

Imitating Christ as Children of Light: Ephesians 5:1–14 and the Spiritual Behavior of Generation Z

Tabita Kustiati¹ , Sarmen Manullang² 

Sekolah Tinggi Teologia Injili Indonesia Batam, Indonesia^{1,2}

tabitakustiati@gmail.com¹, sarmenofgod@gmail.com²

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Description

Ephesians 5:1–14 calls believers to imitate God through Christ's self-giving love and to live as children of light, offering a framework for forming the spiritual behavior of Generation Z.

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Abstract

Ephesians 5:1–14 contains the New Testament's only call to become "imitators of God", yet debates on imitation, the light–darkness contrast and the quotation in 5:14 have rarely been brought to bear on the formation of Generation Z, the largest age group in Indonesia. This study examines how the passage grounds believers' conduct in their relation to God and Christ and how this grounding can frame the formation of Generation Z. It employs a qualitative exegetical method based on the Greek text (NA28), followed by an analogical theological-hermeneutical application. The passage argues from identity to conduct: believers are beloved children and light in the Lord; Christ's self-giving love defines their love; holiness rejects greed as idolatry; discernment and moral clarity guide life amid competing claims; and Christ's promise to shine sustains renewal. The study offers an identity-based framework for formation in families, churches and schools.

Keywords: *Ephesians 5:1–14; imitation of Christ; children of light; Generation Z; spiritual formation*

INTRODUCTION

Ephesians 5:1–14 contains the only exhortation in the New Testament to become "imitators of God" (μιμηταὶ τοῦ θεοῦ, v. 1), and it defines this imitation through Christ's self-giving love (v. 2) before developing it through an extended contrast between darkness and light (vv. 3–14). The passage therefore raises an interpretive problem that is central to Pauline ethics: how can creatures "imitate God", and in what sense is Christ the pattern and source of such imitation? Scholars have answered this question in contrasting ways. Some read imitation in early Christianity as a relational and transformative process in which believers are shaped by a living model (Bennema, 2025; Hartog, 2019; Shin, 2023), whereas others argue that Pauline mimesis also functions as a discourse of power that reinforces the authority of the one imitated (Castelli, 1991). A second debate concerns the background of the light–darkness language: some scholars emphasise its affinity with the "sons of light" in the Qumran writings (Wróbel, 2020), while others stress its roots in

Isaianic and wider Jewish traditions (Lincoln, 1990; Thielman, 2010). A third debate concerns the origin and function of the quotation in 5:14 and the relation it establishes between future resurrection and present ethics (Covington, 2025).

These debates are not merely academic. How imitation and the light–darkness contrast are understood determines whether the passage is heard as a call to moral conformity, as a vision of transformed identity, or as both. In this respect, Ephesians 5:1–14 is distinctive among Pauline texts on formation. Unlike Romans 12:1–2, which speaks of transformation through the renewal of the mind, or Philippians 2:5–11, which presents Christ’s humility as a pattern, Ephesians 5:1–14 combines three elements in a single argument: imitation of God grounded in filial identity (“as beloved children”), a sharp moral contrast expressed through identity statements (“you were darkness, but now you are light”), and a liturgical climax that promises Christ’s illumination (v. 14). Its parallel in Colossians 3:5–8 shows how this tradition was shaped, but Ephesians develops it in a distinctive direction (Cornelius, 2022).

The interpretive problem has particular urgency for Generation Z, commonly defined as the cohort born between 1997 and 2012, which formed the largest age group in Indonesia in the 2020 census (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2021). Generational labels must be used with caution, since cohort theory has been criticised for overgeneralising and for neglecting differences of class, region and culture (De Pelsmacker, 2025; Demeijer & Stoffels, 2019); this study therefore uses the term to refer to young Indonesian Christians who have grown up with digital media, without assuming that they are homogeneous. Research indicates that religiosity and spirituality remain significant for Indonesian children and youth (Borualogo et al., 2023), that religious identity in Indonesia is increasingly negotiated through social media (Hidayat et al., 2020), and that young Christians elsewhere construct and perform their faith on digital platforms (Hamm & Hoeting, 2023; Landová, 2022). Indonesian pastoral studies report concerns about the spiritual growth of this generation and propose roles for parents, teachers and church leaders (Imelda & Yuono, 2024; Pranasoma, 2021; Saragih, 2025; Tangdilintin, 2025). In this article, “spiritual formation” refers to the process by which believers are shaped into the likeness of Christ within a community, “character” to the stable dispositions that result from this process, and “spiritual behavior” to the observable practices and choices in which character is expressed (cf. Porter, 2019).

