

An Assessment of Theological Education as a Factor for the Stratification of Christian Leadership

By

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Abstract

This article examines the growing influence of theological education as a significant factor in the stratification of Christian leadership in contemporary society. Traditionally, Christian leadership has been understood in terms of spiritual gifts and character. However, the current trend shows a prioritization of academic theological qualifications, potentially marginalizing individuals with significant spiritual endowments but limited formal training. This overemphasis on acquired theological knowledge has reshaped leadership criteria, creating tension with scriptural models and increasingly linking leadership roles to educational status. The central problem this article investigates is the potential for this trend to undervalue or overlook spiritual maturity and other biblical qualifications for leadership, leading to unintended hierarchical structures and the exclusion of potentially

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gifted leaders. The purpose of this research is to critically examine this phenomenon and argue for a more balanced approach to Christian leadership development and selection. This paper employs a critical theological and hermeneutical methodology to examine the phenomenon of theological education as a factor in the stratification of Christian leadership. The central research argument posits that an over-reliance on theological education as the primary determinant for Christian leadership can foster a 'leader servant' mentality, contributing to stratification and potentially undermining the biblical model of servant leadership exemplified by Christ. The outcome of this research advocates for a reassessment within the Christian community, urging a leadership model that integrates theological knowledge with essential spiritual qualities, ensuring a more biblically grounded and inclusive approach to leadership development and selection.

Key words: Theological leadership, Stratification, Christian leadership, Spiritual gifts, Servant leadership.

Introduction²

² The paper defines 'Theological education' as the knowledge about theology that someone has learned. It is the same as 'theological knowledge' for this writing. This paper strongly believes that having theological knowledge is a *tool* that helps Christian leaders lead in a way that can continue for a long time. However, the paper warns against depending *too much* on this tool. It suggests that people often pay less attention to God, who is the *giver* of this knowledge. They also may not pay enough attention to the important rules and principles for using this knowledge correctly. Finally, they might forget about who they are as Christian leaders. The paper would see knowledge as an ice block – a valuable gift from God. However, this knowledge needs something like heat, which represents wisdom and the fear of God, to make it useful. This issue, where leaders might rely too much on the 'tool' (knowledge) without considering the 'giver' or the right way to use it, is a problem that could cause the Church to break down if solutions are not found.

Education, particularly in theology, has become increasingly significant in human existence. It has even taken a more decisive shape, particularly in the field of theology. The significance of theological education has made people study theology for several reasons, which may include personal, social, moral, and Christian growth, and look at things differently.³ These motivations can lead individuals to perceive themselves as superior in comparison to others, possibly because of where, when, and how far they have gone in that field. While this paper defines ‘theological education’ as ‘acquired theological knowledge’ and expresses a concern about its potential for misuse, a scholar like Alister McGrath emphasizes its role in personal growth, understanding, and professional development within the church.⁴ A more comprehensive understanding of these varying perspectives is crucial for a nuanced analysis. Now, the central problem this article investigates is the potential for this trend to undervalue or overlook spiritual maturity and other biblical qualifications for leadership, leading to unintended hierarchical structures and the exclusion of potentially gifted leaders.

Leadership could feel attractive in the theological world today, and this is evident in various Christian institutions and Church organizations, particularly in Nigeria.⁵ The question here is that; is this attraction to leadership is driven by a genuine spiritual calling or by more worldly aspirations. Since the scripture affirms that God chooses His servant through grace (1 Cor. 15:10),

³ McGrath, Alister E. *Historical theology: An introduction to the history of Christian thought*. John Wiley & Sons, 2022. 10

⁴ See McGrath, Alister E. *Historical theology*, 2022. 25.

⁵ See Awojobi, P. O. "Leadership Conflict: an Impetus for Church Growth in Nigeria." *Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies* 5, no. 2 (2021): 57-65.

men who crave leadership may not speak openly about their quest for a leadership position, but they should demonstrate to the electorate that they are qualified to be chosen. Theological Education has been somewhat used as a scapegoat by some Christians across the country to get into leadership positions. Using theological education merely as a means to obtain leadership positions, rather than a foundation for service, can result in ineffective leadership.⁶ Leadership must be directed towards the glory of God, not towards the glory of human beings. Success in this form of leadership is presented as being fundamentally linked to Knowledge. This viewpoint does not constitute a rejection of the importance of theological education for those in Christian leadership roles. Instead, it expresses a clear resistance to theological education being employed in a manner that functions as a tool for the destruction of the church. Approaching these lines of thought with caution is considered necessary for the continued health and sustenance of the future church. Hence, this paper employs a critical theological and hermeneutical methodology to examine the phenomenon of theological education as a factor in the stratification of Christian leadership. The approach involves a critical analysis of relevant scholarly literature concerning theological education, Christian leadership models, and social stratification. This is supported by a hermeneutical analysis of key biblical passages that address leadership, spiritual gifts, and the nature of the church community. The methodology synthesizes the insights gleaned from both scholarly discourse and scriptural interpretation to construct a

⁶ The scripture speaks of pastoral leadership as “taking the oversight” (I Peter 5:2) and “them which have the rule over you” (Hebrews 13:7). The rebellion of many Christians against such concepts of pastoral authority often arises out of modern secular understandings of authority and leadership.

theoretical argument that assesses the potential for over-reliance on theological education to foster a ‘leader servant’ mentality and contribute to unintended hierarchical structures. Arguing for a more balanced approach to leadership development and selection.

