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## Spiritual Integrity and Servant Leadership in Christian Education: Reflections on Matthew 23:12 from a Case Study at SD Negeri 3 Kuala Kurun

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores the relationship between spiritual integrity and servant leadership in Christian education through a qualitative case study conducted at SD Negeri 3 Kuala Kurun, involving 350 Christian students and four Christian teachers, including one Christian Religious Education (CRE) teacher. Grounded in the teaching of Jesus in Gospel of Matthew 23:12, this research interprets humility as the core theological foundation of spiritual integrity and authentic leadership. Using an integrated approach of biblical exegesis and field-based qualitative inquiry, data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. The data were analyzed thematically and dialogically integrated with the exegetical findings. The results indicate that spiritual integrity is manifested as a consistent coherence between personal faith, moral character, and professional conduct. This integrity becomes the foundation of servant leadership expressed through humility, patience, self-giving service, fairness, and relational care toward students. Teachers lead not through domination or positional authority but through moral credibility rooted in lived faith. Students primarily experience Christian values through the teachers' daily attitudes and actions rather than through doctrinal instruction alone. The findings also highlight challenges related to limited institutional and ecclesial support for sustained spiritual formation. The study concludes that spiritual integrity grounded in the humility of Christ is the wellspring of authentic servant leadership in Christian education, transforming teaching into a ministry of faithful service and holistic formation.*

**Keywords:** *Spiritual Integrity, Christian Education, Servant Leadership*

### INTRODUCTION

Spiritual integrity and servant leadership are two inseparable dimensions in Christian education, particularly in the vocation of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers who are called not only to teach biblical knowledge but also to embody the values they proclaim. In contemporary educational contexts, teachers are often evaluated primarily through pedagogical performance, administrative compliance, and academic outcomes.

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However, within Christian education, the authenticity of a teacher's life—the harmony between faith, character, and professional conduct—forms the true foundation of effective ministry. This is especially significant in public school settings where Christian teachers are required to express their faith primarily through example rather than overt religious authority. Such a context is clearly reflected in SD Negeri 3 Kuala Kurun, where 350 Christian students and four Christian teachers, including one CRE teacher, participate in the daily life of a pluralistic educational environment. The theological grounding of spiritual integrity and servant leadership is powerfully articulated in Gospel of Matthew 23:12: *“For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”* This statement is spoken by Jesus in the context of His critique of the religious leaders who sought honor, status, and public recognition. The verse presents humility not as weakness but as the essential posture of authentic spiritual leadership. Within Christian theology, humility is understood as the inner orientation of the heart that recognizes God as the ultimate source of authority and life. Servant leadership, therefore, flows naturally from spiritual integrity, because those who live before God in humility will lead others not through domination but through service, sacrifice, and moral example. In Christian educational ministry, spiritual integrity refers to the consistent integration of belief, character, and daily practice. A teacher with spiritual integrity does not merely articulate Christian values in the classroom but lives them out in relationships with students, colleagues, and the wider school community. Servant leadership, on the other hand, describes the outward expression of this integrity in acts of care, responsibility, empathy, and self-giving. The CRE teacher becomes a spiritual guide not by formal authority alone, but through moral credibility and a life that reflects the character of Christ. Numerous studies in Christian education affirm that students are more deeply formed by what teachers are than by what they merely say. Thus, the credibility of Christian teaching depends largely on the visible coherence between doctrine and life.

The context of SD Negeri 3 Kuala Kurun provides a meaningful setting for examining this relationship between spiritual integrity and servant leadership. Situated in Central Kalimantan, the school serves a large number of Christian students within a public educational system that emphasizes inclusivity, discipline, and national character formation. Christian teachers, including the CRE teacher, are required to navigate their faith identity within formal institutional boundaries while remaining faithful to their spiritual calling. In such a setting, spiritual integrity is continually tested through daily challenges such as professional workload, administrative demands, relational conflicts, and the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of students. The way teachers respond to these challenges becomes a living curriculum through which students learn what Christian leadership truly means. Empirical research that integrates biblical exegesis, spiritual integrity, and servant leadership within the specific context of public Christian education remains limited. Many studies on leadership focus on managerial effectiveness, while spiritual integrity is often treated as a private moral quality rather than a public pedagogical force. Likewise, servant leadership is frequently discussed in organizational theory without sufficient theological grounding. There is, therefore, a significant research gap in examining how the biblical theology of humility in Matthew 23:12 is concretely embodied in the daily ministry of CRE teachers. This study seeks to address that gap by

