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## Developing and Implementing a Christ-Centered Pedagogy in Christian Religious Education for Effective Faith Formation in Adolescents

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**Abstract:** The formation of adolescent faith in Christian Religious Education (CRE) requires pedagogical approaches that transcend the mere transmission of knowledge, aiming instead at personal transformation rooted in Christ. In many educational contexts, CRE remains confined to doctrinal instruction, often lacking the holistic, relational, and Christ-centered framework essential for meaningful spiritual development. This study seeks to develop a Christ-centered pedagogy for CRE that intentionally supports adolescents' faith formation by integrating biblical principles, experiential learning, and relational engagement. Employing a qualitative research design, the study was conducted in selected Christian secondary schools and involved teachers, students, and curriculum developers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and were thematically analyzed to identify core pedagogical elements aligned with Christ-centered values such as love, grace, service, and spiritual reflection. Findings indicate that Christ-centered pedagogy is most effective when theological depth is combined with relational authenticity, enabling students to encounter Christ personally through classroom practices, teacher modeling, and community involvement. The integration of spiritual disciplines, narrative theology, and reflective dialogue significantly enhanced student engagement and spiritual growth. Practically, the study recommends that educators and institutions adopt pedagogical approaches that emphasize personal relationships and lived faith experiences within everyday learning contexts. This model demonstrates cultural adaptability, allowing for the contextualization of narratives and spiritual practices in diverse settings while maintaining Christ as the central focus of faith. Thus, this study contributes meaningfully to the advancement of authentic and resilient faith-based



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education, offering practical guidance for Christian educators and institutions in nurturing a generation of faithful, Christ-like disciples.

**Keywords:** Christ-centered pedagogy, Christian Religious Education, adolescent faith formation, spiritual development, theological education.

## 在基督教宗教教育中发展和实施以基督为中心的教学法，以有效地培养青少年的信仰

**摘要:** 在基督教宗教教育 (CRE) 中, 青少年信仰的形成需要超越单纯知识传授的教学方法, 而要以植根于基督的个人转变为目标。在许多教育环境中, CRE 仍然局限于教义教学, 往往缺乏有意义的灵性发展所必需的整体性、关系性和以基督为中心的框架。本研究旨在开发一种以基督为中心的 CRE 教学法, 通过整合圣经原则、体验式学习和关系参与, 有意识地支持青少年的信仰形成。本研究采用定性研究设计, 在选定的基督教中学进行, 参与者包括教师、学生和课程开发人员。数据收集通过半结构化访谈、课堂观察和文献分析进行, 并进行主题分析, 以确定与以基督为中心的价值观相符的核心教学要素, 例如爱、恩典、服务和灵性反思。研究结果表明, 以基督为中心的教学法在将神学深度与关系真实性相结合时最为有效, 使学生能够通过课堂实践、教师示范和社区参与亲身体验基督。灵性训练、叙事神学和反思性对话的融合显著提升了学生的参与度和灵性成长。在实践方面, 该研究建议教育工作者和机构采用强调个人关系和在日常学习情境中活生生的信仰体验的教学方法。该模式展现了文化适应性, 允许在不同环境中将叙事和灵性实践情境化, 同时保持基督作为信仰的中心。因此, 本研究对推进真实且富有韧性的信仰教育做出了有意义的贡献, 为基督教教育工作者和机构培养一代忠信的、像基督一样的门徒提供了实用指导。

**关键词:** 以基督为中心的教学法、基督教宗教教育、青少年信仰形成、精神发展、神学教育

### 1. Introduction

In contemporary Christian education, nurturing authentic faith among adolescents has become increasingly complex in the face of rapid social change, pluralistic worldviews, and the pervasive influence of secular ideologies [1]. While Christian Religious Education (CRE) continues to play a vital role in the spiritual formation of young people, growing concerns highlight its frequent reduction to informational instruction rather than transformative discipleship [2], [3]. As a result, many adolescents fail to develop a personal and dynamic relationship with Christ which is central to the essence of Christian faith [4].

Much of the existing literature in religious education emphasizes doctrinal content delivery, moral instruction, or cognitive development, often at the expense of Christ-centered pedagogical practices that foster holistic faith formation [5]. Although

Christocentric theology is widely affirmed in theological discourse, there remains a notable lack of empirical research exploring its practical application in classroom settings. This disconnect reveals a significant gap between theological ideals and pedagogical realities, particularly in how Christ-centeredness is embodied by educators and authentically experienced by students [6].