Existing approaches to the formation of Generation Z in Indonesia, however, tend either to adopt generic programmes of character education or to focus on the technological means of ministry, while engaging biblical texts only in passing. Both approaches risk treating character as a set of behaviors to be produced rather than as the fruit of a new identity. This study addresses that gap by asking two questions: (1) How does Ephesians 5:1–14 ground believers’ conduct in their relation to God and to Christ, as shown by its structure, key terms and imperatives? (2) How can this grounding serve as a framework for forming the spiritual behavior of Generation Z? The study argues that the passage moves from filial identity and Christ’s self-giving love, through holiness, to life as children of light marked by discernment, moral clarity and renewal. Its exegetical contribution is a reading of the passage in which identity and imitation, rather than rule-keeping, govern the light–darkness paraenesis; its

practical contribution is a framework for formation that families and churches can use with Generation Z.

METHOD

This is a qualitative exegetical study with a contextual hermeneutical application. The interpretive approach is grammatical-historical and literary: it examines the Greek text, its structure, its key terms and the function of its imperatives within the ethical section of Ephesians (4:1–6:20). The object of study is Ephesians 5:1–14. The primary source is the Greek text of Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (28th ed.); lexical analysis follows BDAG (Bauer et al., 2000) and grammatical analysis follows Wallace (1996). English translations are the author's own. Secondary sources comprise critical commentaries on Ephesians, studies of imitation and moral formation in early Christianity, and peer-reviewed journal articles on Generation Z, religiosity and Christian formation. Journal literature was identified through Crossref searches using the keywords “Ephesians 5”, “imitators of God”, “imitatio Christi”, “Generation Z” and “spiritual formation”, with priority given to studies published between 2016 and 2026.

The analysis proceeds in four steps. First, the passage is delimited, and its literary context and structure are established through comparison with the alternative divisions proposed in the commentaries. Second, each unit (vv. 1–2, 3–7, 8–10, 11–13 and 14) is analysed for its key terms, grammatical forms, intertexts and theological meaning, including synoptic comparison with Colossians where relevant. Third, the findings are synthesised, distinguishing explicitly between what the text predicates of God and Christ and what it asks of believers. Fourth, the synthesis is brought into dialogue with research on Generation Z.

The fourth step follows a model of theological interpretation that moves by analogy rather than by direct identification. The text is first read in its own historical and literary setting; the theological logic that connects its indicatives and imperatives is then identified; and only this logic, not the surface details, is related to contemporary situations. Two safeguards guide this move: every application must be traceable to a specific feature of the text, and the analogy between the ancient and the modern situation must be stated explicitly rather than assumed. Studies of Generation Z were selected for their relevance to religiosity, digital faith practice and Christian formation, with priority given to peer-reviewed research and to studies of Indonesian contexts. The study does not include field data; its description of Generation Z therefore depends on published research, which is a limitation acknowledged in the conclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Literary Context and Structure of Ephesians 5:1–14

Ephesians falls into two main parts: a theological exposition of God's saving work in Christ and the unity of Jews and Gentiles in one body (chs. 1–3), and an exhortation to “walk worthily of the calling” (4:1) (chs. 4–6). The verb *περιπατέω* (“to walk”, i.e., to conduct one's

life) structures the second part (4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15), and Ephesians 5:1–14 contains two of its occurrences. The inferential οὖν in 5:1 links the passage with 4:32, “be kind to one another ... forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you”. Whether the letter was written by Paul or by a close follower is debated (Lincoln, 1990; Hoehner, 2002); this study reads it as a Pauline letter in its canonical form, a decision that does not affect the exegesis of the passage. The passage ends at v. 14 with a quotation introduced by διὸ λέγει, after which v. 15 begins a new unit with βλέπετε οὖν ἀκριβῶς πῶς περιπατεῖτε. The ethics of this section are closely tied to the letter's concern with the identity of the new community: the body metaphor reinforces the identity of believers as one in-group in Christ (Vrey, 2019), and Gentile believers are given a new identity in relation to Israel (Windsor, 2018). The following unit (5:15–21), with its call to be filled with the Spirit and to worship together, continues the same line of thought (Dunne, 2018).

