is the true root of service-oriented leadership²⁰. The leader's focus shifts from looking like a leader to being a servant, which effectively deconstructs the performative demands of modern culture.

Theologically, Kenotic Leadership implies that a leader's identity must be grounded in their *Imago Dei* and their security in Christ, rather than in their public image. By doing so, the leader is freed from the "Pandora box" of modern leadership problems, such as the need to maintain an image of perpetual blessing or success. This move from a performative identity to a kenotic identity allows the leader to be authentic not through self-promotion, but through their participation in the cruciform life of Christ.

A significant implication of this study is the need to re-evaluate the theological narratives surrounding blessing and success. In POL environments, material wealth and organizational growth

²⁰ Bekker, "Sharing the Incarnation : Towards a Model of Mimetic Christological Leadership."

are often justified as a sign of divine favor, creating a narrative where being rich or successful is a testimony to God's abundance. This abundant life narrative, as Vosburg observes, can unintentionally justify economic inequality and create distance between leaders and those who live in economic limitation ²¹.

Kenotic Leadership provides a corrective by asserting that the abundant life in Christ is demonstrated through the voluntary divestment of rights and resources for the sake of others. The "mind of Christ" is not one that grasps at equality with God or status and wealth but one that "empties itself". Therefore, the mark of a blessed leader is not their accumulation of prestige but their capacity for sacrificial service, even if that obedience leads to the shame of the cross.

Finally, Kenotic Leadership introduces a new ethical standard for church leaders, the standard of appropriateness and fitness. Instead of asking "Can I do this?" or "Is this legal?", the kenotic leader asks, "Is it appropriate for me, as a representative of the crucified Christ, to display this degree of luxury or success?". This moves the conversation from the "rights" of the leader to the "integrity" of their witness.

The Cross comes before The Crown. This theological priority as it is written in the book of Matthew 16:24-26, ensures that the church does not become a platform for human greatness but remains a sanctuary for Christ's self-giving love. In a culture weary of performance and superficiality, the active humility and missional obedience of kenotic leaders offers a relevant and powerful response to the challenges of the digital and hedonistic age.

In summary, the theological implications of Kenotic Leadership demand a total reconstruction of the leader's motivations, identity, and definitions of success. By rejecting the "theology of glory" that drives Performance-Oriented Leadership and embracing the "theology of the cross" found in Philippians 2:5-8, leaders can provide a transformative witness that points not to themselves, but to Christ who emptied Himself for the life of the world.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Kenotic Leadership provides a Christological framework for reconstructing contemporary Christian leadership in response to the performance-oriented culture of visibility, measurable success, self-presentation, and public recognition. The kenotic pattern of Philippians 2:5-8 demonstrates that Christian leadership begins with the *phronesis* of Christ, in which secure identity does not lead to the exploitation of status and prerogatives (*harpagmos*), but to

²¹ Vosburg, "'I Thank God We're Rich': Justifying Economic Inequality in an Evangelical Congregation."

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voluntary self-emptying (*ekenōsen*) and the assumption of the servant form (*morphē doulou*). This pattern directly challenges Performance-Oriented Leadership, which tends to move leadership toward the accumulation and display of influence, achievement, and social recognition. Kenotic Leadership therefore reconstructs leadership as a movement from image to identity, from exploitation to self-giving, from visibility to faithfulness, and from the pursuit of recognition to obedience and sacrificial service. Within this framework, titles, influence, spiritual gifts, material success, and organizational achievements are not rejected in themselves, but must not become sources of identity, legitimacy, or instruments of self-promotion. The study also demonstrates that Servant, Transformational, Authentic, and Shepherd Leadership remain valuable models, but require a kenotic Christological foundation to prevent their practices from being absorbed into performance-oriented logic. Kenotic Leadership is therefore not merely another leadership model, but a theological foundation that reorients Christian leadership toward participation in the self-emptying pattern of Christ, making conformity to His character, rather than public visibility or measurable success, the primary basis of Christian leadership legitimacy.

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