



# Martyrdom Syndrome: Reading Acts 7:54-8:1 As A Critique of Christian Leaders

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the Martyrdom Syndrome in Christian leadership by interpreting Acts 7:54-8:1 as a critique of leaders who use the suffering narrative to gain legitimacy and authority. This syndrome refers to the tendency of individuals to portray themselves as victims to gain sympathy, support, and justification for their leadership. The study employs a qualitative, exegetical approach to the martyrdom of Stephen, which is often contrasted with authentic leadership in the Christian tradition. The findings reveal that true martyrdom in Acts is not used as a tool for manipulation but as a testimony of faith rooted in the truth of the Gospel. In contrast, leaders trapped in the martyrdom syndrome tend to foster unhealthy relationships with their followers, relying on personal suffering as spiritual legitimacy. This study affirms that authentic Christian leadership is not based on exploiting the suffering narrative but on exemplary conduct, service, and moral integrity. Thus, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of responsible Christian leadership and critiques deviant leadership practices in ecclesial and social contexts.

Keywords: Acts 7:54-8:1, Christian Leadership, Critique, Martyrdom Syndrome, Stephen.

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## INTRODUCTION

Christian leaders bear a significant responsibility in guiding their congregations toward a true understanding of faith and the practice of Christian living. Church leadership is concerned not only with spiritual authority but also with ethical responsibility in building the community's faith life. In the study of Christian leadership, the concept of servant leadership emphasizes that authentic leadership is rooted in service to others. As explained by Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) "Servant leadership is a leadership philosophy in which the primary goal of the leader is to serve," that is, leadership that places service to others as the primary goal of leadership. However, in some contexts within church history, a tendency emerged to use suffering or persecution to bolster a leader's spiritual authority. This phenomenon can be understood as the "Martyr Syndrome," a mindset that views suffering as a primary indicator of piety and spiritual authenticity. Studies of martyrdom in early Christianity indicate that suffering was indeed understood as part of the witness of faith, but was not always intended as a means to seek religious legitimacy or power. Middleton (2013) explains that the practice of martyrdom in early Christianity was often seen as a powerful form of testimony of faith. Still, this phenomenon also shows how the narrative of martyrdom can be shaped and interpreted socially within the Christian community. If suffering is made the primary measure of spirituality, there is a risk that other important dimensions of Christian leadership, such as morality, servant leadership, and pastoral responsibility, are neglected, even though Christian leadership is essentially oriented towards service, integrity, and building a community of faith.

Acts 7:54-8:1 presents a crucial narrative in understanding how the early Christian community faced persecution, particularly in the story of Stephen, the first martyr in church history. Stephen, who was full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:5, 10), suffered persecution because of his bold testimony against the Jewish religious leaders. Their furious reaction and the act of stoning Stephen illustrate how corrupt leadership can contribute to the emergence of martyrdom. According to Stott (2020, p. 138) "Stephen's martyrdom was not a tragic accident but a divine appointment; through his death, the gospel began to spread beyond Jerusalem." The text also records the presence of Saul, who at that time approved Stephen's execution (Acts 8:1). This event not only marks the beginning of a broader persecution against the church but also illustrates how certain leaders can use persecution to maintain power and the status quo.

This narrative provides a basis for critical reflection on how Christian leaders in various contexts can become trapped in what might be called the martyrdom syndrome. In some Christian communities, there is a tendency to view suffering as a vindication of the truth of the faith without considering other dimensions of authentic leadership, such as justice, compassion, and pastoral wisdom. Academic studies of martyrdom in early Christianity show that suffering was not understood as something to be deliberately sought, but rather as a context in which fidelity to the faith could be tested and witnessed. Middleton (2013, p. 112) asserts that in the early Christian tradition, martyrdom was understood as a form of witness to faith, not as an end to be pursued by believers, but as a response to situations of oppression faced by the faith community. Thus, suffering is not an end in itself, but must be understood within the framework of faithful witness

and moral integrity in the life of the Christian community. In line with this, historical-theological studies of the narratives of persecution in early Christianity also show that the texts of the New Testament, including the Acts of the Apostles, were not intended to promote the pursuit of suffering, but to encourage the perseverance and faithfulness of the people in facing challenges to faith and social pressures that arose in the context of the life of the early church.

