



## Teachers' Professional Competence in Christian Religious Education for Cultivating Students' Understanding of Grace: A Study of Exodus 33:19 at SMP Swasta Prestasi Utama - Deli Serdang

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the professional competence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in cultivating students' understanding of grace, grounded in the theological perspective of Exodus 33:19. The concept of grace is central to Christian faith, yet its abstract nature often presents challenges for students, particularly at the secondary school level. Teachers' professional competence plays a crucial role in translating theological concepts into meaningful learning experiences that shape students' cognitive understanding, attitudes, and moral responsibility. This research was conducted at SMP Swasta Prestasi Utama, Deli Serdang, involving 36 Christian students and 6 Christian teachers, including CRE teachers. Employing a qualitative approach, the study integrates a systematic literature review (SLR) with simple semi-structured interviews to obtain both theoretical and contextual insights. The literature review draws on biblical studies, Christian education theories, and pedagogical competence frameworks, while interviews provide empirical data regarding teaching practices and challenges in the classroom. The findings indicate that professionally competent CRE teachers demonstrate mastery of biblical content, pedagogical adaptability, and reflective teaching practices that enable students to grasp grace not merely as a doctrinal concept, but as a lived reality expressed through gratitude, humility, and responsible behavior. The study concludes that teachers' professional competence significantly influences the effectiveness of grace-centered learning and contributes to students' spiritual formation. This research highlights the importance of continuous professional development for CRE teachers to ensure that theological instruction remains contextually relevant, transformative, and aligned with the holistic goals of Christian education.*

**Keywords:** Professional Competence, Christian Religious Education, Grace

### INTRODUCTION

Christian Religious Education (CRE) occupies a strategic position in shaping students' faith, character, and theological understanding within the formal education system. Beyond transmitting doctrinal knowledge, CRE is fundamentally concerned with guiding students

to encounter God's redemptive work and to internalize core Christian values in their daily lives (Groome, 2011). One of the most central yet challenging theological concepts to be communicated in Christian education is the concept of grace. Grace is not merely a theological abstraction but the foundation of Christian faith, shaping how believers understand God, themselves, and their relationship with others (McGrath, 2017). Consequently, the professional competence of Christian Religious Education teachers becomes a decisive factor in enabling students to understand grace in a meaningful and transformative way. Christian Religious Education teachers are required not only to master subject content but also to demonstrate professional competence that integrates pedagogical skills, theological understanding, and ethical responsibility (Pazmiño, 2001). Professional competence involves the ability to plan instruction, implement effective learning strategies, assess learning outcomes, and reflect critically on teaching practices (Shulman, 1987). For CRE teachers, this competence must be accompanied by theological sensitivity and spiritual maturity, as they function not merely as instructors but also as witnesses of faith whose lives and teaching methods communicate theological truths implicitly and explicitly (Wilhoit, 2008). When teaching about grace, teachers' professional competence directly influences whether students perceive grace as a living reality or merely as an abstract religious term.

The biblical foundation for understanding grace is deeply rooted in Scripture, including the narrative of Exodus 33:19, where God declares, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." This text reveals grace as an expression of God's sovereign freedom and compassionate character, independent of human merit (Childs, 2004). In the context of Christian education, Exodus 33:19 offers a crucial theological framework for teaching students that grace is fundamentally God's initiative, grounded in divine mercy rather than human achievement. Helping students grasp this theological truth requires teachers who are not only biblically literate but also professionally competent in translating complex theological ideas into age-appropriate and pedagogically sound learning experiences. At the junior high school level, students are in a critical stage of cognitive and spiritual development. They begin to question, reflect, and form more personal understandings of faith concepts that they may have previously accepted uncritically (Fowler, 1981). Without effective guidance, concepts such as grace can be misunderstood as permissiveness, moral indifference, or mere religious jargon. Therefore, CRE teachers must employ pedagogical approaches that encourage reflection, dialogue, and contextual application, allowing students to connect biblical teaching with their lived experiences (Astley, 2000). This pedagogical responsibility underscores the importance of professional competence as an integral dimension of CRE teaching.

