

## **Reclaiming Integrity in the Post-Truth Era: Reconstructing Pastoral Leadership Based on Ephesians 4:15**

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### **Abstract:**

The post-truth era presents a crisis of truth and integrity that clearly affects Christian leadership practices, particularly regarding the integrity and morality of pastors. The relativization of truth often shifts the theological foundations of church ministry, thereby risking the loss of pastoral leadership's integrity. Even the phenomenon of digital disinformation and the erosion of leadership morality in this era underscores the urgency of reconstructing a leadership model grounded in biblical texts. This study aims to conduct an exegetical analysis of Ephesians 4:15 as a theological foundation for pastoral leadership integrity in a post-truth culture. The method employed is exegetical analysis using a grammatical-historical and theological-syntactic approach. The results of the study show that Ephesians 4:15 emphasizes the integration of truth and love as the foundation for the church's growth toward Christ as its Head. This theological dimension affirms pastoral leadership that is character-based, integrity-based, and Christ-centered amid the challenges of the post-truth culture. Thus, the pastoral leadership paradigm built from this text is able to guide the congregation to live according to the values of God's truth.

### **Keywords:**

Ephesians 4:15; pastoral leadership; integrity; post-truth; pastoral theology

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## INTRODUCTION

The post-truth culture marks a shift in the value of truth from objectivity toward emotional subjectivity, both personal and communal. This demonstrates the blurring of boundaries between truth and falsehood, honesty and dishonesty, highlighting the complexity of navigating truth in the modern era (Modreanu, 2017). These dynamics influence how spiritual leaders interpret truth and the value of integrity in their ministry (Arifianto et al., 2025). However, despite the challenges posed by the dynamics of the post-truth era, truth remains an essential norm for justice and integrity (Wojtyła, 2023). Although pastoral leadership, which should be rooted in God's truth, currently faces the challenge of relativism, it is hoped that Christian leadership will be grounded in absolute truth, as stated in New Testament theology, which places Christ as the Head of the church the standard of truth and Christian integrity. Pastoral leadership today is tested not only in managerial aspects but, above all, in the consistency between doctrine and character. A pastor's integrity is crucial because he serves as both a guardian of doctrine and an ethical role model for the congregation (Sumual & Arifianto, 2025). Therefore, a solid biblical foundation is needed to reexamine the nature of leadership that remains faithful to the truth.

Christian leadership in this study is indeed rooted in Paul's ecclesiology, which places Christ as the Head of the Church and the source of spiritual growth. Within this framework, the synthesis of truth (*alētheia*) and love (*agapē*) serves as a guiding principle for the life of the faith community. Ephesians 4:15 affirms that growth toward spiritual maturity occurs through the value of "holding fast to the truth in love." Theologically, this verse integrates teaching and ethical values, so that the church is not trapped in relationships lacking a foundation of truth. This is especially true given the phenomenon of increasing moral degradation and the spread of theological disinformation through digital media (Arifianto et al., 2025). In this situation, some spiritual leaders face pressures that threaten the integrity of their leadership through compromises in values (Mudak & Manafe, 2025), and inconsistencies between teaching and practice. Thus, Christian leadership rooted in the synthesis of truth and love according to Ephesians 4:15 becomes a theological imperative to reaffirm the integrity of pastors amid character degradation and digital disinformation that threaten the consistency between teaching and practice.

In fact, this topic has previously been explored by Novita Angel Br. Dongoran, whose research discusses how the phenomenon of "deadly faith" in the case of Paul Nthenge and the spiritual exhaustion of Jarrid Wilson demonstrate how Christian leadership can become distorted when truth is separated from love and character integrity (Dongoran, 2025). In a post-truth culture, charisma, emotions, and public pressure often supplant the authority of God's Word, causing faith to become a tool of manipulation or a burden that erodes a leader's spiritual health. Therefore, Christian leadership amid the post-truth era and polarization must be reconstructed on the foundation of biblical truth, a balance of love, and a healthy and accountable spirituality (Dongoran, 2025). Similar research is also discussed by Indra Richard Sigarlaki and Debby Sandra Tendean in their paper, which emphasizes that the post-truth era presents an epistemological crisis that undermines the church's authority on truth through relativism, digital disinformation, and even the dominance of subjective opinions over objective facts, thereby demanding deep theological reflection (Sigarlaki et al., 2025). Consequently,