Theological Education for Leadership

Study of theology for the past two to three decades has enlightened Christians on the need for godly leaders in the Christian community. Thus, Johannes Knoetze, for example, has viewed theological education as a little related to what the paper entails, stating that, “[f]ormal theological education takes place at different higher education institutions (HEIs), such as public universities, seminaries, Bible colleges and even Bible schools. At the different institutions, the academic level of theological education differs, and so does spiritual formation”⁷ In a brief note, this paper views theological education as training dedicated individuals to KNOW more about God and his universe, and also serve him here on earth according to the knowledge of the scriptures (Eph. 2:9-10). It is on this note that this research presents the need to assess the way theological education has been coined and made to suit some personal or corporate situations, especially in the area of leadership. As Knoetze still noted, “leadership is not taking people places. Instead, leadership is helping faith communities and societies to discern the presence of God and his actions amongst them and in their context and then leading them to obediently participate in what God is already

⁷ Knoetze, Johannes J. “Theological education, spiritual formation and leadership development in Africa: What does God have to do with it?” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78, no. 4 (2022).

doing.”⁸ Despite the fact that Knoetze still insists on education first, this paper would rather suggest spiritual gift first, then intellectual ability follows. Now, this line of thought as to this assertion has led to a surge in theological discourse with the thought that theological knowledge is a yardstick or an opportunity to rule over a large congregation, make money easily, and have fame and respect from possibly large congregation. The aim of Christ for the church would be defeated if this kind of compromise continues in the face of the world.

The perspective articulated by Knoetze in the quote above emphasizes that the *essence* of leadership in a faith community is not about human-driven success or reaching predetermined destinations, but about assisting the community in recognizing and joining in with God’s ongoing work in their midst. This type of leadership stems from being a disciple and follower of Christ, called to obedience rather than mere success. This highlights a leadership model deeply rooted in spiritual discernment and active participation in God’s mission (*Missio Dei*). The above thought contrasts this with a view that prioritizes spiritual gifts first, followed by intellectual ability, and notes the concern that theological knowledge can be misused for personal gain, like ruling congregations, making money, or achieving fame.⁹ On a similar note, others thought that within Pentecostal churches like The Apostolic Church Nigeria (TACN), there was initial skepticism towards formal theological education, often favoring

⁸ Knoetze, Johannes J. “Theological education” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78, no. 4 (2022).

⁹ Adeleye, Caleb, Oluwasegun Aluko, Saibu Owoeye, and Emmanuel Olowoyeye. “Evaluating Theological Education in The Apostolic Church Nigeria: Contributions, Challenges and Future Directions.” *African Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 2, no. 1 (2024): 102-125.

direct spiritual empowerment and divine calling over academic training. Some viewed academic training as secondary to spiritual experience or even feared it could foster pride and arrogance or stifle spiritual spontaneity.¹⁰ The TACN article points out that this historical perspective led to a reliance on informal training methods like apprenticeship. The concern that theological knowledge could be used as a “yard stick or an opportunity to rule over” congregations aligns with the TACN article’s discussion of the “utilitarian approach” where ministers may seek theological training primarily as a requirement for ordination or career advancement, rather than for genuine spiritual and intellectual growth, which undermines the true purpose of theological education.¹¹

While the article on TACN details the *historical* preference for spiritual gifts and the *tension* with formal training, it also shows the church’s eventual recognition of the necessity of structured theological education for doctrinal soundness and ministerial effectiveness. Theological institutions were established to provide comprehensive training, equipping ministers for both the spiritual and practical demands of ministry, including pastoral care and leadership skills. They aim to develop both spiritual and intellectual leadership, producing “men of God” alongside skilled individuals. This demonstrates an understanding that intellectual ability and structured training are valuable for

¹⁰ Matisi, Margaret Nanjala. "Effects of Leadership Styles in Pentecostal Evangelistic Fellowship of Africa on Growth and Development." *International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research* 4, no. 2 (2020): 55-64.

¹¹ See Matisi, Margaret Nanjala. "Effects of Leadership Styles in Pentecostal Evangelistic Fellowship of Africa on Growth and Development." *International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research* 4, no. 2 (2020): 55-64.

ministry, even while navigating the emphasis on spiritual empowerment.

Others who discussed the Relationship between Strategic Leadership Intent and Church Growth in the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) offer another perspective. While not directly addressing the spiritual gifts vs. academic training debate in the same way as the TACN article, it focuses on the church as an organization requiring human skills and efforts for leadership and management.¹² It highlights the importance of strategic leadership, defined as forward-looking and vital for identifying evolving organizational and ministry requirements. This source found a significant positive correlation between strategic leadership intent (including vision, mission, values, and strategic objectives) and church growth. This perspective emphasizes the practical and organizational aspects of leadership, suggesting that planning and clear objectives, which are developed and understood intellectually, contribute significantly to the church's expansion. While it touches on "strategic missional leadership", its primary focus is on the organizational efficacy required for growth, viewing the church as also functioning as an earthly entity requiring human strategic skills. All three sources, in different ways, touch on the purpose of equipping leaders for effective ministry within the church's mission. The tension that this section poses is real and reflects in the above writer's thoughts, particularly the challenge of balancing spiritual depth with intellectual competence and ensuring that theological education

¹² Mwangi, Peter Maina, David Minja, and Barnabé Anzuruni Msabah. "Relationship between Strategic Leadership Intent and Church Growth: A Case of the Anglican Church of Kenya." *International Journal of Research And Innovation In Social Science (IJRISS)*, VIII, no. IV (April 2024): 3029-3040.

