



Following the Leader? A New Academic Model of Ethical Decision-Making for Christian Followers

Vanya Starr

Regent University

Roundtable: Followership

Abstract

What makes an ethical Christian follower? More importantly, how do Christian followers make better ethical decisions? By delving into followership and Christian ethical theories, a new academic model emerges that should aid in understanding the determinants of ethical Christian followership and the motivators and worldview that produce better ethical decision-making. Utilizing worldview and the expectancy theory of motivation, it is possible to ascertain a typology of ethical Christian followership that corresponds to Kelley's concept but also enhances knowledge around follower decision-making. This model acts as a future guide to teaching and communications surrounding ethical decision-making in the Church by delineating what effective, ethical Christian followership looks like. With increased clarity around what ethical decision-making for Christian followers looks like, it is possible to create intentional training and development programs to promote this functionality in the workplace and other institutions.

Introduction

In 1962, Adolf Eichmann, on trial for war crimes, famously wrote that he and others were "forced to serve as mere instruments" of the Nazis (Barajas, 2016, para. 1). The post-World War II Nuremberg trials shined a harsh spotlight on the concept of followership ethics by inquiring if followers were to be held liable for actions committed under the orders of another. Ultimately, judges, jury, public opinion, and even science repudiated the "just following orders" defense since everyone has a choice—even followers—and thus should be held responsible for their actions. Indeed, it was this question—Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders?—that prompted Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram to produce one of the most famous research studies on obedience ever

conducted. In essence, Milgram found that the results were conclusive: When acting under orders, anyone could conceivably commit a heinous act (McLeod, 2023).

If any follower can act poorly under a leader's influence, then the need for strong ethical followership is more vital than ever. Of course, society rarely notices or applauds followers. Good followers are like the offensive line of a football team; the better they play, the less they are mentioned because their success draws attention instead to the showy players, like the quarterback, running back, or receivers. Conversely,

Good followership ... is the stuff of nearly nothing. Most of the limited research and writing on subordinates has tended to either explain their behavior in the context of leaders' development rather than followers' or mistakenly assume that followers are amorphous, all one and the same. (Kellerman, 2007b, para. 2)

The fact is good leadership depends on good followership. Good followers are those who are consistently able to make effective, ethical decisions despite the changing times and amid a world that is increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA; Baran & Woznyj, 2021). Add Christianity into the mix, and ethical followership takes on a different scope. Christian ethics is as varied and intricate as its secular counterparts, leading to potentially unexplored followership ethical outcomes. By delving into followership and Christian ethical theories, a new academic model emerges that should aid in understanding the determinants of ethical Christian followership and the motivators and worldview that produce better ethical decision-making.

Background and Literature Review

What makes an ethical Christian follower? More importantly, how do Christian followers make better ethical decisions? The answers can be found by examining Kelley's concept of followership and combining it with Christian ethical theory. These theories elucidate the distinctions among Christian followers and the motivations that drive ethical decision-making.

Followership

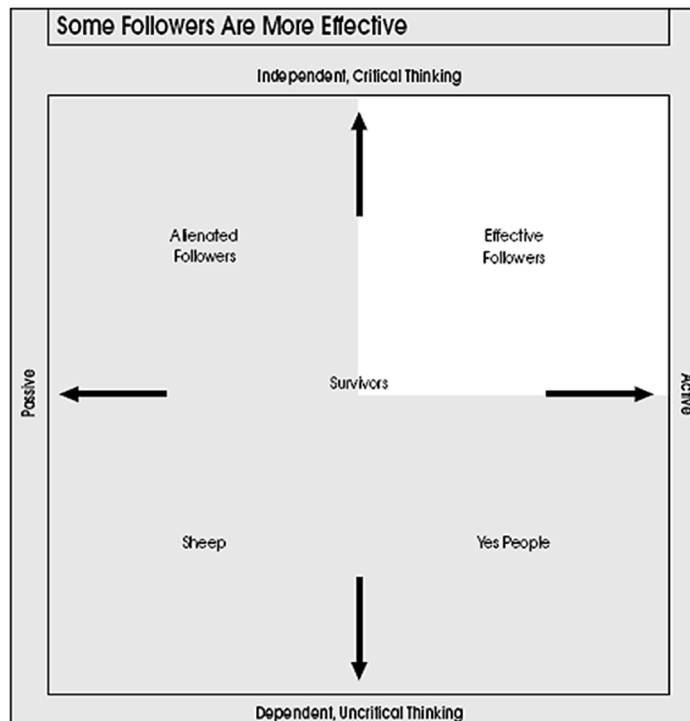
As previously established, the literature and writings about followership are a comparative drop in the bucket to the mountains of information about leadership. However, followership *does* matter, as Kelley (1988) averred, "Without his armies, after all, Napoleon was just a man with grandiose ambitions. Organizations stand or fall partly based on how well their leaders lead, but partly also based on how well their followers follow" (para. 2). Followership – though a newer concept academically – is the hidden driver behind leadership and so deserves a level of recognition.

