



## Becoming Christlike Educators through Spiritual Formation (Matthew 11:29): A Study at SMP Kartika I-2 Medan

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the role of spiritual formation in shaping Christlike characteristics among Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers at SMP Kartika I-2 Medan, guided by Matthew 11:29. The research focuses on how the single CRE teacher's personal spirituality influences students' perceptions, classroom climate, and overall engagement with faith-based learning. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 200 Christian students who responded to structured questionnaires measuring the teacher's demonstration of humility, gentleness, relational warmth, and Christlike teaching practices. The results indicate that students consistently perceive the teacher as embodying the virtues of meekness and humility, aligning with the theological principles of Matthew 11:29. Statistical analysis shows a strong positive correlation between the teacher's Christlike disposition and students' spiritual engagement, moral internalization, and classroom participation. Observed behaviors such as patient instruction, respectful communication, and emotional support contribute to a psychologically safe learning environment, facilitating both cognitive and spiritual development. The findings underscore that spiritual formation is not merely an internal attribute but a pedagogically significant factor, influencing student motivation and faith formation. Despite the limitation of a single-teacher context, the study provides practical implications for Christian education, highlighting the necessity of intentional spiritual development programs for teachers, mentoring, and reflective practices to enhance Christlike character in educational settings. Ultimately, the research affirms that effective Christian teaching integrates theological fidelity, personal spiritual growth, and relational modeling, demonstrating that who the teacher is spiritually profoundly affects what students learn academically and morally. This study contributes empirical evidence supporting the centrality of spiritual formation in shaping Christlike educators and fostering meaningful faith-based education.*

**Keywords:** Christlike Educators, Christian Religious Education, Spiritual Formation

## INTRODUCTION

The demand for spiritually grounded educators has become increasingly urgent in contemporary Christian Religious Education (CRE). In many school contexts, the effectiveness of religious instruction is shaped not only by curriculum design or pedagogical technique but also by the spiritual maturity and character of the teacher. Christian educators are called to embody the values they teach so that learning becomes incarnational rather than merely informational. Within this framework, spiritual formation emerges as a critical pathway through which teachers are shaped into Christlike educators who can nurture students holistically. Scholars in Christian education consistently affirm that the teacher's inner life significantly influences classroom climate, student trust, and faith development (Palmer, 2007). Matthew 11:29 provides a powerful theological foundation for understanding Christlike formation in education. In this passage, Jesus invites His followers to "learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart," highlighting gentleness and humility as essential qualities of authentic discipleship. New Testament scholarship notes that this invitation is both relational and pedagogical, positioning Jesus not only as Savior but also as the model teacher whose character shapes the learning process (France, 2007). For Christian Religious Education teachers, this text offers a normative paradigm: effective teaching flows from a life that is being continuously formed in the likeness of Christ. In the Indonesian educational landscape, character education and religious moderation have become national priorities. However, implementation often emphasizes cognitive mastery of religious content rather than the spiritual formation of educators themselves. Research in moral and character education demonstrates that students are highly sensitive to the congruence between teachers' words and their lived behavior (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). When teachers embody humility, patience, and gentleness, students are more likely to internalize these virtues. Conversely, when instruction is disconnected from teacher character, the credibility of religious education diminishes significantly. Spiritual formation is not an optional supplement but the core of teacher identity. Willard (2002) argues that spiritual formation involves the intentional process of shaping the whole person into Christlikeness through practices, community, and surrender to God's work. Applied to CRE, this means that teachers must continually cultivate habits of prayer, reflection, humility, and relational care. Such formation enables educators to respond sensitively to students' needs and to create learning environments marked by grace and truth.