exploring how spiritual integrity shapes servant leadership in Christian education through a case study at SD Negeri 3 Kuala Kurun. The first objective is to interpret the theological meaning of humility and exaltation in Matthew 23:12 as the foundation of spiritual integrity and servant leadership. The second objective is to analyze how this theological vision is manifested in the personal character, professional conduct, and relational leadership of Christian teachers, especially the CRE teacher. The third objective is to examine how students perceive and are influenced by the servant leadership modeled by their teachers. By integrating exegetical reflection with qualitative educational research, this study argues that spiritual integrity rooted in the humility of Christ is the primary source of authentic servant leadership in Christian education. When teachers live in humble obedience before God, their leadership becomes a form of service that nurtures not only intellectual growth but also spiritual maturity and character formation. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on Christian teacher professionalism by affirming that effective educational ministry is grounded not merely in competence and authority, but in a life shaped by humility, integrity, and faithful service before God.

## **METHODS**

The research integrated biblical exegesis and field-based qualitative inquiry as a theological-empirical approach, to examine the relationship between spiritual integrity and servant leadership in Christian education at SD Negeri 3 Kuala Kurun, where 350 Christian students and four Christian teachers, including one CRE teacher, serve within a pluralistic public-school context. The exegetical component focused on Gospel of Matthew 23:12 using a historical-grammatical method, analyzing the literary context, socio-religious background of the Matthean community, and key theological themes of humility (*tapeinōsis*), exaltation, and leadership reversal (Fee, 1995; O'Brien, 1991). The empirical data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with the CRE teacher as the main informant and three other Christian teachers as supporting informants to explore lived experiences of faith, integrity, and leadership (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Non-participant classroom and school-environment observations were conducted to document concrete expressions of servant leadership in teaching interactions, disciplinary practices, and teacher–student relationships. Data analysis, involving data reduction, open and axial coding, and the construction of theological–educational themes related to humility, service, moral consistency, and leadership credibility (Yin, 2018). The exegetical findings were then dialogically integrated with the empirical themes to produce a coherent interpretation of spiritual integrity as lived servant leadership in education. This study applied triangulation of data sources and methods, member checking with participants, and prolonged engagement in the field (Creswell, 2014). Ethical principles were upheld through informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and formal permission from the school authority.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that spiritual integrity and servant leadership are inseparably intertwined in the daily educational ministry of Christian teachers at SD

Negeri 3 Kuala Kurun. The lived expressions of humility, service, moral consistency, and self-emptying leadership observed in this school context reflect the theological vision articulated in Gospel of Matthew 23:12, where Jesus explicitly teaches that exaltation before God comes only through humility. The discussion below integrates empirical findings with the exegetical meaning of Matthew 23:12 and contemporary theories of servant leadership and Christian education. The finding indicates that spiritual integrity functions as the inner foundation of the teachers' professional identity and ministry. All Christian teachers, especially the CRE teacher, consistently interpreted their work not merely as a formal occupation but as a divine calling. This vocational awareness shaped their attitudes toward responsibility, discipline, and relational ethics. Teachers demonstrated high consistency between what they taught in Christian instruction and how they lived in daily school interactions. Integrity was most visible in their honesty, fairness in assessment, patience in discipline, and refusal to exploit authority for personal gain. This finding resonates directly with Matthew 23:12, where Jesus confronts religious hypocrisy and calls His followers into a life of humble authenticity. The humility Jesus describes is not external modesty but a deep spiritual posture of submitting one's life and authority under God's sovereignty. In this study, spiritual integrity emerged precisely as the coherence between inner faith and outward conduct. Teachers expressed that integrity was sustained not by institutional pressure but by personal spiritual discipline, including prayer, Scripture meditation, and reliance on God in facing professional challenges. In the public-school context, where explicit religious expression is limited by policy, integrity becomes the primary medium of Christian witness. Students described their teachers as "consistent," "patient," and "not easily angry," indicating that spiritual integrity was perceived not through doctrinal language but through observable behavior. This confirms the theological assertion that Christian faith is most powerfully transmitted not through verbal proclamation alone but through a life that embodies truth.