When defining followership, theorists use a variety of distinctions to combat the common misconception that followers are not individuals but groups. Using rank and behavior, Kellerman (2007a) found that followers typically fall into one of these categories based on their level of engagement—isolates, bystanders, participants, activists, or diehards—and while none of these distinctions is ethical per se, she admitted her bias against people who do nothing when lives are at stake. Kellerman then went on to define followership as “a relationship (rank), between subordinates and superiors, and a response (behavior), of the former to the latter” (p. xx). On the other hand, Chaleff (2009) insisted that *follower* and *subordinate* are not synonymous. He noted that “good” followership is exemplified by courageous behaviors, meaning that followers intentionally commit themselves to serve, challenge, participate, take moral action, speak up, and listen. Chaleff divided followers into four categories, including implementer, resource, individualist, and partner, by using degrees of support and challenge of the leader to subdivide these groups.

Robert Kelley, a recognized leader in the field of followership, also used a matrix to delineate the types of followership styles inherent in any organization. Focusing on follower behaviors, his typology consisted of five groupings: alienated, effective (exemplary or “star”), yes people (conformist), sheep (passive), and survivors (pragmatist) that flow from the two axes of independent thinking and level of activity (see Figure 1). R. E. Kelley (2008) took an idealistic approach to followership, desiring to see followers not only embrace their subordinate position but use it to empower ethical conduct, which he called “courageous conscience,” by whistleblowing effectively, combating groupthink, and promoting institutional integrity (p. 14).

Christian Ethics

Christian ethics is a large and complex field of thought ultimately devoted to the concept that God, not humans, defines what is right and what is wrong (Mortimer, 2013). This objective authority affects how human beings view and react to the world. Indeed, this objective standard forms an essential component of Christian ethics. Unlike secular ethical theories, which rely on subjective measurements of good and evil, Christian ethics depends upon the authority of God and the Bible as distinctive elements. Over the centuries, Christian ethics shifted its emphasis from Aquinas’s natural law belief to Luther’s *Sola Scriptura* view but, according to Gill (2020), Christian ethicists today tend to appeal to the Bible, Christian tradition, Christian experience, or Christian doctrine.

Figure 1: *R. Kelley's (1988) Followership Model*

Underpinning Christian ethics is the idea that God acts in history and is just. Second only to that is that the “world is good, but is not God,” and third, that humans, though made in the image of God, are fallen and sinful but also redeemed (Fedler, 2006). For Christian ethicists, the problem remains that humans were created to live in community, but sin distorted both the relationships with the Creator and with each other, leading to various theories about how to manage these challenging situations. At its most basic, though, Christian ethics should inform a worldview that changes how people think, act, and respond.

The primary gap in the followership and Christian ethics literature is where the two intersect. There is adequate information about the topics of followership, ethical followership, and Christian ethics, but there are very few particulars regarding ethical Christian followership motivations and behaviors. What drives followers to engage in ethical Christian behaviors and actions? How does that knowledge inform the best way for followers to make better ethical decisions?