serves the church's mission rather than facilitating self-serving ambition.¹³

Stratification of Leadership

Stratification is and can be described as the composition of objects or people in a place into steps, each one ahead of the other, like a stairway of a multi-storey building. Others will see this term differently, particularly in respect to the society in general and call it "social stratification"; it is then believed to be, "...the arrangement of people or social positions into graded hierarchy so that some people are seen as superior compared to others."¹⁴ Again, Marj Orie Hogani, in his dictionary of sociology, sees social stratification much differently from the above writer. He feels that social stratification involves inequality, arising either from the actual functions performed by the person involved or from superior power and control of resources possessed by certain individuals or groups, or both societal systems of social stratification although differing greatly in degree of emphasis on achievement or ascription are never identical with an objective

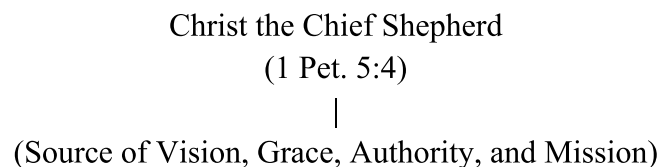
¹³ See for instance Nicola M. Pless, "Understanding Responsible Leadership: Role Identity and Motivational Drivers." *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 74, No. 4, (Sep. 2007): 437-456. The paper views that "responsible leadership is a social and moral phenomenon that was pushed onto the agenda not only by recent scandals and the pressing issues that affect life on our planet, but also by the realization that multinational corporations and their leaders have an enormous potential for contributing to the betterment of the world."

¹⁴ Zwandien Bobai, Education: A Critical factor of social stratification in Nigeria, (*Kagoro Journal of theology*, vol. 1, No. 1, (2016): 47-62. This was said when discussing about *education: a critical factor social stratification in Nigeria*. He believes that many (after gaining social power) would want their relatives to be educated to gain or replace them in their social positions in the society.

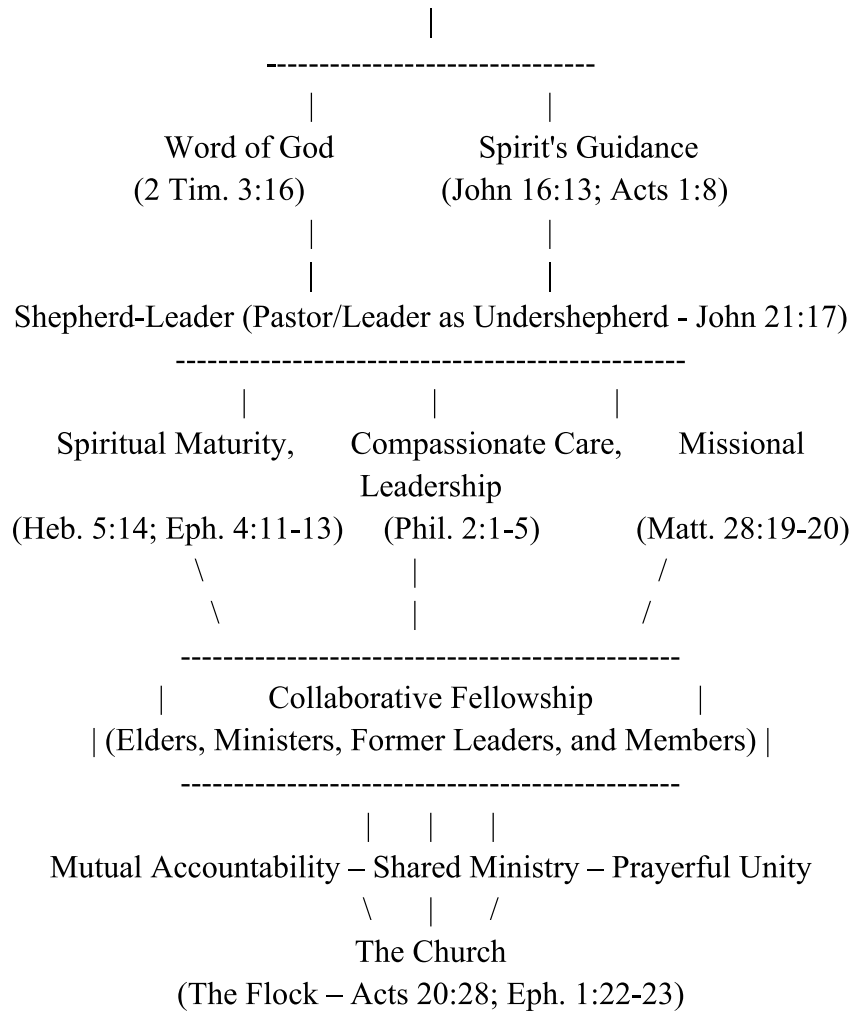
system of functional differentiation or social contribution.¹⁵ Drawing on Bobai's analysis of *education as a factor in social stratification in Nigeria* and Hogani's definition of *social stratification involving inequality*, this research argues that the emphasis on theological education can create a similar 'graded hierarchy' within Christian leadership. For instance, individuals with advanced theological degrees might be perceived as 'superior' or more entitled to leadership roles, mirroring secular patterns of social stratification.

Combining these perspectives on stratification with common perceptions of leadership suggests that some may view leaders as inherently superior—that a leader, to some people, is seen as a superior compared to others. This can lead to the perception that leadership is reserved for the most academically accomplished. In some societies and organizations today, leadership is obtained because of one's social status; here, theological education is used throughout the years by some theologians in aspects of leadership to show their high educational achievements as a stratified way of depriving other gifted people of the rights and opportunities of leadership in the church community.