### ***Servant Leadership as a Practical Expression of Humility***

The significant finding also shows that servant leadership is the concrete manifestation of spiritual integrity in educational practice. Teachers intentionally positioned themselves not as authoritarian figures but as servants who exist for the growth and well-being of students. This was evident in their willingness to give extra time for struggling learners, provide emotional support beyond classroom obligations, and engage personally with students' family difficulties. From the perspective of Matthew 23:12, this pattern of leadership reflects the reversal theology of the kingdom of God, where greatness is measured not by status but by self-giving. Jesus explicitly rejects the religious culture of self-exaltation and honor-seeking, establishing humility as the pathway to true elevation before God. In the school context, this theology took shape in a leadership style that avoided domination and nurtured relationship-based authority. Teachers did not use fear as a tool of discipline but applied corrective actions with gentleness and explanation. Even in situations of misconduct, students felt they were treated with dignity. This is a critical indicator of servant leadership, where authority is exercised not to control but to restore. The CRE teacher, in particular, consciously adopted the role of a spiritual companion rather than a moral judge. This approach strengthened students' openness, trust, and moral awareness. This finding aligns with contemporary servant leadership theory, which emphasizes listening, empathy, stewardship, and commitment to the growth of others.

Theologically, however, this study adds that servant leadership in Christian education is not merely a leadership strategy but the visible fruit of spiritual obedience to Christ's call to humility.

### ***The Dynamics of Humility in a Pluralistic Public School***

A distinctive contribution of this study lies in its analysis of humility as a spiritual strategy for ministry in a pluralistic public environment. Christian teachers at SD Negeri 3 Kuala Kurun function within institutional structures that require religious neutrality and administrative discipline. In such a context, humility becomes not a sign of weakness but a wisdom-based posture that enables faithful witness without conflict. Teachers consciously avoided religious triumphalism and coercive expressions of faith. Instead, they chose to serve through excellence, moral consistency, and relational care. This approach reflects the theological balance of Matthew 23:12, where humility is not passive self-negation but an intentional submission to God's way of working in hidden and quiet forms. Teachers testified that through humility they gained deeper respect from colleagues of other faiths and were trusted with broader responsibilities within the school. Students likewise perceived humility as strength. They observed that Christian teachers did not seek attention, rewards, or public recognition, yet were often the most dependable and morally consistent staff members. This created a silent but powerful testimony of faith. Thus, humility operated both as a spiritual virtue and as a missional strategy within the public educational system. One of the most significant results of this research is the documented transformative influence of spiritual integrity and servant leadership on students' character formation. Students consistently identified their Christian teachers as role models of patience, honesty, responsibility, and care. Rather than citing biblical verses memorized in class, students recalled specific life actions, teachers who listened to their problems, forgave mistakes, supported them during family crises, and modeled discipline without harshness. This indicates that faith formation among students occurs primarily through relational encounter rather than cognitive transmission alone. Spiritual integrity becomes the medium through which Christian values are translated into lived experience. Students reported that they learned about humility not from abstract theological explanation but from how teachers accepted criticism, admitted mistakes, and continued serving without resentment. The discussion of Matthew 23:12 deepens this finding. The verse explicitly rejects performative religious identity and calls for internal transformation that manifests in humble service. In this study, the teachers' lives reflected this inner transformation. Their humility protected students from experiencing religious hypocrisy, which is often the main cause of spiritual disillusionment among young people. Servant leadership fostered a school climate marked by relational safety. Students felt secure to express opinions, ask questions about faith, and confess mistakes without fear of humiliation. This environment is essential for authentic spiritual growth, as faith matures not in fear-based systems but in spaces of trust and grace.

Another important finding is that spiritual integrity strengthens, rather than weakens, teacher authority. Contrary to common assumptions that humility diminishes authority, this study demonstrates that integrity-based humility enhances moral credibility.

