

Following Christ without Ranking: John 21:20-22 and Inclusive Christian Spirituality

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Abstract: Christian formation becomes theologically fragile when discipleship is reduced to uniform expectations, comparative achievement, or status-based measures of spiritual maturity. Addressing this concern, the present study responds to a hermeneutical gap between Johannine scholarship, which has primarily examined Peter and the Beloved Disciple in relation to discipleship, witness, and community, and studies of children's spirituality, which foreground agency, relationality, and developmental context but rarely engage John 21:20–22 as a sustained theological resource. This study therefore aims to clarify the theological logic of personal calling in John 21:20–22 and to formulate its implications for Christ-centered, inclusive spiritual formation. Using qualitative library research, it combines narrative exegesis with grammatical-syntactical analysis of the Greek text (NA28), interpreted within John 21:15–25 and triangulated with Johannine scholarship and literature on children's spirituality. The analysis identifies three interrelated movements: relational identity in “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” Jesus' redirection of Peter's comparative concern through τί πρὸς σέ, and the emphatic personal summons σύ μοι ἀκολούθει. These findings support a model of inclusive spirituality marked by relational identity, differentiated calling without hierarchical ranking, and personal discipleship within community. Its original contribution is a controlled hermeneutical bridge between Johannine discipleship and children's spirituality: a conceptually grounded framework for ministry that resists homogenization, remains Christ-centered, and can be tested empirically across diverse ecclesial and plural social contexts.

Keywords: Narrative exegesis; John 21:20–22; personal calling; children's spirituality; inclusive Christian spirituality

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Introduction

Christian discipleship loses its theological depth when faith formation is measured by uniformity, performance, or comparison with others. This tension emerges sharply in John 21:20–22, where the narrative focus shifts from Peter’s calling to his question about the future of the Beloved Disciple. As part of the epilogue to the Fourth Gospel, this pericope continues themes of love, witness, shepherding, and following Jesus that have been developed throughout the Gospel. Jesus’ response does not assign the two disciples identical destinies; instead, it returns Peter to his personal responsibility to follow Christ. Thus, differentiated trajectories of discipleship do not in themselves create a spiritual hierarchy; the center remains relationship with and obedience to Jesus.

This issue becomes particularly significant in the spiritual formation of children and adolescents. Children are not merely passive recipients of religious instruction but spiritual subjects who experience, question, interpret, and express faith within developmental, relational, familial, ecclesial, and social contexts. Faith education that overemphasizes a single kind of ability—such as memorization, public speaking, leadership, or visible participation in ministry—risks turning particular forms of performance into universal measures of spiritual maturity. Christian formation therefore requires an orientation that remains Christ-centered while making room for diverse ways in which children participate and grow. Within this framework, John 21:20–22 is not read as a text that directly addresses child psychology or education, but as a theological resource for reflecting on relational identity, differentiated calling, and personal responsibility within the community of faith.

Studies of John 21 have provided a strong foundation for understanding the relationship between Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Quast (1989) shows that the two figures perform different functions within the Johannine community: Peter is primarily associated with leadership and shepherding, whereas the Beloved Disciple is closely connected with witness and recognition of Jesus. These differences need not be construed as a simple competition to establish the superiority of one figure over the other. Spencer (2000), meanwhile, demonstrates that John 21 develops intratextual connections with earlier parts of the Gospel through the recurring themes of following Jesus, Peter’s restoration, and the presence of the Beloved Disciple. John 21:20–22 therefore cannot be detached from the broader network of Johannine discipleship theology. Although these studies have enriched discussion of witness, leadership, identity, and forms of discipleship, their implications for the formation of children’s spirituality have not been a primary concern. In other words, Johannine scholarship has explained the internal dynamics of the pericope well, but has only rarely extended that conversation to the question of how communities of faith accompany diverse forms of children’s spiritual response.

