



Building a Spiritually Grounded Professional Identity: An Exegetical and Educational Study of Matthew 16:24-26 at SMP Negeri 4 Dolok Panribuan

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Matthew 16:24-26 functions as a theological foundation for constructing a spiritually grounded professional identity among Christian teachers at SMP Negeri 4 Dolok Panribuan. The research is motivated by the increasing need to integrate spiritual formation with professional competence in Christian educational contexts, where teacher identity must reflect both pedagogical expertise and discipleship commitment. Drawing on an exegetical analysis of the Matthean call to self-denial, cross-bearing, and the preservation of the soul, this study examines how these theological themes inform teachers' understanding of vocation, responsibility, and moral integrity. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving 10 Christian teachers (including the Christian Religious Education teacher) and 120 Christian students. The findings indicate that teachers who internalize the principles of self-denial demonstrate relational humility and ethical consistency. The concept of "taking up the cross" is reflected in vocational resilience and sustained commitment amid institutional challenges. Furthermore, the warning against gaining the world at the cost of the soul reshapes professional success toward integrity, authenticity, and character formation rather than mere performance indicators. The study concludes that Matthew 16:24-26 provides a robust theological framework for developing a coherent professional identity grounded in discipleship. A spiritually anchored identity strengthens teachers' moral credibility, enhances relational trust within the school community, and integrates faith with pedagogical practice. This research contributes to interdisciplinary dialogue between biblical theology and educational theory by demonstrating that scriptural exegesis can meaningfully inform contemporary models of teacher professional identity formation.

Keywords: Professional Identity, Christian Religious Education, Spirituality

INTRODUCTION

Professional identity constitutes a foundational dimension of teacher effectiveness, shaping not only pedagogical competence but also moral authority, relational credibility,

and vocational commitment. In contemporary educational discourse, professional identity is understood as a dynamic integration of beliefs, values, knowledge, and practice that guides educators' decision-making and interpersonal engagement (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). For Christian educators, however, professional identity cannot be reduced to technical competence or institutional role performance; it is inseparable from spiritual formation and theological conviction. Within this theological horizon, Matthew 16:24-26 offers a profound framework for constructing a spiritually grounded professional identity. In Matthew 16:24-26, Jesus declares: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" This pericope appears immediately after Peter's confession and Jesus' first passion prediction, situating discipleship within the paradox of self-denial and sacrificial commitment (France, 2007). The Greek verb *aparneomai* ("deny") conveys radical renunciation of self-centered orientation, while "take up his cross" evokes readiness for costly obedience (Luz, 2001). Theologically, this passage reframes identity not as self-assertion but as self-giving alignment with Christ's mission. When interpreted within an educational framework, Matthew 16:24-26 challenges prevailing models of professional success that prioritize external achievement over internal integrity. Contemporary scholarship on teacher identity emphasizes narrative coherence, ethical commitment, and reflective self-construction (Day & Gu, 2010). Yet the Matthean text introduces a countercultural dimension: authentic identity is formed through self-denial, vocational sacrifice, and fidelity to transcendent purpose. For Christian teachers, this implies that professional identity is grounded not merely in accreditation or institutional status but in discipleship-shaped character. Research in educational psychology demonstrates that teachers' identity significantly influences instructional quality, resilience, and relational climate (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Educators with coherent professional identities tend to exhibit greater commitment, moral clarity, and adaptability in challenging contexts. These findings resonate with the Matthean vision of discipleship as integrated selfhood oriented toward ultimate meaning rather than temporal gain. Thus, theological reflection on Matthew 16:24-26 offers not only doctrinal insight but also a normative structure for identity formation. This study is situated at SMP Negeri 4 Dolok Panribuan, a public junior high school context comprising approximately 120 Christian students and 10 Christian teachers, including Christian Religious Education (PAK) teachers. Although operating within a pluralistic national education system, the presence of a Christian teacher community provides a meaningful environment for exploring faith-informed professional identity. In such a context, teachers negotiate multiple expectations: adherence to national competency standards, responsiveness to diverse student needs, and fidelity to personal theological conviction. The intersection of these dimensions renders professional identity formation both complex and significant. Most theological discussions remain abstract, while educational studies often omit explicit theological frameworks. This gap calls for interdisciplinary inquiry. By combining exegetical analysis of Matthew 16:24-26 with educational investigation within a concrete institutional context, this research seeks to bridge theological reflection and professional practice. The central research question guiding this study is: How does Matthew 16:24-26 inform and shape the construction of a spiritually grounded professional identity among Christian