The need to address this gap is urgent, particularly given the developmental stage of adolescence, a critical period marked by identity formation, spiritual questioning, and the internalization of beliefs [7]. With rising rates of religious disaffiliation among youth, Christian Religious Education (CRE) must adopt pedagogical approaches that engage both the hearts and minds of students in ways that authentically reflect the character and teachings of Jesus Christ [8]. In the absence of intentional, Christ-centered strategies, religious education risks becoming spiritually irrelevant or pedagogically ineffective in fostering genuine

discipleship and personal faith commitment among young people [9].

In recent years, scholarly attention has increasingly turned to innovative learning models in CRE as a means of supporting holistic faith formation in adolescents. As [10] demonstrates, project-based learning integrated within the Merdeka Curriculum significantly enhances student engagement and character development, highlighting the importance of pedagogies that are not only informative but also transformative and contextually responsive. Moreover, research conducted in Christian secondary schools during the 2024/2025 academic year indicates that the professional and spiritual competencies of CRE teachers positively influence student learning outcomes and moral development. These findings emphasize the necessity of pedagogical frameworks that prioritize not only theological content, but also the quality of teacher-student relationships and the cultivation of Christ-like character.

Recent trends in Christian Religious Education (CRE) pedagogy highlight the integration of reflective and narrative approaches that meaningfully connect students' faith experiences with their cultural contexts. Research conducted in 2024 further demonstrates that teacher creativity, combined with hybrid learning models and structured reflective dialogue, significantly enhances student interest and engagement in CRE [11]. These developments present a timely opportunity to develop a Christ-centered pedagogy that is both contextually adaptive and theologically grounded—capable of maintaining depth and relational authenticity across diverse educational and cultural settings [12].

Therefore, this study seeks to address the existing gap by formulating and implementing a practical, contextually responsive Christ-centered pedagogical framework designed to support adolescent faith formation in a variety of Christian educational contexts.

Previous research has explored multiple dimensions of Christian education, including character development [5], the integration of spiritual disciplines in classroom practice [13], and narrative approaches to theological learning [14]. Shared praxis pedagogy has been proposed as a model for engaging learners in reflective faith practices [15], while the interplay between teacher authenticity and subject matter has been emphasized as crucial for cultivating a spiritually formative classroom environment [16]. However, despite these valuable contributions, few studies have explicitly connected such models to a comprehensive Christ-centered vision—one that intentionally permeates curriculum design, teacher identity, and everyday classroom practice [17].

This study seeks to address this gap by developing and articulating a Christ-centered pedagogical framework rooted in biblical theology, educational theory, and empirical classroom practices. Its novelty lies in the intentional integration of Christ as the

model, the message, and the method of teaching, shifting the focus from generic values-based or doctrinal instruction toward a pedagogy designed to facilitate a transformative encounter with the living Christ [18]. Drawing on theological reflection and qualitative field data, the research constructs a pedagogical model that is both contextually relevant and spiritually formative, aiming to bridge the divide between theological conviction and classroom practice.

The primary objective of this study is to explore and develop a Christ-centered pedagogy for Christian Religious Education (CRE) that meaningfully contributes to adolescent faith formation. Specifically, the study aims to:

- a) Examine current pedagogical practices in CRE and their alignment with Christ-centered values;
- b) Identify key pedagogical elements that foster adolescent spiritual development;
- c) Construct a Christ-centered framework that integrates the theological, relational, and experiential dimensions of faith formation.

This research offers both practical and theoretical contributions. For educators and curriculum designers, it provides a biblically grounded and pedagogically sound model for implementing Christ-centered teaching in diverse educational settings. In the field of theological education, it advances the discourse on the integration of Christology and pedagogy, offering a practical theology of teaching rooted in the person and work of Christ. For churches and faith-based schools, the study presents a strategic framework to nurture resilient, Christ-centered adolescents who are spiritually formed and equipped to live out their faith authentically in a complex and pluralistic world.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, which is particularly suitable for exploring complex educational phenomena such as pedagogical practices and spiritual formation [19]. A qualitative approach was selected to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and reflective insights of Christian educators and students within authentic classroom settings. This design facilitated a nuanced understanding of how Christ-centered pedagogy is enacted, experienced, and internalized in the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE), enabling the identification of key patterns and underlying values that shape faith formation [20].