Methodology

To answer these questions, it was necessary to compare Christian ethical theory to Kelley's concept of followership to best determine relevant similarities and differences. Utilizing the expectancy theory of motivation and the concept of worldview, it was then possible to ascertain a typology of ethical Christian followership that corresponds to Kelley's concept but also enhances knowledge around follower decision-making. By tying these concepts together, a clearer picture materializes of what constitutes more effective ethical behaviors by Christian followers.

Analysis

Twenty-five years after he wrote his initial article on followership, R. E. Kelley (2008) clarified the thought process behind his typology of followership styles. Instead of asking whether followers were critical thinkers or what level of engagement they were operating at, he posed the following questions: "Are they actively engaged in creating positive energy for the organization? Or is there negative energy or passive involvement?" (p. 7). R. E. Kelley decided it was not enough for a follower to simply be engaged or not, but that they must take a further step and create "positive energy" within their spheres of influence.

Similarly, Christian ethical theory and its adherence to a biblical perspective encourage positive ethical conduct within any institution. Christian ethics holds to the principle of the "infinite worth of the individual" (Mortimer, 2013, p. 17), which is the antidote to negative workplace occurrences, such as incivility, retaliation, and backbiting. Fedler (2006) made the connection that our worship of God and how we treat our neighbor go hand in hand, thus implying that Christians should behave at a higher ethical level at all times. This high standard can aid Christian followers to positively impact others through both their personal and professional lives.

R. E. Kelley (2008) took his thoughts on ethical followership a step further when he noted, "The ability to make ethical and legal judgments, to take proactive steps to promote ethical and legal activities, and then to stand up against unethical and illegal decisions and actions, is a crucial aspect of followership" (p. 15). Christian ethical theory would agree that while Christian followers are primarily called to "live at peace with everyone" (*New International Version*, 1973/2011, Rom. 12:18) and support secular authorities (Rom. 13:1), there may come a time when they must respectfully stand up to immoral or unethical leaders (Acts 5:29). According to these theories, taking moral action is a responsibility of both followers and Christians.

Christian ethics also deals with motivation and intention, while Kelley's followership theory does not. Kelley's typology merely tracks what people *are*, not what they intend

or should be. However, like all typologies, his theory has an aspirational aspect that draws attention to the merits of the effective or star follower. On the other hand, motivation and intention play a significant role in Christian ethics because this type of ethics includes an emphasis on the importance of conduct, character, and goals (Heimbach, 2022). Similar to virtue ethics, where intention is essential to ethical living (Fedler, 2006), Christian ethics hold intentions as highly as ethical actions, as Jesus made clear when He indicated that sinful thoughts are just as wrong as (or worse than) sinful actions (Matt. 5:22, 28).

