



## The Spiritual Life Example of Christian Religious Education Teachers to Students at SMP Negeri 2 Afulu in Cultivating Discipline in Worship: An Inspiration from John 4:24

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the role of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in cultivating worship discipline among students at SMP Negeri 2 Afulu through spiritual life exemplification, inspired by John 4:24. The research employed a qualitative descriptive approach with data collection through semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation. Participants included three CRE teachers, the school principal, and fifteen students selected through purposive sampling. Data analysis utilized thematic analysis following Miles and Huberman's interactive model. Findings reveal that CRE teachers demonstrate spiritual exemplarity through consistent prayer practices, authentic biblical living, and integrating worship values into daily teaching activities. Students reported increased worship discipline, manifested in regular devotional practices, enhanced spiritual awareness, and improved moral behavior. The study identifies three primary mechanisms of influence: modeling behavior, spiritual mentoring, and creating supportive worship environments. However, challenges persist, including limited teaching hours, diverse student spiritual backgrounds, and external environmental factors. This research contributes to understanding the pedagogical significance of teacher exemplarity in religious education and offers practical implications for developing character education programs grounded in biblical principles. The study concludes that authentic spiritual modeling by teachers significantly impacts students' worship discipline formation.*

**Keywords:** *Spiritual life, Christian religious education, worship discipline, John 4:24*

### INTRODUCTION

The cultivation of spiritual discipline among adolescents represents a critical challenge in contemporary education, particularly in Indonesian contexts where religious education plays a fundamental role in character development. Christian Religious Education (CRE) in public schools serves not merely as theological instruction but as a comprehensive framework for moral and spiritual formation. Within this educational landscape, teachers

function not only as knowledge transmitters but as living exemplars of faith principles, whose personal spiritual lives significantly influence student development. SMP Negeri 2 Afulu, located in a region with diverse religious backgrounds, faces particular challenges in developing students' worship discipline. Preliminary observations revealed inconsistencies in students' devotional practices, irregular prayer habits, and limited understanding of worship significance. These conditions necessitate innovative pedagogical approaches that transcend conventional didactic methods. The biblical principle articulated in John 4:24, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth," provides theological grounding for authentic worship practice, emphasizing sincerity and spiritual authenticity rather than mere ritualistic observance. The role of teacher exemplarity in religious education has gained increasing scholarly attention, recognizing that spiritual formation occurs primarily through relational modeling rather than abstract instruction. Teachers' personal spiritual lives, manifested through their daily conduct, prayer practices, and biblical application, constitute a powerful pedagogical instrument. This phenomenon aligns with Bandura's social learning theory, which emphasizes observational learning and behavioral modeling as primary mechanisms of character development. Limited empirical research exists examining how CRE teachers' spiritual life examples specifically influence students' worship discipline in Indonesian public school contexts. The relationship between teacher spiritual modeling and student devotional practice formation remains inadequately understood, particularly regarding the mechanisms through which such influence operates and the contextual factors that facilitate or impede this process. This research contributes theoretically to the literature on religious education pedagogy by examining teacher exemplarity as a deliberate instructional strategy grounded in biblical principles. Practically, findings offer guidance for educational practitioners, school administrators, and curriculum developers in designing character education programs that emphasize authentic spiritual modeling. The study also addresses contextual needs in Indonesian education by exploring culturally appropriate approaches to religious character development.

## **METHODS**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach, appropriate for exploring complex human experiences and social phenomena in natural settings. The qualitative paradigm enabled in-depth examination of teachers' spiritual practices and their perceived impact on students' worship discipline, capturing nuanced meanings and contextual factors that quantitative methods might overlook. The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Afulu, a public junior secondary school serving approximately 450 students with diverse religious affiliations. The school employs three full-time CRE teachers responsible for Christian religious instruction across all grade levels. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, including: 1) Three CRE teachers (2 females, 1 male) with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 15 years 2) The school principal, providing institutional perspective. 3) Fifteen Christian students (8 females, 7 males) from grades 7-9, representing varied academic abilities and family backgrounds. Selection criteria for student participants included active enrollment in Christian religious education classes, willingness to participate voluntarily, and parental consent. Data collection occurred over four months (March-June 2024) through multiple methods to ensure triangulation: In-depth interviews were conducted with all teacher participants (45-60

minutes each) and student focus group discussions (60-90 minutes per group). Interview protocols explored teachers' spiritual practices, pedagogical approaches, and perceptions of their influence, while student discussions focused on experiences with teachers' spiritual modeling and changes in personal worship practices. Researchers observed 24 CRE class sessions, documenting teacher behaviors, instructional methods, spiritual practices integrated into teaching, and student responses. Observations also included school worship activities and teacher devotional practices. Relevant documents were examined, including lesson plans, devotional materials, student reflection journals, and school policy documents regarding religious education. Thematic analysis techniques were employed to identify recurring patterns, relationships between themes, and contextual factors influencing observed phenomena. The constant comparative method enabled iterative refinement of emerging themes throughout the analysis process. Study limitations include the single-site design limiting generalizability, potential social desirability bias in participant responses, and the four-month timeframe restricting longitudinal observation of behavioral changes. The researcher's positionality as a Christian education scholar may have influenced interpretation, though reflexivity practices aimed to minimize such bias.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