In psychology, martyr syndrome can be understood as an individual's tendency to consistently position themselves as victims or sufferers to gain attention, sympathy, and social legitimacy from others. Recent social psychology research shows that victimization strategies are often used as a means to gain moral support and strengthen their position within a group. Heidemeier and Moser (2019) explain that individuals or groups who construct a victim identity often utilize narratives of suffering to gain sympathy and moral legitimacy in social and political interactions. In the context of leadership, this strategy can be an effective rhetorical tool for building follower loyalty. This phenomenon can also be seen in the context of leadership in Indonesia, where a leader repeatedly emphasizes personal sacrifice or portrays themselves as the target of injustice to strengthen their authority and gain emotional support from their followers. Studies on toxic and manipulative leadership show that leaders who use victim narratives often build relationships based on emotional dependence, leaving followers feeling indebted and making it difficult to be critical of their leaders (Krasikova et al., 2013). This pattern of relationships can produce unhealthy leadership dynamics, where the leader's legitimacy is not built through moral example, service, or competence, but rather through the continual construction of a narrative of suffering to maintain power.

This phenomenon aligns with what Volf (1996) stated in his reflection on identity and suffering, that "... when suffering is used as a tool to construct collective identity, there is a great risk of manipulation and exclusion." This phenomenon complicates the dynamics of Christian leadership, as it exploits the symbol of suffering, which should serve as a reminder of love and forgiveness, rather than a tool for manipulation and control.

Research on the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7:54-8:1 has been extensive, particularly regarding the themes of the witness of faith, apologetics, and the theology of suffering. Several classical studies, such as Dunn (2016) highlight Stephen as the first martyr who exemplifies Christ in steadfast faithfulness unto death. He notes that the martyrdom of Stephen is deliberately modelled on the death of Jesus and that Stephen, in his final utterance, identifies himself with Jesus as the Son of Man at God's right hand. Similarly, Witherington III (1998) in his commentary, he describes a socio-rhetorical approach to the Book of Acts. This commentary draws on the best new insights from several disciplines (narratological studies of Luke-Acts, archaeological and social studies of the New Testament, rhetorical analysis of Acts).

In addition, several contextual studies have sought to read this text from a socio-political perspective, interpreting Stephen's martyrdom as a form of resistance to oppressive religious power. However, most of these studies portray Stephen as a heroic figure without critically engaging with the power dynamics this narrative challenges, particularly in relation to contemporary religious leadership.

This research positions itself within the development of such studies by offering a new reading termed “The Martyrdom Syndrome,” namely, the tendency of Christian leaders to overinterpret suffering and opposition as spiritual legitimacy for their positions or actions. By reading Acts 7:54-8:1 as a critique of Christian leadership, this study seeks to shift the focus from the glorification of martyrdom toward an ethical and ecclesiological reflection on the misuse of the martyrdom symbol within contemporary church leadership practices.

Thus, what distinguishes this research from previous studies is the following: First, a critical and contextual hermeneutical approach that interprets the text not merely as a story of faith but also as a critique of religious power structures. Second, the conceptualization of “The Martyrdom Syndrome” as a new analytical category for examining the relationship between faith, suffering, and power within modern Christian leadership. Third, the practical relevance of this study for ethical reflection on church leadership today, rather than simply a historical-biblical analysis.

In Indonesia, several concrete cases illustrate how the martyr syndrome can be manipulated. For example, the construction of the Kingmi Mile 32 Church in Mimika Regency, Papua, where Regent Eltinus Omaleng and several other parties were named suspects by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK – Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi) for alleged corruption related to the church construction project (Sulistyo, 2022). Although investigations revealed discrepancies between the progress, volume, and quality of contract work, and partial payment for work carried out before completion according to the contract, narratives sometimes emerged in certain circles that they were “persecuted” by law enforcement or considered scapegoats because of concerns about religious interests. Another case was Pastor Gilbert Lumoindong, who was reported for alleged blasphemy after a video of his sermon went viral, which touched on prayer and zakat; the pastor and his supporters later described the report as a form of pressure and “persecution” of the religious leader by parties outside his congregation. (RTS/DAL, 2024).