Proposed Model

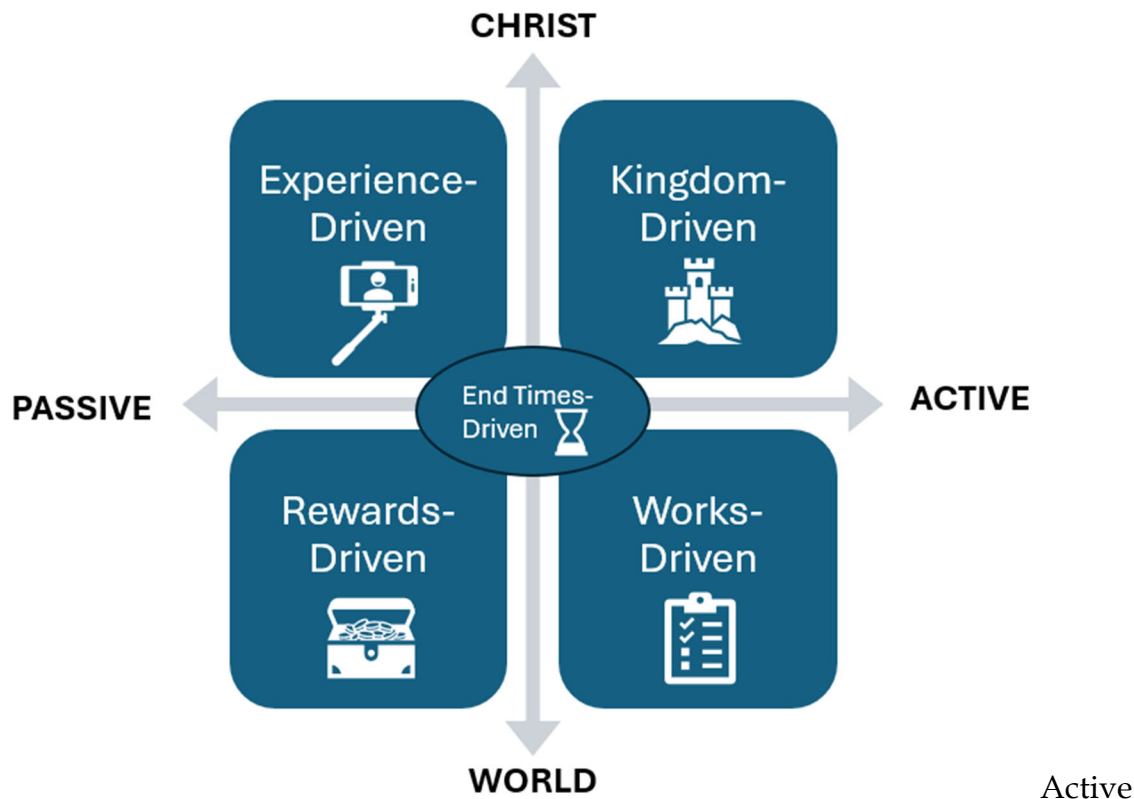
Motivation and intention are crucial in ethical decision making because determining what drives ethical decisions means we are one step closer to understanding ethical choices. This study used Vroom's expectancy theory to explore Christian follower motives. At the risk of oversimplification, expectancy theory is the "belief that an individual chooses their behaviors based on what they believe leads to the most beneficial outcome" (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023, para. 3). In other words, people decide on a course of action based on the potential reward, performance, and outcome. For Christians, these motivators could be rewards, works, the end times, personal experiences, or the Kingdom.

Understanding the motivation behind ethical decisions requires a peek into the concept of worldview. A worldview, according to Ryken and Dockery (2013), is a "well-reasoned framework of beliefs and convictions that helps us see the big picture, giving a true and unified perspective on the meaning of human existence" (p. 14). Grasping worldview is pivotal to frame ethical decision making coherently. For example,

If I envision everyone outside my small circle as hostile competitors in a dog-eat-dog world, I will form my behavior, virtues, and emotions around that belief ... But if I believe that all persons are made in the image of God, then that faith commitment will shape my actions, feelings, and virtues. (Fedler, 2006, pp. 12-13)

Worldviews have an essential impact on motivation and ethical decision making because, even within Christianity, they may differ.

Thus, in the ethical model of Christian followership (see Figure 2), worldview replaces Kelley's (1988) vertical axis of critical thinking with whether the follower's moral compass tends more toward Christ or the world. Kellerman (2007a) intimated that the only "all-important axis" is the level of engagement, so Kelley's x-axis remains the same in Figure 2. Also, mirroring R. Kelley's typology, this new model includes the five follower "buckets" that align with his effective; alienated; survivor; sheep; and yes, people followership styles.

Figure 2*Ethical Model of Christian Followership*

Christian followers with a more secular worldview tend to make decisions motivated by works or doing good things. According to R. E. Kelley (2008), these followers are positive, active people who get the job done. This group has a lot of output, but their works are not necessarily biblically based, which may skew their ethical responses. They may be content to follow a leader who espouses good deeds but hides the real motivators of action, such as social media likes, public praise, or elevated brand or reputation. An example of this type is Mr. Worldly Wiseman – from the book, *Pilgrim's Progress* – who is greatly esteemed by his neighbors for being generous and moral, but it is all external show (Bunyan, 1678/1979). Christian followers in this bucket cite good deeds and helping people as the motivators of their actions but often confuse real aid with busy work.