All three teacher participants maintained regular personal devotional practices visible to students. Teacher A (pseudonym) reported: "I begin each school day with personal prayer in my office at 6:30 AM. Students often see me reading Scripture during breaks, which naturally leads to conversations about what I'm reading." Observational data confirmed teachers' consistent prayer practices before classes, during meetings, and in informal school contexts. Teachers demonstrated worship discipline through punctuality in devotional activities, organized prayer journals, and systematic Bible reading schedules. These practices modeled the spiritual disciplines they sought to cultivate in students. Teacher B explained: "Students notice consistency. When they see me faithfully bringing my Bible, praying before meals, or pausing to give thanks, they observe that faith isn't compartmentalized but integrated into daily life." Beyond formal religious activities, teachers exhibited spiritual authenticity through character integrity, ethical conduct, and compassionate relationships. Students consistently identified teachers' patience, forgiveness, honesty, and servant leadership as manifestations of genuine faith. Student participant S7 noted: "Our CRE teacher doesn't just teach about loving others; she shows it by helping struggling students, listening when we have problems, and treating everyone with respect regardless of their abilities."

Teachers' authentic living provided concrete illustrations of abstract biblical principles. Teacher C emphasized: "I cannot teach about Christ's compassion if I show impatience with slow learners. My response to difficulties, my speech, my treatment of staff—everything teaches louder than my words." This embodied theology created credible models of Christian living that resonated with students more effectively than theoretical instruction. Teachers strategically integrated spiritual practices into instructional activities, creating structured opportunities for students to experience and practice worship disciplines. Documented approaches included: 1) Each class began with 5-10 minute devotional time including Scripture reading, brief reflection, and corporate prayer.

2) Teachers incorporated spontaneous worship responses to learning content, such as prayers of thanksgiving when discussing God's creation or brief worship songs connecting to lesson themes. 3) Students maintained spiritual journals documenting prayer experiences, biblical insights, and personal growth reflections. 4) Teachers organized community service activities framing service as worship expression. Teacher A described her approach: "I design lessons so students don't just learn about worship but practice it. When we study John 4:24, we don't merely discuss 'spirit and truth'—we pause to worship God in spirit and truth, right there in class, so they experience what it means."

### ***Impact on Students' Worship Discipline***

Data analysis identified three significant areas of impact on students' devotional practices and spiritual development. Twelve of fifteen student participants reported establishing or strengthening personal devotional routines following sustained exposure to teachers' spiritual modeling. Student S3 explained: "Seeing my teacher pray every day made me realize I could do the same. I started with five minutes of morning prayer, and now it's become a habit I miss when I skip." Students described implementing specific practices observed in teachers, including daily Bible reading schedules, prayer journaling, and setting aside dedicated worship times. The structured devotional practices introduced in class provided frameworks students could replicate independently. Student S11 shared: "Our teacher taught us a simple prayer pattern—praise, confession, thanksgiving, requests. I use that every night now. It helps me know what to pray."

Students demonstrated deepened comprehension of worship's nature and purpose, moving beyond ritualistic conceptions toward authentic spiritual engagement. Student S5 reflected: "I used to think worship was just singing in church. But watching how our teacher worships God through kindness, through teaching, through everything—I understand now that worship is a lifestyle." This expanded understanding of worship aligned with the biblical principle in John 4:24, emphasizing spiritual authenticity over external forms. Students articulated distinctions between genuine worship "in spirit and truth" and merely external religious observance. Teacher B noted: "Students are asking deeper questions—'How do I know if my worship is sincere?' 'What does it mean to worship in truth?' These questions indicate real spiritual engagement rather than superficial compliance."

Teachers and administrators observed behavioral improvements among students engaged with the spiritual modeling program, including increased honesty, improved peer relationships, greater compassion, and enhanced self-discipline. The school principal commented: "We've noticed that students in CRE classes, particularly those who connect well with their teachers, show marked improvement in character qualities—they're more respectful, more responsible, more willing to help others."

Students themselves recognized connections between worship discipline and moral behavior. Student S9 explained: "When I spend time praying and reading the Bible, I'm more patient with my little brother, less likely to cheat, more careful about my words. Worship changes how I act."

