

Christian Education and the Law of Love (Matthew 22:37-40): Implications for the Character Formation of Youth in the Contemporary Church

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Christian Education;
Law of Love;
Youth;
Character Development

Article history:

Received 2024-09-20
Revised 2024-11-23
Accepted 2024-12-31

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of Christian Religious Education in shaping the character of contemporary church youth through the Law of Love in Matthew 22:37-40. The study contributes by positioning the Law of Love as an integrated theological-educational framework for youth character formation. Using qualitative library research, this study analyzes thirty relevant theological and educational sources through thematic and hermeneutical analysis of biblical texts. The findings indicate that an integrated understanding of love for God and love for others strengthens ethical responsibility, spiritual maturity, and social sensitivity among church youth. The study concludes that Christian education grounded in the Law of Love has strong potential as a transformative model for youth character development in today's church.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Christian Religious Education (CRE) occupies a vital position in the life of the church, particularly in shaping the spiritual maturity and moral character of adolescents. Within the Christian tradition, education is not merely an intellectual endeavor but a formative process aimed at nurturing faith, values, and ethical conduct (Groome, 2011) (Pazmiño, 2019). Christian education is therefore inherently transformative, seeking to form persons who live out their faith through concrete moral action (Wilhoit, 2008). Adolescence represents a critical developmental phase characterized by identity exploration, value formation, and heightened susceptibility to external influences (Erikson, 1968) (Santrock, 2019). During this stage, young people require intentional guidance that enables them to integrate faith, morality, and everyday behavior in a coherent manner (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2008). Boiliu (2018) emphasizes that Christian education should not merely transmit doctrinal knowledge but should guide believers to recognize, internalize, and imitate the character of Christ in daily life (Nababan, Sianturi, Rantung, Naibaho, & Boiliu, 2023) (Boiliu, 2018). In the same vein, Pazmiño (2019) argues that CRE functions as a transformative educational process that nurtures faith formation, moral awareness, and active discipleship (Pazmiño, 2019).

In contemporary society, adolescents face increasingly complex moral and social challenges due to rapid developments in information and communication technology. The digital era has reshaped how young people interact, communicate, and construct meaning in their lives (Campbell, 2013) (Livingstone, 2014). Scholars note that digital culture significantly influences adolescents' moral reasoning, identity construction, and religious engagement (Turkle, 2011) (Buckingham, 2013). While technology offers unprecedented access to information and opportunities for self-expression, it also exposes adolescents to various moral risks, including cyberbullying, substance abuse, pornography, violence, and ethical relativism (Boiliu, 2020; (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014) (Kowalski, Limber, & McCord, 2018). Smith and Denton (2005) found that many adolescents tend to prioritize personal preference and peer acceptance over religious moral frameworks (Smith & Denton, 2005), resulting in weakened moral commitment. Similar findings by Arnett (2015) suggest that moral individualism has become increasingly dominant among youth in late modern societies (Arnett, 2015). These conditions underscore the urgency for churches to strengthen character education rooted in Christian values and grounded in biblical ethics (Dean, 2010) (Setran & Kiesling, 2013).

As a moral and spiritual institution, the church bears responsibility for responding to these challenges by equipping young people with a strong ethical and spiritual foundation. Christian education, when intentionally designed, serves as a means through which biblical faith is connected to lived experience (Groome, 2011) (Wilhoit & Dettoni, 2017). Educational theologians emphasize that without such integration, faith risks becoming abstract and disconnected from daily life (Dykstra & Bass, 2002). Without sustained character formation, adolescents may experience a growing disconnect between religious knowledge and ethical practice. This gap is evident in the declining expression of love, empathy, and respect for others in social life, as observed in several studies on youth religiosity and moral behavior (Smith & Denton, 2005); (Dean, 2010); (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Such conditions raise fundamental questions about how core Christian teachings are understood, internalized, and practiced by the younger generation.

One of the core ethical teachings of Christianity that directly addresses moral and relational issues is the Law of Love, as articulated by Jesus Christ in Matthew 22:37-40 (France, 2007). In this passage, Jesus summarizes the entire Law and the Prophets into two inseparable commandments: loving God with all one's heart, soul, and mind, and loving one's neighbor as oneself. These commandments are rooted in the Old Testament texts of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, demonstrating continuity between the Old and New Testaments (Nicholas Thomas Wright, 2003) (N T Wright, 2015). Biblical scholars affirm that this teaching functions as the hermeneutical key to understanding Christian ethics as a whole (Hagner, 1995); (Keener, 2009). Hays (2013) explains that the Law of Love represents the ethical heart of the Christian faith, emphasizing that authentic devotion to God must be expressed through concrete acts of love toward others (Hays, 2013). Wright (2015) further argues that the inseparability of these commandments forms a comprehensive moral framework governing Christian belief, behavior, and social responsibility (N T Wright, 2015).