With a similar tendency toward a secular worldview, Christian followers who are more passive are more inclined to go for the low-hanging fruit of *rewards* and recognition without the trouble of doing “works.” R. E. Kelley (2008) called this group *sheep* because these followers allow leaders to think for them, and they are typically weak in judgment

and easily led. The rewards of Christianity sway these Christian followers, and so they are apt to follow leaders who espouse get-rich-quick schemes, the prosperity gospel, and name-it-and-claim-it groups. Like Formalist in *Pilgrim's Progress* who jumped over the gate and knew all the outward forms of religion, these followers ethically cut corners and make convenient choices (Bunyan, 1678/1979).

In the dead center of the matrix, R. E. Kelley (2008) indicated that there is a group of survivors or pragmatics who tend to sit on the fence, waiting and watching for events to unfold. These *end-times-driven* Christian followers are content to do as little as or as much as needed while they wait for the Second Coming of Christ to occur. These followers are not out to save the world but to save themselves while watching things burn. An excellent example of this group is Mr. By-ends from *Pilgrim's Progress*; his predilection is for a happy religion, but he also has an uncanny ability to seize any opportunity and turn it into profit (Bunyan, 1678/1979). Ethically, this group of followers is variable because they can easily change allegiances based on potential outcomes, often following leaders who promise safety and security.

It is possible to be passively engaged but still have a Christ-centered worldview. *Experience-driven* followers fall into this category because they rely on “individual feelings, conscience, or love” (Gill, 2020, p. 6) rather than the Bible, tradition, or doctrine. R. E. Kelley (2008) referred to this group as alienated because they may think for themselves but are often critical and loners (though they may see themselves as mavericks). These followers are characterized by their adherence to a personal religion with Jesus, focused exclusively on themselves and their walk with Christ. In *Pilgrim's Progress*, this group would look similar to Mr. Talkative, who speaks wisely and sensibly about Christianity but does very little in the community (Bunyan, 1678/1979). Christian followers of this type will look for leaders who show individual consideration to their constituents.

The Christian followers who are active with a Christ-centered worldview are *Kingdom* driven. This group relies exclusively on the Bible as their moral code and compass to make decisions. R. E. Kelley (2008) found this group to be effective followers due to their ability to show initiative, complete difficult tasks, and offer constructive criticism. Characterized by the follower Faithful in *Pilgrim's Progress* for his faithfulness to God's word unto death, these followers are prone to act according to the dictates of the Scriptures and the Spirit (Bunyan, 1678/1979). That means these followers make more consistent and reasoned ethical decisions due to their obedience to an objective authority. They are likely to actively follow and support their leaders but also have the courage to stand up to unethical practices for the good of their organizations and their leaders. These followers are effective because they are willing to follow the purpose or mission of the organization rather than a specific leader.

Results and Discussion

Typologies, according to Kellerman (2007a), are meant to invite argument because they contain both theoretical and practical applications. A good typology advances academic knowledge by creating distinctions and definitions around esoteric concepts, but it also helps leaders and followers to “translate what they know into what they do” (Kellerman, 2007a, p. 92). While Kellerman acknowledged that typologies are rarely a vehicle for radical change, these models often inspire people to conduct themselves differently than they did before. Thus, while most models are descriptive rather than prescriptive, there is an encouragement to do things differently inherent within any typology due to its primary function of determining the right way versus other ways.

The ethical model of Christian followership, as a typology, aims to not only shed light on an often overlooked academic niche but also provide scope around the motivators affecting ethical decision-making in Christian followers. This model acts as a future guide to teaching and communications around ethical decision-making in the Church and its people by delineating what good ethical Christian followership looks like. Not only that, but this model upholds the ethical necessity of basing decisions on an objective moral code rather than feelings, awards, or deeds. Only by relying on an objective ethical authority can followers make informed, wise decisions regarding complicated ethical daily situations.