Conversely, scholarship on children’s spirituality has emphasized dimensions highly relevant to this dialogue. Nye (2009) shows that adult practices in both home and church can either open or constrain spaces for children’s spiritual growth, while Hay and Nye (2006) stress that children’s spirituality is deeply relational and cannot adequately be reduced to the transmission of religious information. Boyatzis (2009) demonstrates that the religious and spiritual development of children and adolescents is shaped through interaction among personal development, family, relationships, community, and social context. From a theological perspective, Bunge (2001) argues for taking

children seriously as participants in the church's life of faith, whereas Miller-McLemore (2003) understands the formation of children as a communal practice requiring ecclesial responsibility rather than merely individual or familial concern. In Indonesia's plural context, Kim et al. (2020) underscore the importance of maintaining religious identity while engaging constructively with difference in the public sphere. Fowler (1995) likewise provides a heuristic for understanding changes in the ways individuals construct meaning in faith, although developmental stages should not be treated as rigid age categories or as a single measure of spiritual maturity. Despite the strength of these two bodies of scholarship, hermeneutical dialogue between Johannine discipleship theology and children's spirituality remains limited. Few studies have specifically employed the dynamics between Peter and the Beloved Disciple in John 21:20–22 to construct a theological framework integrating relational identity, differentiated calling, and personal response in children's faith formation.

This study addresses that gap through a controlled hermeneutical movement from exegesis to theological and pedagogical construction. Its novelty does not lie in claiming that John 21:20–22 directly teaches modern theories of childhood or inclusivity, but in bringing the pericope's narrative and grammatical dynamics into conversation with the discourse of children's spirituality without blurring the distinction between textual meaning and contemporary application. The study's principal contribution is articulated through three interrelated elements: relational identity, differentiated calling, and personal response. Within this framework, inclusive spirituality is understood not as the relativization of Christian identity, but as the recognition of diverse forms of growth and participation without turning difference into a ranking of spiritual worth.

The significance of this study lies in its integration of New Testament studies, Christian Spirituality, and children's faith education. Academically, it extends the interpretation of John 21:20–22 by placing its exegetical findings in critical dialogue with scholarship on children's spirituality. Ecclesially and educationally, it offers a conceptual basis for models of accompaniment that do not treat one kind of ability or expression of faith as the standard for all children. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the narrative and grammatical functions of John 21:20–22 within the context of John 21:15–25, to explain the theological logic of identity and personal calling that emerges from the relationship among Peter, the Beloved Disciple, and Jesus, and to correlate these findings with literature on children's spirituality in order to formulate a framework of faith formation that is inclusive yet remains centered on Christ.

Taken together, these arguments suggest that John 21:20–22 presents three inseparable movements of discipleship: a disciple receives identity through relationship with Jesus, lives a calling that need not be identical to the trajectory of another disciple, and remains personally responsible for following Christ. These three movements provide the foundation for the Christ-centered inclusive spirituality developed in this study. Its contribution lies in shifting attention from uniform models of formation toward an approach that recognizes differentiation without promoting individualism, since every personal response continues to take place within community and under the same Christological center.

In Christian education, this framework implies the need for learning environments that regard children as subjects of faith rather than merely objects of instruction. Curricula, pedagogical

practices, and forms of ecclesial participation should provide multiple pathways through which children may ask questions, reflect, serve, form relationships, and express their response to Christ. Spiritual education is therefore not directed toward producing a uniform type of disciple, but toward accompanying differentiated growth without losing a shared theological orientation. In Indonesia's plural society, such an approach may also contribute to forming Christian generations with a robust faith identity and the capacity to engage difference constructively. Because this study is textual and conceptual, these educational implications should be understood as a framework that still requires empirical testing across diverse school, church, denominational, and cultural contexts.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative, library-based approach with an exegetical-hermeneutical orientation. The primary data consist of the Greek text of John 21:20–22 in the 28th edition of the *Novum Testamentum Graece* (NA28), analyzed within the immediate narrative context of John 21:15–25 so that the meaning of the pericope is not detached from the sequence of Peter's restoration, calling, and discipleship. Secondary sources include exegetical commentaries on the Gospel of John, studies of the narrative structure of the Fourth Gospel, New Testament Greek lexicons, and literature on children's spirituality and faith development. This approach was selected because the research questions are textual and theological in character: the study seeks to explain how the narrative and grammatical dynamics of John 21:20–22 shape an understanding of identity, differentiated calling, and personal response, and then to correlate these findings critically with the discourse of children's spirituality. Data collection and organization proceeded in stages: first, the text was delimited and translated with attention to its narrative context; second, secondary sources were selected according to their relevance to three principal domains—Johannine studies, Greek-language analysis, and children's spirituality. Narrative criticism was employed to attend to narrator, characters, dialogue, repetition, plot movement, and intratextual relationships between John 21 and earlier sections of the Gospel, in line with the principles of narrative reading developed by Culpepper (1983) and Powell (1990).