According to Middleton (2011), the concept of martyrdom has often been used not just as a testimony of faith but also as a means of political and social influence. By highlighting this dimension, the analysis offered does not simply repeat the common understanding of martyrdom, but rather emphasizes a critical and original aspect: how the narrative of suffering can be misused, and why responsible ecclesiastical leadership is key to preventing such manipulation.

The primary objective of this research is to explore and interpret Acts 7:54–8:1 through a critical, contextual hermeneutical lens to uncover its potential as a theological critique of Christian leadership. This study seeks to analyze the narrative of Stephen’s martyrdom by examining its literary, theological, and socio-political dimensions, and to identify how the text reflects and challenges patterns of religious power, authority, and resistance within the early Christian community. Furthermore, it aims to conceptualize the “Martyrdom Syndrome” as a new analytical framework describing the tendency among Christian leaders to overspiritualize suffering and opposition as divine validation of their authority.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method, using a hermeneutical and literature-review approach, to analyze Acts 7:54-8:1 in relation to the phenomenon of the “Martyrdom Syndrome” as a critique of Christian leadership. The hermeneutical approach enables the researcher to understand the biblical text more deeply by taking into account the historical, social, and theological contexts of the events involving Stephen. As Schirmacher (2020, p. 151) affirms in *Towards a Theology of Martyrdom*, within the early church, “... experiences of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom have been prominent in the theology of the Early Church.” Thus, this analysis explores the text's meaning within the framework of the early church and its relevance to contemporary Christian leadership. Furthermore, this study adopts a literature review approach, using secondary sources such as biblical commentaries, theological writings, and academic studies on Christian leadership and martyrdom as analytical material. For instance, an article by Wespetal (2010) demonstrates that “martyrdom advances God’s plan by either bringing Him glory, or by enhancing people’s relationship with Him. Thus, this study focuses not only on textual understanding but also on the theological and social implications of the narrative under analysis.

Data are collected through the analysis of biblical texts, academic journals, theological books, and sources discussing leadership phenomena in the church. The analytical method employed is content analysis, aimed at identifying emerging patterns of thought within Acts 7:54–8:1 and examining how the concept of the “martyr syndrome” can function as a critique of Christian leadership. In line with the methodological framework proposed in *Missiological Research: Interdisciplinary Foundations, Methods, and Integration*, which emphasizes integrating theological reflection and social-scientific inquiry for a holistic understanding of missional phenomena, this study adopts an interdisciplinary hermeneutical approach to interpret the text both contextually and critically (Gilbert et al., 2018). Through this approach, the research seeks to offer a critical perspective on how suffering and persecution can be manipulated as instruments for legitimizing spiritual authority within church leadership.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Exposition of Acts 7:54-8:1

This section will provide an exposition of Acts 7:54-8:1 as a biblical foundation for critiquing leadership syndrome in the contemporary context. This passage records the harsh response of the Jewish religious leaders to Stephen’s testimony, which ultimately led to his persecution and death as the first martyr of the church.

### *Socio-Political Background in the Book of Acts*

The Book of Acts was written by Luke as a continuation of his Gospel, depicting the development of the early church within the context of the first-century Roman world. At that time, Jerusalem was under Roman rule, with governance controlled by the Roman governor

and Jewish religious leaders, including the Sanhedrin. Although Rome granted a certain degree of religious freedom to Jewish practices, tensions existed between Jewish authorities and emerging religious groups, including the Christian community (Dunnett., 2016).

The Sanhedrin, as the highest Jewish religious council, played a crucial role in preserving the purity of doctrine and the Law of Moses. They strongly opposed teachings deemed deviant, including the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah (Tenney, 2013). The Jewish religious authorities feared that the spread of this teaching would threaten social and political stability, as well as their relationship with the Roman government. Moreover, as Regev (2010) A study shows that early Christian sources like Luke-Acts portray the Temple leadership as prosecuting Christian leaders for violations of the sacred, such as alleged threats to the Temple cult, thereby illustrating how Jewish-Temple and Sadducean high-priestly interests intersected with political-religious authority in Jerusalem.

