



Reformed Christology: Historical Foundations and Contemporary Doctrinal Implications

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the uniqueness of 16th-century Reformed Christology and its contribution to the development of contemporary church theology. The background of this study arises from concerns about efforts to reconstruct Christological dogmas that are considered no longer relevant because they are too influenced by a rigid, elitist Western metaphysical framework and do not touch on the context of the real lives of the congregation. Amidst the demands of the modern era that prioritize authentic, inclusive, and contextual experiences of faith, a merely speculative and abstract understanding of Christology becomes less functional for church life. Through a qualitative approach using historical-theological methods, this study finds that Reformed Christology emphasizes the supremacy and finality of Christ in history, as well as its relevance to the salvation of believers. The thought of reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin consistently places Christ at the center of faith; not merely as an object of theological contemplation, but as a living Person present in the word, sacraments, and the life of the congregation. Amid the decline in Christological understanding in the modern era, Reformed Christological thought is a theological treasure that can bridge the gap between the proclamation of the Gospel and the realities of the lives of today's congregations. The results of this study are expected to provide a real contribution in formulating a Christology that is relevant, contextual, and remains faithful to the testimony of the Bible for the Protestant church today.

Keywords: Churches Doctrine, John Calvin, Martin Luther, Reformer Christology, Ulrich Zwingli

Article history

Submitted: March 9, 2025

Revised: March 22, 2026

Accepted: March 27, 2026

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How to cite this article:

Basri, H.A. & Panggarra, R. (2026). Reformed Christology: Historical Foundations and Contemporary Doctrinal Implications. *Evangelikal: Jurnal Teologi Injili dan Pembinaan Warga Jemaat*. 10(1): 133-152. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46445/ejti.v10i1.1051>

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible is the ultimate authoritative source for understanding the identity and work of Jesus Christ, including the plan of salvation that is revealed (John 5:39; 2 Tim. 3:16). Christian faith is essentially rooted in a true knowledge of the person and work of Christ; without a deep and structured understanding of who Christ is and what He has done, the entire edifice of Christian theology loses its conceptual basis and doctrinal foundation (Rowe, 2022). This statement affirms that Christ is the absolute ontological and theological foundation of the Christian faith.

The church, as the body of Christ, has a theological responsibility to preserve, teach, and pass on a correct understanding of the person and work of Christ (Matt. 16:18). Throughout its history, the church has endeavored to maintain the purity of Christological doctrine through ecumenical councils, including the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), which explicitly rejected Arianism—a teaching that denied the divinity of Christ—and formulated a creed affirming the essential equality of the Son with the Father (Bryant, 1993). This historical effort affirms that a faithful understanding of the biblical testimony about Christ is a fundamental requirement for the continuity and integrity of true Christian faith.

Since the early days of the church, the struggle over the nature of Jesus Christ as both God and man has been a central issue in the formation of Christian dogma (Dawe, 1972). The seriousness of the early church in maintaining the purity of its teachings is reflected in the convening of ecumenical councils, which attempted to formulate a Christology that was faithful to the testimony of the Bible and the apostolic tradition (Norris, 2011, p. 155). The First Council of Nicaea (325 AD) and the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) were major milestones in the formation of orthodox Christology. Nicaea responded to Arianism by affirming the full divinity of Christ through the use of the term *homoousios*—“consubstantial with the Father”—which affirmed the ontological equality of the Son with the Father as the basis of the unity of the Trinity (Williams, 2002, p. 137). Meanwhile, the Council of Chalcedon synthesized various Christological ideas that had developed previously by formulating that Christ is one person (*hypostasis*) who has two natures, divine and human, which are “... without mixture, without change, without division, and without separation” (Davis, 1990, p. 327). This Chalcedonian Formula not only affirmed the decisions of previous councils, but also established a doctrinal balance that has become the standard of orthodoxy in the Christian tradition to this day.

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century was a significant turning point in church history, challenging the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and reasserting the supremacy of Scripture as the foundation of faith and doctrine. In the context of this theological and ecclesial shift, Reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli not only made significant contributions to soteriology, ecclesiology, and bibliology, but also reformulated a Christological understanding rooted in the testimony of Scripture. The Reformers' efforts to reinterpret the person and work of Christ became a crucial pillar in shaping the theological identity of the Protestant tradition and provided a new foundation for a more Christ-centered and Gospel-centered experience of Christian faith (Locher, 2007, pp. 233–238). Each Reformer presented a distinctive approach to understanding the person of Christ, the relationship between His divine

and human natures, and the soteriological implications of His work for humanity. This unique Christological approach not only reflects the intellectual and theological background of each Reformer but also plays a significant role in shaping the development of dogma and theological identity of Protestant churches to the present day.