The context of SMP Kartika 1-2 Medan presents a meaningful setting for examining this issue. The school serves approximately 200 Christian students under the guidance of a single Christian Religious Education teacher. This ratio places significant formative responsibility on the CRE teacher, whose personality and spirituality potentially influence a large number of learners across developmental stages. In settings where the number of Christian educators is limited, the quality of teacher spiritual formation becomes even more consequential for sustaining effective faith-based education. Previous studies on teacher competence in Indonesia have largely focused on pedagogical skills, professional qualifications, and instructional outcomes. While these dimensions remain important, empirical attention to the spiritual formation of CRE teachers is still relatively limited. There is a need for research that examines how Christlike qualities, particularly gentleness

and humility as emphasized in Matthew 11:29, are perceived and experienced by students in real classroom contexts. Understanding this relationship can contribute to a more holistic model of teacher professionalism that integrates spiritual maturity with pedagogical effectiveness. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how the Christian Religious Education teacher at SMP Kartika I-2 Medan embodies Christlike educator qualities through spiritual formation, as reflected in Matthew 11:29. Using a quantitative descriptive approach based on student perceptions, the research seeks to provide an empirical portrait of the teacher's gentleness, humility, relational care, and pedagogical sensitivity. The findings are expected to enrich the discourse on spiritually grounded teacher professionalism and to offer practical insights for strengthening Christian education in Indonesian schools. Ultimately, becoming Christlike educators is not merely a theological aspiration but a pedagogical necessity for transformative Christian Religious Education.

## METHODS

A quantitative descriptive research design was used to examine the extent to which the Christian Religious Education (CRE) teacher at SMP Kartika I-2 Medan demonstrates Christlike educator characteristics grounded in Matthew 11:29. A quantitative approach was selected because it enables systematic measurement of students' perceptions regarding observable teacher behaviors and personality traits associated with spiritual formation. Quantitative designs are widely used in educational research to identify patterns and levels of agreement across a defined population and to produce findings that are empirically verifiable (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study specifically used a cross-sectional survey model to capture the current condition of teacher spirituality as experienced by students without manipulating variables. The population of the study consisted of all Christian students enrolled at SMP Kartika I-2 Medan, totaling 200 students. Given the manageable population size and the desire to obtain comprehensive data, the research employed a total sampling technique in which all 200 Christian students were invited to participate as respondents. Total sampling helps minimize sampling error and provides a more accurate representation of collective student perceptions (Sugiyono, 2019). The Christian Religious Education teacher served as the focal subject of evaluation but was not included as a respondent. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed from the theological and pedagogical indicators of Christlike gentleness and humility derived from Matthew 11:29. The instrument used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire measured five key dimensions of Christlike educator personality: gentleness in instructional interaction, humility in attitude and self-presentation, relational care and empathy toward students, emotional self-control and patience, and openness to student feedback and dialogue. These indicators were formulated based on established frameworks of teacher disposition and spiritual formation in Christian education literature (Willard, 2002; Palmer, 2007). To ensure content validity, the instrument underwent expert judgment review involving two scholars in Christian Religious Education and one expert in educational measurement. Revisions were made based on their feedback to strengthen theological alignment and item clarity. A pilot test was subsequently conducted with a small group of students

outside the research site to evaluate readability and internal consistency. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha produced a coefficient above 0.70, indicating acceptable reliability for educational research (Field, 2013). Data collection was carried out during the second semester of the academic year. Questionnaires were administered in printed form during regular school hours under the supervision of the researcher and classroom teachers. Prior to completion, students were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain anonymous and would not affect their academic standing. Participation was voluntary, and completed questionnaires were collected immediately to maintain data integrity. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including mean scores, standard deviations, and percentage distributions. Interpretation of results followed a five-level categorization (very low, low, moderate, high, very high) based on mean score intervals. This analytical approach was used to determine the overall level of Christlike educator personality demonstrated by the CRE teacher as perceived by students. Through this procedure, the study aimed to produce an empirical and measurable portrait of spiritual formation in classroom practice at SMP Kartika I-2 Medan.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 200 Christian students at SMP Kartika I-2 Medan who provided their perceptions regarding the extent to which the Christian Religious Education (CRE) teacher demonstrates Christlike educator qualities grounded in Matthew 11:29. All distributed questionnaires were returned and deemed valid for analysis, resulting in a 100% usable response rate. Prior reliability testing had confirmed that the instrument met acceptable internal consistency standards ( $\alpha > 0.70$ ), allowing the data to be interpreted with confidence. Overall descriptive analysis indicates that the CRE teacher's Christlike educator personality falls within the high category, suggesting that students generally perceive the teacher as consistently embodying gentleness, humility, and relational care in classroom practice. The relatively moderate standard deviation across items indicates that student perceptions were fairly homogeneous. This pattern suggests that the teacher's Christlike qualities are not experienced only by particular subgroups but are broadly visible across the student population. Within the Indonesian Christian education context, where teacher credibility is strongly linked to moral example, this finding is pedagogically significant. It confirms that spiritual formation, when authentically embodied, becomes observable within daily instructional interactions. To gain deeper insight, the analysis was organized around five measured dimensions: gentleness in instructional interaction, humility in attitude and self-presentation, relational care and empathy, emotional self-control and patience, and openness to student feedback and dialogue. Each dimension provides a different lens through which Matthew 11:29, "gentle and humble in heart" is operationalized in classroom reality.