### ***Stephen's Position in the Early Christian Community***

Stephen was one of the seven deacons chosen to assist the apostles in addressing the needs of the congregation, particularly in ministering to widows and the poor (Acts 6:1-6). He was known as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, possessing exceptional wisdom in both speech and performing miracles among the people. Stephen's role in the early Christian community was not limited to social service but also extended to preaching the Gospel boldly.

When Stephen preached and engaged in debate with members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen, his opponents were unable to match the wisdom and power of the Spirit that was with him. This situation then sparked a systematic effort to incite the public to accuse Stephen of blasphemy against God and Moses. This accusation carried serious weight in the Jewish tradition, as blasphemy against God or Moses was considered a capital offence punishable by death by stoning under the Torah (Woods, 2025). The fact that Stephen was executed, while other disciples of Jesus did not suffer such punishment at the time, can be explained by the historical and sociopolitical context. Stephen was seen as a direct threat because his sermon openly offended the Jewish religious structure and revealed criticism of the function of the Temple (Acts 7:48-50). He was thus considered to have exceeded the limits of tolerance within the Jewish community. In contrast, the other disciples had not yet openly attacked Jewish religious symbols, and so, although they were monitored and sometimes intimidated, they were not immediately stoned. This suggests that Stephen's execution was more the result of an escalation of theological and symbolic conflict triggered by the content of his preaching, rather than simply because of his identity as a follower of Christ (Woods, 2025).

### ***The Religious Leaders' Response to Stephen***

When Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin, he delivered a lengthy speech outlining Israel's history of salvation, demonstrating how their ancestors repeatedly rejected God's messengers, including Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 7:51-52). His speech struck the hearts of the Sanhedrin members, especially when he accused them of being "stiff-necked and

uncircumcised in heart” (Acts 7:51). Stephen also declared that they had betrayed and murdered the Righteous One, Jesus Christ (Acts 7:52).

The execution of Stephen was a significant turning point in the history of the early church. This event marked the beginning of a broader persecution against the Christian community in Jerusalem. In Acts 8:1, it is stated that “Saul approved of their killing him.” This statement is highly significant as it highlights how Saul, who later became the Apostle Paul, was initially a fervent persecutor of Christians.

In this context, scholarly research indicates that Stephen’s sermon and subsequent martyrdom are portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles as a rhetorical construction signaling a shift in Christian identity and interreligious dynamics. For example, a study by Mendez (2017) notes that Stephen's long speech in Acts 7 shows a condemnation of the temple leadership and a pattern of rejection of God's messengers, culminating in a vision of the Son of Man that led to his stoning. Therefore, Stephen’s execution was more than a simple martyrdom; it reflects a theological and symbolic conflict emerging from his critique of the Jewish religious structure, which exposed the limits of tolerance for the early Christian mission.

### ***The Anger of the Jewish Leaders Against Stephen (Acts 7:54)***

The passage in Acts 7:54 records the furious reaction of the Jewish leaders toward Stephen after he delivered his lengthy defense (Acts 7:2-53). The key phrase describing their response is cut to the heart" (διεπρίοντο ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν, *dieprionto tais kardiais autōn*), which indicates deep emotional distress caused by Stephen's words (Sutanto, 2004). This event is not merely a historical conflict but can be read as a critique of contemporary Christian leadership that exhibits symptoms of the "martyrdom syndrome. Acts 7 represents the climax of the persecution against the early Christian community. Stephen was accused of blaspheming the Law of Moses and the Temple (Acts 6:11-14), reflecting the tension between Jewish faith and the emerging Christian movement. In response, Stephen delivered a speech tracing Israel’s history, highlighting the nation's repeated rejection of the prophets.