Christian leadership is called to restore the authority of truth through moral integrity and prophetic courage to guide the congregation amid information bias and the degradation of spirituality (Sigarlaki et al., 2025). Several previous studies have discussed pastoral leadership and its characteristics in exegetical studies of the Epistle to the Ephesians; this gap highlights the need for an integrative study that connects exegetical analysis with reflections on pastoral leadership in a post-truth context. Based on this research gap, this study offers a novel approach through an in-depth exegetical analysis of Ephesians 4:15, which is directly correlated with the concept of pastoral leadership integrity in the post-truth era. The purpose of this study is to conduct an exegetical analysis of Ephesians 4:15 as a theological foundation for pastoral leadership integrity in a post-truth culture.

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative method (Sugiyono, 2012, p. 90), utilizing a literature review and theological analysis of the text of Ephesians 4:15. Research sources include the Greek text of the New Testament, systematic theology literature, as well as studies on pastoral leadership and post-truth culture. This study begins with a historical examination and exegetical analysis of Ephesians 4:15 to understand the context and lexical-syntactic meaning of the text. Next, the study explores the theological dimensions of truth and love in Paul's ecclesiology and identifies a crisis of leadership integrity in post-truth culture. Finally, this study discusses the reconstruction of a pastoral leadership paradigm based on Ephesians 4:15 as a model of pastoral ministry that is characterized by integrity, Christ-centeredness, and transformativeness.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Historical and Textual Analysis of Ephesians 4:15

Ephesus was the capital of the Province of Asia now known as Turkey and was a major city in the Roman Empire located on a busy trade route (Johnston, 2006, p. 361). The Epistle to the Ephesians is traditionally associated with the Apostle Paul's ministry while he was in prison, most likely in Rome around 60–62 CE (Pfeiffer, 2001, p. 958). Spiritual life in Ephesus was also dominated by the Temple of Diana, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, better known as the Temple of Artemis the goddess of the Ephesians, believed to be the goddess of fertility, and later identified with the Greek goddess Artemis and the Roman goddess Diana (Tenney, 2017, p. 362). These temples of the goddess Artemis also became centers of debauchery and immorality (prostitution), where people openly engaged in lewd acts, and a large number of the prostitutes were female priests (Sutanto, 2007, p. 207). In such a strongly religio-political context, the Christian congregation faced immense pressure to compromise with the dominant beliefs around them. It was this situation that prompted Paul to write the Epistle to the Ephesians to strengthen the congregation's faith so that they would not be influenced by the prevailing forms of worship and ideologies that contradicted the Gospel of Christ (Tino & Kristiana, 2021). The city of Ephesus was located about three miles from the coast on the banks of the Cayster River, which at that time was navigable, connecting it to all the other major cities in the province, thus providing a connection to the entire Asian hinterland (Samarena, 2018). Furthermore, Ephesus was a highly strategic city for various purposes, as it was the most

important city in the Roman province of Asia, situated on the western coast of Turkey. The city was situated at the mouth of the Kayster River, between the Kores Mountains and the sea, and was located three miles from the navigable mouth of the Kayster River, making Ephesus a port city (Douglas, 1982, p. 267).

The city of Ephesus itself was a religious and intellectual center in Asia Minor, known for its religious pluralism and a strong cult of Artemis. The Christian community there lived under social pressure and faced the challenge of syncretism. Within this historical context, the Epistle to the Ephesians places a strong emphasis on ecclesial identity and the unity of the body of Christ, and stresses the need for believers to grow to maturity, reflecting the fullness of Christ (Janke, 1993). Chapter 4, in particular, moves from doctrine to ethics, from theological identity to the practical implications for congregational life. Verse 15 is part of the pericope 4:11–16, which discusses the purpose of the gift of ministry: growth toward full maturity in Christ. The central theme of the Epistle to the Ephesians is the church as the body of Christ (Tulluan, 1999). It is in the Epistle to the Ephesians that the word “congregation” is used to refer to the universal church rather than a single local group. This is intended to inform other nations of their new calling (Tenney, 2017). Thus, it emphasizes the need for believers to grow into maturity, reflecting the fullness of Christ. Historically, this passage addresses the threat of “teaching winds” and heresy (4:14). This indicates the presence of unstable doctrinal dynamics within the early community. Thus, verse 15 does not stand as general moral advice, but rather as a theological response to doctrinal instability. The church is called not only to preserve the purity of doctrine, but also to build spiritual maturity centered on Christ as the Head.