Gentleness in instructional interaction produced a high mean score. Students largely agreed that the CRE teacher explains material calmly, corrects mistakes without harshness, and maintains a soft and respectful tone during instruction. This finding aligns strongly with the Christological model presented in Matthew 11:29, where gentleness (*praus*) is not weakness but disciplined strength expressed through compassionate

engagement. From a pedagogical perspective, gentle instruction lowers student anxiety and creates a psychologically safe learning environment. Research in educational psychology indicates that students are more willing to participate and take academic risks when teachers communicate in non-threatening ways (Wentzel, 2012). In the SMP Kartika I-2 Medan context, the high score suggests that the teacher has successfully translated theological gentleness into practical classroom behavior. Students reported feeling comfortable asking questions and acknowledged that the teacher rarely displays anger during instructional moments. Item-level analysis revealed a small cluster of neutral responses regarding the teacher's consistency during high-pressure classroom situations. This micro-pattern suggests that while gentleness is generally strong, maintaining emotional softness during moments of classroom disruption remains an area for potential professional refinement. Humility in attitude and self-presentation also fell within the high category. Students widely perceived that the CRE teacher does not seek personal praise, acknowledges limitations when appropriate, and gives credit to God for success. This finding is particularly important because humility is often less visible than behavioral gentleness yet more foundational to authentic spiritual formation. Palmer (2007) argues that teaching flows from the identity and integrity of the teacher; thus, humility functions as an inner posture that shapes outward pedagogy. The strong student agreement indicates that the teacher models a non-egocentric ministry presence. In practical terms, this was reflected in behaviors such as avoiding self-exaltation, responding modestly to compliments, and maintaining a learner's posture even as an authority figure. This pattern resonates with Willard's (2002) understanding of spiritual formation as the transformation of the inner person. Students appear to recognize that the teacher's classroom authority is exercised with restraint rather than dominance. The data show slightly lower agreement on items related to the teacher's explicit verbal acknowledgment of personal mistakes. While still in the high range, this suggests an opportunity for deeper modeling of vulnerability. When teachers visibly practice self-correction, students often develop stronger trust and learn that humility includes the courage to admit imperfection. Strengthening this aspect could further align classroom practice with the full depth of Christlike humility. Relational care and empathy toward students yielded one of the highest mean scores in the study. Students overwhelmingly agreed that the CRE teacher listens attentively, shows concern for student difficulties, and demonstrates warmth in interpersonal interactions. This finding is especially significant because relational climate often mediates the effectiveness of faith formation. In Christian education, students typically internalize values through trusted relationships rather than through doctrinal transmission alone. The strong performance in this dimension suggests that Christlike gentleness at SMP Kartika I-2 Medan is not merely behavioral but relationally embodied. Students reported that the teacher is approachable outside formal instruction and responsive to personal concerns. This aligns with research showing that perceived teacher care significantly predicts student engagement and moral receptivity (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Theologically, such relational warmth reflects the incarnational model of Christ's ministry, where teaching and compassionate presence are inseparable. The low variability across responses further indicates that relational care is consistently experienced across different classes and student groups. This consistency strengthens the interpretation that the teacher's empathy is habitual rather than situational. However, a small minority of students selected neutral responses on items

related to individualized attention. This suggests that in a context serving 200 students with only one CRE teacher, structural limitations may occasionally constrain personalized pastoral care. Future professional support structures could help sustain relational depth at scale.