Data analysis was conducted in five interrelated stages. First, narrative analysis mapped the position of John 21:20–22 within the flow of John 21:15–25 and identified the functions of Peter, the Beloved Disciple, and Jesus' response within the development of the scene. Second, grammatical-syntactical analysis focused on key elements such as ἡγάπα, τί πρὸς σέ, θέλω, and σύ μοι ἀκολούθει with the aid of lexicons and exegetical commentaries, so that theological conclusions were not built on isolated lexical assumptions. Third, the narrative and grammatical findings were synthesized into three theological categories—relational identity, differentiated calling, and personal response. Fourth, these categories were correlated hermeneutically with literature on children's spirituality in order to formulate pedagogical implications while maintaining a clear distinction between the historical-narrative meaning of the text and its contemporary application. Fifth, interpretive rigor was strengthened through source triangulation among the Greek text, Johannine scholarship, and literature on children's spirituality, as well as through consistency among textual evidence, theological argumentation, and the limits of the claims advanced. This layered approach was chosen to prevent a direct leap from word meaning to practical application and to ensure that the

pedagogical construction remained grounded in exegetical findings. Because the study involved no human participants, personal data collection, or field intervention, its ethical considerations primarily concern interpretive integrity, accurate representation of sources, transparency in the use of literature, and avoidance of untested empirical claims. Accordingly, all educational and ministry implications are presented as a conceptual framework that still requires validation through field research.

Results and Discussion

Narrative Dynamics of John 21:20–22: From Comparison to a Reorientation of Discipleship

John 21:20–22 should be read as the direct continuation of Peter’s restoration and commissioning in John 21:15–19. After being asked three times about his love for Jesus, receiving a shepherding mandate, and hearing a prediction of the manner of his death by which he would glorify God, Peter receives the concise yet decisive command, “Follow me.” The narrative, however, immediately depicts Peter turning and seeing the Beloved Disciple following them, after which he asks about that disciple’s future. The first key finding of this study is a shift in narrative orientation from Peter’s personal calling to attention directed toward another disciple’s trajectory. The text does not disclose Peter’s psychological motivation; therefore, attributions such as envy, jealousy, competition, or anxiety must be treated cautiously. What can be established from the narrative structure is that Peter’s question diverts attention from the responsibility just given to him, whereas Jesus’ response returns that attention to the call to follow him.

The narrative coherence of John 21 strengthens this reading. Wiarda (1992) argues that John 21:1–23 forms an integrated narrative unit and that Jesus’ encounter with Peter functions to illuminate dimensions of discipleship rather than merely to combine otherwise independent traditions. Neirynck (1990) likewise shows that John 21 must be considered in its organic relationship to the Fourth Gospel and to debates concerning the function of the Beloved Disciple. Peter’s question in verse 21 is therefore better read within the movement of the scene as a whole than as an isolated utterance. This perspective accords with Spencer (2000), who emphasizes intratextual echoes between John 21 and earlier sections of the Gospel. The recurring theme of “following” not only connects Peter with his earlier calling but situates his response within the broader Johannine theology of discipleship.

The relationship between Peter and the Beloved Disciple is also inadequately described by a simple hierarchy between a “greater” and a “lesser” disciple. Quast (1989) shows that the two figures appear with different but complementary functions: Peter is strongly associated with shepherding and leadership, whereas the Beloved Disciple has a distinctive relationship to witness and recognition of Jesus. Discussion of the Beloved Disciple becomes even more complex when his testimonial function is taken into account. Lincoln (2002), for example, demonstrates that the function of the Beloved Disciple is closely related to the narrative construction of witness in the Fourth Gospel, and the figure should therefore not be reduced to Peter’s rival. The difference

between the two disciples is thus not primarily a competition for superior status, but a representation of nonidentical trajectories and functions within discipleship.