teachers at SMP Negeri 4 Dolok Panribuan? The study assumes that spiritual identity and professional identity are not discrete categories but mutually formative dimensions of vocational life. Through disciplined exegesis and empirical educational analysis, this research aims to articulate how discipleship theology translates into pedagogical ethos. Matthew 16:24-26 presents a transformative paradigm of identity grounded in sacrificial commitment, ethical integrity, and ultimate accountability. When internalized by educators, this paradigm has the potential to reshape professional self-understanding, reorient definitions of success, and cultivate resilience grounded in transcendent purpose. This study therefore explores the convergence of biblical theology and educational identity formation within a contemporary Indonesian school context.

METHODS

A qualitative case study design was used to explore how Matthew 16:24-26 informs the construction of a spiritually grounded professional identity among Christian teachers at SMP Negeri 4 Dolok Panribuan. A qualitative approach was selected because professional identity and spiritual formation are complex, interpretive phenomena that require in-depth exploration of meaning, experience, and contextual practice rather than numerical measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, assuming that identity is socially constructed and continuously negotiated through reflection, relational interaction, and vocational commitment. The participants consisted of the 10 Christian teachers at the school, including the Christian Religious Education (PAK) teacher. Given the relatively small population, total participation was sought to ensure comprehensive representation of the Christian teacher community. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. The interviews focused on teachers' understanding of Matthew 16:24-26, their interpretation of self-denial and cross-bearing in professional life, experiences of vocational sacrifice, and perceptions of professional success and integrity. Classroom observations were conducted to examine how identity-related values, such as humility, commitment, resilience, and ethical consistency, were enacted in daily pedagogical practice. Field notes documented communicative style, responses to classroom challenges, and relational dynamics with students. Document analysis included review of lesson plans, school vision and mission statements, and professional development records to identify explicit or implicit expressions of spiritually grounded identity. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the stages of familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, and interpretive synthesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was conducted inductively while being conceptually informed by exegetical insights from Matthew 16:24-26 and theoretical frameworks on teacher professional identity (Beijaard et al., 2004). Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of data sources, member checking with participants to confirm interpretive accuracy, and maintenance of reflective memos to minimize researcher bias. Ethical approval was obtained from the school leadership of SMP Negeri 4 Dolok Panribuan, and all participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing individual identities in reporting findings. Through this methodological framework, the study systematically examined the intersection between

discipleship theology and professional identity formation within a specific educational context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this qualitative case study reveal that Matthew 16:24-26 functions not merely as a doctrinal text for Christian Religious Education (PAK) instruction but as a formative theological paradigm shaping the professional identity of Christian teachers at SMP Negeri 4 Dolok Panribuan. Through thematic analysis of interviews, observations, and document review, five major themes emerged: self-denial as vocational reorientation, cross-bearing as professional resilience, redefinition of success and profit, integrity as soul-preserving identity, and communal discipleship as professional solidarity. These themes collectively demonstrate that the Matthean discourse on discipleship profoundly informs how teachers interpret their vocation, negotiate institutional pressures, and sustain moral coherence within a public-school context comprising 120 Christian students and 10 Christian teachers. Self-denial (*aparneomai heauton*) was consistently interpreted by participants as vocational reorientation rather than self-negation in a psychological sense. Teachers described self-denial as the conscious decision to subordinate personal ego, recognition-seeking, and emotional impulsivity to the demands of pedagogical responsibility and Christ-centered character. Several participants articulated that professional conflicts often arise not from curricular issues but from ego-related reactions, defensiveness, pride, or desire for dominance. In this context, Matthew 16:24 was perceived as an internal corrective mechanism. Rather than asserting authority through positional power, teachers reported intentionally practicing humility in communication with students and colleagues. Classroom observations confirmed this dynamic: teachers who explicitly reflected on self-denial demonstrated greater patience during disciplinary disruptions and were less likely to respond reactively to student misbehavior. Theologically, this aligns with Matthean discipleship as an identity transformation that precedes mission. R. T. France (2007) notes that the call to self-denial follows Peter's confession and Jesus' passion prediction, emphasizing that authentic discipleship requires relinquishment of self-centered expectations. In pedagogical terms, this relinquishment translates into relational humility, which strengthens trust and classroom stability. Cross-bearing ("take up his cross") emerged as a metaphor for professional resilience in contexts of institutional limitation and emotional strain. Participants acknowledged experiencing challenges such as limited resources, administrative workload, and varying levels of student motivation. Rather than interpreting these challenges as mere occupational burdens, teachers framed them as integral dimensions of vocational faithfulness. One teacher described cross-bearing as "continuing to teach with integrity even when appreciation is minimal." Another associated it with maintaining ethical standards despite peer pressure to compromise. This reframing reflects Ulrich Luz's (2001) observation that the Matthean cross motif conveys costly loyalty rather than abstract suffering. In the school setting, cross-bearing manifested in consistent lesson preparation, compassionate engagement with struggling students, and refusal to participate in unprofessional gossip. Observational data supported these claims: teachers identified as highly reflective demonstrated sustained composure during stressful situations and maintained respectful communication patterns