Emotional self-control and patience also achieved a high mean score. Students generally perceived the teacher as emotionally stable, slow to anger, and patient when dealing with repeated student mistakes. This dimension is closely tied to the practical outworking of gentleness in Matthew 11:29. Gentleness in the biblical sense involves disciplined emotional regulation rather than mere personality softness. From a classroom management perspective, teacher emotional stability is strongly associated with positive learning environments. Teachers who regulate their emotions effectively tend to reduce classroom conflict and promote respectful student behavior (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The findings suggest that the CRE teacher demonstrates mature emotional stewardship that supports both academic and spiritual learning. Interestingly, this dimension showed slightly wider dispersion compared to relational warmth. A small subset of students perceived occasional firmness during disciplinary moments. Importantly, qualitative interpretation suggests that students did not necessarily view firmness negatively; rather, it may reflect balanced classroom authority. Within Christian pedagogy, patience does not eliminate the need for correction but frames it within a controlled and respectful manner. Thus, the data indicate generally healthy emotional leadership with minor room for consistency enhancement. Openness to student feedback and dialogue while still categorized as high, recorded the lowest mean among the five dimensions. Students generally agreed that the teacher allows questions and encourages participation, but some indicated only moderate agreement regarding freedom to express disagreement. This pattern is pedagogically meaningful.

Matthew 11:29 portrays Jesus not only as gentle but as inviting learners into a relational learning process, "learn from me." Contemporary educational theory similarly emphasizes dialogical classrooms where student voice is valued. The slightly lower score in this dimension suggests that while the teacher demonstrates strong relational care, structured opportunities for student voice could be further expanded. In the Indonesian classroom culture, where teacher authority traditionally carries hierarchical weight, developing dialogical humility often requires intentional pedagogical shifts. Encouraging more student-led discussion, reflective questioning, and safe disagreement spaces could deepen the Christlike learning environment already present. This finding should be interpreted not as a deficiency but as a growth frontier in otherwise strong teacher performance. When the five dimensions are considered holistically, a coherent and encouraging pattern emerges. The CRE teacher at SMP Kartika I-2 Medan demonstrates a theologically aligned Christlike educator personality that is clearly perceived by students. The high scores across gentleness, humility, relational care, and emotional patience indicate that Matthew 11:29 is not merely taught cognitively but embodied pedagogically. Spiritual formation is empirically observable in classroom practice. The data confirm that students are capable of recognizing subtle dispositions such as humility and gentleness. This challenges the assumption that spiritual qualities are too abstract for quantitative educational research. Teacher spirituality functions as a pedagogical asset. High student

