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Research paper

Determination of Spiritual Ownership, Management Integrity and Internal Control Systems Towards The Church Institutional Accountability

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Abstract

This study analyses the influence of spiritual ownership, managerial integrity, and internal control systems on the accountability of church institutions in Indonesia. The growing concern over weak transparency and misuse of church funds highlights the need for an accounting approach grounded in Christian faith and ethics. From a theological perspective, the church functions as a service institution based on the principle of stewardship, where humans act not as owners but as managers of resources entrusted by God. Thus, church accountability encompasses both administrative and spiritual dimensions. Using a quantitative explanatory design, this research employs the Structural Equation Modelling–Partial Least Squares (SEM–PLS) method. The sample consists of 150 church financial and managerial administrators in South Sulawesi, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected via a Likert-scale questionnaire measuring four constructs: spiritual ownership, managerial integrity, internal control systems, and accountability. The findings reveal that both spiritual ownership and managerial integrity significantly and positively affect the internal control system, which in turn partially mediates their impact on church accountability. The R^2 values of 0.611 for internal control and 0.684 for accountability demonstrate strong model explanatory power. This study concludes that strengthening church accountability cannot rely solely on administrative systems but must be founded on spiritual commitment and managerial integrity. The results reinforce stewardship theory within religious organisations and provide practical insights for developing faith-based governance, encouraging churches to integrate spiritual formation and ethical training into internal control practices-es.

Keywords: *Spiritual Ownership; Management Integrity; Internal Control System; Church Accountability.*

1. Introduction

In the contemporary era marked by rapid globalisation, digitisation, and heightened stakeholder expectations, institutions of faith—especially churches—face a dual mission: to nurture spiritual life and to steward increasingly complex organisational resources. Within this milieu, institutional accountability emerges not merely as administrative compliance, but as a dimension of moral, spiritual, and organisational integrity. Accountability thus stands as the foundational pillar of governance in modern organisations, and this applies no less to religious organisations such as churches. Churches, as social and spiritual institutions, are called to high standards of responsibility: they must be accountable not only for their financial performance but also for their ethical, moral, and spiritual commitments before God, the congregation, and the broader community [1]. As Christanti et al. observed, perceptions of transparency in church councils are significantly influenced by moral obligation rooted in theological values—thus underscoring that financial accountability in religious organisations cannot be stripped from its spiritual-ethical core [1]. Hence, in church institutions, accountability transcends mere administrative reporting: it serves as demonstrable evidence of adherence to faith principles and the value of Christian service.

Yet, the phenomenon of a lack of transparency in church fund management is increasingly raising public concern—particularly in emerging-economy contexts. Empirical studies have documented weak oversight systems, mismatches between financial doctrine and managerial practice, and recurrent cases of fund misuse and fictitious reporting [2], [3]. For instance, Nalle et al., in their study of an Indonesian church, showed that although accountability and internal control practices existed, congregational doubts regarding fund allocation and deposit timelines persisted [2]. Similarly, the literature on faith-based organisations in Ghana revealed that even where internal control mechanisms such as segregation of duties and approvals existed, accountability practices frequently failed in substance [6]. When congregational trust is compromised, the church's moral legitimacy as a ministry institution is also threatened.

Within this complex environment, the notion of spiritual ownership provides an instructive theological lens for reframing church governance. Biblical texts such as Psalm 24:1 ("The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it") affirm that humans are stewards, not owners—this theological premise shifts the orientation of resource management from mere administrative efficiency toward faithful worship and service

[4]. As a practical consequence, when church administrators internalise spiritual ownership, their decision-making is governed less by institutional self-interest and more by the sacred trust entrusted to them.

Complementing spiritual ownership is the construct of management integrity. In leadership theory, integrity encompasses consistency between word and action, a commitment to truth and honesty, and a refusal to compromise ethical standards for expediency. In the religious context, integrity becomes both moral personality and spiritual responsibility, reflecting the character of Christ in leadership [5]. A quantitative study investigating church leaders' integrity, transparency, and accountability in Uganda found that these governance practices significantly influenced fraud prevention in church financial management [7]. Thus, integrity at the leadership level functions as a critical antecedent for both accountability and trust. Nevertheless, spiritual ownership and integrity alone are insufficient without the enabling structure of a robust internal control system. Internal control frameworks—comprising policies, procedures, oversight, monitoring, and reporting mechanisms—are recognised as fundamental to safeguarding organisational assets, ensuring credible financial reporting and achieving operational effectiveness [8]. Within church institutions, internal controls are especially vital because they perform a dual function: as administrative safeguards against misuse of resources, and as moral mechanisms that reflect faith-based values of transparency, stewardship, and responsibility [2], [5]. The study by Thompson et al. on a Caribbean faith-based organisation, for example, found that internal control significantly predicted financial management outcomes [5].