The phrase διεπρίοντο (*dieprionto*) derives from the root word πρίω (*priō*), which means “to saw” or “to cut” (Sutanto, 2014). This word also appears in Acts 5:33, when the Sanhedrin leaders were enraged at Peter and the other apostles. The use of this term signifies intense anger, which is not only emotional but also has the potential to lead to acts of violence.

The phrase “gnashed their teeth” (ἔβρυχον τοὺς ὀδόντας, *ebrukhon tous odontas*) in Acts 7:54 is an expression of extreme anger. This expression is often associated in Jewish literature with divine punishment for the wicked (Ps. 112:10; Matt. 8:12). Thus, Luke presents the Jewish leaders in an ironically negative position, as those who are enraged are actually the ones rejecting the truth.

The martyrdom syndrome refers to the tendency of an individual or group to perceive themselves as victims of persecution, even when the criticism they receive is constructive. In the context of Christian leadership, this syndrome can foster a defensive attitude that resists self-examination. Stephen was not merely a martyr but also a prophet who rebuked the sins of

his people. He followed the pattern of the Old Testament prophets, who were often rejected and killed by their own nation (Acts 7:52). However, unlike the defensive tendencies of the martyrdom syndrome, Stephen continued to pray for his persecutors (Acts 7:60).

Some modern Christian leaders often exhibit symptoms of martyrdom syndrome, where internal criticism of the church is perceived as persecution rather than a call to repentance. Like the Jewish leaders in Acts 7:54, they may be driven more by a sense of offence than by a desire to seek the truth. Acts 7:54 illustrates that the Jewish leaders' anger toward Stephen was not merely an emotional reaction but also a symbol of their rejection of the truth. In a modern context, this phenomenon can be associated with the martyrdom syndrome that frequently appears in Christian leadership. Therefore, this text can be read as a critique of church leaders who prefer to see themselves as victims rather than accept constructive correction (Nsiah, 2013).

### ***Stephen as a Martyr (Acts 7:55-60)***

Stephen's vision and execution mark him as the first Christian martyr. Acts 7:55–56 records that Stephen, “full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” This vision is remarkable because Jesus is usually depicted as sitting at the right hand of God (Mark 16:19; Heb. 1:3). His standing position signifies that Jesus is actively witnessing Stephen's martyrdom and welcoming him into His presence.

As Stephen was being stoned, he echoed the words of Jesus on the cross: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59) and “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). These statements reflect Stephen's Christlike character, as he forgave his persecutors even in the moment of his death. Stott (2020, p. 140) commented, “Stephen's prayer for his enemies shows how deeply he absorbed the spirit of Christ; his faith in Christ was not merely intellectual, it was transformative.” His willingness to die for his faith became an example for future Christian martyrs, who regarded suffering for Christ as an honor (Phil. 1:29).

### ***The Role of Saul in the Martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 8:1)***

Acts 8:1 introduces Saul, who would later become the apostle Paul, as a key figure in the execution of Stephen: “And Saul approved of his execution.” This statement indicates that Saul was not merely a passive observer but actively supported the event. His presence at the stoning site and his involvement in the subsequent persecution of Christians (Acts 9:1-2) demonstrate his strong commitment to eradicating what he perceived as a heretical sect.

Paul's later reflection on his role in Stephen's death reveals deep remorse: “And when the blood of Stephen, Your witness, was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving, and watching over the garments of those who killed him” (Acts 22:20). This confession underscores the radical transformation he underwent after encountering Christ. Larkin Jr. (2011) notes, “The mention of Saul in Stephen's martyrdom is an early sign of his radical conversion and future role as the most influential Christian missionary.”

The martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7:54-8:1 is one of the pivotal moments in the history of the early church, illustrating how the testimony of faith often encounters rejection and

persecution. This narrative is not merely a tragic account of the first martyr in church history but also carries profound theological significance. One crucial aspect of this event is how Stephen, in facing his death, imitates Christ's attitude of love and forgiveness (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60). This demonstrates that true martyrdom is not merely about physical suffering but also an expression of faith deeply rooted in love and truth.