Exegetically, the key phrase in this verse is *aletheúontes en agapē*. The participle *\*aletheúontes\** derives from the root *alētheia* (truth). (Software, 2018) This form does not merely mean “to speak the truth,” but rather “to practice” or “to live out” the truth. Its verbal nuance points to a continuous, existential action. Truth in Paul’s context is not merely a theological proposition, but a reality embodied in communal life. Thus, the integrity of faith becomes a practical dimension, not merely a cognitive one.

The phrase *en agapē* (“in love”) serves as the ethical framework for this action. Love (*agapē*) in Paul’s theology is Christological and sacrificial (Faubun et al., 2025), and also reflects the character of Christ himself. Love is not merely an emotional addition, but rather the medium through which righteousness is practiced. Furthermore, the main clause *auxēsōmen eis auton ta panta* (“we grow toward Him in every way”) (Software, 2018) affirms the teleological goal of the church’s growth. The verb *auxanō* (to grow) is in the subjunctive mood, implying a progressive and collective dynamic. (Sutanto, 2014) This growth is directed *eis auton* toward Christ, who is affirmed as the “Head” (*kephalē*) (Alkitab, 2021). The metaphor of the body and the head emphasizes the organic relationship between Christ and the congregation (Yulianus, 2022). Leadership and spiritual maturity are not autonomous, as if standing on their own, but are integrated into the authority of Christ. From a historical and exegetical perspective, Ephesians 4:15 presents a vision of a church that is doctrinally and ethically mature. Theologically, this verse serves as the foundation for church leadership rooted in integrity—that is, the alignment between teaching and life. Thus, historical and exegetical analysis shows that Ephesians 4:15 is not merely a moral exhortation but a paradigm for the church’s growth in God’s truth.

In light of Ephesians 4:15, the word ἀληθεύοντες (abiding in the truth) demands that a shepherd lead with complete integrity—not only being true in teaching but also true in character and actions. The integrity of a shepherd’s leadership means harmony between the pulpit and personal life, between the doctrine preached and daily conduct, so that the congregation not only hears the truth but sees it put into practice. A shepherd who “speaks and lives in the truth” rejects manipulation, pretense, and compromise for the sake of popularity. A shepherd also dares to proclaim the Word honestly, yet does so in love (Hasibuan, 2024). Following the example of Paul, who emphasized that truth and love must go hand in hand (Sumual & Arifianto, 2025). Thus, integrity is not merely a matter of reputation, but rather spiritual consistency that enables the congregation to grow toward Christ as the Head.

Ephesians 4:15 provides the theological foundation for a dynamic and Christ-centered concept of pastoral leadership, namely, “holding fast to the truth in love” so that the congregation “may grow in every way into Him who is the Head, Christ” (Telaumbanua, 2019). From an ecclesiological perspective, this text affirms that pastoral leadership cannot be separated from doctrinal truth and the practice of love. The first principle—holding fast to the truth—implies that pastors are responsible for preserving the purity of apostolic teaching as the foundation for the formation of the congregation’s faith (Lewu, 2025). Truth here is not abstract but rooted in the revelation of Christ as “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), so that the pastor’s authority is derivative and subject to Christ as the center of truth.

The second principle—growing love—emphasizes that truth must not be separated from transformative relationships. Within the framework of Ephesians 4:15, love is not merely an emotion or tolerance, but a relational principle that organically builds up the body of Christ (Faubun et al., 2025). Love serves as the medium through which truth is conveyed not destructively, but in a constructive manner. This aligns with the understanding that the church is the body of Christ that “grows and builds itself up in love” (Eph 4:16), so pastoral leadership must integrate doctrinal correction with pastoral empathy. Thus, pastoral authority functions not as a means of control, but as a service for the growth of the faith community (Arifin & Tambunan, 2026). The third principle—living in every way toward Christ—affirms the Christ-centered teleological orientation of pastoral leadership (Awuy & Tombeng, 2025). The entire dynamic of leadership—whether in teaching, shepherding, or decision-making—is directed toward the spiritual maturity of the congregation as they become more like Christ. This reflects Paul’s idea that the goal of ministry is “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature” (Eph 4:13). Thus, pastoral leadership is not static or administrative, but rather a formative process that guides the congregation toward Christlikeness as the Head of the church. These three principles integrally shape a theological, relational, and missional model of pastoral leadership within the framework of Paul’s ecclesiology.