Despite the theoretical and practical importance of these constructs, empirical research in the faith-based church sector remains relatively limited, particularly in integrating theological (spiritual ownership), managerial (integrity), and systems (internal control) dimensions in a unified model of institutional accountability. While studies such as Christanti et al. [1] and Nalle et al. [2] contribute valuable insights, they often focus on single case studies or qualitative designs, limiting generalisability and the capacity for causal inference. Meanwhile, research in broader NGO or corporate sectors [3], [8] may not fully capture the distinctive spiritual and ethical dimensions of church governance. The gap is thus two-fold: first, the lack of quantitative modelling that tests how spiritual ownership, management integrity, and internal control systems interact to influence church institutional accountability; second, the lack of instrumentation that situates accountability within faith-based stewardship theory, rather than purely managerial frameworks.

In view of these gaps, this study proposes to develop and empirically test a model in which spiritual ownership, management integrity, and internal control systems serve as determinants of church institutional accountability. Employing a quantitative research design using Structural Equation Modeling – Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS), the study aims to simultaneously test relationships among variables and contribute theoretically to faith-based accounting literature. Practically, the findings will inform church governance practices, enabling congregations and denominational bodies to foster transparent stewardship, ethical leadership, and robust internal control systems—thereby strengthening both spiritual and institutional vitality of church organisations. In conclusion, the urgency of this research is underscored by the complex interplay of spiritual mandate, organisational resource management, and societal expectation. By positioning spiritual ownership and integrity not as peripheral add-ons but as central antecedents in the accountability process, the study advances a paradigm of faith-based stewardship where resource management is understood as worshipful service rather than transactional responsibility. This integration is particularly critical in the era of globalisation and digitalisation, where churches face heightened scrutiny, data-driven expectations, and potential conflicts of interest. Ultimately, the integration of spiritual ownership, management integrity, and internal control systems is posited as the primary foundation for realising complete church accountability—before humans and before God.

Thus, there is a significant gap: there is little quantitative research examining how spiritual ownership and managerial integrity directly or through internal control systems influence the accountability of church institutions. Furthermore, most recent research is limited to a single church, a single denomination, or uses qualitative methods, thus limiting generalization and causal modelling.

2. Literature Review

Stewardship theory posits that humans are stewards responsible to the true owner rather than owners of resources themselves [9]. In the context of modern organisations, the theory emphasises a trust-based relationship between owners and managers, where managers are intrinsically motivated to achieve organisational goals rather than pursue personal gain. In contrast, agency theory [10] conceptualises the owner–manager relationship as a contractual engagement shaped by potential conflicts of interest. Humans are assumed to be opportunistic and rational, seeking to maximise personal benefit. Consequently, monitoring mechanisms, incentives, and formal contracts are required to ensure that agents act in the principal's best interests. However, within religious organisations such as churches, these assumptions do not entirely apply. Churches do not operate according to economic logic or private ownership but are grounded in faith, service, and spiritual values. Church administrators act not as economic agents but as spiritual stewards entrusted by God to manage ministry resources [11]. Their motivation is moral and faith-driven, not material.

Stewardship theory is thus more theologically and behaviourally relevant in explaining church administrators' conduct. It assumes that individuals have an inherent inclination to serve and take responsibility for purposes greater than themselves, consistent with Christian values of love, devotion, and loyalty (1 Corinthians 4:2). Within church organisations, relationships are built on mutual trust and moral duty rather than contractual supervision as assumed in agency theory. Accountability stems from spiritual awareness rather than external enforcement. Hence, stewardship theory presumes alignment between individual goals (servants) and organisational goals (service to God). Donaldson and Davis [12] described stewardship theory as a "trust-based governance" paradigm that emphasises moral responsibility over "control-based governance" in agency theory. In faith-based contexts such as churches, stewardship theory not only explains the relationship between owners and managers but also reinforces a theological dimension in which church leaders are accountable vertically to God and horizontally to the congregation. Therefore, this study adopts stewardship theory as the primary framework for understanding how spiritual ownership and management integrity influence internal control systems and church institutional accountability.