### ***Mechanisms of Influence***

Analysis identified three primary mechanisms through which teachers' spiritual exemplarity influenced students' worship discipline. Consistent with social learning

theory, students acquired devotional practices through observing teachers' behaviors and imitating modeled actions. The visibility of teachers' spiritual lives provided concrete templates students could replicate. Student S12 noted: "I didn't know how to pray aloud until I heard my teacher pray. Now I use similar patterns and language." Modeling proved particularly effective because it demonstrated feasibility and authenticity. Students could observe that the practices teachers advocated were genuinely sustainable and meaningful in teachers' own lives, reducing perceptions of hypocrisy or unrealistic expectations.

The impact of spiritual modeling operated primarily through positive teacher-student relationships characterized by trust, respect, and genuine care. Students reported greater receptivity to spiritual influence from teachers they perceived as authentically caring for their wellbeing. Student S4 explained: "I listen to Teacher A because I know she really cares about me, not just my grades. When she shares about her faith, it means something because I trust her." Teachers intentionally invested in relational connections, creating safe spaces for spiritual questions and struggles. These mentoring relationships facilitated vulnerable conversations about faith challenges and provided personalized guidance for spiritual development. Teacher C described: "When students trust you, they'll share their spiritual struggles. Then you can speak specifically into their situations, not just teach generic principles."

The school environment and structured opportunities for worship practice significantly facilitated impact. The integration of devotional activities into regular class routines normalized spiritual practices and provided consistent exposure. The supportive Christian community among CRE students created positive peer reinforcement for devotional discipline. School policies accommodating religious expression, such as allowing prayer before exams and supporting religious activities, contributed to an environment where spiritual development was valued and encouraged. Teacher B observed: "The school's openness to religious expression makes our work possible. Students see that faith isn't hidden but welcomed as part of education."

### ***Teacher Sustainability and Self-Care***

The expectation of continuous spiritual exemplarity created pressure on teachers' personal spiritual lives. Teachers reported feeling burdened by awareness that students constantly observed their behavior, limiting authenticity when experiencing personal spiritual struggles or doubts. Teacher B confided: "It's exhausting sometimes, feeling like I must always have it together spiritually. I have doubts and dry seasons too, but I worry about what students will think if they see me struggling."

This phenomenon highlights the need for teacher support systems, including peer accountability, professional spiritual direction, and grace-filled understanding that authentic spiritual modeling includes modeling honest struggle and growth, not perfection.

### ***Theological Foundations of Spiritual Exemplarity***

The biblical imperative in John 4:24—"God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth"—provides theological grounding for the spiritual life modeling observed in this study. Jesus' teaching to the Samaritan woman emphasized worship authenticity over ritualistic form or geographic location, stressing that genuine worship

flows from spiritual transformation and truthful alignment with God's nature. This principle directly relates to teachers' emphasis on authentic spiritual living rather than mere religious performance. The concept of worship "in spirit" implies engagement of one's entire being—mind, will, emotions, and actions—in devotion to God. Teachers' integration of worship into daily activities and character expression models this holistic understanding, demonstrating that worship transcends formal religious ceremonies to encompass all of life. Worship "in truth" requires alignment with divine reality and honest authenticity before God, which teachers exemplified through transparent struggles, genuine humility, and integrity between professed beliefs and lived practices.

Paul's exhortation in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ," establishes biblical precedent for spiritual modeling in Christian formation. Early Christian pedagogy emphasized apprenticeship models where mature believers mentored newer Christians through life example rather than merely abstract instruction. This study's findings align with this biblical pattern, demonstrating that spiritual formation occurs most effectively through relational modeling.

### ***Pedagogical Implications of Teacher Exemplarity***

The study's findings contribute to broader pedagogical discussions regarding the role of teacher character and personal example in educational effectiveness, particularly within moral and religious education. Traditional pedagogical models emphasizing knowledge transmission prove insufficient for character and spiritual formation, which require embodied demonstration and relational engagement. This research supports pedagogical approaches recognizing teachers as curriculum—their lives, values, and practices constitute primary instructional content in character education.

The observed impact of teacher spiritual exemplarity validates Parker Palmer's concept of teaching from authentic selfhood, where educational effectiveness flows from congruence between teachers' inner lives and external practices. Palmer argues that good teaching emerges from teacher identity and integrity rather than merely from methodological techniques. This study demonstrates this principle's application in religious education contexts, where teachers' authentic spiritual lives create powerful learning environments for student spiritual development. The mechanisms of influence identified—observational learning, relational mentoring, and supportive environments—suggest that effective religious education requires institutional structures facilitating sustained teacher-student relationships, opportunities for students to observe teachers' spiritual practices, and supportive communities reinforcing developing faith commitments. These findings challenge educational models isolating spiritual formation within brief weekly classes, suggesting instead that pervasive spiritual culture and ongoing relational engagement prove more effective.