Ideally, understanding motivation and worldview can enhance knowledge around ethical decision-making and practice, prompting personal, group, and organizational change. Now that there is more clarity around what effective ethical decision-making for Christian followers looks like, it is possible to create intentional training and development programs to promote this functionality in the workplace and other institutions. Stimulating followers to manage ethical situations better is a noble task every organization should pursue.

Implications for Human Flourishing

Scholarship is relatively silent on the outcomes of follower ethical decision-making and their subsequent ramifications for organizations. This dearth of information could be due to a lack of research on the subject or because the benefits are not easily quantifiable. For example, whistleblowers – who are an acknowledged subset of followers – often find that their ethical decisions produce negative consequences and outcomes for themselves personally. Though there may be greater societal benefits, the individual whistleblower can experience intense persecution, criticism, skepticism, loss of job, or even loss of home/homeland. Nevertheless, making ethical decisions continues to be a follower mandate.

There are real, undeniable benefits to being an ethical follower, which have positive implications for human flourishing. Harvard University's (2024) Human Flourishing Program helped quantify human flourishing by studying and promoting it across disciplines. Based on their results, it is possible to link their human flourishing components directly to the benefits of ethical followership.

- **Happiness and life satisfaction:** Carsten and Uhl-Bien (2013) found that followers who partner with their leaders in a “coproduction of leadership” produce positive organizational outcomes through shared ethical behaviors. For example, they noted that coproduction generates an ethical organizational culture where followers “are more likely to voice ideas and concerns, influence leaders to gain support and resources, and are less likely to see their role as ineffectual or insignificant” (p. 50). Such a culture can positively impact follower life happiness and satisfaction.
- **Mental and physical health:** Authentic followership has implications for better health outcomes. As Johnson (2021) noted,
- Authentic leaders and followers encourage transparency, self-awareness, and moral behavior in each other. Together they build open, healthy relationships and collaborate to achieve worthwhile objectives. Because they feel safe, employees reveal problems rather than creating the impression that everything is fine. (p. 258)
- **Meaning and purpose:** “Courageous conscience” (Kelley, 1992) and “courageous followership” (Chaleff, 2009) are both concepts that promote a sense of meaning and purpose for followers. As Chaleff (2009) stated,
- The rewards of the balanced leader-follower relationship are the rewards of all healthy relationships—honest struggle, growth, mutual admiration, and even love. A reward of the wholesome use of power is the opportunity to witness improvements in the lives of those we serve. When leaders and followers fulfill their respective roles, they give each other the gift of being able to serve well. This service adds meaning to our lives. (p. 235)
- **Character and virtue:** This human flourishing component is exemplified by James Maroosis' (2008) concept of “response-able” followership. This is followership that walks the talk, saying the right things, and doing them the right way. Practicing virtues is essential for ethical followership. “To be virtuous, powerful, and competent consists in large part in knowing what and who to follow and how to lead and comport oneself response-ably in a given situation” (Maroosis, 2008, p. 22).
- **Close societal relationships:** Having close bonds is also a benefit of ethical followership. These benefits are evident in the inherent kindness of what Chaleff called “intelligent disobedience.” Think of guide dogs who are trained to obey but will disobey when their owners are walking into harm's way. “Chaleff notes

that in most cases, obedience is the right option that allows us to benefit from living in communities and organizations” (Johnson, 2021, p. 185). Followers sometimes need to disobey unethical or misguided orders for the greater good of the organization or society.

Limitations and Future Research

While this proposed model effectively addresses the motivators that inspire ethical decision-making in Christian followers, more research is needed to understand the ramifications and accuracy of the claims made. Future research should explore the various components of the model more fully by creating a questionnaire or test that will quantify where individuals fall within the framework. This research can be used in organizational development interventions or ethical decision-making instruction.