Read in this context, the passage permits a more precise interpretation. John 21:20–22 does not erase differences among disciples; rather, the text disciplines the way difference is understood. Difference is allowed to remain, but it is not given to Peter as the basis for defining his own calling. In this sense, Jesus’ response may be described as a Christological reorientation: the center for evaluating discipleship is shifted from another disciple’s journey to relationship with and response to Christ. This produces an important theological principle: the unity of discipleship does not require uniformity of trajectory, and differentiated trajectories do not in themselves produce a hierarchy of worth. Unity lies in the one who is followed—Christ—rather than in identical functions, experiences, or futures among disciples.

This interpretation also corrects popular readings that reduce the pericope to the slogan, “Do not compare yourself with others.” A critique of comparison can indeed be drawn from the narrative, but the structure of the text is richer than psychological advice about self-comparison. At stake is a theology of discipleship orientation: is calling understood through the Christ who calls, or through the destiny and achievements of another disciple? Application to children’s spirituality must therefore be analogical rather than direct. The text does not teach that every child possesses an entirely individualized “special office.” It does, however, provide a theological pattern that enables a community to distinguish trajectories of growth without turning one child’s experience into the universal norm for another.

Grammatical-Syntactical Analysis: Relational Identity and the Emphasis on Personal Calling

The second finding concerns the grammatical and syntactical function of key elements in John 21:20–22. In verse 20, the narrator uses the phrase τὸν μαθητὴν ὃν ἠγάπα ὁ Ἰησοῦς (*ton mathētēn hon ēgapā ho Iēsous*), “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” The form ἠγάπα is the third-person singular imperfect active indicative of ἀγαπάω. Yet this grammatical form does not support the claim that ἀγαπάω intrinsically means “unconditional love” or that the imperfect aspect automatically denotes love continuing eternally. The lexical guidance of BDAG requires the meaning of a verb to be determined by its usage in context rather than by loading theological meaning into grammatical form alone (Bauer, 2000). Similarly, Carson (1991) cautions against constructing the variation between ἀγαπάω and φιλέω in John 21 as two theologically distinct levels of love.

Avoiding exaggerated lexical claims clarifies the phrase’s narrative function. The disciple is identified through a relational marker—“whom Jesus loved.” His narrative identity is therefore not constructed first through office, achievement, or claims to superiority. Lincoln (2002) shows that the Beloved Disciple performs a complex literary and testimonial function in the Gospel, so his identity should be understood within the broader narrative network rather than through one isolated phrase. From this, the present study formulates the category of relational identity: within the narrative framework, a disciple’s worth is preceded by relationship rather than performance.

For children's spirituality, the significance of this distinction lies in how identity is construed before performance is assessed. Relational identity does not mean that John 21 directly addresses children's self-esteem or modern developmental psychology. A more measured correlation is that this narrative characterization provides a theological pattern: identity within the Christian community is not produced primarily by visible ability. In children's ministry, this principle challenges practices that unconsciously identify the "spiritual child" only with the child who memorizes most quickly, speaks most confidently, leads most actively, or appears most often in public ministry. The interpretation proposed here therefore moves from being before performing: one's existence within a relationship of faith precedes the measurement of one's performance.

A second key element is the expression τί πρὸς σέ in John 21:22. Idiomatically, the phrase may be rendered "What is that to you?" or "What concern is that of yours?" (Morris, 1995). It occurs within the construction ἐὰν αὐτὸν θέλω μένειν ἕως ἔρχομαι, which places the future of the Beloved Disciple under Jesus' will. Syntactically, Jesus' response does not provide Peter with new information about the other disciple's future; instead, it limits the relevance of that question to Peter's own responsibility. The key finding is not that Peter is forbidden to care about others, but that another person's destiny must not become the governing principle of his own calling.

A theological distinction is therefore needed between communal concern and comparative normativity. Johannine Christianity does not endorse individualism, since love, fellowship, and witness are central themes of the Gospel. The expression τί πρὸς σέ therefore cannot legitimize indifference toward others. What is restricted is the tendency to make another person's journey normative for oneself. This interpretation matters for inclusive spirituality: the community remains responsible for mutual care, but such care need not take the form of homogenization or ranking.