Figure 1: **The Servant Leader Model**



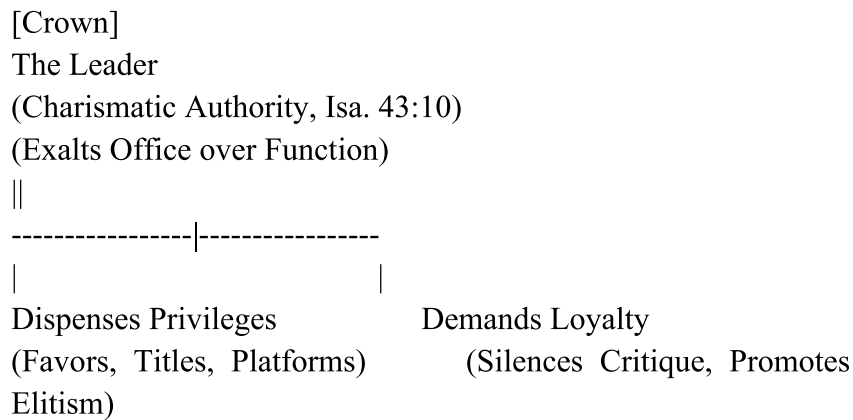
¹⁵ Swedberg, Richard, and Ola Agevall. *The Max Weber dictionary: Key words and central concepts*. Stanford University Press, 2020. 344.



Christ remains at the apex, symbolizing the ultimate authority and the model for Christian leadership. The arrow indicates that the leader's authority and conduct are derived from and should reflect Christ. The 'Leader' is positioned below Christ, emphasizing his role as a servant following Christ's example. The label "(Servant - Acts 20:28)" reinforces this biblical basis. The arrows pointing

from the leader to ‘Theological Knowledge’, ‘Other Leaders’, ‘Ex-leaders’, and ‘Members’ now illustrate guidance through service and humility, rather than implying the leader is burdened by them. The paper states the servant leader is “docile to everyone, including the unschooled people listening to their thoughts of wisdom”. The asterisk (*) next to ‘Theological Knowledge’, ‘Other Leaders’, ‘Ex-leaders’, and ‘Members’ signifies that in this model, theological knowledge is one of several aspects that the servant leader humbly engages with and serves, not a pedestal for superiority. Arrows now point from these groups *towards* the base (The Church) and back *towards* the leader, indicating mutual support and a shared purpose of glorifying God. The leader relies on the support of the followers. ‘The Church’ forms the foundation, representing the community that the leader serves. This design aims to visually represent the servant leader as embedded within and serving the community, with Christ as the ultimate guiding figure. Theological knowledge is a tool for service, not a marker of superiority in this model.

Figure 2: **The Leader’s Servants Model**



downward-pointing arrow from ‘Theological Knowledge’ then branches out towards ‘Other Leaders’, ‘Ex-leaders’, and ‘Members’, signifies a hierarchical influence and the potential for exclusion of those with less formal theological training. The asterisk (*) indicates these groups might be positioned differently based on their perceived theological standing. Arrows point *upwards* from ‘Other Leaders’, ‘Ex-leaders’, and ‘Members’ towards the leader, indicating dependence and the possibility that their spiritual gifts might be undervalued. ‘Christ’ is placed at the bottom and questioned with “(Nominal Acknowledgment)”, suggesting that while Christ might be acknowledged in theory, the operational leadership model is driven by the leader’s elevated status and theological qualifications rather than genuine servanthood. ‘The Church’ is positioned above Christ, implying that the leader’s perception of leadership, influenced by overvalued theological knowledge, mediates their relationship with the community, potentially overshadowing a direct focus on Christ’s model. This is certainly the same direction as the views of Chua Hian. According to Hian,

[t]here is a striking contrast between worldly leadership and spiritual leadership. Christ knew that political rulers wielded immense power. Their subjects had to submit to their authority. As leaders, they could throw their weight around. But at the same time, they craved popularity. They want to play the role of benefactors, so

as long as the ‘thanksgiving service’ is concerned. If these members see the things that were received by the out-going leaders, what would stop them from going to any length to acquire these positions? See for instance Joseph T. Dyaji. *Godly Leadership is Governance with Eternity in View: A quest for African Leaders*. Challenge Press, Jos Nigeria, 2020. 136.

they liberally dispense privileges. One thing is clear: leaders form the apex of the hierarchical pyramid.¹⁷

Therefore, if Jesus viewed servanthood as the true model of leadership, one who expects nothing in return for their service embodies this ideal. However, if a leader sets him/herself high, the leader has then created a “hierarchical pyramid.” Some Christian organizations may have appeared to correct the notion of hierarchy in their leadership election processes, but may have overlooked other elusive details (see Matt. 23:25-28).¹⁸

Christian Leadership and Stratification

This research is conscious of the predicaments that control the leadership election in the church today (i.e., claiming a sole reliance on the Holy Spirit for a choice but seriously using political tactics). Hence, what is leadership? Leadership comes from the verb “lead”. The root word in the Greek is *αγω*, which means, “I lead” or “I bring.”¹⁹ This implies that a leader is chosen to guide others towards progress. It is also an aspect of taking the

¹⁷ Chua Wee Hian, *Learning to lead: Biblical leadership Then & Now*, intervarsity press, 38 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GP, England, 1987. 14.

¹⁸ Secret campaigns before elections or creating boundaries of where particular leaders should come from, are already attempts of creating limit for who God plans to be the leader. We don’t trust God for leaders, instead, we want God to trust us for those who will serve him. These people will end up serving us not God. This has created an unknown burden for the local churches to bare. Again, this turns out to be a clear imitation of the world authorities and which we (Believers in Christ) do not belong to the world – though we live in it –there should be an incomparable difference (John 15:19). As a pyramid the weight go downward to the bearers below who may not even know what is actually causing the weight.