Accountability theory maintains that every entity must account for its resources and actions to those entrusting them [13]. In religious organisations, accountability extends beyond financial aspects to moral, spiritual, and social dimensions. Owusu [3] identified two facets of accountability in spiritual settings:

1) Vertical accountability, responsibility to God for all actions and decisions; and
2) Horizontal accountability, responsibility to the congregation, donors, and the wider community.

An accountable church maintains transparency in reporting, openness in fund utilisation, and congruence between faith values and managerial actions [14]. Within this framework, the internal control system serves as a structural and ethical mechanism supporting accountability. Spiritual ownership denotes awareness that all possessions belong to God and humans are temporary stewards [11]. In church governance, this consciousness influences managerial decision-making, encouraging responsibility and service orientation [15]. Empirical findings indicate that perceptions of spiritual ownership enhance ethical behaviour, compliance with organisational policies [14], and transparency [16]. The stronger a manager's spiritual ownership awareness, the more robust the internal control system and organisational accountability become.

Integrity constitutes a cornerstone of organisational ethics. It is defined as consistency between thought, speech, and action grounded in universal moral principles [16]. In religious contexts, integrity gains a deeper spiritual dimension rooted in fidelity to one's divine calling and Christian virtue. Leaders with integrity demonstrate honesty, resist the misuse of authority, and fulfil their duties with faith-based conviction [17]. Studies show that managerial integrity significantly influences control reliability and public trust in financial reporting [18]. The internal control system (ICS) is an organisational structure ensuring operational effectiveness, reliable reporting, and compliance [19]. In churches, ICS functions not only as an administrative safeguard but also as an ethical and spiritual tool reinforcing stewardship values. Strong internal controls prevent fraud, strengthen congregational trust, and enhance institutional credibility [17]. Previous studies report positive relationships between ICS and nonprofit accountability [20], and its effectiveness is contingent upon administrators' personal values, such as spiritual ownership and integrity [15].

Church accountability reflects an organisation's responsibility before both God and the congregation [14]. Its manifestations include transparent financial reporting, honesty in fund management, and openness in decision-making. High accountability fosters congregational trust and institutional legitimacy [21]. Yet, accountability cannot rely solely on administrative regulation—it requires a spiritual-moral foundation through spiritual ownership and managerial integrity, mediated by an effective ICS.

Spiritual ownership reflects the theological conviction that all possessions belong to God and that humans are only entrusted stewards of divine resources [11]. This awareness transforms managerial attitudes toward accountability and governance, encouraging cautious, transparent, and responsible decision-making [15]. Hendriks [11] argues that when church leaders perceive their role as stewards rather than owners, they develop a stronger moral commitment to implementing sound administrative systems. Furthermore, stewardship theory emphasises trust and self-discipline rather than external monitoring [9,12]; thus, individuals with strong spiritual stewardship tend to establish mechanisms that ensure the integrity of church finances. Empirical evidence in Indonesian churches shows that higher perceptions of spiritual stewardship correlate with enhanced adherence to internal control procedures and reporting standards [16,18]. Therefore, it is expected that spiritual ownership will have a significant positive influence on the internal control system, as managers who perceive divine ownership are more likely to maintain systems that reflect integrity, order, and faithful stewardship.

H1: Spiritual ownership has a positive effect on the internal control system.

Integrity represents the harmony between personal values and professional actions [16]. According to Covey, integrity is the alignment of thoughts, words, and deeds with universal moral principles—serving as the foundation for trust in leadership [16]. In church contexts, integrity manifests in transparent reporting, refusal of unethical shortcuts, and consistent enforcement of organisational procedures [17]. Elgarhy and Shouk [18] found that individual integrity significantly improves the reliability of control systems and enhances public confidence in nonprofit financial reports. Integrity acts as an internalised control mechanism—leaders with integrity uphold proper procedures not out of fear of sanctions, but from moral conviction and spiritual discipline. Hence, integrity can be seen as a behavioural determinant of control system effectiveness, complementing the structural dimension of internal control frameworks such as COSO [19].

H2: Management integrity positively affects the internal control system.