The 16th-century Protestant Reformation not only transformed church structures and sacramental practices, but also revived Christological discourse previously thought to have reached consensus through ecumenical councils. The Reformers reexamined the teachings on the person and work of Christ by referring directly to Scripture, thus opening up space for new interpretations that have helped shape the development of Christian theology in the modern era. Martin Luther, with his emphasis on *sola Scriptura*, challenged the traditional interpretation of Christ developed in the medieval scholastic tradition (Torseth, 2023). In *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther rejected the concept of synergism (the cooperation of human beings and God in salvation) and asserted that Christ is the only mediator (Shofner, 1973). This view indirectly influenced Christology by emphasizing the unique role of Christ in redemption, in contrast to the Catholic concept of the mediation of the saints. Meanwhile, John Calvin developed a Christology that was integrated with his doctrine of predestination. In the *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, Calvin (1559) emphasized that Christ, as the “Mediator,” plays a triple role as Prophet, Priest, and King (*munus triplex*), which became the basis for the Reformed understanding of the work of redemption. Calvin also rejected the physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist (as taught in the Lutheran ubiquity) and replaced it with the concept of *unio mystica*, namely, a spiritual union with Christ through the Holy Spirit (Duby, 2012). This difference led to conflict between Lutherans and the Reformed, especially in the Marburg Disputation, where Luther and Zwingli clashed over the meaning of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper. Ulrich Zwingli, on the other hand, took a more radical approach, rejecting the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist altogether. In “*De Vera et Falsa Religione*,” Zwingli (1525) argued that the Eucharist was merely a memorial and symbol, not an objective means of grace. This view was based on a literal interpretation of Christ’s words, “This is my body,” which he considered to be a metaphorical (Locher & Shaw, 1981). These Christological differences reflect deep divisions in the Reformation, where the emphasis on the authority of Scripture (*sola Scriptura*) actually produced diverse interpretations of the nature of Christ.

This division not only has theoretical implications, but also has a real impact on the liturgy, spirituality, and denominational identity of Protestant churches to this day. Various attempts at Christological reconstruction have emerged because this doctrine is often considered to have lost its relevance (Groenen, 2014, p. 18), argued that the Christological doctrine taught in the church so far must be removed because it is considered a legacy of Western thought, in which the entire concept of Christology is formulated based on an anthropocentric, secular, personalist, and individualist approach, that emphasizes human autonomy and upholds freedom. A similar criticism was made by Brinkman (2009, pp. 267–269), who argued that in non-Western countries, Christological discourse is colored by criticism of traditional approaches that are considered too Western and less relevant to local realities. A

more radical view comes from Carlsson (2017, pp. 127–130), who advocates a non-apologetic Christology based on philosophical hermeneutics and postmodern thought, thereby rejecting the finality of biblical interpretation.

Christology is the fundamental foundation of the entire structure of Christian theology because it addresses the identity and work of Jesus Christ as God incarnate, thus ensuring His absolute and final authority. Therefore, all theological disciplines depend on a proper Christological formulation; any misunderstanding of the person or work of Christ will result in a distortion of doctrine. Lumintang (2025, pp. 82–84) asserts that the Lord Jesus is an absolute and unique person among all that exists. His uniqueness lies in His perfect character, without the slightest moral flaw. His life and teachings do not contradict each other, and He is the only one who claims to be God.

In his study of Reformed Christology, Dolezal (2014) asserts that the continuity between classical Trinity doctrine and Reformed Christology is essential. Meanwhile, Trueman (2010, pp. 225–244) asserts that Calvin's Christology not only strengthened the doctrine of the two natures of Christ, but also formed the framework of early Reformation orthodoxy in responding to various Christological challenges posed by non-Reformist traditions (Barrett, 2007). Crisp (2016, pp. 87–88) demonstrates that Calvin's interpretation reflects his hermeneutical courage and systematic ability to explain the mysteries of faith contextually and theologically. Although Reformed Christology has been extensively researched, there remains unexplored research, particularly in the comparative study of Calvin, Luther, and Zwingli. This paper aims to examine the distinctive Christologies of these three Reformers and assess their contributions to the formation of church doctrine that is relevant to the contemporary Christian context. The paper's scholarly value lies in its use of an integrative framework that combines historical analysis, doctrinal comparison, and pastoral implications. This approach not only clarifies the theological positions of the Reformers but also opens up new avenues for reflection on the challenges and opportunities of contextualizing Christ's teachings for the modern church.