¹⁹ Jeremy Duff, *Elements of New Testament Greek*, Cambridge University Press, Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK. 2005.

lead in one's field. When presenting facts about the effective training for church leaders in respect to excellence in theological education, Steven A. Hardy will present a leader as someone who "is visibly up-front and who takes people somewhere, whether leading God's people to the Promised Land or leading them astray!"²⁰ Christian leadership should aim at leading people towards Christ' redemptive work on the cross not towards the leader's intellectual abilities and achievements in office. Some leaders do not lead; they rule their followers through order, autocracy, title-awareness, and presence recognition. Hardy also added the fact that "Christian leadership involves being a follower of Christ."²¹ The leader is to point at Jesus as the supreme leader not to himself; the Bible also affirms this necessity in Matthew 6:13; 28:19; Psalms 139:24; 101:2. In the above passages the picture of the leader is one of total submission to the will of God expunge.

There is a concern that theological education, particularly through the influence of acquired theological knowledge and the type of leadership sought, has the potential to transform Christian leadership into a form of social stratification. This process is viewed as hazardous for both the leader and the community due to underlying self-serving motivations. The stratification occurs by limiting leadership opportunities for individuals who possess potential but may have lower levels of formal theological education. Framing this issue, Odeyanju notes that "socio-religious elitism... suggests that every culture creates its caste system whereof distinction exists among citizens therein... elitism

²⁰ Steven A. Hardy, *Excellence in theological Education: Effective Training for church Leaders*, publishing unit, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, 2007, 33.

²¹ Steven A. Hardy, 2007, 33.

is a social denotation for standing self-important, aloof, arrogant, lordly, presumptuous, superior, high-and-mighty, egotistic.”²² This dynamic can effectively silence those perceived as theologically “illiterate” while simultaneously elevating the “literate” to positions of considerable influence or “formidable heights”. Such a system could easily deny individuals from less formally educated backgrounds the chance to exercise their spiritual gifts within the church.

Furthermore, Adeyanju points out that theological knowledge can sometimes be misused by some theologians, specifically to confuse others by introducing complex theological doctrines, primarily as a means to display their ego.²³ This stands in contrast to the nature of the church as a community of believers in Christ gathered to serve God, where all members are considered one family, equal regardless of their social standing, family background, educational attainment, or level of theological knowledge. In God’s view, all are seen as sinners, with no one person being inherently better than another, saved only through the death of His son, Jesus. This self-focused approach to leadership, particularly when it leverages theological knowledge for personal status or power, deviates significantly from a biblical model. As one source defines it, “Biblical leadership is not about position, privilege, or power. Biblical leadership is not about self, but about others. A Biblical leader asks how others can be served, how their needs can be met, how others can be lifted.”²⁴ Otubah

²² Adeyanju, James O. "Socio-Religious Elitism, Biblical Interpretation, and Neo-Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria." *Jos Journal of Religion and Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (2023): 213-231.

²³ Adeyanju, "Socio-Religious Elitism," 213-231.

²⁴ Otubah, Grace Ifeoma. "Biblical Leadership as a Model for Leadership on The Development of Nigeria." *NJIKO: A Multi-Disciplinary*

further elaborates on how this elitist mindset impacts theological practice itself, leading to a deficiency in core Christian teachings. One source specifically argues that “The elitist-driven neo-Pentecostals’ hermeneutics is deficient of orthodoxy, thereby resulting in daunting poverty of essential Christian religious fundamentals... It undermines the rigorous task of arriving at the meaning of the biblical texts through a critical and scientific interpretive method. It is rather replaced by charismatic and titular achievements on the altar, drawing attention to self rather than God.”²⁵ This underscores how an elitist approach, linked to theological methods, can prioritize self-exaltation over genuine service and sound doctrine within the Christian community.

Assessing Theological Education as a Factor in Christian Leadership

Based on the information in the provided sources and our conversation history, theological education, despite its historical purpose of facilitating the study of God and preparing individuals for ministry, is critically observed as being redirected in practice. A significant concern raised is that trained individuals to attain High-Church leadership positions primarily for their advantage sometimes utilize this education as a tool.²⁶ This results in a form of **stratification within the church structure**, where the leader is elevated to a hierarchical role that seems fixed, with their focus

Journal of Humanities, Law, Education and Social Sciences 4, no. 1 (2025): 6-18.

²⁵ Otubah, “*Biblical Leadership as a Model*,” 6-18.

²⁶ See for instance Eko, Enebieni Enebieni, and Ekpenyong Obo Ekpenyong. “Evangelistic Thrust as an Influence to the Spiritual Development of Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in Cross River State.” *Social Science and Humanities Journal* 3, no. 11 (2019): 1599–1621.

often shifting towards securing the next higher position. This approach is viewed as fundamentally compromising the nature of spiritual gifts intended for service and signifying a failure in the true essence of theological knowledge. This problematic application of theological education for personal advancement is exacerbated when viewed through the lens of historical and socio-economic factors that have shaped access to such training. Topf notes, **“issues of race, financial capabilities, and social status loom large when describing the dynamics within early Pentecostalism, and especially so when one zooms in on the training of its leaders and their limited access to degree-granting institutions of theological education.”**²⁷ This suggests that access to formal theological training has historically been influenced by social and economic disparities. Critically interacting with this, the contemporary misuse of theological education for hierarchical stratification can be seen as potentially reinforcing these historical inequalities, as the formal credentials often gained through accessible (or inaccessible) institutions become the basis for power and position, rather than spiritual gifting or calling, potentially entrenching existing social divides within the church leadership structure.