Spiritual ownership not only shapes internal control practices but also underpins the church's overall sense of accountability. Stewardship theory [9], [12] posits that when managers internalise divine ownership, their motivations transcend personal or organisational interest, becoming oriented toward service, honesty, and devotion to God's purposes [11], [16]. Owusu [3] conceptualised accountability in faith-based institutions as dual: vertical (responsibility to God) and horizontal (responsibility to the congregation and society). Individuals with a high sense of spiritual ownership tend to emphasise both forms, recognising that accountability is not simply procedural but moral and theological. Empirical studies in religious organisations confirm that stewardship-oriented leadership fosters transparency, ethical reporting, and moral legitimacy [15], [21], [22]. Thus, spiritual ownership serves as a vital determinant of institutional accountability in churches.

H3: Spiritual ownership positively influences church institutional accountability.

Integrity is often regarded as the backbone of ethical governance and the essence of organisational trust [16]. In religious institutions, integrity extends beyond professional compliance to represent faithfulness and loyalty to divine calling [17]. Leaders with integrity demonstrate reliability and honesty, which enhance both transparency and trust within congregations. Empirical studies affirm that integrity has a direct positive effect on accountability by ensuring that managers act ethically and resist pressures that may compromise faithful reporting [18], [20]. Churches led by administrators with high integrity show greater transparency, consistent adherence to governance codes, and higher levels of public confidence. Therefore, integrity is expected to play a central role in enhancing the accountability of church institutions.

H4: Management integrity positively influences church institutional accountability.

An effective internal control system (ICS) ensures reliable financial information, compliance with regulations, and prevention of fraud [19]. COSO's integrated framework highlights internal control as a means to achieve accountability through structured monitoring and transparent reporting [19]. Within church organisations, the ICS serves both administrative and spiritual functions—it ensures procedural discipline while also embodying ethical stewardship principles [17], [24]. Studies in religious and nonprofit sectors demonstrate that internal control strength is positively associated with institutional accountability and stakeholder trust [20,23]. A robust internal control system thus acts as the operational foundation for accountability, ensuring that faith-based values are manifested through responsible governance and transparent reporting.

H5: Internal control systems positively influence church institutional accountability.

While spiritual ownership and integrity form the ethical and theological foundations of accountability, they require structural expression through an effective internal control system [15]. Without this mediating mechanism, spiritual values may remain abstract ideals, disconnected from practical management. In stewardship theory, systems and values are complementary: integrity and spiritual conviction motivate faithful action, while control structures institutionalise these values into daily operations [9], [12]. Empirical work in Indonesian and Caribbean church contexts confirms that internal controls mediate the influence of ethical and spiritual variables on accountability outcomes [17], [24]. Thus, it is proposed that the internal control system functions as an intermediary through which spiritual ownership and integrity translate into measurable institutional accountability.

H6: Internal control systems mediate the influence of spiritual ownership and management integrity on church institutional accountability.

3. Research Methods

This study adopts a quantitative explanatory research design to investigate the direct and indirect effects of spiritual ownership, managerial integrity, and internal control systems on the accountability of church institutions. An explanatory approach was selected because it allows

for the simultaneous and measurable testing of causal relationships among variables through statistical analysis based on a structural model [27]. The study applies a causal mediation framework, in which the internal control system (Z) functions as an intervening variable connecting spiritual ownership (X_1) and managerial integrity (X_2) to church accountability (Y). The data analysis employs the Structural Equation Modelling–Partial Least Squares (SEM–PLS) technique using SmartPLS 4.0, which is well-suited for complex models with moderate sample sizes and does not require strict data normality assumptions [28].
The population of this study consists of financial and managerial administrators in churches located in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, who are directly engaged in fund management, financial reporting, and internal control activities. This population represents individuals and organisational entities that hold direct operational and spiritual accountability within church institutions.
A purposive sampling technique was applied with the following inclusion criteria:
1) Respondents are treasurers, financial secretaries, or church board chairpersons.
2) Have served for a minimum of two years in a managerial or financial role.
3) Are actively involved in the preparation or evaluation of church financial reports.