Conclusion

Followers—for all of their implied secondary status—bear the onus, along with leaders, to behave ethically and righteously. It is not enough to allow one’s subordinate position to create an ethical *carte blanche*; the follower must also realize their power to affect ethical situations based on their decisions. This concept is more than just ensuring that unethical followership ends but that followers can make informed ethical decisions daily. The proposed ethical model of Christian followership aids ethical decision-making by bringing insight and clarity to Christian follower motivators and worldviews. Kellerman (2007a) concluded her book on followership by asking, “Is something being done? And if something is being done—to what end?” The purpose and intentions behind ethical decisions separate those who merely follow from effective followership. Believing in an objective moral code takes followership from good to great, which can be enhanced by training and developing followers to make that leap.

About the Author

Vanya Starr, SHRM-CP, PHR, is a Human Resources professional in her final year of Regent University’s Doctor of Strategic Leadership and Human Resources Development. She received a Bachelor of Arts in History in 2000, a Master of Arts in Teaching in 2011, and a Juris Master in 2021. Based out of Atlanta, GA, she enjoys working in the software consulting industry with a service-minded orientation providing an integral service of connecting employees and organizations through positive OD interventions. Vanya’s research interests include how to support and develop good employees via a combined focus on followership theory and biblical principles.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: 3200 Montheath Ct, Duluth, GA 30096 Email: Vanya.starr@gmail.com

References

- Barajas, J. (2016, February 20). *How the Nazi's defense of 'just following orders' plays out in the mind*. PBS.org. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/how-the-nazis-defense-of-just-following-orders-plays-out-in-the-mind>
- Baran, B. E., & Woznyj, H. M. (2021). Managing VUCA: The human dynamics of agility. *Organizational Dynamics*, 50(2), 1-11.
- Bunyan, J. (1979). *The pilgrim's progress: From this world to that which is to come*. The Easton Press. (Original work published 1678)
- Carsten, M. K., & Uhl-Bien, M. (2013). Ethical followership: An examination of followership beliefs and crimes of obedience. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 20(1), 49-61.
- Chaleff, I. (2009). *The courageous follower: Standing up to and for our leaders* (3rd ed.). Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Fedler, K. D. (2006). *Exploring Christian ethics: Biblical foundations for morality*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Gill, R. (2020). *Christian ethics: The basics*. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Harvard University. (2024). *The human flourishing program*. Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science. <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/>
- Heimbach. (2022). *Fundamental christian ethics*. B&H Publishing Group.
- Indeed Editorial Team. (2023, February 3). *Expectancy theory of motivation: guide for managers*. Indeed. <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/expectancy-theory-of-motivation>
- Johnson, C. E. (2021). *Meeting the ethical challenges of leadership: Casting light or shadow*. SAGE Publications.
- Kellerman, B. (2007a). *Followership: How followers are creating change and changing leaders*. Harvard University Press.
- Kellerman, B. (2007b, December). *What every leader needs to know about followers*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2007/12/what-every-leader-needs-to-know-about-followers>

- Kelley, R.E. (1988, Nov). In praise of followers. *Harvard Business Review*.
<https://hbr.org/1988/11/in-praise-of-followers>
- Kelley, R. E. (1992). *The power of followership: How to create leaders people want to follow and followers who lead themselves*. Currency.
- Kelley, R. E. (2008). Rethinking followership. In R. E. Riggio, I. Chaleff, & J. Lipman-Blumen (Eds.), *The art of followership: How greater followers create great leaders and organizations* (pp. 5-15). Jossey-Bass.
- Maroosis. (2008). Leadership: A partnership in reciprocal following. In R.E. Riggio, I. Chaleff, and J. Lipman-Blumen (Eds.), *The art of followership: How greater followers create great leaders and organizations* (pp. 17-24). Jossey-Bass.
- McLeod, S. (2023, November 14). *Stanley Milgram shock experiment*. SimplyPsychology.
<https://www.simplypsychology.org/milgram.html>
- Mortimer, R. C. (2013). *Christian ethics*. Taylor & Francis Group.
- New International Version*. (2011). BibleGateway. www.biblegateway.com (Original work published 1973)
- Ryken, P. G., & Dockery, D. S. (2013). *Christian worldview: A student's guide*. Crossway.