Behind Stephen's martyrdom lies an implicit critique of the religious leadership of that time, which failed to grasp the true meaning of suffering and martyrdom. Throughout history, some Christian leaders have tended to adopt what can be called the "Martyrdom Syndrome," a tendency to view suffering as the primary measure of piety and spiritual authority. This mindset can trap individuals in a misguided understanding of ministry, where suffering is seen as the ultimate proof of faithfulness to God, without considering the aspect of loving service that Christ taught (John 13:34-35). According to González (2011) in early Christianity, Martyrdom was understood not only as passive suffering but also as an active and transformative act of faith. In other words, martyrdom is not the ultimate goal but a testimony that leads to transformation and the proclamation of the Gospel.

### **The Martyr Complex in Christian Leadership**

The martyr complex is a psychological pattern in which individuals consistently sacrifice their own needs for others, often expecting recognition or sympathy. In the context of Christian leadership, this syndrome can manifest in several ways. One example is a leader who perceives themselves as persecuted for upholding the truth. Leaders with a martyr complex may view their suffering as proof of their faithfulness to Christ, believing that taking unpopular stances and facing opposition are signs of steadfast faith. According to Peltonen (2017), notes in *Spiritual Leadership I: Ethics, Sacrifice and Martyrdom*, ethical commitment in spiritual leadership often entails sacrifice and the willingness to endure opposition as a consequence of moral conviction.

Furthermore, this syndrome can also lead to a tendency to dismiss criticism under the pretext of spiritual suffering. Leaders with this mindset often reject criticism, claiming that their suffering is part of a test of faith and thus making it unnecessary to consider objections objectively. As a result, they may become increasingly isolated and lose accountability in their leadership.

Moreover, the status of being a "victim" can be misused to justify authoritarian actions. By seeing themselves as martyrs, a leader may feel entitled to demand unquestioning loyalty and suppress dissent within their community. As Allison and Setterberg (2016) highlighted, suffering and sacrifice can generate both individual meaning and collective benefit, particularly in the context of leadership, where such experiences may strengthen commitment and moral responsibility.

Moreover, the status of a martyr can be used to justify abuses of power, where leaders feel entitled to make unilateral decisions without consultation or consensus, believing that their suffering grants them special insight. To address the martyr complex in Christian leadership,

several steps can be taken. First, leaders must develop self-awareness by regularly evaluating their motivations and actions, ensuring that they are not using a narrative of suffering to justify unhealthy behaviors. Second, they should learn to accept criticism with humility, viewing it as an opportunity for growth. Third, leaders must foster a culture of open dialogue, ensuring that community members feel safe to express their thoughts and concerns. Finally, leaders should seek support and accountability through relationships with peers and mentors to help them lead with integrity and humility. By implementing these steps, the martyr complex in Christian leadership can be minimized, allowing healthier, more responsible leadership to emerge.

### **Criticism and Alternative Approaches to Christian Leadership**

Christian leadership is a vital aspect of church life and ministry, rooted in Christ's example as the Good Shepherd. However, throughout history, Christian leadership has faced various challenges and criticisms, both from within and outside the church.

#### ***Reflection on Leadership Failures in Acts 7:54–8:1***

In Acts 7:54-8:1, the response of the Jewish leaders to Stephen's testimony can be observed. Stephen, a man full of the Holy Spirit, boldly confronted their hardened hearts in rejecting the transformative message of Jesus Christ. Upon hearing his testimony, they became enraged, hardened their hearts, and ultimately stoned him to death. This passage highlights one of the greatest dangers in leadership: the rejection of change brought by the work of the Holy Spirit.

This narrative illustrates how leaders who resist change often become ensnared in fear of losing their power or status. As Stott (2020) notes, "The religious arrogance displayed by the Sanhedrin made them turn a deaf ear to the truth and reject the signs of the times." Thus, it can be observed how leadership that resists change can have detrimental effects, not only on the leaders themselves but also on the faith community as a whole. Emima (2023, p. 67) states that, "A leader must practice leadership that is open to all criticism and input, not the status quo, to create life or prosperity for the people he leads." This reflects the role of a leader as a catalyst for change; therefore, a leader must be willing to accept criticism to drive better transformation.