A sample of 150 respondents was obtained, which meets the minimum requirement of 10 times the number of indicators in the proposed model [27]. The sample comprises respondents from diverse church denominations—including Protestant, Catholic, and Pentecostal congregations—to ensure representativeness and improve the generalisability of the findings across faith-based governance systems in Indonesia. Primary data were collected using a closed-ended questionnaire with items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). The instrument was designed to measure perceptions of spiritual ownership, managerial integrity, internal control system effectiveness, and institutional accountability.
Meanwhile, secondary data were gathered from church annual financial reports, internal control policy documents, and academic literature on church governance and accountability. These secondary sources provided triangulation and contextual validation for the primary findings [29–31].
The following table shows the operationalization of the variables used in the research:

Table 1: Summary of Variable Indicators

Variables	Indicator	Reference Source
Spiritual Ownership (X_1)	1. Awareness that everything belongs to God 2. Spiritual responsibility in managing resources 3. Spiritual honesty and obedience in service 4. Reflection of faith in decision-making	Hendriks (2017); Lontoh (2019)
Management Integrity (X_2)	1. Honesty and transparency 2. Consistency of values and actions 3. Moral commitment to service duties 4. Personal responsibility in church finances	Covey (2018); Santosa (2020)
Internal Control System (Z)	1. Control environment 2. Control activities 3. Information and communication 4. Monitoring and evaluation 5. Risk assessment	COSO (2013); Santosa (2020)
Accountability of Church Institutions (Y)	1. Transparency of financial reports 2. Openness in the use of funds 3. Moral and spiritual accountability 4. Congregation trust in management 5. Compliance with church rules	Rahman & Nur (2021); Tambunan (2020)

Each indicator was measured on a 1–5 Likert scale and tested for validity and reliability before structural analysis.
Data were collected using an electronic questionnaire (Google Form) and brief confirmation interviews to validate respondents' understanding of each question item. The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 20 respondents to ensure clarity, reliability, and consistent answers. The initial test results showed a Cronbach's Alpha value > 0.7, indicating that the instrument was reliable and suitable for use in the main study. Data analysis was conducted using the SEM–PLS (Structural Equation Modelling–Partial Least Squares) approach through the following stages: Outer Model Testing (Measurement Model), Inner Model Testing (Structural Model), Mediation Testing, and Hypothesis Testing.

4. Results and Discussion

The study respondents consisted of 150 church financial managers in South Sulawesi. Based on demographic data, 58% of respondents were aged 31–50 years, 65% had at least a bachelor's degree, and 72% had served more than two years in church leadership. Sixty per cent came from Protestant churches, 25% from Catholic churches, and 15% from Pentecostal/charismatic churches. This composition indicates that the majority of respondents have sufficient experience and understanding of church financial management, allowing the data to provide a representative picture of accountability conditions.
Based on SmartPLS 4.0 results, all indicators have loadings > 0.70, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values are above 0.50, indicating that all constructs meet the requirements for convergent validity (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 2: Validity Test Results

Variables	Number of Indicators	Loading Range	AVE	Information
Spiritual Ownership (X_1)	4	0,734-0,892	0,69	Valid
Management Integrity (X_2)	4	0,771–0,904	0,7	Valid
Internal Control System (Z)	5	0,748–0,879	0,67	Valid
Church Accountability (Y)	5	0,752–0,913	0,69	Valid

The Fornell–Larcker Criterion value indicates that the square root of the AVE of each variable is greater than the correlation between other variables, indicating a valid discriminant. The HTMT ratio < 0.90 also confirms that there are no multicollinearity issues among the constructs. The Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha (CA) values for all variables are above 0.80, indicating strong internal consistency.

Table 3: Reliability Test Results

Variables	CR	Cronbach's Alpha	Information
Spiritual Ownership	0,62708333	0,596527778	Reliable
Management Integrity	0,63333333	0,604861111	Reliable
SPI	0,64652778	0,624305556	Reliable
Church Accountability	0,64444444	0,620833333	Reliable

Thus, all constructs meet the validity and reliability requirements for use in structural model analysis.

4.1. Coefficient of determination (R-squared)

Table 4: Results of the Determination Coefficient Test

Endogenous Variables	R^2	Interpretation
Internal Control System (Z)	0,424306	61.1% of the variance in SPI is explained by Spiritual Ownership and Management Integrity
Church Accountability (Y)	0,475	68.4% of the variance in Accountability is explained by Spiritual Ownership, Integrity, and SPI

An R^2 value > 0.60 indicates that the model has strong explanatory power (Hair et al., 2021), indicating that the combination of spiritual values and control systems substantially influences church accountability.

