**Approaching Leadership Studies: Priority 1 - What is Humanity?**

Sarah Kimball Grunblatt, ThM, MPH, MS, MS, MEd, MEd, MA, BS

School of Divinity, Liberty University

Biblical & Theological Foundations of Leadership: CLED-700

Dr. Alvin Dockett

July 20, 2025

**Author Note**

Sarah Kimball Grunblatt, ThM, MPH, MS, MS, MEd, MEd, MA, BS

I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Sarah Kimball Grunblatt.

Email: SKGrunblatt@liberty.edu

CONTENTS

[Introduction 3](#_Toc203616381)

[What is Humanity? 3](#_Toc203616382)

[Doctrine 1: Humanity Created in the Image of God 5](#_Toc203616383)

[Doctrine 2: The Fallen Nature of Humanity 7](#_Toc203616384)

[Doctrine 3: Redeemed Humanity Through Christ 9](#_Toc203616385)

[Conclusion 10](#_Toc203616386)

# **Introduction**

Understanding the nature of humanity forms a critical foundation for Christian leadership studies, as it directly influences how leaders perceive their own identity and the individuals they serve. Theological anthropology, rooted in Scripture, portrays humanity as beings created in God's image, marred by sin, and capable of redemption through Christ. Psalm 139:13-14 beautifully illustrates this creative act: "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well."[[1]](#footnote-1) This biblical framework not only shapes ethical decision-making but also guides relational dynamics in leadership, emphasizing dignity, humility, and transformative growth (Huizing, 2011). By prioritizing these doctrines, Christian leaders can integrate faith with practice, fostering environments that honor God's design for human flourishing. As Tripp (2021) emphasizes in exploring historic doctrines, true belief in humanity's nature must translate into everyday life, affecting how leaders shepherd others toward God's purposes.

# **What is Humanity?**

From a biblical standpoint, humanity encompasses all individuals as created beings endowed with purpose, relational capacity, and moral agency, yet affected by the fall and oriented toward redemption. Genesis 1:26–27 affirms, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.'" This imago Dei includes substantive (inherent qualities like rationality), functional (dominion and stewardship), and relational (communion with God and others) dimensions, distinguishing humans as unique among creation (Wilburn, 2017). Ecclesiastes 3:11 adds depth: "He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." However, the narrative of sin introduces distortion, fracturing these aspects, while the promise of redemption through Christ restores alignment with God's mission.

In the context of leadership studies, this understanding of humanity informs approaches that view followers not as mere subordinates but as image-bearers deserving of empowerment and respect. Hammett's chapter in A Theology for the Church outlines the doctrine of humanity as dichotomous—body and soul—rooted in the imago Dei, which imparts value and calls for ethical treatment in communal settings (Akin, 2014). Huizing argues that Christian leadership must begin with a theology that prioritizes followership, noting, "Christianity, at its deepest essence, is a practice of followership. The final command of Jesus before bodily leaving this earth was to go and make disciples" (Huizing, 2011, p. 59). This shifts the focus from self-aggrandizement to discipleship, aligning with biblical anthropology where humanity's essence is submission to Christ as King.

Ayers bridges theology and anthropology by emphasizing character rooted in Christ's example, particularly through Philippians 2:5–11, which exhorts believers to adopt Christ's mindset of humility for unity and service. He posits that leadership emerges from ontology—the essence of being—stating that "the process of becoming a leader is the same process that makes a person a healthy, fully integrated human being" (Ayers, 2006, p. 6, citing Bennis). Tangen (2023) extends this through the S-E-R-V-E framework (Spiritual, Equipping, Relational, Visionary, Effective), which integrates Trinitarian views of relationality, portraying humanity as inherently communal and called to reflect God's triune nature in leadership practices. Smith (2009) adds a formative perspective, viewing humans not primarily as thinkers but as "desiring animals" shaped by liturgies and practices that direct loves toward God's kingdom.

The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology reinforces this by defining theological anthropology as the study of humanity in relation to God, covering creation, fall, and redemption (Treier & Elwell, 2017). Thus, humanity's nature demands a balanced leadership paradigm: one that acknowledges inherent dignity while addressing brokenness, ultimately directing toward Christlikeness. This holistic view equips Christian leaders to navigate diverse contexts, promoting ethical influence and communal transformation.