Previous studies in Christian education emphasize that effective faith formation in schools is closely linked to teachers' professional and spiritual competencies (Banks, 1999; Groome, 2011). Teachers who possess strong professional competence are better equipped to design learning activities that foster theological understanding, critical thinking, and moral responsibility. In contrast, limited pedagogical competence often results in rote learning that fails to nurture deep theological insight or personal faith commitment. This concern becomes particularly relevant in smaller Christian student

populations, such as at SMP Swasta Prestasi Utama in Deli Serdang, where there are 36 Christian students and six Christian teachers, including CRE teachers. In such contexts, the teacher's role becomes even more influential, as limited peer interaction places greater emphasis on instructional quality and teacher guidance. This study seeks to examine the professional competence of Christian Religious Education teachers in cultivating students' understanding of grace through the lens of Exodus 33:19. By focusing on how teachers interpret, teach, and contextualize the concept of grace, this research aims to contribute to the discourse on effective CRE pedagogy in Indonesian schools. Understanding the relationship between teachers' professional competence and students' theological comprehension is essential for strengthening Christian education practices that are both academically rigorous and spiritually transformative. Ultimately, this study aspires to affirm that teaching grace is not only a theological task but also a pedagogical vocation that demands professional excellence and faithful witness.

## **METHODS**

A qualitative research approach was implemented to examine the professional competence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in cultivating students' understanding of grace, grounded in the theological framework of Exodus 33:19. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research aimed to explore meanings, interpretations, and pedagogical practices rather than to measure variables quantitatively or test statistical hypotheses (Creswell, 2014). The study focused on understanding how teachers conceptualize grace, how this theological concept is translated into instructional practice, and how professional competence shapes students' theological comprehension. This combination allowed for a comprehensive analysis that integrated theoretical perspectives with empirical insights from the school context. The SLR served as the primary method for constructing the conceptual and theological framework of the study, while interviews were used to contextualize and enrich the findings based on lived pedagogical experiences.

The SLR was conducted through a systematic search and analysis of scholarly literature related to Christian Religious Education, teacher professional competence, theology of grace, and faith formation in educational settings. Sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and theological texts published by reputable academic publishers, such as Google Scholar, ATLA Religion Database, and institutional repositories were utilized to ensure the credibility and relevance of sources. Key authors in Christian education and theology, such as Groome, Pazmiño, Wilhoit, Fowler, and McGrath, were prioritized due to their recognized contributions to the field. Biblical texts, particularly Exodus 33:19, were treated as primary theological sources and analyzed using contextual and theological interpretation to support educational reflection. The selection of literature followed inclusion criteria focusing on relevance to Christian education, professional competence, pedagogical practice, and the theological concept of grace. Sources were critically evaluated based on academic credibility, clarity of argument, and contribution to the research topic. Data from the literature were analyzed using descriptive-analytical techniques by identifying key themes, comparing theoretical perspectives, and synthesizing insights related to teacher competence and grace-oriented

pedagogy. Simple semi-structured interviews were conducted with Christian Religious Education teachers at SMP Swasta Prestasi Utama, Deli Serdang. The school context included 36 Christian students and six Christian teachers, including CRE teachers. The interviews aimed to explore teachers' understanding of grace, their pedagogical strategies in teaching the concept, and their reflections on professional competence in CRE instruction. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow flexibility while maintaining focus on core research questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interview data were analyzed thematically by categorizing responses into recurring themes such as theological understanding of grace, instructional methods, challenges in teaching abstract theological concepts, and reflections on professional responsibility. The findings from interviews were then interpreted in dialogue with the results of the literature review to ensure theoretical coherence and contextual relevance.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the systematic literature review and interview data indicate that the professional competence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers plays a decisive role in shaping students' understanding of grace as a core theological concept. Professional competence, as articulated in Christian education literature, encompasses mastery of subject matter, pedagogical skills, theological depth, and the ability to contextualize faith teachings within students' lived experiences (Pazmiño, 2012; Wilhoit, 2008). In the context of this study, teachers who demonstrated a mature theological understanding of grace were more effective in guiding students toward a meaningful and transformative comprehension of divine grace. Analysis of theological literature reveals that grace is not merely an abstract doctrinal concept but a foundational theme in the biblical narrative that shapes Christian identity and ethics (McGrath, 2011). Exodus 33:19, which emphasizes God's sovereign mercy, "*I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy,*" underscores grace as an initiative of God rather than a human achievement. Teachers who internalized this theological insight were better equipped to present grace not as a reward for moral performance, but as a divine gift that invites gratitude, humility, and ethical responsibility. Interview data showed that CRE teachers who possessed strong professional competence were able to articulate grace in ways that were both biblically faithful and pedagogically accessible. These teachers emphasized grace as God's loving initiative that precedes human response, helping students move beyond a transactional understanding of faith. This aligns with Groome's (2011) assertion that effective Christian education integrates theological truth with learners' personal and social contexts, enabling faith to be understood as lived reality rather than abstract doctrine.