Numerous studies have examined the role of love in Christian ethics and character formation. Napitupulu, Theresia, and Deak (2021) found that teaching the Law of Love within church education significantly enhances adolescents' moral sensitivity, empathy, and social responsibility (Napitupulu, Theresia, & Deak, 2021). Sunarko (2020) highlights that love for God must be demonstrated through ethical conduct and social concern, particularly in responding to contemporary moral challenges (Sunarko, 2020). Richards and Bredfeldt (1998) also demonstrate that faith-based character education rooted in Christian values promotes self-control, compassion, and prosocial behavior among adolescents (Richards & Bredfeldt, 1998). These findings align with broader theories of character education, which emphasize the integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action (Lickona, 1992); (Nucci, 2014); (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005).

Other scholars emphasize the pedagogical dimensions of Christian education. Groome (2011) proposes a shared praxis approach that integrates biblical narratives, personal experience, and communal reflection to foster moral transformation (Groome, 2011). Wilhoit and Dettoni (2017) stress

that Christian education should intentionally cultivate spiritual disciplines and moral virtues (Wilhoit & Dettoni, 2017), including love, humility, and service. Estep, Anthony, and Allison (2018) further argue that effective Christian education for adolescents must be contextually responsive, addressing psychological, social, and spiritual challenges in a rapidly changing world (Estep, Anthony, & Allison, 2018). Similar perspectives are offered by Setran and Kiesling (2013), who argue that faith formation among youth must engage both theological depth and cultural awareness (Setran & Kiesling, 2013).

Despite these significant contributions, existing research reveals several limitations. First, many studies discuss Christian character education in general terms without grounding their analysis in a specific biblical text. Second, research on love in Christian education often emphasizes theological reflection rather than its systematic integration into educational practice for adolescents. Third, studies on youth moral development frequently treat love for God and love for others as separate ethical dimensions, rather than as an integrated and inseparable command as taught in Matthew 22:37–40 (Pazmiño, 2019); Wright, 2015; Hays, 2013). These limitations indicate that the transformative potential of the Law of Love has not yet been fully explored within the framework of Christian Religious Education for church youth.

Furthermore, most existing studies focus either on moral decline or on normative ideals of Christian ethics, with limited attention to how the Law of Love can be operationalized as an educational framework that shapes adolescent character in concrete ways. Pazmiño (2019) warns that without a clear educational paradigm, Christian ethics risks remaining abstract and disconnected from daily life. Therefore, there is a need for research that bridges biblical theology, Christian education, and character development, particularly for adolescents facing complex moral pressures in contemporary society.

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the Law of Love as articulated in Matthew 22:37–40 as the theological and educational foundation for character development among today's church youth (Keener, 2009). The novelty of this research lies in its focused biblical-textual analysis combined with an educational perspective, positioning the Law of Love not merely as a moral command but as a comprehensive framework for Christian Religious Education. By emphasizing the unity of love for God and love for fellow human beings, this study offers a holistic approach to adolescent character formation that integrates faith, ethics, and social responsibility.

Based on the above background, the research problem of this study is formulated as follows: How can Christian Religious Education concerning the Law of Love according to Matthew 22:37–40 contribute to the character development of today's church youth? Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the theological meaning of the Law of Love in Matthew 22:37–40 and to explore its implications for Christian Religious Education in shaping the moral, spiritual, and social character of contemporary church adolescents.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach using a library research design (J. A. Moleong, 2003)(Sugiyono, 2011). Library research was selected because the focus of this study is on conceptual, theological, and educational analysis rather than empirical field data. The primary aim is to examine the concept of the Law of Love in Matthew 22:37–40 and its implications for Christian Religious Education in the context of adolescent character development. The data used in this study are theoretical and textual in nature, derived from various written sources relevant to the research topic. These sources include the Bible as the primary text, scholarly books on Christian education and theology, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other academic publications that discuss the Law of Love, character education, and youth spiritual formation.

Data collection was conducted through systematic identification, selection, and review of relevant literature (L J Moleong, 2024). The collected data were carefully read, categorized, and compared (Sugiyono, 2013)(Sugiyono, 2014) (Lexy J. Moleong, 1989) to identify key themes and conceptual patterns related to the Law of Love and Christian character formation. Data analysis was carried out using descriptive-analytical and interpretative methods, involving biblical-textual analysis of Matthew

22:37–40 and synthesis of findings from previous studies. The results of the analysis are presented descriptively and systematically to construct a coherent theoretical framework regarding the role of Christian Religious Education in fostering love for God and fellow human beings as the foundation for adolescent character development in today's church.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings of this study reveal insights into the implementation of Christian Religious Education (CRE) in instilling the Law of Love based on Matthew 22:37–40 for adolescent character development. The focus of the study includes adolescents' understanding of love for God, moral awareness, spiritual orientation, and social responsibility. Informants emphasized that teaching the Law of Love is not merely theoretical but is applied in daily life through practices such as empathy, respect for others, and active engagement in the community. The following table summarizes the main findings on how Christian Religious Education contributes to shaping adolescents' character values through the internalization of the Law of Love.