The grammatical climax of the scene occurs in σύ μοι ἀκολούθει. The presence of the explicit pronoun σύ places emphasis on the person addressed, while ἀκολούθει is the imperative form of ἀκολουθέω. In the Johannine context, following Jesus is not merely spatial movement but theological language for discipleship (Koester, 2008). The force of the command can therefore be heard as: "You, follow me." This personal emphasis does not separate Peter from the community; rather, it establishes that belonging to a community does not remove personal responsibility.

This study describes this dynamic as personal responsibility within a differentiated community. Peter is not called to become a copy of the Beloved Disciple, nor is the Beloved Disciple made into a copy of Peter. Yet both remain within the same horizon of discipleship. The personalization of calling is therefore not individualism, just as communal unity is not homogenization. The relationship between these two principles provides an important foundation for the study's theological construction.

From Exegesis to Theological Construction: Christ-Centered Inclusive Spirituality

The preceding narrative and grammatical analyses yield a threefold theological structure: relational identity, differentiated calling, and personal response. These are not abstract terms explicitly stated by the text, but theological categories synthesized from its narrative and grammatical dynamics. The term "inclusive spirituality" therefore requires clear boundaries in this

study. Inclusivity does not mean theological relativism, the removal of Christian identity, or the assumption that all expressions of faith possess identical theological value. Rather, it refers to faith formation that recognizes children as spiritual subjects, receives diverse forms of experience and participation, and rejects the ranking of worth on the basis of performance.

The first category, relational identity, resonates strongly with scholarship on children's spirituality. Nye (2009) shows that environments created by adults can either open or constrict spaces for children's spiritual growth, while Hay and Nye (2006) emphasize the strongly relational character of children's spiritual lives. More recent research extends this perspective. Adams (2026) highlights the importance of recognizing children's spiritual voice(s)—including forms of expression that are not always verbal—as an important part of dialogue in spiritual, religious, and moral education. This strengthens the critique of models of faith education that recognize only those forms of response that are readily visible and assessable by adults.

Relational identity becomes pedagogically significant when the community's criteria for recognizing spiritual growth are examined. If a child's identity within the community is determined primarily by the visibility of performance, verbally confident, active, or expressive children will more readily be judged as “growing” than children who are contemplative, slower to respond, or who express faith differently. By contrast, the reading of John 21 developed in this study shifts priority from visibility of performance to quality of relationship. This does not render performance unimportant; rather, performance must not become the ontological basis of a child's worth within the community of faith.

The second category is differentiated calling. Bunge (2001) calls for a theological anthropology that treats children as genuine participants in the life of faith rather than merely as “unfinished adults.” Miller-McLemore (2003) likewise locates the formation of children within communal practice, so attention to personal particularity must not become individualism. This perspective allows John 21:20–22 to be read as an analogical pattern for communities that make room for diverse forms of participation.

Recent faith-formation research sharpens this point. Through a scoping review of faith formation in Christian schools, Archer (2024) questions the adequacy of approaches overly dependent on stage-based faith-development models and proposes greater attention to faith engagement. This resonates with the present study's criticism of using one trajectory as a universal measure of growth. Similarly, in developing the Practicing Faith Survey, Cheng et al. (2023) show that Christian students' faith formation is multidimensional, encompassing intellectual, relational, introspective, beneficent, and formative practices. These empirical findings do not prove the interpretation of John 21, but they provide an interdisciplinary conversation supporting the need to assess faith formation more richly than through a single performative indicator.

The study therefore proposes the principle of differentiation without ranking. Inclusivity is not the elimination of difference but a way of receiving difference without converting it into a hierarchy of worth. On the one hand, homogenization requires children to respond in the same form; on the other, extreme individualism detaches personal response from communal and Christological responsibility. John 21 offers another configuration: Peter and the Beloved Disciple are different, yet

both remain within the same horizon of following Jesus. The center of the community is therefore not uniformity of expression but a shared orientation toward Christ.

The third category is personal response within community. Fowler (1995) continues to offer an important heuristic for understanding how individuals construct meaning in faith, but developmental categories should not be transformed into deterministic labels or a single measure of spiritual maturity. More recent literature increasingly stresses the complexity of religious and spiritual developmental trajectories. Hardy and Taylor (2024), for example, argue that contemporary research should attend more closely to processes, contexts, and trajectories of religious and spiritual development rather than only to static outcomes. This view resonates with Boyatzis (2009), who situates spiritual development within the interaction of individuals, families, relationships, communities, and social contexts.