## **The Theological Dimensions of Truth and Love in Paul’s Ecclesiology**

In Paul’s thought, the church is not merely a religious institution, but a theological reality born of God’s work of salvation in Christ and realized through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (Waruwu & Zega, 2025). Therefore, truth (alētheia) (Oddeng, 2025), and love (agapē) are

inseparable because both are rooted in God's very nature and reach their pinnacle in the person and work of Christ. Paul's teaching emphasizes that truth is first and foremost Christological. Christ is the manifestation of God's truth (Tarigan, 2019). Who reveals the mystery of salvation that was previously hidden? Truth is not merely doctrinal, but a reality that is revealed and lived out in relationship with Christ. In ecclesiological terms, truth serves as the foundation of the faith community's identity. The church is built upon the true proclamation of the Gospel and is called to preserve the purity of doctrine. However, for Paul, truth must be embodied in a way of life consistent with the Gospel.

Love, on the other hand, is a relational dynamic that shapes the internal structure of the church. Paul positions love as the law that fulfills all ethical demands (Fauubun et al., 2025). In his perspective, love is the fruit of the Spirit and a tangible sign of new life in Christ. Love is not merely an emotion (Fauubun et al., 2025), but rather an active commitment to building up and strengthening fellow members of the body of Christ. Within the framework of the church, love serves as the glue of unity and a means of spiritual growth for the community (Widodo & Suseno, 2025). Without love, spiritual gifts lose their meaning and ministry becomes empty. Truth and love in Ephesians 4:15 are expressed through the phrase "holding fast to the truth in love." Theologically, this expression reflects what should occur in leadership to build good character. Ephesians 4:15 serves as an important foundation for character-based leadership. Spiritual leaders are called not only to uphold the truth dogmatically but also to communicate it with love so as not to fall into manipulation or superficial image-building. Thus, the integrity of leadership is tested through the courage to consistently speak the truth while maintaining an attitude that builds up, not divides. For truth protects the church from doctrinal deviation, while love prevents truth from becoming a tool of domination or spiritual violence.

Truth guides the church toward that eschatological vision, while love enables the church to be a concrete sign of God's presence. The unity of the body of Christ is not built through uniformity, but through the diversity of gifts united by love and governed by the truth of the Gospel (Gea & Zebua, n.d.). This essentially leads leaders to function not merely as hierarchical rulers, but as servants who equip the saints for works of service. Their character-based leadership is rooted in faithfulness to the truth of the Gospel and manifested through love that builds up

## **The Crisis of Leadership Integrity in a Post-Truth Culture**

Christian leadership integrity is rooted in the unity of character, biblical truth, and action. Integrity is not merely a moral reputation, but the consistency of actions that are continually lived out. In a post-truth culture, this consistency faces serious pressure. Leaders may be tempted to compromise the truth of the Gospel when truth is diminished, and morality loses its foundation. Leadership shifts from a spiritual calling to a mere symbol. Social media creates a space where narratives can be spread without verification (Amin, 2025), while algorithms tend to reinforce biases that are far from the facts. Moreover, theological disinformation spreads easily and shapes congregational opinion. Consequently, spiritual leaders often find themselves under pressure to respond quickly to viral issues, even before engaging in deep theological

reflection. As a result, the quality of faith discourse declines, and the integrity of teaching is threatened.

A crisis of integrity is also evident in the stagnation of pastoral ministry (Rini, 2025). Moreover, the success of ministry is often measured by quantitative indicators such as the number of followers and congregational growth. While growth is not inherently negative, when the measure of success is detached from fidelity to the truth of the Gospel, the orientation of ministry can shift. Leaders may be tempted to deliver messages that please their audience but neglect the depth of truth and character, thereby risking the loss of their identity as Christian leaders. From a biblical perspective, the principle of “holding fast to the truth in love” in Ephesians 4:15 teaches that truth without love leads to harshness and legalism, while love without truth gives rise to relativism and ethical compromise. In a post-truth culture, leadership integrity demands the courage to consistently speak the truth, while doing so within a framework of edifying love.