METHOD

This paper uses a qualitative approach with theological historical research methods and comparative analysis to dissect the Christology of the Reformers, such as Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, in shaping the dogmatic heritage of the present-day church (Cornille, 2020, pp. 78–82). The type of research used is a systematic literature study of the primary works of the Reformers, such as Calvin's *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, Martin Luther's *95 Theses*, and Zwingli's catechism, as well as secondary sources from theological journals (Triandini et al., 2019). This paper combines doctrinal and historical-comparative analysis, as explained by Muller (2003, pp. 145–147) in *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, to compare key Christological concepts such as Luther's *theologia crucis*, Calvin's *munus triplex*, and Zwingli's Christology. The first step in this method is heuristics, namely the collection of source materials, both primary, such as critical editions of the works of the Reformers (e.g., the *Corpus Reformatorum* for Calvin and Zwingli's texts), and secondarily from contemporary theological

journals and books. The second stage is verification, which includes external criticism of the authenticity and credibility of the source through academic editions, as well as internal criticism of the consistency of the theological logic within the document within the historical context of the 16th century (Cunliffe, 2006, pp. 234–238).

With this approach, this article not only traces the textual development of the Reformers' Christological thought but also re-examines the validity of traditional dogma through the lens of postmodern hermeneutics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mapping the Concept of Reformed Christology

Martin Luther's Christology within the Framework of Theologia Crucis

Martin Luther's Christology is deeply rooted in *theologia crucis* (the theology of the cross), which places the cross of Christ at the center of God's revelation and the foundation of human salvation (Susanti, 2017). In contrast to the scholastic approach that emphasized metaphysical speculation concerning the two natures of Christ (Dabney, 2000). Luther asserted that genuine knowledge of God is possible only through the crucified Christ. In the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther famously declared that "true theology and the knowledge of God are found in the crucified Christ," emphasizing that God does not reveal Himself through rational glory or natural philosophy, but through Christ's suffering on the cross (McGrath, 2011, pp. 234–239). Thus, God reveals the divine identity and accomplishes the work of salvation in historical and soteriological terms.

Within this perspective, the cross functions as a *locus theologicus*, namely, the meeting point of divine justice and mercy (Luther, 2020, pp. 205–215). Christ is primarily understood as *Der Leidende*—the Suffering One—who bears the wrath of God as a substitute for sinful humanity (Pelikan & Lehmann, 2004, pp. 78–84). This understanding affirms that salvation depends entirely on the work of Christ rather than on the capacity of human will, in accordance with Luther's doctrine of the bondage of the will.

A central aspect of Luther's Christology is his understanding of *communicatio idiomatum* (Grimm, 1979, p. 176), namely the unity of Christ's divine and human natures in the one person of the incarnate Word (McGrath, 2011). Luther emphasized that Christ's suffering cannot be reduced to the suffering of His human nature alone, but must be understood as the suffering of God Himself (Mawikere, 2017). since the subject of suffering is the divine Person who became incarnate (Pelikan & Lehmann, 2004). Consequently, the cross is not merely a symbolic representation of human suffering, but an ontological manifestation of God's participation in human suffering (Moltmann, 1974).

Luther's Christology is closely related to the doctrine of justification. Christ is understood as the only righteous and sinless Person who bears the sins of humanity through vicarious substitution. His atoning work constitutes the objective foundation of justification, in which

Christ's righteousness is imputed to believers by grace. This Christological framework undergirds the principle of *solus Christus*, which rejects the mediating role of the church or the sacraments in salvation and affirms the supremacy of Christ as the center of faith and ecclesial doctrine.

The influence of Luther's *theologia crucis* extends beyond the historical context of the Reformation and remains significant in modern theology. Theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann have developed the notion of a suffering God rooted in Luther's Christology. Accordingly, Luther's Christology is not merely doctrinal in nature but also possesses a profound existential dimension, offering hope and meaning to human life amid suffering and injustice.

John Calvin's Christology: Munus Triplex and the Fulfillment of Salvation

In John Calvin's Christology, the concept of *Munus Triplex*—Christ's offices as Prophet, Priest, and King—serves as a foundational framework for understanding the unity and completeness of the work of salvation (Calvin, 2018). Calvin did not regard Christ as merely fulfilling three distinct functions, but as embodying the total fulfillment of God's eternal plan of salvation (Calvin, 2018). Christ stands at the center of divine revelation, redemption, and governance over the world.

As Prophet, Christ is the Word made flesh and the perfect revelation of God's will. (Calvin, 2018). He offers Himself as the perfect and eternal sacrifice, replacing the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament, while continually interceding for His people (Parker, 1995, pp. 61–64). As King, Christ actively reigns in the lives of believers, so that the Kingdom of God carries concrete ethical and social implications (Horton, 2005, pp. 215–217).

The three offices of Christ affirm the holistic character of Calvin's Christology, which integrates the doctrinal and practical dimensions of the Christian faith (Calvin, 2018). *Munus Triplex* not only forms the foundation of systematic Reformed theology but also shapes the life of the church in teaching, worship, and ethics, with Christ as the center and the guarantee of salvation by grace alone.