The delimitation of the unit requires justification. Some commentators join 5:1–2 to 4:25–32, since the inferential οὖν and the theme of forgiveness link 5:1 closely to 4:32 (Lincoln, 1990); others extend the unit to 5:20, treating 5:15–20 as the continuation of the light–darkness section. This study reads 5:1–14 as a coherent unit for three reasons. First, the repetition of γίνεσθε (vv. 1, 7) and περιπατεῖτε (vv. 2, 8) frames the passage as a call to become and to walk according to a new identity. Second, the movement from “beloved children” (v. 1) to “children of light” (v. 8) provides a consistent identity motif. Third, the quotation introduced by διὸ λέγει (v. 14) functions as a climax, after which βλέπετε οὖν (v. 15) begins a new exhortation on wisdom and worship. The link with 4:32 is nonetheless acknowledged: 5:1–2 functions as a hinge that both concludes the preceding exhortation and opens the new unit.

Within the unit, the argument alternates between imperatives and grounding statements. The imperatives of vv. 1–2 (“become imitators”, “walk in love”) are grounded in the indicative of Christ’s love and self-offering. Verses 3–7 move to prohibitions (“let it not be named”, “let no one deceive you”, “do not become partners”), grounded in the warnings of vv. 5–6. Verses 8–10 return to identity (“you are light in the Lord”) and draw from it the positive command to walk as children of light, with the participle “testing” describing the manner of this walk. Verses 11–13 apply the identity to relations with the works of darkness, and v. 14 grounds the whole with a promise. The argument therefore proceeds not from rules to behavior but from identity to conduct: each section begins or ends with a statement about who believers are or what Christ has done, and the commands follow from it. This structure supports the thesis that the passage is governed by identity and imitation rather than by rule-keeping.

Imitating God through Christ's Self-Giving Love (Ephesians 5:1–2)

The passage opens with the present imperative Γίνεσθε οὖν μιμηταὶ τοῦ θεοῦ ὡς τέκνα ἀγαπητά (“Be therefore imitators of God, as beloved children”). This is the only place in the New Testament where believers are called imitators of God; elsewhere Paul calls believers to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor 11:1; cf. 1 Thess 1:6). The phrase ὡς τέκνα ἀγαπητά

grounds the imitation in identity: children resemble their father because they belong to him and are loved by him. The God whom believers imitate is characterised in Ephesians above all by love, mercy and grace (Cornelius, 2021; cf. 2:4–7). Imitation, therefore, is not an attempt to earn God's love but the response of those who already receive it (Hoehner, 2002; Thielman, 2010). Studies of early Christian mimesis show that imitation in this sense is a relational and transformative process, not mere copying of behavior (Bennema, 2025), while Spezzano (2017) shows how the exhortation was later read in the theological tradition in terms of charity.

Verse 2 defines how God is to be imitated: *καὶ περιπατεῖτε ἐν ἀγάπῃ, καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς ἡγάπησεν ἡμᾶς καὶ παρέδωκεν ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν προσφορὰν καὶ θυσίαν τῷ θεῷ εἰς ὁσμὴν εὐωδίας*. The conjunction *καθὼς* is both comparative and causal: believers love as Christ loved and because he loved. The two aorists *ἡγάπησεν* and *παρέδωκεν ἑαυτὸν* point to the cross as the concrete expression of love, and the sacrificial language (*προσφορά*, *θυσία*, *ὁσμὴ εὐωδίας*) echoes the Septuagint description of offerings pleasing to God (e.g., Gen 8:21; Exod 29:18; Lev 1:9) language that reappears in Phil 4:18 to describe the Philippians' gift to Paul. The sacrificial frame shows that love in this passage is not mere benevolence but, first of all, self-offering to God, of which care for others is the expression. Some manuscripts read *ὑμᾶς* / *ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν* ("you") instead of *ἡμᾶς* / *ἡμῶν* ("us"), but the variant does not materially affect the meaning. The first element, and the one explicitly predicated of Christ, is therefore self-giving love, which Van der Merwe (2022) shows to be central to the experience of God's love in Ephesians.