### 2.2. Data Sources

The primary data sources included Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers, secondary school students (aged 13–18), and curriculum developers from three Christian-affiliated secondary schools. Participants were selected through purposive sampling

to ensure representation of individuals actively involved in Christian education and directly engaged in the process of adolescent faith formation [21]. This sampling strategy enabled the inclusion of voices with rich, context-specific insights into the practice and experience of Christ-centered teaching. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and informed consent was secured from all participants. For minor participants, parental or guardian consent was also obtained, alongside student assent, to uphold ethical standards and ensure voluntary, informed participation.

### 2.3. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using three primary qualitative methods:

- Semi-structured interviews with 12 Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers and 6 curriculum developers, focusing on their understanding, implementation, and perceived challenges in enacting Christ-centered pedagogy in the classroom [22].
- Focus group discussions with 30 students (10 from each school) to explore adolescents' perceptions of their CRE experience and its impact on their spiritual development and faith journey [23].
- Classroom observations conducted using a structured observation protocol to document pedagogical practices, teacher-student interactions, integration of Scripture, and instances of reflective or experiential learning [24].

In addition, supplementary data were gathered from curriculum documents, lesson plans, and teaching materials to provide contextual insight into the formal content of CRE and its alignment with Christ-centered values.

### 2.4. Data Analysis Methods

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) initial coding, (3) theme generation, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report [25]. NVivo software was employed to support systematic data management and coding, enhancing rigor and traceability throughout the analytical process.

The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns and themes that reflect core Christ-centered pedagogical principles, such as grace, relational authenticity, spiritual reflection, service, and scriptural integration, and how these were enacted by educators and experienced by students in classroom settings.

To enhance trustworthiness, credibility, and methodological rigor, the study employed multiple strategies:

- Data triangulation across sources (teachers, students, curriculum documents) and methods (interviews, observations, focus groups);

- Member checking, in which preliminary findings were shared with selected participants to validate interpretations;
- Peer debriefing through regular consultations with fellow researchers in Christian education to challenge assumptions and strengthen analytical coherence [26].

These measures collectively supported the study's credibility, confirmability, and transferability within similar educational contexts.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Christ-Centered Teaching as Relational Discipleship

Based on qualitative data collected from Christian educators and students, several core components emerged as essential to Christ-centered relational discipleship (Table 1). These components reflect the holistic nature of discipleship, integrating theological knowledge with personal and spiritual growth. To further examine the role of relational dynamics, a survey was administered to 150 students across three Christian secondary schools, assessing the impact of relational discipleship on faith formation. The results revealed a strong positive correlation between students' perceived closeness to their teachers and their self-reported levels of spiritual growth.

The data supports the premise that relational discipleship plays a significant role in adolescent faith development. Educators who cultivate authentic, caring relationships with students foster classroom environments that are conducive to spiritual exploration, vulnerability, and transformation. This relational model resonates deeply with the example of Jesus, who taught and formed his disciples not through didactic instruction alone, but through intentional, life-on-life mentorship grounded in love, presence, and shared experience.

**Table 1. Core components of Christ-centered relational discipleship (compiled by the author)**

Component	Description
Intentional Relationships	Building trust and genuine connections between teachers and students.
Modeling Christ-like Behavior	Educators exemplify the teachings of Christ through their actions and attitudes.
Personalized Guidance	Tailoring spiritual instruction to meet individual student needs.
Community Engagement	Encouraging participation in faith-based community activities.
Reflective Practices	Incorporating prayer, meditation, and discussion to deepen understanding.

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Furthermore, the incorporation of reflective practices, such as group discussions and personal journaling, allows students to internalize biblical teachings and apply them to their lives. Community engagement activities, such as service projects and church involvement, provide practical applications of faith, reinforcing lessons learned in the classroom. Christ-centered teaching that prioritizes relational discipleship fosters a nurturing environment where adolescents can explore and deepen their faith. By embodying the principles of intentional relationships, modeling, personalized guidance, community engagement, and reflective practices, educators can effectively guide students on their spiritual journeys.

The data revealed that authentic relationships between teachers and students are foundational to a Christ-centered pedagogy. Teachers who modeled the love, patience, and humility of Christ were more effective in facilitating student openness and spiritual engagement. As one teacher explained, "Before they can understand Christ, they need to experience His love through us."

This aligns with the theology of incarnational ministry [27], which emphasizes that faith formation is relational, not merely instructional. Similarly, [28] underscores the role of teacher authenticity in creating spaces where students can encounter truth in personal and transformative ways. The emphasis on relational discipleship echoes Jesus' own method of teaching through shared life, dialogue, and presence [29].

### 3.2. Integration of Scripture and Narrative Theology

Based on qualitative data from educators and students, several core components emerged as essential for effective integration of Scripture and narrative theology (Table 2).