even under pressure. Thus, cross-bearing functions not as passive endurance but as active perseverance grounded in theological conviction. Matthew 16:26, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" prompted a significant redefinition of professional success. Participants contrasted worldly measures of achievement, promotion, salary increase, public recognition, with the Matthean emphasis on soul preservation. Teachers articulated that authentic professional identity cannot be reduced to career advancement alone. Instead, they prioritized moral integrity, spiritual consistency, and long-term influence on students' character. This redefinition directly influenced classroom practices. Teachers reported resisting shortcuts that would inflate academic performance statistics at the expense of genuine learning. They emphasized formative feedback rather than grade inflation and preferred restorative discipline over punitive display of authority. In educational theory, professional identity coherence correlates with long-term commitment and resilience (Day & Gu, 2010). The findings of this study extend that insight by demonstrating how theological anthropology reorients success metrics from external gain to internal fidelity. Within a public educational environment, this reorientation enhances ethical consistency and reduces susceptibility to instrumentalist pressures. The theme of integrity as soul-preserving identity was deeply embedded in teachers' reflections. Participants consistently linked the "soul" in Matthew 16:26 not only to eschatological destiny but also to present moral wholeness. Integrity was described as alignment between personal belief, public speech, and pedagogical practice. Teachers emphasized that students quickly perceive inconsistencies between proclaimed values and actual behavior. In this regard, the Matthean warning against forfeiting one's soul was interpreted as a caution against professional fragmentation, performing religious language while compromising ethical conduct. Classroom observations revealed that teachers who articulated this theological conviction were meticulous in fulfilling responsibilities such as punctuality, transparent grading, and equitable treatment of students. They avoided favoritism and maintained confidentiality in sensitive matters. These practices resonate with broader research indicating that teacher credibility significantly influences student engagement and classroom climate (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Theologically grounded integrity therefore functions not only as spiritual fidelity but as pedagogical efficacy. Communal discipleship emerged as an unexpected yet significant dimension of professional identity. Although Matthew 16:24 addresses individual discipleship, participants interpreted the call collectively. Teachers described mutual encouragement, shared prayer, and collaborative reflection as essential supports for sustaining spiritually grounded identity. In a school environment with 10 Christian teachers, informal peer dialogue played a crucial role in reinforcing vocational commitments. Several participants noted that professional discouragement diminished when colleagues shared similar theological perspectives. This communal dynamic mitigated burnout and fostered collective accountability. Educational literature on professional learning communities emphasizes collaboration as a factor in teacher effectiveness (Beijaard et al., 2004). The present findings suggest that when such collaboration is infused with shared theological vision, it acquires deeper motivational force. Community becomes not merely strategic but formative. The integration of exegesis and empirical observation highlights the transformative potential of Matthew 16:24-26 within professional identity construction. Exegetically, the pericope presents three interrelated imperatives: deny oneself, take up the cross, and follow Christ. These

imperatives manifested as humility, resilience, and ethical commitment in professional practice. Teachers' narratives consistently linked spiritual reflection to practical behavior. For example, one participant described consciously praying before addressing a difficult classroom situation to avoid ego-driven reactions. Another recounted declining participation in a practice that would artificially inflate student achievement metrics, citing the Matthean warning against losing one's soul. These narratives demonstrate that theological texts can function as cognitive-ethical frameworks guiding real-time decision-making.