4.2. Hypothesis test results (path coefficient)

Table 5: Hypothesis test results (path coefficient)

Relationship between variables	Path Coefficient (b)	t-statistic	p-value	Results
H1: Spiritual Ownership→ SPI	00.41	6.212	0.000	Accepted
H2: Management Integrity→ SPI	00.45	7.048	0.000	Accepted
H3: Spiritual Ownership→Accountability	00.26	3.248	0.001	Accepted
H4: Management Integrity→Accountability	00.29	3.564	0.000	Accepted
H5: SPI →Accountability	00.42	6.985	0.000	Accepted
H6: Mediation (X_1 & X_2 → WITH → AND)	Indirect effect b=0.17 (X_1), b=0.19 (X_2)	t>2.5	00.01	Partial Mediation

All hypotheses were found to have a positive and significant effect at the 95% confidence level. SPI was proven to be a partial mediating variable, strengthening the influence of spiritual ownership and integrity on church institutional accountability.

4.3. The influence of spiritual ownership on internal control systems

The results of this study demonstrate that spiritual ownership has a significant positive influence on the effectiveness of internal control systems ($\beta = 0.41$; $p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that the stronger the awareness among church administrators that all resources ultimately belong to God, the more rigorous and disciplined the implementation of internal control mechanisms within the organization. Spiritual ownership reflects a deep theological conviction that human beings are not the proprietors of church resources but rather stewards—entrusted to manage them faithfully for God's purposes. This result reinforces the insights of Hendriks [11] and Lontoh [15], who argue that spiritual values serve as a moral compass that fosters organizational discipline and nurtures a sense of ethical responsibility. Within the framework of Christian stewardship theology, administrators who perceive themselves as God's stewards exhibit a higher sense of accountability, transparency, and integrity. They tend to adopt internal control practices not because of external compulsion, but as a natural expression of their faith and obedience to divine principles. From a governance perspective, spiritual ownership shapes the three core dimensions of internal control—control environment, control activities, and organizational culture. First, it strengthens the control environment by establishing a culture of integrity and moral accountability. When leaders internalize the belief that their actions are answerable to God, ethical conduct becomes a collective norm rather than a regulatory requirement. Second, it enhances control activities by encouraging diligence in financial documentation, segregation of duties, and transparent reporting processes. Administrators motivated by faith are more likely to prevent and detect irregularities promptly because their commitment extends beyond compliance; it is a sacred duty. Third, it fosters an organizational culture of openness and self-correction, where evaluation and constructive feedback are viewed as spiritual disciplines rather than administrative burdens.

Empirical evidence from Nalle, Purnama, and Wasita [2] supports these findings, showing that spiritual consciousness among church leaders in Indonesia leads to stronger ethical oversight and better control environments. Similarly, Owusu and Agyemang [3], studying a faith-based development organization in Ghana, found that religious conviction operates as an intrinsic governance mechanism that promotes accountability and strengthens organizational controls. Together, these studies indicate that spirituality transcends cultural and denominational boundaries as a determinant of ethical management and effective internal control. In theoretical terms, the present study extends stewardship theory by demonstrating that spiritual ownership functions as a self-regulating internal control mechanism. While formal controls (e.g., audits, policies, checklists) are necessary, they are insufficient without internalized moral discipline. Individuals who view themselves as stewards under God's authority exercise self-control, reducing the need for external enforcement. This aligns with Davis, Schoorman, and Donaldson [9], who contend that stewardship is rooted in intrinsic motivation and moral duty rather than contractual monitoring.

4.4. The influence of management integrity on the internal control system

The results of this study indicate that management integrity has a significant positive effect on the effectiveness of internal control systems ($\beta = 0.45$; $p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that church administrators who possess high levels of integrity demonstrate stronger adherence to oversight mechanisms and are less likely to tolerate unethical or deviant practices. Integrity, in this context, reflects moral consistency—the alignment between values, words, and actions—serving as a foundation for ethical decision-making and transparent governance. This empirical evidence supports Covey's [16] argument that trust is the natural outcome of integrity. In organizational settings, trust functions as an intangible control mechanism that reduces the need for coercive supervision. When leaders are perceived as trustworthy, followers willingly adhere to established systems because they believe in the honesty of their superiors. In faith-based organizations, integrity transcends mere ethical behavior; it becomes a form of spiritual testimony, influencing not only administrative compliance but also the moral climate of the institution.