Holiness That Rejects Greed and Empty Words (Ephesians 5:3–7)

Verses 3–5 describe the conduct that contradicts this love. Three vices are named in v. 3: *πορνεία* (sexual immorality), *ἀκαθαρσία πᾶσα* (every kind of impurity) and *πλεονεξία* (greed, the desire to have more). Because *πλεονεξία* stands beside sexual vices here and in 4:19, some commentators read it as sexual covetousness, whereas others take it in its usual sense of material greed (Lincoln, 1990; Thielman, 2010). The parallel in Colossians 3:5, where *πλεονεξία* again closes a list of sexual vices and is identified as idolatry, suggests that the term denotes an insatiable desire that can take sexual or material forms; this broader reading is adopted here. These vices are not even to be named among believers, "as is fitting for saints" (*καθὼς πρέπει ἁγίοις*). Holiness is thus presented not as an external rule but as what fits the identity of *ἅγιοι*. Verse 4 extends holiness to speech, rejecting obscenity (*αἰσχροτόητος*), foolish talk (*μωρολογία*) and crude joking (*εὐτραπεία*), and commending instead *εὐχαριστία* (thanksgiving). The contrast is striking: the alternative to degrading speech is not silence but gratitude.

Verse 5 contains a key theological identification: *πλεονέκτης, ὃ ἐστὶν εἰδωλολάτρης* ("the greedy person, who is an idolater"; cf. Col 3:5). Greed is idolatry because it places possessions or desires in the position that belongs to God. The verse also states that such people have "no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God" (*οὐκ ἔχει κληρονομίαν ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ θεοῦ*), and v. 6 adds that "the wrath of God comes on the sons of disobedience" (cf. 2:2–3). These eschatological warnings show that holiness is not optional: it marks those who belong to the coming kingdom. The same verse opens with a warning: *μηδεὶς ὑμᾶς*

ἀπατάτω κενοῖς λόγοις (“let no one deceive you with empty words”). The present imperative ἀπατάτω suggests an ongoing threat of deception, and κενοὶ λόγοι are words without substance or truth; in context they are arguments that excuse or trivialise the vices just named. Verse 7 concludes: μὴ οὖν γίνεσθε συμμέτοχοι αὐτῶν (“do not become partners with them”), which repeats the verb γίνεσθε of v. 1: believers must decide whom they will resemble. The second element is therefore holiness, understood as freedom from the idolatry of desire and from deceptive speech (Arnold, 2010; Lincoln, 1990).

Living as Children of Light (Ephesians 5:8–10)

Verse 8 grounds the exhortation in a change of identity: ἦτε γὰρ ποτε σκότος, νῦν δὲ φῶς ἐν κυρίῳ (“for once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord”). Believers are not described as merely being in darkness or in light; they are identified with them. The “once ... now” schema (ποτε ... νῦν) recalls Ephesians 2:1–13, and the phrase ἐν κυρίῳ shows that this new identity exists only in union with Christ. From this indicative follows the imperative ὡς τέκνα φωτὸς περιπατεῖτε (“walk as children of light”), which parallels ὡς τέκνα ἀγαπητά in v. 1. Bowes (2024) shows that Ephesians constructs a shared social representation of the “new self” (cf. 4:22–24), which helps explain why the letter grounds behavior in a renewed identity rather than in rules alone. The language of “children” or “sons of light” has a notable parallel in the Qumran writings, where the community understood itself as “sons of light” in opposition to the “sons of darkness” (e.g., 1QS 1.9–10; 3.13–4.26; see Wróbel, 2020), and similar language appears elsewhere in the New Testament (John 12:36; 1 Thess 5:5). Ephesians differs from Qumran, however, in two respects: the transition from darkness to light is a change of identity that has already occurred “in the Lord”, and the boundary is not ethnic or sectarian but defined by union with Christ. The Isaianic imagery of light dawning on God’s people (Isa 9:2; 60:1–3), which reappears in the quotation of v. 14, appears to be the closer background.