Ulrich Zwingli's Christology: The Lord's Supper as Memorial

Ulrich Zwingli developed a distinctive Christology through his understanding of the sacraments, particularly the Lord's Supper (Sallmann, 1999, pp. 78–80). Rejecting the doctrine of transubstantiation (Sumiyati & Mendrofa, 2021). Zwingli asserted that the Lord's Supper is a symbolic act that serves as a memorial of Christ's sacrifice on the cross (Kirby, 2009, p. 229). Within Zwingli's memorialist framework, the bread and wine do not contain the physical presence of Christ but function as signs that direct the believer's faith toward the crucified and risen Christ.

Zwingli emphasized that salvation is not achieved through physical participation in the sacrament but through faith in Christ alone. Accordingly, Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper is understood spiritually rather than corporeally. This position led to significant theological conflict with Luther, most notably at the Marburg Colloquy (1529). Nevertheless, Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli were united by the principle of *sola Scriptura*, which affirms Scripture as

the supreme authority in all matters of theology, including sacramental doctrine (Feingold, 2018, pp. 55–59). This principle provided a common foundation for their critique of medieval sacramental theology and continues to be relevant for theological dialogue across denominations within the context of the contemporary global church.

Points of Convergence

The three prominent figures of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli, shared common ground in their opposition to certain Roman Catholic doctrines. Most notably, all three rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation, which claimed that the substance of bread and wine is transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ. They considered this teaching unbiblical and speculative. As Calvin (2018) strongly stated in his Institutes, “We must reject the papal transubstantiation as a human invention, unsupported by Scripture.” In addition, each of these Reformers upheld the principle of *sola Scriptura* that Scripture alone is the ultimate authority in theological matters, including the sacraments. This conviction formed the basis of their critiques of Catholic sacramental theology and their doctrinal developments. In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther (1915) argues that ecclesiastical authority must not override Christ’s command and that theological certainty must be grounded in God’s Word rather than merely in churchly decision. Ulrich Zwingli emphasized that the Lord’s Supper is symbolic (memorial), that is, a remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice, without any actual physical or spiritual presence. In his view, the bread and wine serve as signs pointing to Christ’s work, but do not transmit grace itself. In *Fidei Ratio* (1531b), Zwingli asserts this in the sacraments, including the Lord’s Supper, function as symbolic signs and memorials rather than as bodily participation in the body of Christ; therefore, the statement “This is my body” must be understood figuratively, and the reception of Christ occurs spiritually rather than physically.

Thus, despite the Reformers’ differing views—Luther emphasizing Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist, Calvin emphasizing the spiritual presence through the Holy Spirit, and Zwingli emphasizing the symbolic aspect—all the Reformers remained united in the principle of *sola Scriptura* and the rejection of Catholic sacramental metaphysics. This common ground affirms the biblical foundation that unifies early Protestant doctrine and is relevant to the study of liturgy and sacramental practices in the church today.

Points of Divergence (Differences)

While they agreed on rejecting transubstantiation, sharp disagreements emerged regarding the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. Martin Luther insisted on the real, bodily presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine. He did not affirm a change in substance (as in transubstantiation) but believed that Christ’s body and blood are truly present “in, with, and under” the bread and wine, a view later termed consubstantiation (Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, 2005, p. 234). He believed that the communicant physically receives the body and blood of Christ through the elements by faith. John Calvin, while rejecting

consubstantiation, emphasized a real spiritual presence. In Calvin’s view, Christ is genuinely present in the Supper not physically, but spiritually, mediated through the work of the Holy Spirit and received by faith. In *Institutes* (IV.17.10), he writes: “Christ is truly offered to us in the Supper, but spiritually, not physically” (Calvin, 2008, p.10). Ulrich Zwingli, however, maintained a radically different view. He argued that the Lord’s Supper is a purely symbolic memorial (*memoria*) of Christ’s sacrifice. He denied any form of real presence, spiritual or physical. Zwingli presents the bread and wine as sacramental signs that point to Christ and his saving work, rather than as elements that convey grace in themselves (H. Zwingli, 1531a). He cited John 6:63, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing,” as theological evidence for the symbolic nature of the rite.

The primary theological contribution of the three Reformers—Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli—lies in their recognition of the complexity of the sacrament as a theological, liturgical, and existential phenomenon. The Reformers’ perspective encourages a continuous dialogue between the historical dimension (the history of the institution of the sacrament), the spiritual dimension (the real or spiritual presence of Christ), and the symbolic dimension (the memorial and reminder of the work of salvation) in the practice of Holy Communion. This thinking is relevant in modern theology, particularly in the context of a global and multicultural church, because it emphasizes the integration of faith, spiritual experience, and ethical reflection in sacramental participation. Furthermore, contemporary perspectives—as developed by ecumenical and liturgical theologians—highlight that sacramental experience is not merely individual, but also shapes community awareness, facilitates solidarity, and strengthens social commitment and ethical transformation in the life of the congregation amidst the complexities of the modern world.