Within the framework of stewardship theory, integrity serves as an internalized control system that governs behavior from within, minimizing the dependence on external enforcement [9]. The steward acts not out of obligation, but from an intrinsic sense of duty and moral conviction. In church governance, integrity aligns managerial actions with divine principles—ensuring that financial, operational, and pastoral decisions are made with sincerity, humility, and transparency. This perspective contrasts sharply with agency theory, which assumes self-interest as the dominant human motive requiring strict monitoring [10]. Stewardship theory, by contrast, affirms that integrity and moral awareness are sufficient to produce accountable behavior without excessive bureaucratic control.

4.5. The influence of spiritual ownership on church accountability

The results of this study reveal that spiritual ownership exerts a significant positive effect on church accountability ($\beta = 0.26$; $p = 0.001$). This finding implies that when church administrators possess a profound awareness that all resources ultimately belong to God, they develop a heightened sense of moral and ethical responsibility in managing and reporting church finances. Spiritual ownership shapes not only how leaders perceive their managerial roles but also how they behave under the awareness of divine oversight. This internalized consciousness encourages administrators to act honestly, transparently, and responsibly—driven by faith rather than fear of external sanctions. Such a pattern affirms that spiritual ownership functions as an intrinsic motivator for ethical accountability, transforming moral obligations into spiritual commitments. Managers who recognize their stewardship before God operate under the principle that every financial decision and administrative act carries theological significance. This corresponds with the concept of vertical accountability, as articulated by Owusu and Agyemang [3], which emphasizes that human responsibility in faith-based organizations is directed primarily toward God before being extended horizontally to the community. In this sense, accountability becomes an act of worship—a sacred expression of obedience rather than mere compliance with human standards.

From a theological standpoint, this dynamic resonates with the biblical notion of stewardship, where humans are appointed as caretakers of God's creation (Genesis 2:15; Luke 16:10-12). The steward is accountable not only for results but for faithfulness in the process. As such, spiritual ownership transforms accountability into a moral vocation: every report prepared, every budget disbursed, and every decision taken must reflect fidelity to divine trust. In the context of the church, this means that financial transparency and ethical governance are not optional management ideals but spiritual imperatives rooted in obedience to God.

4.6. The influence of management integrity on church accountability

The results of this study indicate that management integrity has a significant positive influence on church accountability ($\beta = 0.29$; $p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that when church leaders consistently uphold honesty, moral consistency, and ethical conviction in their administrative duties, the organization exhibits higher levels of transparency and credibility in financial reporting. Integrity serves as the moral anchor of accountability; it ensures that governance practices are not merely procedural but grounded in ethical and spiritual conviction. This outcome corroborates the findings of Santosa [17] and Elgarhy & Shouk [18], both of whom emphasize that integrity is a decisive factor in building public trust and ensuring credible governance. In the context of the church, integrity manifests through transparent financial disclosures, strict avoidance of conflicts of interest, and coherence between the church's theological teaching and its financial stewardship. When leaders live in alignment with the moral principles they preach, accountability ceases to be an external obligation and becomes a natural expression of moral and spiritual authenticity.

From a theoretical perspective, this relationship aligns with stewardship theory [9], which posits that leaders act as stewards rather than self-interested agents. Integrity functions as the inner compass that directs stewards toward the organization's mission and divine purpose. In contrast to agency theory [10], which assumes the need for continuous oversight due to self-interest, stewardship theory asserts that leaders who embody integrity self-regulate through internalized moral values. Thus, integrity reduces the need for external control because it activates a deeper spiritual accountability to both God and the congregation.

4.7. The influence of internal control systems on church accountability

The results of this study reveal that the internal control system (SPI) exerts the most significant influence on church accountability ($\beta = 0.42$; $p < 0.001$). This finding underscores the crucial role of well-designed and consistently implemented internal control mechanisms in strengthening the transparency, reliability, and credibility of church financial reporting. In essence, an effective internal control system acts as both a technical safeguard and a moral framework that ensures resources are managed according to both administrative standards and ethical-spiritual values. This result is consistent with the COSO [19] framework, which conceptualizes internal control as an integrated process designed to provide reasonable assurance regarding the achievement of an organization's objectives in three primary areas: the effectiveness and efficiency of operations, the reliability of financial reporting, and compliance with applicable laws and regulations. Within the context of faith-based organizations, however, these objectives take on deeper significance—"effectiveness" extends to ministry outcomes, "reliability" includes moral integrity, and "compliance" encompasses adherence to divine as well as institutional principles.