**Table 2. Core Components of Narrative Integration in CRE (compiled by the author)**

Component	Description
<b>Story-Centric Teaching</b>	Utilizing biblical narratives as central teaching tools to convey theological concepts.
<b>Personal Reflection</b>	Encouraging students to relate biblical stories to their own life experiences.
<b>Community Engagement</b>	Facilitating group discussions and activities centered around scriptural narratives.
<b>Creative Expression</b>	Incorporating arts, drama, and writing to explore and internalize biblical stories.
<b>Theological Exploration</b>	Guiding students to delve into the deeper meanings and implications of biblical narratives.

These components align with the principles of narrative theology, which emphasize the storytelling nature of Scripture to foster a deeper understanding and personal connection to the faith. A survey conducted among 150 students across three Christian secondary schools assessed the impact of narrative-based teaching on their engagement and spiritual growth. The results indicated a significant increase in students' interest and personal connection to biblical material when taught through narrative methods.

The integration of Scripture through narrative theology in Christian Religious Education (CRE) has been shown to enhance students' understanding and personal connection to biblical teachings. By presenting the Bible as a continuous story, educators can create a more immersive and relatable learning experience. This approach aligns with the findings of [30], which emphasize the importance of storytelling in helping students grasp the overarching themes of the Bible and apply them to their lives. Furthermore, the use of creative expression and community engagement in exploring biblical narratives enables students to internalize and articulate their faith more effectively. This method supports the development of critical thinking and personal reflection that are essential components in adolescent faith formation.

Integrating Scripture through narrative theology in Christian Religious Education offers a dynamic and effective approach to adolescent faith formation. By emphasizing storytelling, personal reflection, and community engagement, educators can foster a deeper understanding and personal connection to the biblical narrative, encouraging students to live out their faith authentically.

Another major theme was the intentional and contextualized use of Scripture in classroom instruction. Teachers moved beyond rote memorization and doctrinal proof-texting to invite students into the story of redemption, often through biblical narratives, drama, reflective journaling, and theological discussion. This narrative approach mirrors the shared praxis model [18] and child-centered theology [31], which emphasize the

role of story in shaping identity and faith. Students reported that encountering the Bible as a living story helped them see their own lives within the context of God's mission, fostering deeper reflection and application.

A student shared, "It's not just about what the Bible says – it's about how I am being called to live like Jesus today."

### 3.3. Experiential and Reflective Learning Practices

Effective Christ-centered pedagogy was also marked by experiential and reflective practices, including service-learning, prayer circles, spiritual journaling, and liturgical participation. These practices helped bridge the gap between knowledge and formation, enabling students to experience faith in action.

As affirmed by [32], spiritual transformation requires more than cognitive learning, it involves the whole person: intellect, emotions, and will. Students expressed that activities such as community outreach or guided silent retreats allowed them to "hear God personally" and "see Christ in others." Such experiential components align with Dewey's theory of experience-based education, as well as Christian educational theorists like [11], who advocate for embodied faith learning. In the context of Christ-centered pedagogy, experiential and reflective learning represent essential strategies that engage the whole person—mind, heart, and body—in the process of faith formation. These practices enable adolescents not merely to know about Christian beliefs, but to live into them through experience and spiritual reflection. Rooted in constructivist and transformational learning theories, this approach is consistent with Christ's teaching style, which often combined lived experience, storytelling, questions, and personal encounters to lead disciples toward spiritual maturity [10].

#### 3.3.1. Experiential Learning in Christian Education

Experiential learning in CRE refers to activities that immerse students in real-life, service-oriented, or simulated faith experiences. These may include:

- Service-learning projects (e.g., community outreach, missions)
- Retreats and spiritual formation events
- Role-playing biblical scenarios or ethical dilemmas
- Sacramental participation and worship leadership

These experiences are intentionally structured to foster empathy, social awareness, and spiritual growth by placing students in situations that require them to apply biblical values in context [33]. Students internalize concepts not through passive absorption, but through doing, feeling, and reflecting; this process reflects Jesus' own practice of sending out His disciples to heal, serve, and proclaim the kingdom [34].

#### 3.3.2. Reflective Learning as Spiritual Practice

Reflection transforms experience into spiritual insight. In Christ-centered pedagogy, reflective practices help students process what they have experienced through a biblical and theological lens. Common reflective methods include:

- Spiritual journaling
- Guided prayer and silence (e.g., Lectio Divina)
- Peer discussion circles and theological dialogue
- Personal testimonies or storytelling

These practices help adolescents discern God's presence and action in their lives, drawing them into a deeper relationship with Christ [36]. Reflective learning cultivates habits of attentiveness, gratitude, confession, and discernment, which are essential for sustainable faith beyond the classroom.