Furthermore, this drive for personal status through hierarchical ascent, potentially enabled by theological training, stands in tension with the core mission of the church. While Matthew 28:19-20 calls for all to preach the gospel, the focus shifts from this shared responsibility to individuals craving leadership based on their perceived prominence from training. The

²⁷ Topf, Daniel. "Fundamentalism, marginalization, and eschatology: Historical, socio-economic, and theological factors influencing early Pentecostal theological education." *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 5, no. 1 (2020): 9.

fundamental goal of the church's outreach, particularly evangelism, is described in another article: **"The authors noted that salvation is an individualized good, and mass marketing with sweeping promises will not yield meaningful impacts. Evangelism marketing sinks the gospel message into people's minds, leveraging on personal interactions while encouraging them to adhere to faith and remain in the church."**²⁸ This highlights that the efficacy of sharing the gospel lies in personal interaction focused on the individualized nature of salvation. Critically interacting with this, the pursuit of elevated, hierarchical positions for personal gain through theological education draws focus away from this essential personal, service-oriented mission of leading individuals to Christ. A leader preoccupied with climbing the hierarchical ladder is less likely to prioritize the personal, relational engagement necessary for effective evangelism as described, thereby compromising the very purpose for which theological knowledge might ideally be used in ministry. Therefore, the misuse of theological education for personal ambition leads to a form of stratification that compromises spiritual gifts and the true essence of theological knowledge. This is particularly concerning given the historical inequalities in access to formal training and fundamentally conflicts with the church's mission, which emphasizes the individualized nature of salvation and requires service-oriented, personal engagement rather than status-seeking and hierarchical advancement. This practice undermines collaborative leadership

²⁸ Dike, Onwubiko N. "An Evangelism Marketing Model For The Growth Of Twenty-First Century Church." *Covenant Journal of Business and Social Sciences* (2022): 32-32.

involving both clergy and laity, prioritizing perceived prominence over the collective responsibility to spread the gospel.

This presents a challenge to those who consider themselves theologically informed, there is a *boiling dilemma* that awaits them in the wider future world. Matthew Michael, assessing Alister McGrath, writes,

The dilemma of modern theological institutions, especially in their relationship with the public and the church. First, they sought partnership with the university but were only to be disappointed that the university did not welcome them with the ‘ecstasy they hoped for.’ They now went back to the church, only to realize that the church had gone ahead without them. Considering this modern dilemma of theological institutions, McGrath warned that theological institutions may not lose their close binding with the church and thereby become institutions without ‘audience’ or ‘public.’²⁹

²⁹ Matthew Michael, Cold Theology & Boiling Praxis? Bridging the widening gap between African Theological Institutions & the African Church for Sustainable Development, (*unpublished resource, presented at ECWA Theological Seminary Kagoro, February 16, 2016*), 1. He noted, “significantly, there is an increasing recognition that proper theological education holds the key to the survival of Christianity because of the strategic importance of theological education in the transmission, communication and preservation of Biblical truths, and the strategic importance of theological education in the training of competent workers for church’s ministry.” This presents Matthew’s passion for quality theological institutions that should be compatible with the public and church ministry. Hence, as important as this is does not solve the problem of the current paper that deals with *theological education as a factor for the stratification of Christian leadership*.

By assessing Alister,³⁰ Matthew feels that, like other fields of study, there is a need for a proper rigorous understanding of being a professional and how this skill (theological education) can positively affect the leadership and works of the church rather than being irrelevant to the church. A leader would not have an audience if the theological training acquired for leadership is not well used. While individuals may perceive their field of study as superior, it is crucial to recognize that it may not independently address challenges arising in other areas. The professional has to do more to be of benefit to contemporary challenges, especially those of his field of endeavor. Since a professional in any field of endeavor is a potential leader who guides or leads those who are not trained in the area, the theological knowledge should not distract the mind of a professional from the leadership's end. In Romans 10:1-5, Paul prayed that the Israelites would humble themselves so that their eyes would be opened to see the righteousness of Christ that is by faith. This is because their knowledge of the law made them feel they were better than the Gentiles.³¹

The core argument concerning the application of theological education is explicitly presented, that theological education is observed to be **diverted from its spiritual purpose and utilized as a tool by trained individuals primarily for their advantage**, specifically to attain High-Church leadership positions, resulting in stratification within the church structure. The critical thrust of

³⁰ Alister McGrath, *the future of Christianity*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 145.

³¹ See Cameron, Averil. *Christianity and the rhetoric of empire: The development of Christian discourse*. Vol. 55. Univ of California Press, 2023. Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:1; ACTS 18:17; Romans 16:23.

the argument, strongly supported by Source, is that this practice directly contradicts the fundamental principle that **leaders are leading others for God's glory, not for themselves, no matter what they have learned or acquired. Going ahead because of theological education and leaving behind the sheep, which Christ has laid before the theological leaders to shepherd, will only be like wanting to be like the world game.**³² Thereby explicitly labeling this pursuit of status through education as a **worldly endeavor that neglects essential pastoral duty** and is antithetical to true spiritual leadership, which must be **under the guidance of the Holy Spirit**. Therefore, this application for personal advancement and hierarchical position is framed not as fulfilling a divine calling but as adopting a worldly mindset, ultimately signifying a **failure in the true essence of theological knowledge** as it deviates from leading solely for God's glory and caring for the flock.