Aspect	Martin Luther	Ulrich Zwingli	John Calvin
View on Presence	Real bodily presence (consubstantiation)	Purely symbolic/memorial	Real spiritual presence
Nature of Sacrament	Means of grace	Act of remembrance	Means of grace, spiritual nourishment
Mode of Reception	Physical and by faith	Intellectual remembrance	By faith through the Holy Spirit
Rejection of Transubstantiation	Yes	Yes	Yes
Authority Source	<i>Sola Scriptura</i>	<i>Sola Scriptura</i>	<i>Sola Scriptura</i>
Key Work	Babylonian Captivity of the Church (1520)	Fidei Ratio (1530)	Institutes of the Christian Religion (1559)
Key Verse Emphasis	“This is my body” (Luke 22:19)	“The Spirit gives life...” (John 6:63)	Both John 6 and Luke 22, in synthesis

Table 1. Comparison Table

This major divergence came to a head at the Marburg Colloquy of 1529, a meeting arranged by Philip of Hesse in hopes of reconciling the reformers. Luther and Zwingli agreed on 14 of 15 theological points but could not reconcile on the Eucharist. Luther famously refused to compromise, writing on the table: “*Hoc est corpus meum*” (“This is my body”), affirming literal interpretation. The colloquy ended with both sides agreeing to disagree, marking a lasting division between Lutheran and Reformed theological traditions (Pelikan & Lehmann, 2004).

Theological and Liturgical Implications

These theological differences significantly influenced the liturgical practices and ecclesial self-understanding of the churches that followed these reformers. Lutheran liturgy preserved much of the traditional sacramental structure but reinterpreted it around the presence of grace through faith (Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, 2005). This distinction demonstrates that the way each tradition understands Christ and the sacraments has direct implications for liturgy, sacramentality, and the very nature of worship: for Calvinists, the Eucharist is a means of “spiritual nourishment” and living communion; for Zwinglians, the Eucharist is a symbol of remembrance and education in the faith.

This view remains relevant today, especially in the context of a global and pluralistic church: the distinction between the Eucharist as “spiritual communion” and “symbolic memorial” offers two distinct liturgical paradigms—one emphasizing interior/spiritual experience and grace, the other emphasizing historical memory, doctrinal teaching, and ethical response. This allows churches of different traditions to develop sacramental practices according to the theology and context of their communities.

Theological Implications for the Modern Church

The theological differences between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions in understanding the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, are rooted in fundamental Christological differences. In the Lutheran view, the principle of *communicatio idiomatum*—the communication of nature between Christ's divine and human natures—is fundamental. This doctrine asserts that because Christ is fully God and fully man, His body and blood are truly present in the elements of bread and wine during the Eucharist, enabling the participants' faith to receive Christ's grace concretely through the sacrament. This understanding emphasizes the unity of Christ's person as the medium of revelation and redemption in the liturgical context, while affirming Christ's historical and ontological presence in sacramental practice (Jenson, 2001, p. 132). The differences in an understanding of the Eucharist between the Lutheran, Reformed, and Zwingli traditions are theologically rooted in their respective Christologies. The Lutheran view is based on an incarnational Christology, affirming that Christ is physically present in the elements of bread and wine, even though He has ascended into heaven, so that the Eucharist participants truly receive the body and blood of Christ through faith. In the Reformed tradition, especially in Calvin's thought, Christ's bodily presence is not located physically in the Eucharistic elements; rather, believers truly commune with the living Christ

through the Holy Spirit, as they are lifted up spiritually to partake of him (Calvin, n.d., Chapter IV.17). Zwingli took a more radically symbolic approach, viewing the Eucharist solely as a memorial or commemoration, emphasizing the historical aspect of Christ's death without interpreting the sacrament as an actual channel of grace (Lindberg, 2021, pp. 98–90). Modern perspectives, including ecumenical and liturgical studies, see this distinction as an important foundation for interdenominational theological dialogue, while emphasizing that sacramental practices must be understood contextually: integrating the dimensions of faith, spiritual experience, ethical reflection, and historical awareness, so that the Eucharist remains relevant in the life of the contemporary, pluralistic and global church.

In ecumenical reconciliation efforts such as the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, Christology plays a significant role, though not explicitly discussed. Lutheran-Catholic agreement on justification by faith presupposes a shared understanding of Christ's work as the mediator of salvation (Kristanto, 2017). However, fundamental Christological differences remain a barrier, especially in discussions with the Reformed tradition about how Christ is present in the church and the sacraments. For example, the Consensus Tigurinus attempts to reconcile Calvin and Zwingli's views by emphasizing that the Eucharist is not merely a symbol but a means of grace in which Christ is spiritually present (O'Brien, 2024). However, tensions remain due to differences in understanding the relationship between Christ's humanity and divinity. For Lutherans, a denial of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist could be seen as a denial of Christ's hypostatic union, while for the Reformed, the Lutheran emphasis is seen as blurring the line between the divine and the human (McCormack, 2008, pp. 76–79).