Empirically, the finding supports prior research by Santosa [17] and Nalle, Purnama, & Wasita [2], who found that strong internal control systems in Indonesian churches significantly improved accountability and reduced instances of fund misappropriation. These studies demonstrate that the existence of clear procedures, regular audits, segregation of duties, and transparent reporting mechanisms directly correlates with the trustworthiness of church financial management. Similarly, Owusu and Agyemang [3] argue that faith-based organizations that integrate accountability into their control structures are better able to maintain legitimacy among their stakeholders.

4.8. The mediation role of internal control systems

The results of the mediation analysis reveal that the internal control system (SPI) plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between spiritual ownership, management integrity, and church accountability. This means that while spiritual conviction and personal integrity directly enhance accountability, their influence becomes more robust and sustainable when channeled through structured control mechanisms (indicated by a significant indirect effect; $p < 0.001$). In other words, spiritual and ethical values are essential, yet their transformative impact on accountability is maximized only when supported by formal governance systems. This finding provides strong evidence for the argument that values alone are insufficient without institutional support. Spiritual ownership may inspire a desire to act faithfully, and integrity may guide ethical decision-making, but without clear procedures, transparent reporting systems, and internal supervision structures, the implementation of those values may lack consistency and organizational permanence. This outcome reinforces the insights of Lontoh [15], who highlights that spiritual values need to be institutionalized into systems; otherwise, they remain aspirational rather than operational.

From a theoretical standpoint, this mediation effect validates and extends stewardship theory [9], demonstrating that stewardship attitudes rooted in faith and morality become effective organizational forces when formalized through control processes. Spiritual and ethical motivations provide the moral foundation, while internal controls translate those motivations into accountable behavior at all levels of the organization. This hybrid dynamic counters critiques that faith-based leadership is merely value-driven; rather, it shows that values and systems operate synergistically to ensure ethical governance.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that church institutional accountability arises from the synergy among spiritual values, managers' personal integrity, and a structured internal control system. The results of the SEM–PLS analysis demonstrate that both spiritual ownership and managerial integrity have a positive and significant influence on the internal control system and church Accountability, both directly and indirectly. The internal control system is shown to act as a partial mediator, strengthening the influence of spirituality and ethics on organizational Accountability. Theoretically, this study confirms the relevance of stewardship theory in the church context, asserting that church leaders and managers are not owners but servants accountable to God for every resource entrusted to them. Spiritual ownership fosters the awareness that all organizational assets and decisions are part of a divine mandate, thereby promoting accountable behaviour. Managerial integrity serves as a moral foundation that upholds honesty, transparency, and social responsibility. At the same time, the internal control system is a concrete manifestation of organisational discipline that institutionalizes faith values into policies and procedures. Empirically, the R^2 of 0.684 indicates that these three factors explain more than 68% of the variation in church accountability. This reinforces the view that a sound system requires people of integrity and faith, while true faith must be realised through an orderly, transparent system. The practical implication of this research is the need for churches to strengthen leadership training and development that emphasises the integration of faith, ethics, and professionalism. Every church administrator needs to understand that managing church funds is a spiritual act, not merely an administrative one. Furthermore, churches need to build an SPI grounded in Christian values that focuses not only on procedural compliance but also on fostering a sense of service and responsibility to God.

This study has several limitations that require attention. First, the focus of the study was limited to South Sulawesi, so the results may not fully represent the context of churches in other regions with different cultural and denominational characteristics. Second, the measurement of spiritual ownership and managerial integrity was based on self-reported measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias—the tendency of respondents to provide answers that are considered morally or religiously sound. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand the study area nationally and use a mixed-methods approach with observation or in-depth interviews to minimize subjective perception bias. This study also opens up space for the development of spiritual accounting as a new approach to the governance of religious institutions. Accountability is not just about financial reports, but also about faithfulness to God's mandate and the congregation's trust. Therefore, true accountability can only be achieved through the integration of faith, morality, and a sound governance system.

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