Within this framework, *σύ μοι ἀκολουθεῖ* acquires more precise pedagogical relevance. Personal response does not mean that “every child is free to define faith however they wish.” Rather, response retains a Christological direction: following Christ. Yet the way such response develops may be shaped by a child’s age, capacities, relationships, experiences, and context. The role of the educator is therefore not to produce identical responses, but to provide accompaniment that helps children develop increasingly conscious and responsible responses to Christ.

Implications for Children’s Faith Formation and Christian Education

The synthesis of these findings yields a first implication for Christian education: faith formation needs to move from a paradigm of standardization toward a paradigm of differentiated participation. This shift does not mean lowering theological or pedagogical expectations. Rather, it requires educators to distinguish between shared goals and forms of response. The shared goal remains Christ-centered—to know, love, and follow Christ—but the forms of participation through which children move toward that goal need not be uniform.

Contemporary literature on children’s faith formation underscores the urgency of this shift. Holmes et al. (2025) identify tensions and disconnections among churches, families, and established models of children’s faith formation, and highlight the need for more relational and participatory approaches. Their findings are important because they show that programmatic models heavily dependent on institutions may fail when they are not deeply connected with children’s relational lives. From the perspective of this study, Christ-centered inclusive spirituality requires communities to see children not as objects of programs but as fellow participants in the life of faith who nevertheless continue to need guidance and formation.

A second implication concerns how communities assess spiritual growth. Practices that recognize only verbal ability, memorization, public leadership, or visible stage participation as signs of maturity can unintentionally create spiritual hierarchies. Cheng et al. (2023) demonstrate empirically that students’ faith practices may emerge across different domains, including relational and introspective dimensions. The evaluation of faith education should therefore integrate knowledge, reflection, relationships, action, service, and the capacity to interpret experience. This

perspective does not replace theological discipline; rather, it helps Christian education assess whether formation genuinely engages the whole person.

A third implication is the need for a pedagogy that listens before it judges. If relational identity precedes performance, then children's questions, doubts, experiences, symbols, stories, creativity, and even silence can function as pedagogical entry points. Adams (2026) shows that children's spiritual voices can take diverse forms and that educational spaces need to be sufficiently safe to make such expression possible. Inclusive spiritual education is therefore not a directionless pedagogy, but one hospitable enough to listen to children and theologically substantive enough to guide their response toward Christ.

Christ-Centered Inclusivity in Indonesia's Plural Context

The findings of this study must also be situated within Indonesia's socio-religious context. Kim et al. (2020) show that Indonesian pluralism requires the ability to maintain identity while developing constructive communication in the public sphere. More recent research on religious education in Indonesia further underscores the complexity of this issue. Rukiyanto et al. (2025) demonstrate that religious education can contribute to developing respect for plurality through openness and encounters with those who are different. Harjatanaya (2025), meanwhile, shows that the implementation of religious education in Indonesia's multireligious society invariably involves negotiation among policy, school actors, students' needs, and local contexts; inclusivity therefore does not arise automatically simply because policy affirms diversity.

In a wider social frame, this model can be extended without relinquishing its Christological center. Christ-centered inclusive spirituality does not ask children to diminish faith commitment in order to accept diversity. Rather, this study argues that an identity relationally rooted in Christ can reduce the need to construct identity through comparative superiority. This logic is consistent with the pattern of John 21: Peter's identity does not need to be reinforced by determining whether another disciple's journey is higher or lower than his own. In a plural context, this pattern may be translated into the capacity to hold clear commitments without treating difference as a threat to one's dignity.

Here the concept of differentiation without ranking acquires social implications. Within the church, the principle rejects ranking children according to ability or forms of faith expression. Beyond the church, the same principle can help children learn that difference does not necessarily require a hierarchy of interpersonal worth. This analogy does not imply that all theological convictions are equivalent. What is rejected is the transformation of difference into grounds for contempt, exclusion, or personal superiority. Christian education can therefore cultivate a clear confessional identity while also developing the capacity to live constructively in a plural society.