Thus, Christological issues are not merely theoretical constructs, but have significant practical implications for contemporary church life. Differences in understandings of Christ in the Lutheran, Calvinist, and Zwinglian traditions influence worship practices, sacramental practices, and fellowship among congregations, while also shaping their respective denominational identities. In the context of the ecumenical movement, awareness of these differences encourages critical and constructive theological dialogue, emphasizing the principle of *sola Scriptura*, the unity of faith in Christ, and respect for the diversity of sacramental interpretations. Thus, Christological reflection remains relevant as a foundation for reconciliation, liturgical collaboration, and strengthening the awareness of the global Christian community in facing today's spiritual, social, and cultural challenges.

Critique of Reformed Christology

Although the Christology of the Reformers, such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli, has provided a strong theological foundation for Western Christianity, their thoughts are not free from criticism, especially in the context of the development of global theology and contemporary intellectual dynamics.

First, in terms of contextual limitations, Reformed Christology is considered to be very tied to the European context of the 16th century, so that it pays less attention to non-Western perspectives that developed later. For example, in Latin American liberation theology, a

Christological approach known as *Christus Liberator* emerged, namely, understanding Christ as a liberator from social and economic injustice (Lindberg, 2021). This view emphasizes the historical and practical dimensions of Jesus Christ's life as an expression of solidarity with the oppressed, an aspect relatively overlooked in classical Reformed Christology, which generally emphasizes the metaphysical, juridical, and soteriological dimensions of salvation (Boff, 1978). From a postmodern critical perspective, the Reformed approach is often criticized for its tendency toward doctrinal universality, which obscures the historical, social, and cultural contexts of diverse communities, making it less responsive to the plurality of human experiences of faith and suffering.

Studies in global and postcolonial theology have highlighted that dominant Western theological frameworks often fail to account adequately for structural injustice, collective suffering, and the political, cultural, and economic realities of marginalized communities (Cone, 2011, p. 29; Sugirtharajah, 2011, pp. 2–5). This critique demonstrates the need for Christological thinking that emphasizes not only doctrinal consistency but also sensitivity to the socio-historical and contextual dynamics of the community.

Thus, the development of a more contextual and inclusive Christology is crucial. Such an approach combines doctrinal reflection with ethical, social, and historical awareness, so that Christ's revelation may be articulated meaningfully in a diverse global society. This perspective resonates with liberation and contextual theologies, which stress solidarity with the poor and suffering as central to Christian discipleship and to a transformative understanding of Christ (Boff, 1978, pp. 286–293; Gutierrez, 1988, pp. 28–30).

Second, Reformed Christology faces major challenges in the context of postmodern philosophy and theology, especially related to interpretive relativism. The postmodern era questions universal and absolute claims, including theological truths dogmatically asserted by the Reformers (J. Smith, 2006, pp. 78–79). This creates tension between the Reformation's belief in absolute truth in the Bible and the more fluid and pluralistic postmodern approach. In this context, Reformed Christology is considered too rigid and less adaptive to the dynamics of epistemological shifts that emphasize subjectivity, personal experience, and cultural context in understanding faith (McGrath, 2013, pp. 331–334). Thus, while Reformed Christology has made a significant contribution to shaping the face of global Christianity, particularly through its emphasis on the supremacy of Christ, the authority of Scripture, and the work of redemption, contemporary Reformed Christology is called not only to maintain continuity with the legacy of the Reformation, but also to incarnate Christological truth that is dynamic and incarnational, not static and normative, becoming increasingly relevant in responding to the needs of the contemporary church.

Contemporary Reinterpretation

An exploration of the uniqueness of the Reformers' Christology shows that each figure developed a distinctive understanding of Christ, rooted in the social dynamics, church crises, and needs of the people of his time. Major works such as Martin Luther's 95 Theses, John

Calvin's *Institutes of Christianae Religionis*, and Ulrich Zwingli's Zurich Catechism are historical witnesses that show how Christological thought was formed through deep spiritual and intellectual struggles. Each text shows a structure of understanding of Christ that is not only theological, but also pastoral and contextual (U. Zwingli, 2015, p. 203). In Luther's work, an understanding of Christ is seen that is formed in humility and suffering. God is understood not in worldly glory, but in the cross, a radical revelation of who God is in human powerlessness (Grimm, 1979). Through this theology of the cross, Luther showed that God's presence is most real when humans are in decline. This idea later became one of the foundations of modern soteriology that places Christ's work in suffering as a source of hope and justification (McGrath, 2011).