Verse 9 describes the “fruit of the light” (ὁ καρπὸς τοῦ φωτός) as consisting in all goodness (ἀγαθωσύνη), righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) and truth (ἀληθεία). A number of witnesses read “fruit of the Spirit” (πνεύματος), whereas NA28 prints “light” (φωτός). Internal evidence favours “light”: it fits the immediate context, whereas “Spirit” can be explained as assimilation to the familiar phrase of Galatians 5:22; “fruit of the light” is thus the harder reading [author: insert the witnesses for each reading from the NA28 apparatus]. The image of fruit indicates that this character grows from the new identity rather than being produced by effort alone. Verse 10 adds a participle of manner: δοκιμάζοντες τί ἐστὶν εὐάρεστον τῷ κυρίῳ (“testing what is pleasing to the Lord”). Life in the light therefore requires active discernment (cf. Rom 12:2; Phil 1:10). The third element is truthfulness and discernment, which the text describes as the fruit of the light that believers have become “in the Lord”.

Moral Clarity: Exposing the Works of Darkness (Ephesians 5:11–13)

Verse 11 contains a negative and a positive command: καὶ μὴ συγκοινωνεῖτε τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς ἀκάρποις τοῦ σκοτοῦς, μᾶλλον δὲ καὶ ἐλέγχετε (“do not participate in the unfruitful works

of darkness, but rather expose them"). The adjective ἄκαρπος deliberately contrasts with the "fruit of the light" in v. 9: darkness produces nothing of lasting value. The verb ἐλέγχω means to bring to light, to show something for what it is, and to reprove (Bauer et al., 2000). Commentators debate whether the exposure is verbal or takes place through the contrasting life of believers: those who favour verbal reproof point to the imperative force of ἐλέγχετε and to Matthew 18:15; those who favour exposure by lifestyle point to v. 13, where it is the light that exposes (Hoehner, 2002; Thielman, 2010). This study adopts a combined view: the primary means of exposure is the contrasting life of the community, which may include, but is not limited to, verbal correction, since v. 12 itself discourages speaking about these deeds.

Verse 12 explains the reason: τὰ γὰρ κρυφῇ γινόμενα ὑπ' αὐτῶν αἰσχρόν ἐστιν καὶ λέγειν ("for it is shameful even to speak of the things they do in secret"). The emphasis on what is done κρυφῇ (in secret) is significant. Verse 13 continues: τὰ δὲ πάντα ἐλεγχόμενα ὑπὸ τοῦ φωτὸς φανεροῦται ("but everything exposed by the light becomes visible"). Verses 13–14a are syntactically difficult. The participle φανερούμενον in v. 14a can be read as passive ("everything that is made visible is light") or middle ("everything that makes visible is light") (Wallace, 1996). The passive reading, followed here, implies that what is exposed by the light can itself become light: exposure is not only condemnation but the possibility of transformation, which prepares for the call to awaken in v. 14b (Lincoln, 1990; Thielman, 2010). The fourth element of the passage is therefore moral clarity: refusing partnership with darkness while allowing the light to reveal and heal what is hidden. This clarity is not harshness; within Ephesians it remains governed by the love of vv. 1–2 and by "speaking the truth in love" (4:15).