Table 1. Findings of Christian Religious Education on the Law of Love (Matthew 22:37–40) for Teenage Character Development

No.	Focus of Findings	Description of Findings
1	Love for God	Christian Religious Education emphasizes loving God with heart, soul, and mind as the foundation of adolescent faith and character formation.
2	Spiritual Orientation	The Law of Love shapes adolescents' spiritual orientation toward holistic devotion rather than mere ritual or doctrinal knowledge.
3	Moral Awareness	Teaching Matthew 22:37–40 increases adolescents' awareness of moral responsibility rooted in biblical values.
4	Love for Fellow Human Beings	Adolescents are encouraged to practice love through empathy, respect, tolerance, and concern for others.
5	Social Responsibility	The Law of Love fosters a sense of social responsibility, including willingness to help, serve, and engage positively in the community.
6	Integration of Faith and Practice	Christian education links belief in God with concrete ethical behavior toward others.
7	Character Values	Character traits identified include compassion, self-control, humility, responsibility, and respect for diversity.
8	Role of Christian Education	Christian Religious Education functions as a primary medium for transmitting and internalizing the Law of Love among church adolescents.
9	Relevance for Adolescents	The Law of Love addresses contemporary moral challenges faced by teenagers in church contexts.
10	Educational Framework	Matthew 22:37–40 serves as a core framework for character development in church-based Christian education.

Table 1 presents the main findings of the literature-based study regarding the role of Christian Religious Education grounded in the Law of Love (Matthew 22:37–40) in shaping the spiritual, moral, and social character of today's church adolescents.

Discussion

The Law of Love for God as the Foundation of Teenage Character Formation

The findings indicate that Christian education grounded in the Law of Love for God emphasizes holistic devotion, encompassing heart, soul, and mind. This holistic orientation reflects a

comprehensive understanding of faith that integrates emotional commitment, spiritual surrender, and intellectual engagement. In the context of adolescent development, such integration is essential because teenagers are in a critical phase of identity formation, during which cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions develop simultaneously.

From a theological perspective, this finding aligns with the biblical anthropology underlying Matthew 22:37–38 and Deuteronomy 6:5, where the human person is understood as an integrated unity rather than a set of separate components. Scholars such as Kent and Keener argue that the command to love God with heart, soul, and mind does not suggest compartmentalized devotion but total self-giving to God. In Christian education, this holistic devotion becomes the moral and spiritual foundation upon which character is formed.

Educational theory further supports this interpretation. Transformative learning theory suggests that meaningful education reshapes learners' perspectives, values, and self-understanding, not merely their knowledge (Mezirow). When Christian education invites adolescents to love God with their whole being, it facilitates internal transformation rather than external conformity. This is particularly important for teenagers who often struggle with faith that feels imposed rather than personally meaningful.

When compared with previous studies, these findings strongly affirm earlier research. Suryadi's study demonstrated that structured discipleship programs significantly enhanced congregational understanding and practice of the Law of Love, resulting in character transformation. Similarly, Kristanti et al. emphasized that Jesus' teaching on love forms the ethical core of Christian education. The present study reinforces these conclusions by showing that such teaching is especially effective when applied to adolescents within the church context.

However, this study also extends previous findings by emphasizing the intellectual dimension ("mind") of loving God. While earlier research tended to focus primarily on emotional devotion and spiritual discipline, the present analysis highlights the importance of engaging adolescents' reasoning abilities. This emphasis serves as a constructive development rather than a contradiction, suggesting that Christian education must address teenagers' critical thinking to remain relevant in contemporary society.

The Law of Love for Fellow Human Beings and Social Character Development

The findings also reveal that the Law of Love for fellow human beings functions as a practical expression of love for God. Adolescents who internalize this command are guided toward values such as empathy, respect, tolerance, and social responsibility. Theologically, this reflects the inseparability of love for God and love for others, as emphasized in Matthew 22:39–40 and 1 John 4:20.

From a theoretical standpoint, this finding corresponds with social learning theory, which explains moral development as a process shaped by modeled behavior and social interaction. When Christian education consistently demonstrates love in action—through service, compassion, and inclusivity—adolescents learn to embody these values in their daily lives. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), frequently cited in the findings, functions as a pedagogical narrative that challenges social boundaries and promotes active compassion.