Theoretical Contribution and Original Interpretation

The analysis yields a three-dimensional model: relational identity–differentiated calling–personal response. These are not three linear developmental stages but three dimensions operating

simultaneously. Relational identity prevents performance from becoming the basis of dignity; differentiated calling prevents unity from becoming uniformity; and personal response prevents inclusivity from becoming passivity. All three receive their center and boundaries from Christ.

Its originality does not depend on claiming that John 21:20–22 directly addresses child psychology, educational theory, or contemporary concepts of inclusivity. Its novelty lies in a layered hermeneutical construction: first, identifying the logic of discipleship through the narrative; second, testing that logic through grammatical-syntactical data; third, formulating it as theological categories; and fourth, correlating it critically with scholarship on children’s spirituality and faith education. This procedure maintains a necessary distinction between what the text says and what the text may responsibly contribute to contemporary theological reflection.

Two interpretive formulations crystallize the argument. First, Jesus’ response constitutes a Christological reorientation of discipleship: attention captured by another person’s trajectory is redirected toward Christ as the center of calling. Second, the Peter–Beloved Disciple configuration yields the principle of differentiation without ranking: differences of function and journey can be preserved without being transformed into a hierarchy of worth. Together, these formulations extend the reading of John 21:20–22 beyond a simple prohibition against comparison toward a theology of community that integrates differentiation and responsibility.

The resulting account of inclusive spirituality remains explicitly Christological. Precisely because Christ remains the center, the community need not produce uniformity in order to preserve unity. In educational contexts, this means creating learning spaces in which children are recognized before they are evaluated, accompanied without being homogenized, and challenged to respond to Christ without making another person’s journey the primary measure of their own. Because this study is textual and conceptual, however, the relationship between this framework and educational outcomes cannot yet be stated empirically. Participatory studies, action research, cross-denominational case studies, or mixed-methods research are needed to examine how non-comparative patterns of accompaniment shape faith identity, ecclesial participation, spiritual agency, and children’s capacity to live constructively amid diversity.

Conclusion

The analysis of John 21:20–22 identifies a pattern of discipleship structured through three interrelated theological movements: relational identity rooted in relationship with Jesus, differentiated calling that need not produce ranking, and personal responsibility to follow Christ within community. Narratively and grammatically, Peter’s shift of attention toward the Beloved Disciple, the expression τί πρὸς σέ, and the emphatic command σύ μοι ἀκολούθει indicate that a disciple’s calling is not determined by another person’s trajectory but is reoriented toward Christ as the center of discipleship. The novelty of this study lies in a hermeneutical construction that brings Johannine discipleship theology into conversation with children’s spirituality without claiming that the text directly addresses child psychology or modern concepts of inclusivity. From this construction emerges the principle of differentiation without ranking: the recognition of diverse forms of growth and participation without converting them into a hierarchy of spiritual worth. In

Christian education, this framework encourages faith formation that recognizes children as spiritual subjects, creates space for diverse forms of response, and maintains a clear Christological orientation. More broadly, it points toward communities capable of sustaining faith identity without relying on homogenization or comparative superiority. Future research should test the relational identity–differentiated calling–personal response framework through empirical, participatory, or mixed-methods studies in Christian schools, ministries with children and adolescents, diverse denominational settings, and Indonesia’s religiously and culturally plural contexts.

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Artificial Intelligence (AI), specifically OpenAI ChatGPT, was used during the preparation and revision of this manuscript to assist with language translation and refinement, structural organization, editorial improvement, and the identification and consistency checking of relevant references. AI was not relied upon as an independent source of theological interpretation, exegetical judgment, or academic decision-making. All substantive arguments, exegetical analyses, interpretations of John 21:20–22, theological formulations, selection and evaluation of scholarly sources, and conclusions presented in this article were critically reviewed and verified by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and scholarly content of the manuscript.

Authors Contributions

Christon Nababan, Alberto Sitorus, Enjel Capah, and Chelsia Hasugian contributed to the conceptualization of the study, development of the research methodology, literature search and analysis, interpretation of the primary and secondary sources, preparation of the manuscript, and critical revision of the article for important intellectual content. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and take collective responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and scholarly quality of the work.

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