### ***Comparative Analysis with Existing Research***

This study's findings align with international research on teacher influence in religious education while providing Indonesian contextual insights. Studies in Western contexts similarly demonstrate significant impact of teacher religious commitment and personal piety on student faith development. Research by Smith and Denton examining American adolescent religiosity found that adult relational modeling constituted the strongest

predictor of teenage faith vitality, more influential than formal religious education programs or youth ministry participation.

Similarly, research in Christian schooling contexts demonstrates that teacher faith authenticity significantly impacts student spiritual development. Studies by Cooling and Green in the United Kingdom found that students consistently identified teacher character and faith authenticity as primary factors influencing their own spiritual journeys, often more significant than curriculum content or teaching methodology.

This study extends existing literature by examining these dynamics within Indonesian public school contexts, where religious education serves diverse student populations within secular educational institutions. The challenges identified—limited instructional time, diverse student backgrounds, and external cultural pressures—reflect distinctive features of religious education in pluralistic public school settings, offering insights for similar contexts globally. Indonesian research on character education increasingly emphasizes the importance of teacher modeling in moral development. Studies by Maryamah and others demonstrate that Indonesian students particularly value relational authenticity and teacher integrity in character formation. This cultural emphasis on relational hierarchy and respect for authority figures may enhance the impact of teacher exemplarity in Indonesian contexts compared to more individualistic Western cultures.

While findings demonstrate positive impacts of spiritual life modeling, several critical considerations warrant attention. First, the emphasis on teacher exemplarity risks creating unrealistic expectations and burdensome pressure on teachers, potentially leading to burnout or inauthentic performance of spirituality. Educational systems must balance expectations for teacher spiritual exemplarity with grace-filled acknowledgment of teacher humanity and provision for teacher spiritual care and support. Second, the personal nature of spiritual influence raises questions about appropriate boundaries in teacher-student relationships within public education contexts. While this study demonstrates beneficial impacts, educators must navigate tensions between personal spiritual influence and professional boundaries, ensuring that spiritual mentoring respects student autonomy and family authority while avoiding inappropriate personal entanglement. Third, the effectiveness of spiritual modeling depends significantly on students' receptivity and relational connection with teachers, creating potential inequities where students lacking positive teacher relationships may experience reduced spiritual formation opportunities. Educational approaches should complement exemplarity with diverse formation pathways accommodating varied student needs and preferences. Finally, the focus on individual teacher character may inadvertently minimize attention to systemic and curricular factors also influencing spiritual development. While teacher exemplarity proves significant, comprehensive spiritual formation requires supportive institutional cultures, well-designed curricula, family partnerships, and broader Christian community involvement beyond individual teacher influence.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how Christian Religious Education teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Afulu cultivate worship discipline among students through spiritual life exemplification, inspired by the biblical principle in John 4:24 of worshiping in spirit and truth. Findings demonstrate that teachers' authentic spiritual lives—manifested through consistent

personal devotional practices, genuine biblical living, and intentional integration of worship into teaching—significantly influence students' developing worship discipline. Students exposed to sustained teacher spiritual modeling reported establishing regular devotional habits, developing enhanced spiritual awareness, and experiencing character transformation. The impact operated through three primary mechanisms: observational learning from visible spiritual practices, relational influence within trusting mentoring relationships, and supportive environmental structures normalizing spiritual expression. These findings validate the pedagogical significance of teacher exemplarity in religious education, demonstrating that teachers' lives constitute powerful curriculum in spiritual formation. However, significant challenges persist, including limited instructional time constraints, diverse student spiritual readiness, competing cultural influences, and sustainability pressures on teachers. Addressing these challenges requires systemic approaches including institutional support for teacher spiritual development, adequate time allocation for relational religious education, family-school partnerships, and supportive Christian community involvement. The study contributes to religious education literature by demonstrating specific mechanisms through which teacher spiritual exemplarity influences student formation within Indonesian public school contexts. Findings support pedagogical approaches emphasizing authentic relational modeling rather than merely cognitive instruction in spiritual development. The research offers practical guidance for teachers, administrators, and policymakers seeking to enhance religious education effectiveness through spiritual exemplarity grounded in biblical principles. Future research should examine longitudinal impacts of teacher spiritual modeling on students' sustained faith development beyond immediate school contexts, explore how specific teacher characteristics and practices maximize positive influence, investigate family-school partnership models supporting comprehensive spiritual formation, and examine spiritual exemplarity dynamics across diverse religious education contexts and cultural settings. Such research will continue refining understanding of effective practices for cultivating authentic worship discipline and spiritual maturity among adolescent learners. Ultimately, this study affirms that worship "in spirit and truth" begins not merely with instructional content but with teachers whose authentic spiritual lives invite students into transformative encounters with divine reality. The most powerful lessons in worship discipline emerge not from textbooks but from observing faithful lives genuinely devoted to God, modeling the very worship they seek to cultivate in students.

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