Students obeyed not because they were forced to, but because they trusted their teachers' moral consistency. This form of authority corresponds closely with the theology of Matthew 23:12. Jesus does not abolish leadership, but transforms its foundation. Authority in the kingdom of God flows not from self-exaltation but from obedience to God. In practical terms, the teachers' authority was sustained by three moral pillars: consistency between words and actions, fairness in decisions, and visible self-sacrifice. The CRE teacher, for instance, maintained high professional standards despite limited institutional facilities. This perseverance communicated to students that faith is not dependent on comfort or status but on commitment. Students described this teacher as "firm but kind," suggesting that moral authority rooted in integrity generates both respect and affection. Teachers often carried heavy workloads, limited opportunities for formal spiritual formation, and minimal institutional support for theological development. Spiritual resilience depended largely on personal devotional discipline rather than on structured ecclesial-educational collaboration. This situation highlights a critical tension. Humility in Matthew 23:12 does not imply isolation or self-reliance but presupposes a living relationship with God and the supportive presence of a faith community. When spiritual integrity rests solely on individual strength without communal reinforcement, the risk of burnout increases. Teachers also faced emotional fatigue due to the high number of Christian students requiring pastoral attention. While servant leadership motivated them to give generously, the absence of systematic support mechanisms created vulnerability. This finding suggests that servant leadership in Christian education must not only be nurtured personally but also institutionally sustained through mentoring, spiritual retreats, and collaborative reflection.

Integrating the exegetical meaning of Matthew 23:12 with the empirical findings, this study affirms that humility is the theological core of both spiritual integrity and servant leadership. Humility is not merely a personality trait but a spiritual orientation of total dependence on God. From this orientation flows integrity (inner coherence of faith and life) and leadership (outer service to others). Teachers at SD Negeri 3 Kuala Kurun lived out the paradox of the Kingdom: they did not seek to be exalted, yet they were honored by students and colleagues through trust and respect. This confirms Jesus' promise that God Himself exalts those who humble themselves. The exaltation observed is not social prestige but moral authority, relational influence, and spiritual credibility. Christian education, therefore, cannot be reduced to curriculum delivery or competence assessment alone. At its deepest level, it is a form of spiritual leadership shaped by the cross of Christ, where teachers lead by serving and influence by surrendering personal ambition. This theological vision redefines professionalism in Christian education as faithfulness before God rather than performance before people. The results demonstrate that spiritual integrity rooted in humility is the foundation of servant leadership in Christian education. Teachers at SD Negeri 3 Kuala Kurun embodied Matthew 23:12 not as a theoretical doctrine but as a lived spiritual reality that shaped their identity, authority, relationships, and influence on students. Their integrity produced moral credibility, their humility generated authentic leadership, and their service fostered holistic student formation. At the same time, the study highlights the urgent need for stronger institutional support to sustain long-term spiritual resilience. Theologically and pedagogically, this research confirms that the true power of Christian education lies not

in external authority or institutional dominance, but in the quiet strength of a humble life that faithfully serves before God and others.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that spiritual integrity and servant leadership are the essential theological and pedagogical foundations of Christian educational ministry, as clearly embodied by Christian teachers at SD Negeri 3 Kuala Kurun. Rooted in the teaching of Jesus in Gospel of Matthew 23:12, humility emerges as the core spiritual posture that shapes both the inner life and the outward leadership practice of teachers. The findings affirm that spiritual integrity is not merely a private moral quality, but a lived coherence between faith, character, and daily professional conduct that becomes visible and formative for students. Servant leadership is shown to be the concrete expression of this integrity. Teachers who humble themselves before God lead not through domination or institutional power, but through service, self-giving, patience, and moral consistency. This form of leadership generates moral authority rather than fear-based compliance, fostering deep trust, relational safety, and authentic character formation among students. Students do not primarily learn Christian values through verbal instruction alone, but through sustained encounters with teachers whose lives reflect the humility, compassion, and faithfulness of Christ. The study also confirms that in a public and pluralistic school context, humility functions as both a spiritual virtue and a missional strategy. By choosing the path of service rather than self-exaltation, Christian teachers are able to witness to their faith without conflict, gaining respect across religious boundaries and strengthening the credibility of Christian education in the public sphere. At the same time, the research reveals structural vulnerabilities, particularly the limited institutional support for ongoing spiritual formation and the risk of emotional and spiritual fatigue due to heavy pastoral demands. This research affirms the paradox of the Kingdom of God: those who humble themselves are truly exalted-not through social status, but through moral authority, spiritual influence, and enduring impact on lives. Pedagogically, it reframes Christian teacher professionalism as a vocation of faithful service rather than mere technical competence. In conclusion, spiritual integrity grounded in humility is the wellspring of authentic servant leadership in Christian education, enabling teachers to become not only instructors of knowledge, but living witnesses of the transforming power of the Gospel in the everyday life of the school community.

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