Implications

Building upon the analysis that formal theological education can, intentionally or unintentionally, contribute to the stratification of Christian leadership – often by creating a focus on academic credentials or personal advancement that may overshadow

³² The statement confuses the roles of a leader and a ruler, which are fundamentally different. A **ruler** often exercises authority through control and commands, expecting obedience without necessarily participating in the actions they mandate. In contrast, a **leader** inspires and guides by example, actively engaging in the tasks alongside their followers. As Cornelius Oludeyi articulates, “A leader leads from in front, by the power of example. A ruler pushes from behind, by means of the club, the whip, the power of fear”. This highlights that leadership is about influence and inspiration, not mere authority. See Cornelius Oludeyi, *Rulership – Pseudo Leadership*, <https://corneliusoludeyi.com/> Accessed 5/6/2025, 7:35pm.

spiritual preparedness and character – this section explores the significant implications of this phenomenon. These implications manifest particularly in how leaders are chosen within the church and the extent to which contemporary leadership aligns with biblical expectations.

Choosing the Leader

A primary implication of theological education functioning as a stratifying factor in Christian leadership is its profound effect on the process of selecting leaders within ecclesial contexts. The tendency to prioritize formal theological qualifications, potentially viewing them as indicators of ‘superiority’ or entitlement to leadership roles, creates a dynamic where individuals with substantial spiritual depth or demonstrated biblical qualifications may be overlooked if they lack formal academic training. This mirrors secular patterns of social stratification where educational credentials become gatekeepers. While ideally, criteria for church leadership should center on spiritual giftedness and character, the research suggests a concerning trend: “the selection of church administrative officers in the twenty-first century should be based on competence, spirituality, experience, and educational qualifications”.³³ The inclusion of “educational qualifications” alongside spiritual and

³³ See Awino, Odhiambo, Awuor Emmanuel, and Wambua Leonard. “The mediating effects of leader power on the relationship between servant leadership and growth of evangelical churches in Kenya.” *African Journal of Emerging Issues* 3, no. 11 (2021): 62-84. Despite the intellectual nature of a leader, if that leadership does not bring glory to God, it is a direct rejection of God’s omnipotence. And if a man (the leader) goes against his moral objective end –that is a clear sign of being an *antichrist*.

experiential factors highlights the contemporary emphasis, which, if not balanced, can fuel the stratification previously discussed.

Furthermore, scholarly examination of church electoral processes reveals that the overemphasis on certain credentials and the pursuit of leadership positions can lead to the adoption of secular political tactics within sacred spaces. Research by Zakiri specifically investigated the factors influencing church elections in North East Nigeria and found that “deficiencies in organizational culture, organizational politics, ethnicity, geopolitical affiliation, leadership influence, transparency, spirituality, and competence were factors”. Crucially, the study determined that “organizational politics has a negative unstandardized coefficient..., implying that as politics grows, so does the perceived outcome of the election process”.³⁴ This suggests that the political dimension “has become institutionalized within the church”, compromising the integrity and perceived credibility of the selection process. This aligns with observations from other sources indicating that church leadership authority can be likened to government authority and that some worldly leaders crave popularity and dispense privileges. When theological education is pursued or used primarily as a means to gain status or advantage, it can contribute to what Adeleye et al. termed a “utilitarian approach”, where the focus is on personal gain rather than genuine service, thus making leadership elections susceptible

³⁴ Zakiri, Ezekiel Luka. “Factors Responsible to an Effective Electoral Process in the North East Nigeria Conference of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. A Basis for Transformation.” *Open Journal of Leadership* 12, no. 1 (2023): 37-54. See Washington Machokoto. “The Existence of Servant Leadership: Evidence from Modern Church Organisations.” *International Journal of Psychology and Cognitive Science*. Vol. 5, No. 2, 2019, pp. 109-115

to “politics of bitterness and rancor” and undermining criteria like “fairness and equity”.³⁵

Oyewale further explores the role of Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) in Nigerian electoral processes, noting their potential to influence public opinion and mobilize voters. While FBOs can positively contribute by serving as “moral compasses”, advocating for “ethical conduct and accountability among political leaders”, and promoting “transparency and fair play”, there is also a risk when “the lines between spiritual guidance and political influence become blurred”.³⁶ This can lead to “undue partisanship and the potential manipulation of religious sentiments”. The presence of organizational politics, ethnicity, and leadership influence in church elections, as identified by Zakiri, provides a concrete example of how these blurring lines and secular tactics manifest.³⁷ Different curriculum paradigms within theological education, such as the “social behaviourist” approach that references “successful individuals or leaders and their related attributes as well as how to achieve these successes” or the “bag-of-virtues approach” which was criticized for not fully accounting for individualization of moral character, might inadvertently contribute to a mindset focused on achieving leadership status rather than embodying godly character, thereby

³⁵ Adeleye, Caleb, Oluwasegun Aluko, Saibu Owoeye, and Emmanuel Olowoyeye. “Evaluating Theological Education in The Apostolic Church Nigeria: Contributions, Challenges and Future Directions.” *African Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 2, no. 1 (2024): 102-125

³⁶ Oyewale, Peter Oluwaseun. “The Role of Faith Based Organisation in the Electoral Process in Nigeria.” *Polit Journal Scientific Journal of Politics* 4, no. 4 (2024): 240-252.

³⁷ Zakiri, Ezekiel Luka. “Factors Responsible to an Effective Electoral Process in the North East Nigeria Conference of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. A Basis for Transformation.” *Open Journal of Leadership* 12, no. 1 (2023): 37-54.

making leaders susceptible to engaging in or being influenced by negative political dynamics during selection. The call for leadership selection based on “competence, spirituality, experience, and educational qualifications” underscores the challenge: integrating academic achievement with character and spiritual depth in a system often influenced by less godly factors.