In contrast, Calvin presents a systematic and functional construction. Through Christ's triple office as Prophet, Priest, and King, he constructs a comprehensive understanding of Christ's redemptive work concerning the people and the church. This idea provides a coherent framework for how Christ works as the bearer of the Word, the mediator who reconciles people to God, and the spiritual leader who guides people in their growth in faith (Calvin, 2018). This order reflects Calvin's view of an orderly church and a structured theology as a reflection of God, who rules wisely and lovingly (Parker, 1995). Zwingli, though often seen as less systematic, emphasized the importance of Christ's moral example. He saw Christ's life as a model for ethical living for believers. In his writings, the emphasis on discipline, piety, and social order emerged as a response to the corruption and spiritual chaos of his day. His views show a Christology that is deeply rooted in social life, emphasizing conversion as a real change in everyday actions and behavior.

These three ideas do not just stand alone, but form a complementary spectrum. In the contemporary context, Luther's ideas provide deep reflection for communities struggling with suffering and existential uncertainty. Calvin's ideas provide direction and form for the modern church that wants to build a ministry based on the sovereignty and authority of Christ. Meanwhile, Zwingli provides a foundation for a spirituality that is grounded in social life, emphasizing moral integrity as an expression of faith. Luther's tendency to use the language of the cross and suffering as the key to understanding God shows a deep spiritual intensity. The repeated use of terms such as "cross," "faith," and "forgiveness" indicates the great influence of his personal experience with the fear of God's wrath and the discovery of grace through the Gospel. Meanwhile, the consistent structure of Calvin's thought presents terms such as "office," "authority," and "kingdom" that affirm his belief in Christ's role as the organizer of salvation history. In Zwingli's work, the concepts of "exemplar," "sanctification," and "discipline" dominate, along with his understanding that faith must be incarnated in social and ethical action (Stephens, 2000, pp. 89–92).

When all these emphases are read together, it is clear that the Christology of the Reformation is not a single voice, but a harmony of voices that explain and confirm each other. The tradition that is formed is not a finished product, but an open narrative that continues to develop. In dialogue with the contemporary context, the tension between suffering and glory,

between law and grace, between ethics and faith remains a real field of struggle (Stephens, 2000). Each of these Christologies presents a distinctive approach to the same question: who is Christ for humanity in the midst of history? These findings show that the legacy of the Reformation dogma about Christ holds a transformative power that remains relevant. When the church today is faced with spiritual crisis, social polarization, and global challenges, returning to the depth of the Reformers' theological reflection provides a sharp direction. Luther invited the church to find strength in weakness and the cross. Calvin pointed to the need for integration between doctrine and community life (McCormack, 2008). Zwingli emphasized the importance of piety united with ethical responsibility. All three, when read in the unity of history and spirituality, contribute to the formation of a living and dynamic theological identity of the church.

Thus, an understanding of Reformed Christology not only explains the past, but also opens up new possibilities for the future of church dogma. In the context of changing times, the works of Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli continue to speak—not as historical artifacts, but as living voices, echoing the Gospel through the way of the cross, the structure of salvation, and the example of life. Therefore, Reformation Christology deserves to be explored not only for its heritage but for the sake of a fresh and profound renewal of faith amid the modern world. A close study of the Christological thought of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli shows that all three were not only historical reformers, but also theological architects who reformulated the meaning of Christ for the church and believers during the Reformation, a legacy that continues to influence Christianity today. Luther emphasized the centrality of the cross in understanding Christ's saving work, showing that God is most real in human suffering and weakness (Jenson, 2001). Calvin organized Christological doctrine in the framework of the prophetic, priestly, and royal offices (*munus triplex*), which demonstrates Christ as the center of the life of faith and the living church. While Zwingli focused on Christ as an ethical and spiritual example, emphasizing piety of life and moral reform as concrete manifestations of true faith.

All three, although different in emphasis and approach, contribute a strong dogmatic foundation for the Protestant church, which remains relevant in responding to theological and pastoral challenges in the contemporary era. By comparing and reflecting on the three comprehensively, it can be concluded that the Christological heritage of the Reformers is not a closed system, but rather a living tradition that continues to invite new interpretations and contextualization in the light of the development of the times (Torrance, 1996, pp. 211–215). The Christology formed through the faith and intellectual struggles of the Reformers opens up space for the contemporary church to rediscover the richness of the Gospel in its deepest form: active grace, concrete hope, and renewed life in Christ.

Theological Implications for the Modern Church

The theological debate between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529 was not merely a conflict over sacramental doctrine; it reflected a fundamental divergence in Reformation Christology. For Luther, belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist was a continuation of the incarnation and a testimony to Christ's ongoing

presence in the life of the Church. He maintained that the body and blood of Christ are truly present “in, with, and under” the elements of bread and wine not through transubstantiation (as in Roman Catholic theology), but via consubstantiation, which affirms a real presence without altering the substance of the elements. Thus, Luther linked incarnational Christology with sacramentology, emphasizing that God not only became human in the past but continues to make Himself tangibly present in the sacrament for believers.