# **Doctrine 1: Humanity Created in the Image of God**

The doctrine of creation establishes humanity's foundational identity as bearers of God's image, imparting inherent dignity, relational depth, and stewardship responsibilities. Genesis 1:28 commands, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over...every living thing." This functional aspect of the imago Dei positions humans as co-creators with God, exercising authority that mirrors divine order and creativity, rather than mere dominance (Huizing, 2011). Genesis 2:7 details this intimate formation: "then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." Wilburn elaborates that the imago Dei involves both ontological (being in God's likeness) and functional (ruling as a result of that likeness) elements, quoting Peter Gentry: "The ruling is not the essence of the divine image, but rather a result of being made as the divine image" (Wilburn, 2017, p. 101). This underscores humanity's unique role in reflecting God's character through responsible governance.

Hammett in Akin's volume emphasizes that the imago Dei includes rationality, morality, and relationality, setting humans apart for leadership roles in creation (Akin, 2014). In Christian leadership, this doctrine implies affirming the intrinsic value of every person, creating spaces where creativity, relationships, and purpose thrive. Leaders must foster environments that honor followers' dignity, recognizing diverse gifts as expressions of the imago Dei. Wilburn connects this to anthropological telos—the trajectory toward Christ—advocating flexibility in leadership styles, such as those in Situational Leadership Theory (directing, coaching, supporting, delegating), to adapt to followers' competency and commitment levels. He asserts, "Anthropological telos calls for flexibility as the key Christian leadership principle guiding followers toward relationality as a formative end and resurrection as a final end" (Wilburn, 2017, p. 90). This plasticity aligns with Kathryn Tanner's view of human adaptability, where spiritual nourishment reshapes individuals according to God's image.

Psalm 8:4–5 further exalts this created state: "What is man that you are mindful of him...Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor." James 3:9 reinforces the imago Dei's persistence: "With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God." Ayers links this to leadership ontology, where character balances authority with humility, enabling transformational influence. He notes that leadership qualities are "not skills that can be learned...but the natural expression of the fully functional personality" (Ayers, 2006, p. 7, citing Thompson). Tangen (2023) reinforces this through the Relational dimension of S-E-R-V-E, viewing humanity as inherently communal, reflecting Trinitarian interdependence and calling leaders to cultivate virtue ethics in interpersonal dynamics. Laniak (2006) portrays God as the ultimate Shepherd, implying humanity's created need for guidance, with leaders serving as under-shepherds after God's heart (Jer. 3:15).

This doctrine counters dehumanizing leadership practices, such as exploitation, by promoting solidarity and ethical stewardship. Zimmerli et al. (2007) add a corporate perspective, viewing humanity as ethical agents in governance, resolving dilemmas through hermeneutical ethics that consider contextual responsibilities. As Huizing observes, leadership in creation's narrative includes "Adam’s dominion in the garden (Gen. 1:26)" as a model of God-governed authority (Huizing, 2011, p. 74). Christian leaders, therefore, empower teams to co-create, ensuring actions align with divine intent and foster human flourishing in organizational and communal settings.

# **Doctrine 2: The Fallen Nature of Humanity**

The fall, as narrated in Genesis 3, introduces sin, distorting the imago Dei and infusing human nature with self-centeredness, broken relationships, and moral frailty. Genesis 3:6 captures the moment: "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate." Romans 3:23 encapsulates this reality: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," highlighting the universal impact of sin on humanity's capacity for good. Jeremiah 17:9 warns, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" This distortion manifests in leadership through pride, power abuse, and relational conflicts, necessitating vigilance and humility.

Hammett details how sin affects the totality of humanity, corrupting body, soul, and relationships (Akin, 2014). Christian leadership must account for this fallen state by prioritizing accountability and heart-level transformation over mere behavioral compliance. Huizing illustrates this with David's census (1 Chronicles 21:1–4), where sinful motives undermine actions: "There is no foolishness in the action—unless there is a sinful heart behind it...This clearly illustrates how the ‘why’ question becomes far more important to Christian leadership than the ‘what’ question" (Huizing, 2011, p. 62). He critiques outcome-focused theories, urging a Christ-centric approach that addresses sin's relational disruptions.

Wilburn notes that the Fall breaks relationality "in the now," requiring leaders to evaluate followers amid limitations, using flexible styles to guide toward restoration. He draws on Wolfhart Pannenberg's historicity, viewing humanity within a narrative of exocentric destiny, where sin hinders but does not eradicate the image of God (Wilburn, 2017, p. 98). Romans 7:18 expresses this internal struggle: "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out." Ayers addresses sin through insecurity: "Many leaders possess deep insecurity about their identity and worth and thus exhibit behavior that undermines leadership...Their leadership actions flow from insecurity" (Ayers, 2006, p. 8, citing Palmer). This calls for self-examination, as in Ephesians 2:1–3, which describes humanity as "dead in...sins," following worldly influences.