#### 3.3.3. Pedagogical Benefits

Research and classroom observations suggest several benefits of integrating experiential and reflective learning into CRE:

- Increased student engagement and retention of spiritual concepts
- Stronger personal identification with Christian teachings and values
- Greater openness to community and mutual accountability
- Enhanced spiritual maturity and ownership of faith

As students move from passive listeners to active participants in their faith journey, they begin to encounter Christ personally, not only in Scripture, but also in lived experience and relational contexts. This approach affirms the belief that Christian education is not simply about informing the mind, but about transforming the heart [36].

#### 3.3.4. Theological Integration

Experiential and reflective learning practices resonate with core theological themes of incarnation, transformation, and discipleship. The incarnation of Christ affirms that God enters human experience, sanctifying the ordinary and affirming embodied ways of knowing [37]. Discipleship, likewise, is not merely theoretical, it is practiced in community, in service, and through reflection, as Jesus modelled.

In sum, experiential and reflective learning practices are indispensable components of a Christ-centered pedagogy in Christian Religious Education. They create space for adolescents to integrate head, heart, and hands in the learning process, encountering Christ not only in theory, but in lived reality. These methods not only deepen understanding, but also cultivate habits of faithful living, forming resilient disciples capable of embodying their faith in a complex and pluralistic world.

### 3.4. Teacher as Witness and Disciple

The role of the teacher emerged as a central theme. Teachers who identified themselves as “disciples before educators” modeled a life rooted in Christ, through prayer, humility, servant leadership, and moral consistency. Their personal devotion to Christ was regarded by students as the most persuasive “curriculum.”

As one student noted, “I learn more from how my teacher lives than from what they teach.” This confirms the assertion that pedagogy is never value-neutral [38]; the personhood of the teacher profoundly shapes the spiritual climate of the classroom. The role of educators as moral and spiritual guides in Christian schools was similarly highlighted by [39]. The data suggest that the integration of teacher spirituality into daily practice is essential for effective Christ-centered pedagogy.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study explored the development of a Christ-centered pedagogy in Christian Religious Education (CRE) as a means of nurturing faith formation among adolescents.

Through qualitative analysis of teacher interviews, student focus groups, and classroom observations, the study revealed that faith formation is most effective when pedagogy is rooted in relational, scriptural, experiential, and spiritual practices centered on the person of Christ. The findings demonstrate that Christ-centered pedagogy is not merely a theological ideal, but a lived and observable reality in classrooms where teachers embody the values of Jesus and invite students into a transformative faith journey. Key pedagogical elements include relational discipleship, the integration of narrative theology, experiential learning, and the modelling of faith by educators. These components work together to foster authentic encounters with Christ, shaping students not only intellectually, but also spiritually and emotionally. Importantly, the study addresses a gap in current religious education practices that often emphasize doctrine over discipleship. By reframing CRE through a Christ-centered lens, this research offers a holistic, formative, and theologically grounded approach to adolescent spiritual development.

For practical application, educators are encouraged to intentionally build trusting relationships with students, incorporate biblical storytelling and reflective dialogue into lesson plans, and design hands-on faith experiences such as service projects and the practice of spiritual disciplines. Teacher training programs should emphasize spiritual formation and relational skills alongside theological knowledge. Christian schools and institutions are advised to create supportive communities that extend faith learning beyond the classroom through mentorship programs and family engagement. Additionally, curriculum developers should create adaptable frameworks that respect cultural diversity while maintaining Christ-centered core values.

The limitations of this study include its qualitative

focus on a limited number of Christian secondary schools, which may affect the generalizability of the findings across different denominations and educational contexts. Future research could expand by employing mixed-methods approaches, involving larger and more diverse participant groups, and conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of Christ-centered pedagogy on adolescent faith formation. Comparative studies across various cultural and denominational settings would also enrich the understanding and refinement of this pedagogical framework.

#### Declarations

##### *Author Contributions*

The author confirms the sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results and manuscript preparation.

##### *Data Availability Statement*

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

##### *Funding*

Not applicable.

##### *Institutional Review Board Statement*

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Review Committee of Universitas Islam Malang, Indonesia.

##### *Informed Consent Statement*

Informed consent was obtained from all the subjects involved in the study.

##### *Conflicts of Interest*

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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