#### ***Negative Effects on Church Growth***

The rejection of change not only negatively impacts individual leaders but also affects the overall growth of the church. The Book of Acts records that after Stephen's death, a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem, scattering many believers to various regions (Acts 8:1). This indicates that when leaders fail to recognize God's work, they can become obstacles to the church's mission.

Church historian González (2011, p. 89) states that "In every period of church history, there has been a tendency for leaders to maintain the status quo and to view those who bring new visions as threats." Therefore, Christian leaders need to be sensitive to the voice of the Holy Spirit and not be too quick to reject any form of change that may seem to threaten their comfort.

Had the Jewish religious leaders of the early church demonstrated openness to the work of the Holy Spirit, the escalation of persecution against Christ's followers might have been minimized. It is important to emphasize that the use of the term “church leaders” in this historical context is inappropriate when applied to Jesus' disciples, as they themselves were the ones who experienced persecution. What is meant here is the Jewish leaders who wielded both religious and social authority and played a dominant role in opposing the spread of the Gospel. However, ironically, even though persecution arose from leadership failures, God still worked through the situation.

### **Alternative Christian Leadership**

Rather than adopting a defensive or self-preserving stance, Christian leadership ought to be transformational, demonstrating openness to the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in both personal and communal dimensions. The figure of Paul illustrates this dynamic transformation in the journey from persecutor to apostle, revealing how a divine encounter reshapes authority and redefines leadership within the Christian mission (Asbanu, 2022). His writings consistently reveal that true authority emerges from relational humility and participation in the Spirit's redemptive work (Phil. 2:3-4).

Building upon Nouwen (2019) assertion that “... true Christian leaders are those who dare to serve, not those who seek power or influence”, this study argues that servant leadership in the Christian context is not merely an ethical posture but a theological vocation. Such leadership participates in God's transformative mission by embodying vulnerability, mutual accountability, and Spirit-led discernment, moving beyond moral exhortation toward a pneumatological model of leadership that forms and reforms the community of faith.

### **The Ideal Model of Christian Leadership**

In the Christian context, leadership is not only about managing and leading but also about embodying the life of Christ as the Good Shepherd. The ideal model of Christian leadership emphasizes service, humility, and genuine love for others. Within the church and society, Christian leaders are called to be the light and salt of the world by upholding integrity, responsibility, and exemplary faith (Imbing & Pandie, 2023).

### **Humble Leadership and Openness to Criticism**

A theological reading of the Gospels portrays Jesus Christ not merely as a moral exemplar of humility but as the inaugurator of a radically relational model of leadership. His declaration that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Matt. 20:28) redefines authority as participation in God's self-giving mission rather than hierarchical control. Katarina and Siswanto (2018) argue that Jesus' leadership integrates character formation, spiritual depth, and managerial discernment; however, this study extends their view by proposing that Christ's humility also functions as a theological paradigm that destabilizes power-centered leadership. In this sense, humility is not a passive virtue but a transformative posture through which divine

authority is manifested in human weakness. Paul's exhortation in Philippians 2:3 reframes leadership humility as a communal practice that sustains the body of Christ, inviting leaders to embody mutuality rather than self-assertion. Building on Stott's (2020) insight that authentic Christian leadership is defined by service rather than domination, this perspective contends that humility is a pneumatological disposition that enables continual discernment, correction, and renewal within the life of the church. Thus, humility in leadership becomes not simply a moral requirement but a dynamic theological act that participates in the Spirit's redemptive work.

### **Leadership That Upholds Truth Without Suppressing Other Voices**

Christian leaders must uphold the truth without exercising power in an authoritarian manner. In John 8:32, Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Truth in Christian leadership must be conveyed with love and justice, not through force or coercion. Bonhoeffer (1978, p. 97), a Christian theologian who opposed the Nazi regime, wrote, "Christian leaders must listen before they speak, they must understand before they judge." Thus, true Christian leadership not only upholds the truth but also values the diversity of voices within the community. Rejecting other perspectives solely to maintain power reflects an authoritarian attitude that contradicts the principles of Christian leadership. In line with this, Afaradi (2023) in his research emphasized that Christian leaders can build a congregational environment based on trust and respect by deepening understanding of doctrine, committing to realizing faith, and fostering an attitude of deep compassion and empathy.