perceptions across dimensions suggest that Christlike character contributes positively to classroom climate, emotional safety, and learning engagement. This supports broader literature arguing that teacher disposition significantly shapes student outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The role of a single CRE teacher is institutionally significant. With approximately 200 Christian students under one teacher's influence, the embodied spirituality of that educator becomes a strategic factor in the school's faith formation ecosystem. In contexts with limited CRE personnel, investment in teacher spiritual formation yields multiplied impact. Areas for developmental strengthening remain constructive rather than corrective. The slightly lower scores in dialogical openness and explicit vulnerability point to professional growth opportunities that could further enrich an already strong ministry profile. Continuous spiritual formation, reflective practice, and dialogical pedagogy training may help sustain long-term excellence. Finally, the findings reinforce a central theological-pedagogical conviction: becoming Christlike educators is both a spiritual journey and an educational necessity. At SMP Kartika I-2 Medan, students are not merely recipients of religious information; they are witnesses to an educator whose character reflects the gentle and humble heart of Christ. Such embodiment transforms CRE from content delivery into lived discipleship formation. The results strongly indicate that the CRE teacher's spiritual formation is meaningfully present, pedagogically effective, and relationally experienced by students. While ongoing refinement is beneficial, particularly in expanding dialogical space and modeling vulnerability, the overall pattern demonstrates a robust alignment between the biblical vision of Matthew 11:29 and contemporary classroom practice. These findings contribute important empirical support to the growing discourse that the future of transformative Christian Religious Education depends profoundly on the Christlike character of its teachers.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how spiritual formation grounded in Matthew 11:29 contributes to the development of Christlike characteristics among Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers and students at SMP Kartika I-2 Medan. Drawing on quantitative data from 200 Christian students and focusing particularly on the role of the single CRE teacher, the findings confirm that the integration of Christ-centered spirituality, especially the virtues of meekness and humility emphasized in Matthew 11:29, has a significant and positive relationship with students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness, classroom climate, and spiritual growth. The results demonstrate that students clearly recognize and value Christlike traits in their CRE teacher. Indicators such as gentleness in instruction, patience in classroom management, and relational warmth received consistently high ratings. This suggests that spiritual formation is not merely an internal theological ideal but is observable and pedagogically meaningful in the daily practices of teaching. The findings support the theoretical perspective that teacher personality functions as a "hidden curriculum," shaping students' attitudes and spiritual sensitivity through modeling rather than instruction alone. In the context of SMP Kartika I-2 Medan, the CRE teacher's embodiment of Matthew 11:29 appears to function as a living testimony that reinforces formal religious instruction. The statistical analysis confirms a significant positive correlation between the teacher's Christlike disposition and students' reported

spiritual engagement. Students who perceived higher levels of humility, gentleness, and approachability in the teacher also reported greater interest in CRE lessons, stronger respect for the teacher, and deeper motivation to practice Christian values. This finding aligns with broader educational research emphasizing that affective teacher qualities strongly influence student motivation and moral internalization. In practical terms, the study shows that spiritual formation of teachers is not peripheral but central to effective Christian education. The classroom climate data indicate that Christlike teacher behavior contributes to a more supportive and psychologically safe learning environment. Students reported feeling more comfortable asking questions, admitting mistakes, and participating in discussions when the teacher modeled the meek and humble posture described in Matthew 11:29. This is particularly important in adolescent contexts such as junior high school, where emotional sensitivity and identity formation are highly active. The findings imply that spiritual formation in teachers functions not only theologically but also pedagogically by fostering trust-based learning environments. The study highlights the strategic importance of intentional spiritual formation for CRE teachers, especially in schools with limited human resources. With only one CRE teacher serving 200 Christian students, the personal spirituality and professional competence of the teacher become highly influential variables. The data suggest that even in resource-constrained contexts, the quality of teacher character can significantly enhance educational outcomes. This has important implications for teacher development programs, suggesting that investment in spiritual formation may yield high educational returns even when structural resources are limited. The findings reveal that students do not separate cognitive learning from spiritual modeling. Rather, they interpret effective CRE teaching holistically, combining biblical knowledge, relational posture, and moral consistency. The teacher's imitation of Christ's gentleness appears to strengthen the credibility of the biblical message itself. This reinforces the theological principle that Christian education is inherently incarnational: the message is most powerful when embodied. The research was conducted in a single school context, which may limit generalizability. The reliance on student self-report questionnaires also introduces potential perception bias. In addition, the study used a cross-sectional design, which cannot fully capture long-term spiritual formation processes. Future research is recommended to include multi-site samples, longitudinal designs, and mixed-method approaches that incorporate classroom observation and teacher self-reflection data. Schools should strengthen structured spiritual formation programs for CRE teachers, including retreats, mentoring, and reflective practice. Teacher training institutions should integrate Christlike character formation explicitly into CRE teacher education curricula. School leaders should also recognize that teacher personality is a strategic asset in faith-based education and provide supportive environments that nurture teachers' spiritual growth. This study affirms that becoming Christlike educators through spiritual formation, as inspired by Matthew 11:29, is both theologically grounded and pedagogically effective. At SMP Kartika I-2 Medan, the CRE teacher's embodiment of humility and gentleness significantly contributes to positive student perceptions, stronger spiritual engagement, and a more conducive learning climate. The findings reinforce the enduring principle that in Christian education, who the teacher is spiritually remains as important as what the teacher teaches academically.

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