Awakening in the Light of Christ (Ephesians 5:14)

The passage culminates in a quotation introduced by διὸ λέγει: ἔγειρε, ὁ καθεύδων, καὶ ἀνάστα ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν, καὶ ἐπιφάσει σοι ὁ Χριστός ("Awake, sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you"). The words do not correspond exactly to any Old Testament text, although they echo Isaiah 26:19 and 60:1. Three explanations have been proposed: a free conflation of Isaianic texts; an early Christian hymn, possibly sung at baptism, where the passage from darkness to light was enacted; or another Jewish tradition no longer extant. The formula διὸ λέγει is used in 4:8 for a modified quotation of Psalm 68:18, which suggests that the author regards the quoted words as authoritative even if they are not a verbatim scriptural text. The baptismal setting is plausible because the "once ... now" schema of v. 8 and the imagery of rising from the dead correspond to Paul's baptismal language (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12), though it cannot be proven (Lincoln, 1990). The two imperatives ἔγειρε and ἀνάστα are followed by a promise in the future tense, ἐπιφάσει: the initiative of shining belongs to Christ. Covington (2025) argues that this verse joins the hope of future resurrection with present ethical transformation in Ephesians. The fifth element is therefore renewal: the passage ends by attributing to Christ the power to raise and enlighten, so that spiritual growth is a continual awakening rather than a demand for instant perfection.

Synthesis: Identity, Imitation, and the Light of Christ

The exegesis permits a more precise answer to the first research question than a list of “traits of Christ” would provide. The text predicates two things directly of Christ: he loved and gave himself as an offering to God (v. 2), and he is the source of the light in which believers now live and which he will shine upon them (vv. 8, 14). The other elements – holiness, discernment and moral clarity – are not stated as attributes of Christ but as the conduct required of those who are “beloved children” and “light in the Lord”. The move from Christ to believers is made by the logic of imitation in v. 1: because believers are God’s beloved children and have been loved by Christ, they are to become like the one they imitate. What may legitimately be called the “character of Christ” in this passage is therefore his self-giving love and his illuminating presence; the remaining elements describe how that character is reproduced in a community that belongs to him.

Read in this way, the five elements are not a set of independent virtues but stages in a single argument. Identity comes first: the passage opens with “as beloved children” (v. 1) and turns at its centre on “now you are light in the Lord” (v. 8). Love comes second, as the form that identity takes: it is defined by Christ’s self-offering and therefore excludes any conduct that treats others as objects of desire or gain. Holiness follows as the negative boundary of love: sexual immorality and greed are rejected not because they break abstract rules but because they are incompatible with the self-giving love of v. 2 and amount to idolatry (v. 5). Discernment and moral clarity then describe how this identity is lived amid competing claims: believers test what pleases the Lord (v. 10) and refuse partnership with the unfruitful works of darkness (v. 11). Finally, the promise of v. 14 reframes the whole sequence. Because Christ shines on those who rise, the process is sustained by his initiative, and exposure by the light becomes the occasion for transformation rather than mere condemnation (vv. 13–14a).

This reading agrees with the commentators that the passage moves from the imitation of God to the contrast between light and darkness (Arnold, 2010; Lincoln, 1990), but it differs from them at two points. First, whereas commentaries often treat vv. 1–2 as the conclusion of 4:25–32 and vv. 3–14 as a separate warning, this study argues that the identity motif (“children” in vv. 1 and 8) binds the passage into one argument, so that the warnings of vv. 3–7 are read as the negative side of love rather than as an independent catalogue of vices. Second, by adopting the passive reading of *φανερούμενον* in v. 14a, the study gives exposure a transformative rather than purely judicial function, which explains why the passage ends with a promise. In relation to the debate on mimesis, the passage supports a relational account of imitation (Bennema, 2025; Putra & Susanta, 2026): the one imitated is God himself, the model is Christ’s self-giving, and the motivation is filial love. At the same time, Castelli’s (1991) critique remains a useful caution: imitation language can be misused to reinforce human authority, which is why formation that appeals to this passage must keep God and Christ, not human leaders, as the object of imitation.