### ***Pedagogical Practices for Teaching Grace***

The results indicate that professional competence significantly influences the pedagogical strategies employed by CRE teachers in teaching grace. Teachers with higher levels of pedagogical and theological competence tended to adopt dialogical and reflective teaching approaches rather than purely didactic methods. Such approaches included biblical storytelling, guided reflection, contextual examples, and classroom discussions

that invited students to relate the concept of grace to their personal experiences. The literature supports the effectiveness of reflective and experiential learning in Christian education, particularly when addressing complex theological concepts such as grace (Astley, 2000; Fowler, 1981). Grace, by its nature, cannot be fully grasped through memorization alone; it requires existential engagement and personal reflection. Teachers who understood this pedagogical principle were more successful in fostering students' internalization of grace as a lived reality. Interview findings revealed that CRE teachers often used Exodus 33:19 as a starting point to discuss God's character, His freedom, mercy, and faithfulness, before linking these attributes to students' daily lives. For instance, teachers encouraged students to reflect on experiences of forgiveness, acceptance, and compassion as concrete expressions of grace. This pedagogical practice resonates with Wilhoit's (2008) view that faith formation occurs through practices that shape imagination, character, and moral vision. Professionally competent teachers demonstrated the ability to scaffold learning by adjusting explanations of grace according to students' cognitive and emotional development. Given that students at the junior secondary level are in a critical stage of moral and spiritual development, such pedagogical sensitivity is essential (Fowler, 1981). This adaptability reflects a key dimension of professional competence, namely the capacity to align theological depth with pedagogical appropriateness.

### ***Professional Competence and Students' Theological Understanding***

The findings suggest a strong relationship between teachers' professional competence and students' theological understanding of grace. Students taught by teachers with deeper theological insight and pedagogical skill were more likely to articulate grace as an expression of God's unconditional love rather than as a consequence of good behavior. This shift in understanding is significant because it reflects a move from legalistic religiosity toward a grace-centered faith. The literature emphasizes that misconceptions about grace can lead to distorted forms of spirituality, such as moralism or fear-based obedience (McKnight, 2010). Teachers who lack professional competence may inadvertently reinforce these misconceptions by presenting grace as conditional or merit-based. In contrast, professionally competent teachers are able to correct such misunderstandings by grounding instruction in sound biblical theology. Interview data revealed that students exposed to grace-oriented teaching demonstrated increased openness, empathy, and willingness to forgive peers. While these observations are qualitative and exploratory, they align with Volf and Bass's (2002) argument that theological understanding shapes ethical behavior and social relationships. Grace, when properly understood, fosters humility and compassion, which are essential virtues in both personal and communal life.