Previous studies strongly support this conclusion. Sibarani found that Christian spirituality rooted in Matthew 22:37–40 demands love even toward enemies, shaping ethical behavior in Christian communities. Raharjo likewise emphasized that character education grounded in love, responsibility, and tolerance contributes to noble moral development. The present study affirms these findings by demonstrating that such values are particularly formative during adolescence, when social attitudes and moral commitments are still being shaped.

At the same time, this study offers a critical nuance. While some earlier research conceptualized love primarily as an internal disposition or moral ideal, the present discussion emphasizes love as proactive and action-oriented. Drawing on McDowell and Bultmann, love is understood not merely as emotion but as concrete ethical practice. This perspective challenges churches that emphasize doctrinal

teaching without sufficient opportunities for adolescents to practice love through service and social engagement. In this sense, the study introduces an implicit critique of purely cognitive or ritualistic approaches to Christian education.

Christian Education and the Church's Role in Developing Teenage Character

The findings further highlight the strategic role of Christian education in the church for developing teenage character. Adolescents today face declining church involvement, identity confusion, and strong external influences from secular culture. When Christian education fails to address these realities, teenage participation and spiritual growth tend to decline.

Theoretically, this aligns with character education models that integrate moral knowledge, moral feeling, and moral action. Christian education that is rooted in the Law of Love provides a coherent framework for integrating these dimensions. Love for God shapes moral orientation, love for others informs social behavior, and both together guide ethical action.

This conclusion is strongly supported by previous research. Debora and Han emphasized that Christian teachers play a crucial role in shaping students' character by modeling Christlike virtues and guiding them toward biblical truth. Latif highlighted that meaningful teaching and fellowship are essential for sustaining adolescents' spiritual growth and church engagement. The present study affirms these findings and further argues that the Law of Love serves as the theological core that unifies teaching, fellowship, and service within the church's tri-fold mission of *koinonia*, *marturia*, and *diakonia*.

Nevertheless, this study also offers a critical reflection on current church practices. Consistent with Latif's findings, monotonous and unstable church programs contribute to declining teenage interest. The present study extends this critique by arguing that character education without a clear theological grounding in the Law of Love risks becoming moralistic rather than transformative. Thus, churches are challenged to redesign educational programs that are relational, participatory, and contextually relevant.

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that the Law of Love for God and fellow human beings provides a comprehensive theological and educational foundation for teenage character development in today's church. The findings affirm previous scholarship while contributing a contextual synthesis that emphasizes holistic devotion, active compassion, and intentional educational practice.

By integrating theological insight, educational theory, and empirical findings from prior studies, this research affirms that Christian education rooted in the Law of Love has significant potential to shape adolescents into individuals of integrity, empathy, and spiritual maturity. At the same time, it challenges churches to move beyond formal instruction toward transformative character formation that addresses the real needs of contemporary teenagers.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion of this literature-based study on Christian Religious Education concerning the Law of Love according to Matthew 22:37–40 and its implications for teenage character development in today's church, several conclusions can be drawn.

First, the study concludes that the Law of Love for God constitutes the theological foundation of adolescent character formation in Christian education. Loving God with all one's heart, soul, and mind is not merely a doctrinal teaching but a formative principle that shapes adolescents' spiritual orientation, moral awareness, and personal identity. When internalized through Christian Religious Education, this command fosters holistic devotion and strengthens adolescents' commitment to living out their faith in everyday life.

Second, the Law of Love for fellow human beings emerges as the concrete ethical expression of love for God. The findings demonstrate that Christian education grounded in Matthew 22:37–40

encourages adolescents to develop empathy, respect, tolerance, and social responsibility. Love for others is not limited to fellow believers but extends to all people without distinction, thereby promoting harmonious relationships and ethical behavior within pluralistic societies.

Third, the study concludes that the Law of Love for God and love for others form an inseparable unity that serves as a comprehensive framework for teenage character development in the church. Christian Religious Education that integrates both dimensions effectively bridges faith and practice, enabling adolescents to respond to contemporary moral challenges, including those arising from rapid technological and social change.

Overall, this study affirms that Christian Religious Education centered on the Law of Love has significant potential to shape the spiritual, moral, and social character of today's church adolescents in a holistic and transformative manner.

Based on these conclusions, further research is recommended in several areas. Future studies could employ empirical methods, such as qualitative field research or mixed-method approaches, to examine how the Law of Love is implemented in concrete church educational practices and how adolescents experience its impact on their character development. Additionally, comparative studies across different church denominations or cultural contexts may provide deeper insight into the effectiveness of Law of Love-based Christian education. Further research may also explore the integration of the Law of Love with digital-age pedagogies to address the moral and spiritual challenges faced by adolescents in contemporary society.

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