God’s Expectation of a Leader

In sharp contrast to leadership selection processes influenced by stratification, worldly politics, and personal ambition, the biblical standard for Christian leadership is fundamentally rooted in servanthood. This principle, “most perfectly exemplified by Christ Himself”, stands in tension with models focused on status, popularity, or self-exaltation (such as the ‘Leader Servants’ model previously discussed, driven by High Self-Esteem and Craving Popularity). Scripture presents figures like Moses, David, and Paul, whose leadership, despite imperfections, demonstrated core principles such as obedience to God, humility, compassion, selflessness, and shared leadership. Jesus Himself taught, “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all”, embodying this by even washing His disciples’ feet. Ideally, theological education should serve as a critical component of the spiritual formation necessary to cultivate these servant leadership qualities. Du Plessis and Nkambule emphasize that theological training “should be a life-creating process and experience” focused on “broadening and deepening the students’ spiritual formation”, arguing that understanding servant leadership is essential for ministerial effectiveness and

resilience.³⁸ They note, however, that while some pastors *aim* to emulate Jesus' servant leadership, "Comprehension of the concept of servant leadership was a challenge for some of the pastors". This highlights a potential gap: academic theological training, if it is predominantly "cognitive training" and overlooks "experiential and practical trainings" or fails to adequately integrate spiritual formation, may not effectively translate knowledge *about* biblical leadership into the *actual embodiment* of servant character and competencies.

Different curriculum paradigms can impact the approach to spiritual and character formation. Lee discusses various orientations to "life and spiritual education". An "intellectual traditionalist" perspective might focus on studying the lives of biblical figures, while a "social behaviourist" might analyze attributes of successful leaders – neither necessarily guaranteeing the deep internal transformation required for genuine servanthood.³⁹ The "virtue-ethics approach", which prioritizes moral character and emphasizes learning through observing and engaging in moral practices, seems potentially more aligned with developing servant leadership qualities than approaches focused solely on knowledge or rules. A "holistic curriculum" that emphasizes "connectedness, inclusion and balance" and integrates a "secular-spiritual aspect" could also better foster the well-rounded character needed. Furthermore, finding that while spirituality influences electoral outcomes when compared to

³⁸ Du Plessis, Amanda L., and Carol M. Nkambule. "Servant leadership as part of spiritual formation of theological students in contextualisation of 21st century theological training." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 2 (2020): 1-9.

³⁹ Lee, John Chi-Kin. "Curriculum paradigms and perspectives of life and spiritual education: Contrast and diversity." *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 25, no. 3-4 (2020): 175-186.

organizational factors, it “does not mediate the relationships between electorate perceptions, leadership, and electoral process outcomes” suggests that the presence of spirituality among delegates doesn’t automatically guarantee a biblically aligned outcome when faced with the pressures of politics, personal influence, or flawed perceptions.⁴⁰ This underscores the critical need for theological education to not only impart knowledge but also to deeply embed the spiritual formation and character development – particularly servant leadership principles – necessary to resist worldly influences and uphold God’s expectation for leadership, which is fundamentally about leading others “for God’s glory, not for personal aggrandizement, irrespective of acquired theological knowledge”. The proposed servant leadership model integrates style, principles, functions, character, and competency, offering a structured approach for theological education to intentionally cultivate these essential biblical qualities.⁴¹

Conclusion

This research concludes that theological education, while highly valuable for understanding God and preparing for ministry, faces a profound and dangerous **diversion in its practical application within contemporary Christian leadership**,

⁴⁰ Zakiri, Ezekiel Luka. “Factors Responsible to an Effective Electoral Process in the North East Nigeria Conference of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. A Basis for Transformation.” *Open Journal of Leadership* 12, no. 1 (2023): 37-54.

⁴¹ See Du Plessis, Amanda L., and Carol M. Nkambule. “Servant leadership as part of spiritual formation of theological students in contextualisation of 21st century theological training.” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 2 (2020): 1-9.

particularly in the form of strategic misuse for personal advantage and hierarchical ascent. The core thrust of this paper reveals a serious tension where acquired theological knowledge becomes an **overvalued qualification and a tool for stratification**, prioritizing academic credentials over spiritual gifts, character, and biblical qualifications for leadership. As Figure 2 illustrates, this trend risks creating a “Leader Servants” model where the leader is positioned at the apex, driven by “High Self-Esteem” and “Craving Popularity,” mediating the relationship with the community through potentially overvalued theological knowledge, a dynamic Chua Hian explicitly contrasts with Christ's model of servanthood. This stands in direct contradiction to the biblical imperative that **leaders are leading others for God's glory, not for themselves, no matter what they have learned or acquired.** The practice of “**Going ahead because of theological education and leaving behind the sheep**” is unequivocally labeled not as divine calling, but as a “**want to be like the world game,**” a worldly endeavor that **explicitly neglects essential pastoral duty** and is antithetical to true spiritual leadership guided by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, this self-serving ambition, potentially reinforcing historical inequalities in access to formal training, compromises the service-oriented mission of the church, including the personal, relational engagement necessary for effective evangelism, and risks sidelining spiritually gifted individuals with less formal training. This research, therefore, makes a crucial academic contribution by providing a critical examination of this phenomenon, arguing explicitly that **this application for personal advancement and hierarchical position signifies a fundamental failure in the true essence of theological knowledge**, diverting it from its intended purpose to serve God's glory and shepherd the flock. The

findings underscore the urgent need for a **reassessment within the Christian community**, advocating strongly for a leadership model that rigorously integrates theological knowledge with essential spiritual qualities and biblical character, ensuring a biblically grounded, inclusive, and service-oriented approach. This is for the health and sustenance of the church in an era where theological institutions themselves face dilemmas of relevance if disconnected from the church's genuine mission.