The integrity crisis reveals the need for deep character. Christian leadership requires ongoing spiritual formation, in which leaders live in an intimate relationship with Christ and the community of faith. Integrity is born from a life lived with God before it manifests in public service (Lase et al., 2025). The post-truth culture is, in fact, a call to return to genuine spiritual foundations because, in the crisis of leadership integrity within the post-truth culture, the issue is not merely one of individual ethics but an ecclesiological challenge that touches on the church’s identity and mission. Moreover, since Christian leadership must be rooted in Christ-centered integrity, the church can stand as a credible witness in the midst of a relativistic world.

## **Reconstructing the Pastoral Leadership Paradigm Based on Ephesians 4:15**

Pastoral leadership is rooted in objective theological truth. The word *aletheúontes* in Ephesians 4:15 indicates an active commitment to living out and tangibly actualizing the truth—not merely declaring it in words as mere ornamentation. In a pastoral context, this means that pastors are called to preserve the purity of doctrine (Lewu, 2025). Pastors are also expected to build the congregation on the foundation of the Gospel (Djami, 2025), and to reject any compromise with doctrinal relativism. Truth serves as the standard that guides the vision, decisions, and actions of leadership. Without this foundation, ministry is easily swayed by cultural pressures and community preferences.

Love (*agapē*) serves as the ethical force that frames the practice of truth. In Paul’s theology, love is sacrificial and oriented toward building up the body of Christ (Widodo & Suseno, 2025). Reconstructing the pastoral leadership paradigm requires an understanding that authority is not manifested through domination, but through service that builds up and restores. Love ensures that truth does not degenerate into legalism or an exclusive attitude that causes harm. Furthermore, there is an attitude directly centered on a Christological orientation, which forms the core of this paradigm. Ephesians 4:15 affirms that growth is directed “toward Him, Christ, who is the Head” (Zega & Tarigan, 2024). Thus, pastoral leadership is not an end in itself, nor is it a means (Rupa, 2016), but rather a means to bring the congregation into greater likeness to Christ. This Christ-centered approach functions as a ministry that points to Christ, not as a replacement for His position. The integrity of leadership is measured by faithfulness to

Christ's example of humility and self-sacrifice. This reconstruction shifts the leadership model from a hierarchical structure toward one that understands truth as a foundation for fostering good character and moral integrity. For integrity is not merely the personal responsibility of the leader but is also built within mutually affirming relationships within the body of Christ. Overall, the reconstruction of the Ephesians 4:15-based pastoral leadership paradigm affirms that integrity is the unity of sound teaching and edifying love. This paradigm offers a Christ-centered model of leadership amid the challenges of our time. Rooted in truth and sheltered by love, pastoral leadership is able to guide the church toward full maturity in Christ, so that the church remains faithful to its calling as a living body that bears witness in the world.

## CONCLUSION

The post-truth culture presents a serious challenge to Christian leadership because it shifts the meaning of truth from the objective toward subjectivity influenced by emotions and public opinion. In this context, a pastor's integrity is tested not only in terms of managerial capacity but primarily in the consistency between teaching, character, and way of life. Drawing from Paul's ecclesiology, this study affirms that Christ, as the Head of the church, serves as the normative standard of truth and integrity. Through an exegetical analysis of Ephesians 4:15, the phrase "holding fast to the truth in love" is understood as a theological synthesis that integrates doctrinal and ethical dimensions, so that the church does not become trapped in relativism, spiritual manipulation, or theological disinformation—all of which are rampant in the digital age.

The results of the discussion indicate that the reconstruction of the pastoral leadership paradigm must be rooted in the objective truth of the Gospel and manifested in edifying love. Integrity is not merely a matter of moral reputation, but rather a complete unity between sound teaching and a life that reflects the character of Christ. By taking Ephesians 4:15 as its theological foundation, pastoral leadership is called to be Christ-centered, transformative, and accountable amid the epistemological crisis of the post-truth culture. Thus, the church can grow toward spiritual maturity and remain a credible witness through leadership that is faithful to the truth and rooted in love.

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