Exodus 33:19 emerged as a central theological anchor in the teaching of grace. The verse highlights God's sovereignty and freedom in dispensing grace, challenging anthropocentric notions of control and entitlement. The literature underscores that this passage is pivotal in understanding grace as rooted in God's character rather than human action (Childs, 2004). Teachers who demonstrated professional competence were able to unpack the theological depth of this text without overwhelming students. They

contextualized the passage within the broader narrative of God's covenant relationship with Israel, emphasizing God's faithfulness despite human failure. This narrative approach helped students perceive grace as a sustaining force in the relationship between God and humanity. The discussion of Exodus 33:19 enabled teachers to address ethical implications of grace. Students were encouraged to reflect on how receiving grace calls them to extend grace to others. This pedagogical move aligns with Pazmiño's (2012) assertion that Christian education must bridge theology and ethics, ensuring that doctrinal understanding leads to transformed living. Some teachers expressed difficulty in simplifying complex theological concepts without reducing their meaning. Others noted limited opportunities for ongoing professional development in theology and pedagogy. The literature highlights the importance of continuous professional formation for Christian educators, particularly in navigating the intersection of theology, pedagogy, and contemporary educational challenges (Wilhoit & Dettoni, 2017). Without adequate support and training, teachers may struggle to maintain theological depth and pedagogical effectiveness. The findings suggest that strengthening professional competence through theological education, reflective practice, and collaborative learning communities is essential for enhancing the quality of CRE instruction. Such efforts would enable teachers to address students' questions and struggles with greater confidence and theological clarity. The integration of literature review and interview findings underscores that professional competence is not merely a technical requirement but a theological and pedagogical vocation. CRE teachers are called to embody the message of grace they teach, serving as living witnesses to God's gracious character. This embodiment reinforces the credibility of instruction and deepens students' engagement with faith. In the context of SMP Swasta Prestasi Utama, the findings highlight the importance of investing in the professional and spiritual development of CRE teachers. When teachers possess strong professional competence, they are better equipped to cultivate students' understanding of grace as a transformative reality that shapes identity, relationships, and ethical responsibility. The results and discussion affirm that teachers' professional competence in Christian Religious Education is a crucial factor in fostering students' understanding of grace. Through sound theology, reflective pedagogy, and contextual application of biblical texts such as Exodus 33:19, CRE teachers contribute significantly to the holistic formation of students' faith and character.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the professional competence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers plays a vital role in cultivating students' understanding of grace as a foundational concept of Christian faith. Through a systematic literature review and simple interviews, the findings demonstrate that teachers' mastery of theological content, pedagogical skills, and contextual teaching strategies significantly influences how students comprehend and internalize the meaning of divine grace. Professional competence enables teachers to move beyond a purely doctrinal transmission of knowledge toward a formational approach that integrates theological understanding with students' lived experiences. The study reveals that teachers who possess a deep and reflective understanding of grace are more effective in presenting grace as God's sovereign and unconditional gift, as emphasized in Exodus 33:19. When grace is taught as

an initiative rooted in God's character rather than human merit, students are guided away from legalistic or transactional views of faith. Instead, they begin to perceive grace as a transformative reality that shapes identity, attitudes, and ethical responsibility. This theological clarity is closely linked to teachers' professional competence, particularly their ability to interpret biblical texts accurately and communicate them in developmentally appropriate ways. The findings indicate that pedagogical approaches grounded in reflection, dialogue, and contextual application enhance students' engagement with the concept of grace. Teachers who integrate biblical narratives with everyday experiences help students recognize grace in concrete situations such as forgiveness, acceptance, and compassion. This pedagogical integration reflects the holistic nature of professional competence, which encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of learning. As a result, students' understanding of grace is not limited to intellectual awareness but extends to attitudes and practices that reflect Christian values. The study also highlights challenges faced by CRE teachers, including the complexity of theological concepts and limited opportunities for ongoing professional development. These challenges underscore the need for continuous formation that strengthens both theological depth and pedagogical effectiveness. Professional development programs that emphasize biblical theology, reflective teaching practices, and contextual education are essential for sustaining high-quality CRE instruction. This study affirms that teachers' professional competence in Christian Religious Education is a crucial factor in fostering students' understanding of grace. By grounding instruction in sound theology, particularly Exodus 33:19, and employing reflective and contextual pedagogies, CRE teachers contribute significantly to the holistic formation of students' faith and character. Strengthening teachers' professional competence should therefore be a strategic priority in Christian education, as it directly impacts the quality of faith formation and the transmission of core Christian beliefs to the next generation.

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