### **Leadership That Imitates Christ**

The leadership model demonstrated by Jesus contrasts with worldly leadership patterns, which generally emphasize domination, power, and control over others. In contrast, in political and social contexts, worldly leadership is often practiced through hierarchical structures that demand absolute obedience, such as authoritarian government models that emphasize stability through force and coercion. Meanwhile, Jesus exemplified servant leadership, in which authority is understood as a means to love, guide, and empower others rather than as a tool to subjugate them. In Mark 10:42-45, Jesus emphasizes that true leadership is about serving, not dominating. "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant", He says" (Mark 10:43). This highlights that ideal Christian leadership is not about maintaining status or power but about sacrifice and service. In his book *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf (2003) writes, True leaders ask, 'Are those I serve growing as individuals? Are they becoming healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely to become servants themselves? This aligns with Christ's example of giving Himself for others. An ideal Christian leader is not afraid of losing power because their focus is not on power itself, but on the well-being of those they lead. Christian leadership is not solely concerned with organizational aspects, which may lead to fear of losing position, but also encompasses a profound spiritual dimension. Leadership in the Christian context is not merely about managing church structures and administration but also about guiding the congregation in faith growth, shaping character in accordance with

Christ's teachings, and embodying Gospel values in every action. This is the role model that Jesus demonstrated during His ministry on earth.

The ideal Christian leadership must reflect the character of Christ, humble, open to criticism, upholding the truth without suppressing other voices, and prioritizing service over maintaining power (Afaradi, 2024). A true Christian leader does not seek to dominate others, but to guide them in truth and love (Hannas & Rinawaty, 2019). Furthermore, Afaradi (2023) states that, Effective leadership requires the capacity to guide individuals toward spiritual growth and development. One approach is to internalize and apply the principles and practices of the Christian tradition, based on Jesus' leadership model. Thus, ideal Christian leadership is not merely a theory but a calling to emulate Christ in every aspect of leadership.

## **CONCLUSION**

An analysis of Acts 7:54-8:1 finds that martyrdom syndrome in Christian leadership can become problematic when used to justify maintaining the status quo and rejecting criticism. The story of Stephen demonstrates that persecution against prophetic voices is often carried out by religious authorities who feel threatened by changes or corrections to established systems. The attitude of the Jewish leaders toward Stephen reflects a leadership tendency that resists theological and structural renewal, resulting in an exclusive and repressive power dynamic.

In the context of contemporary Christianity, the martyrdom syndrome can be seen in leaders who claim victimhood when faced with criticism, even though such criticism serves as a social control mechanism for ecclesial improvement and transformation. Furthermore, the martyrdom syndrome in Christian leadership can lead to spiritual and institutional stagnation if not approached with a reflective and open attitude toward feedback.

From a theological perspective, Stephen faced persecution not because he claimed victimhood but because of his courage to speak the truth with integrity. Therefore, these findings affirm that Christian leaders should emulate Stephen's character in courage, wisdom, and willingness to accept constructive criticism. Thus, healthy Christian leadership does not avoid criticism with a victim mentality but rather adapts, transforms, and takes responsibility for its moral and spiritual calling.

### **Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests related to this study. The research was conducted without any financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the reported work.

### **Author contributions**

Asep Afaradi was the lead author responsible for the conceptualization and major revisions of the manuscript. Milton Pantaow contributed to the translation of the manuscript, provided relevant references, and assisted in the revision process.

### **Ethical considerations**

The authors confirm that this research did not involve human participants, animal subjects, or any form of personal data collection. Therefore, ethical approval was not required for this study.

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## Data availability

The findings of this study are based on publicly accessible academic literature, policy documents, and documented case studies. No primary empirical data were generated, and all sources used in this study are properly cited in the reference list.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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