The presence of 120 Christian students and 10 Christian teachers at SMP Negeri 4 Dolok Panribuan creates a relational ecosystem in which spiritually grounded identity is socially visible. Students interviewed informally during observation periods described certain teachers as "consistent," "patient," and "fair." These descriptors align with the themes derived from Matthew 16:24-26. The congruence between teacher self-description and student perception strengthens the credibility of the findings. Although the study does not claim causality, the coherence between theological reflection and observable behavior suggests a meaningful relationship. Not all teachers reported equal depth of engagement with the Matthean text. Some participants admitted that professional busyness occasionally overshadowed spiritual reflection. Others acknowledged difficulty practicing self-denial in moments of emotional fatigue. These admissions underscore the dynamic nature of identity formation. Spiritual grounding does not eliminate human limitation; rather, it provides a normative horizon toward which teachers continually orient themselves. The gap between ideal and practice highlights the necessity of ongoing formation rather than static attainment. This study contributes to the discourse on professional identity by demonstrating that biblical exegesis can serve as a legitimate interpretive resource in educational research. Whereas much literature conceptualizes identity as narrative construction or sociocultural negotiation, the present findings illustrate that theological narratives can function as formative meta-narratives shaping vocational meaning. Matthew 16:24-26 provides an identity grammar that integrates selfhood, suffering, and ultimate accountability. This grammar shapes how teachers interpret success, endure hardship, and maintain ethical coherence. The findings suggest that professional development programs within Christian educational communities may benefit from structured theological reflection integrated with pedagogical training. Rather than separating spiritual formation from professional competency, institutions could design workshops that explicitly connect biblical texts to classroom practice. Such integration would reinforce identity coherence and reduce compartmentalization between faith and profession. The results demonstrate that Matthew 16:24-26 significantly informs the construction of spiritually grounded professional identity among Christian teachers at SMP Negeri 4 Dolok Panribuan. Self-denial fosters humility; cross-bearing cultivates resilience; redefined success safeguards moral focus; integrity preserves the "soul" of professional life; and communal discipleship sustains vocational perseverance. The discussion affirms that theological exegesis, when contextualized within lived educational practice, offers a robust framework for understanding and strengthening professional identity in contemporary schooling.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Matthew 16:24-26 functions as a theological foundation for constructing a spiritually grounded professional identity among Christian teachers at SMP Negeri 4 Dolok Panribuan. Through qualitative case study analysis integrating exegesis and educational inquiry, the research demonstrates that the Matthean call to self-denial, cross-bearing, and faithful discipleship meaningfully shapes teachers' vocational self-understanding and professional conduct. The findings confirm that professional identity, when rooted in discipleship theology, transcends technical competence and institutional role fulfillment. Self-denial was interpreted as humility in relational practice, reducing ego-driven responses and fostering ethical communication. Cross-bearing emerged as vocational resilience, enabling teachers to sustain commitment amid institutional constraints and emotional pressures. The warning against gaining the world while losing the soul reframed professional success, shifting emphasis from external achievement to moral integrity and long-term character influence. These dimensions collectively reveal that spiritual formation provides an internal architecture for professional stability and coherence. The study highlights that spiritually grounded identity is not abstract but observable. Teachers who consciously internalized the Matthean paradigm demonstrated consistency between belief and behavior, fairness in evaluation, patience in discipline, and collaborative collegiality. Student perceptions corroborated these characteristics, suggesting that theological conviction translates into pedagogical credibility. Within the context of 120 Christian students and 10 Christian teachers at SMP Negeri 4 Dolok Panribuan, such identity coherence contributes to relational trust and institutional integrity. The research also acknowledges that identity formation remains dynamic and unfinished. Participants reported tensions between theological ideals and daily pressures, indicating the need for continuous spiritual reflection and communal support. Professional identity grounded in Matthew 16:24-26 is therefore not a static achievement but an ongoing process of alignment between inner conviction and outward practice. This study contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship by demonstrating that biblical exegesis can serve as a substantive framework for understanding teacher identity. It expands educational research by integrating theological anthropology with professional identity theory. Practically, it suggests that teacher development initiatives within Christian contexts should intentionally integrate scriptural reflection with pedagogical formation to strengthen coherence between faith and vocation. Matthew 16:24-26 provides a robust theological architecture for building a spiritually grounded professional identity. By embracing self-denial, accepting vocational sacrifice, and prioritizing soul-preserving integrity, Christian teachers embody a form of discipleship that shapes not only personal spirituality but also professional excellence. Within the educational community of SMP Negeri 4 Dolok Panribuan, such identity becomes a transformative force that aligns faith, character, and pedagogical responsibility.

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