Implications for the Spiritual Behavior of Generation Z

The synthesis can now be related to the situation of Generation Z by analogy, following the hermeneutical safeguards stated in the Method. First, the priority of identity in vv. 1 and 8 speaks to a context in which young people are encouraged to construct their identity through online visibility and approval. Research on the faith of Generation Z on TikTok shows how religious identity is increasingly performed for an audience (Hamm & Hoeting, 2023). The analogy is not that ancient readers used social media, but that in both cases identity can be sought in recognition by others; Ephesians locates it instead in being God's beloved children. Second, the identification of greed with idolatry (v. 5) applies by analogy to environments structured by consumption and attention, in which insatiable desire is constantly stimulated. Third, the warning against "empty words" (v. 6), which in context are arguments that excuse vice, provides a criterion for evaluating persuasive content that normalises what the passage calls darkness. Fourth, the call to "test what pleases the Lord" (v. 10) supports digital discernment as a spiritual practice, in line with proposals to re-imagine discipleship in the age of social media (Hunt, 2019). Fifth, the contrast between what is done "in secret" and what is exposed (vv. 12–13) invites integrity across private and public, offline and online life; this is an inference from the theological logic of the text rather than a direct reference, and it is presented here as such.

This argument should not, however, be one-sided. Digital media also offer genuine opportunities for formation: access to Scripture and teaching, connection with believing communities, and new forms of witness. Studies of digital discipleship show both the potential and the limits of such tools (Dunlow, 2021; Hunt, 2019), and research among young people suggests that religiosity contributes to positive development when it is joined with genuine spirituality rather than mere participation (Buenconsejo & Datu, 2023). The framework derived from Ephesians 5:1–14 therefore does not call for withdrawal from the digital world but for living in it "as children of light", using it for love, truth and discernment.

These implications require formative communities, since the imperatives of the passage are plural and the identity of "children of light" is shared. In families, parents are the first models of imitation; Indonesian research documents the significant role of parents and spiritual leaders in the faith growth of Generation Z (Imelda & Yuono, 2024). Practically, this means that families can embody the passage's pattern by grounding correction in the child's identity as beloved rather than in shame, and by practising gratitude (v. 4) as an alternative to cynical or degrading speech. In churches, catechesis and youth ministry can be structured around the movement of the passage – identity, love, holiness, discernment and renewal – rather than around lists of rules, and mentoring relationships can provide the communal discernment that v. 10 presupposes. In schools, Christian religious education teachers can integrate these elements into character formation (Saragih, 2025), while pastoral counselling can address the spiritual struggles of young people (Pranasoma, 2021). Contextual programmes, such as those that combine biblical teaching with local culture and digital socialisation in the Toraja Church, show how this can be adapted to Indonesian settings

(Tangdilintin, 2025). Throughout, formation must address the whole person, including will and heart, rather than information alone (Porter, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study asked how Ephesians 5:1–14 grounds believers' conduct in their relation to God and Christ, and how this grounding can frame the spiritual formation of Generation Z. The exegesis shows that the passage is an argument from identity to conduct. Believers are God's beloved children (v. 1) and light in the Lord (v. 8); Christ's self-giving love (v. 2) defines the love they are to practise; holiness forms the negative boundary of that love and rejects the idolatry of greed (vv. 3–7); discernment and moral clarity describe life amid competing claims (vv. 8–13); and the promise that Christ will shine (v. 14) sustains the whole process. The text predicates love and light directly of Christ, while the other elements describe how his character is reproduced in the community.

Exegetically, the study contributes a reading in which the identity motif binds the passage into one argument and in which exposure by the light has a transformative function. Practically, it offers a framework for forming Generation Z in families, churches and schools that begins with identity rather than rules and that relates the text to digital life by explicit analogy. The study is limited to a single passage, relies on published research rather than field data, and has not been evaluated by young people or practitioners. Further research could test the framework through a mixed-methods study among Indonesian Christian youth and compare Ephesians 5:1–14 with related texts on imitation and light (e.g., 1 Thess 1:6; Phil 2:5–11; 1 John 1:5–7).

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study did not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, or personal data requiring ethical approval.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF AI USAGE

The author used Claude AI (Opus 5.5) to translate the manuscript into English, to restructure it according to the journal template, to suggest exegetical points and to identify journal literature through Crossref, and to revise it in response to peer review. The research question, the choice of text and the pastoral concerns are the author's. All exegetical claims

and sources were reviewed, verified and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final content of this article.

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