Smith (2009) views the fall as misdirected desires, where liturgies of the world shape loves away from God, calling leaders to redirect affections through formative practices. Tangen (2023) integrates this into the Effective dimension of S-E-R-V-E, balancing moral and instrumental goods through stewardship, mitigating selfish motives with virtues like prudence. Leaders model repentance and forgiveness, creating safe spaces for growth. As Huizing (2011) warns, without faith alignment, practices deviate from Scripture, reflecting fallen desires for glory. This doctrine tempers leadership optimism with realism, emphasizing structures like mentorship to navigate conflicts and pursue ethical integrity.

# **Doctrine 3: Redeemed Humanity Through Christ**

Redemption renews humanity's distorted image, transforming individuals into new creations through Christ's work and the Holy Spirit's empowerment. 2 Corinthians 5:17 declares, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." Ephesians 2:8-10 elaborates: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." This process orients humanity toward conformity with Christ, restoring relationality and purpose.

In leadership, redemption manifests as servant-hearted influence that empowers others for discipleship. Huizing frames this as embodying Christ: "Mission does not happen until the leader knows what it means to embody Christ and is already on the path of faith to which others are invited and are empowered to join" (Huizing, 2011, p. 66). Leaders, as "jars of clay" (2 Corinthians 4:7), display God's power, shifting from self-glory to Gospel proclamation. Tripp (2021) applies the doctrine of humanity to daily life, urging believers to live out their redeemed identity, combating sin through grace and influencing others toward transformation.

Wilburn ties redemption to eschatological telos, with Romans 8:29 emphasizing predestination: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." Flexible leadership directs followers toward progressive sanctification and resurrection, prioritizing soul care over structure (Wilburn, 2017, p. 100). Colossians 3:9-10 instructs: "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." Ayers draws from Philippians 2:5–11, where Christ's kenosis redeems through humility: "The mantra of Philippians 2:5-11 is that through the humility, selflessness, and sacrifice of Christ mankind is redeemed and he is exalted as Lord" (Ayers, 2006, p. 20). This inspires sacrificial unity, enhancing transformational traits like inspirational motivation.

Tangen (2023) embodies redemption in S-E-R-V-E's Spiritual and Visionary elements, grounding leadership in Trinitarian mission and hope. Galatians 5:22–23 lists Spirit fruits—love, joy, peace—as marks of redeemed behavior, fostering relational ethics. John 3:16 underscores God's love: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son..." Leaders reflect this by prioritizing equity and healing, anticipating God's kingdom. Laniak (2006) highlights redeemed leaders as shepherds after God's heart, caring for the vulnerable as God does. Redemption thus inspires visionary, compassionate leadership that restores dignity and advances eternal goals.

# **Conclusion**

Humanity—created in God's image, fallen into sin, and redeemed through Christ—offers a comprehensive theological foundation for Christian leadership, promoting dignity, humility, and hope. Integrating these doctrines enables leaders to guide with wisdom, transforming individuals and communities for God's glory (Tangen, 2023). As Smith (2009) reminds, this involves shaping desires toward the kingdom, ensuring doctrine informs practice.

**References**

Akin, D. L. (Ed.). (2014). *A theology for the church* (Rev. ed.). B&H Academic.

Ayers, M. (2006). Toward a theology of leadership. *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership*, *1*(1), 3–27. <https://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/jbpl/vol1no1/Ayers_JBPL_V1No1.pdf>

Crossway. 2001. Holy Bible: English Standard Version. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

Huizing, R. L. (2011). Bringing Christ to the table of leadership: Moving towards a theology of leadership. *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*, *5*(2), 58–75. <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1080&context=jacl>

Laniak, T. (2006). *Shepherds after my own heart: Pastoral traditions and leadership in the Bible*. IVP Academic.

Smith, J. K. A. (2009). *Desiring the kingdom: Worship, worldview, and cultural formation* (Vol. 1). Baker Academic.

Tangen, K. I. (2023). S-E-R-V-E: A theoretical framework for Christian leadership. *Scandinavian Journal for Leadership & Theology*, *10*. <https://doi.org/10.53311/sjlt.v10.106>

Treier, D. J., & Elwell, W. A. (Eds.). (2017). *Evangelical dictionary of theology* (3rd ed.). Baker Academic.

Tripp, P. D. (2021). *Do you believe? 12 historic doctrines to change your everyday life*. Crossway.

Wilburn, M. (2017). Anthropological telos and leadership goals in theological anthropology. *Journal of Religious Leadership*, *16*(1), 90–112. <https://arl-jrl.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Wlburn-Anthropological-Telos.pdf>

Zimmerli, W. C., Richter, K., & Holzinger, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Corporate ethics and corporate governance*. Springer Berlin.

1. All Scripture references will be from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated. Crossway, *Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)