In contrast, Zwingli rejected the physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist and developed a spiritual-symbolic Christology, arguing that Christ, having ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father and therefore cannot be physically present in the sacrament. For Zwingli, the bread and wine are not means of grace but memorial symbols pointing to the salvific work of Christ on the cross. His rejection of a real presence was not simply sacramental but stemmed from a theological emphasis on the transcendence of Christ, who is no longer physically available in earthly forms. Under Zwingli’s influence, a view of Christ emerged that highlighted divine sovereignty and distance, contrasting sharply with Luther’s vision of a Christ who is concretely available in the liturgical life of the Church (Muller, 2008, pp. 78–81).

This divergence in Christology shaped a theological polarization that persists in the life of the Church today. The Lutheran tradition upholds the sacramental dimension as a tangible expression of Christological faith: Christ is not merely spiritually present, but actually and transformatively present, offering grace through both body and spirit (Timothy, 2013, p. 56). On the other hand, the Reformed tradition (both Calvinist and Zwinglian) teaches that Christ is present in the Eucharist spiritually through the work of the Holy Spirit, not physically in the elements. Calvin attempted to mediate the extremes by teaching that Christ is truly present, but spiritually, through the believer’s union with Him by faith (Robert, 2001, pp. 20–22). This represents a theological shift from incarnational to pneumatological Christology, from Christ present in the flesh to Christ experienced by faith through the Spirit.

The Lutheran Church emphasizes the inseparable unity of Christ's nature (God and man). Luther believed in the real presence, based on the Council of Chalcedon's (451) formulation of *una persona, duae naturae* (one person, two natures). Luther argued that the body of Christ is physically and tangibly present in the Lord's Supper. This view is based on a literal understanding of Christ's institutional statement, "This is my body" (Luke 22:19). "Christ is present in the Sacrament not only spiritually, but also bodily, truly, and essentially (Luther, 1959, p. 36). This understanding is known as the "real presence," which is an important pillar of Lutheran sacramental theology.

The Calvinist church views the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as a sign and seal. Calvin rejected Zwingli's overly symbolic view, but also criticized Luther's position as too "materialistic." For Calvin, Christ is truly present, but through the power of the Holy Spirit, not physically. The Spirit truly unites things separated by distance; thus, though Christ’s body is in heaven, we truly partake of Him (Calvin, 2018). The spiritual and immanent presence of Christ occurs through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Zwingli's Christology was more rationalistic. He placed great emphasis on the divinity of Christ and tended to emphasize the distance between Christ in heaven and the church on earth. He rejected Christ's physical or spiritual presence in the sacraments. Zwingli emphasized that Christ's physical body had ascended to heaven and could not be literally present on earth. The body of Christ is in heaven and not on earth; the sacrament is a memorial, not a real participation in the body of Christ (Stephens, 2000). Zwingli emphasized the subjective and rational aspects of faith, focusing on remembrance (*anamnesis*), not ontological presence. The Lord's Supper is merely a memorial of Christ's death.

These Christological differences not only inform doctrinal distinctions but also shape liturgical practice, spirituality, and the experience of faith in modern Christianity. Lutheran churches often preserve structured, sacramental liturgies, reflecting the belief that Christ's grace is communicated through tangible means. Meanwhile, Reformed and Evangelical churches tend toward simpler, symbolic expressions of the Eucharist, placing greater emphasis on personal faith, biblical teaching, and spiritual reflection. In this sense, Christology becomes not just a doctrinal idea but the theological foundation that determines how believers encounter and worship Christ today.

In light of this, modern churches have attempted to bridge historical divisions through various ecumenical dialogues. One notable effort is the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, affirming that salvation is a gift of God's grace through faith (Barna, 2005, p. 146). However, tensions remain, especially regarding the Christological implications of the Eucharist. Although Calvin and Bullinger formulated the Consensus Tigurinus to unite Reformed voices on a spiritual presence of Christ in the sacrament, the Lutheran tradition has continued to reject such views as insufficiently affirming the real presence of Christ (Robert, 2001). In this regard, the Christological legacy of the Reformers remains a central point of differentiation that continues to challenge ecumenical reconciliation.

The core challenge of modern ecumenism is how to affirm unity amid Christological diversity without compromising the theological integrity of each tradition. The differences between Luther and Zwingli offer a historical case study in the tension between sacramental realism and symbolic memorialism. These debates remind the Church today that Christology is not an abstract dogma but a lived theology that shapes the way Christians encounter Christ, participate in worship, and engage in community. As emphasized in reflections by the Christian History Institute, the legacy of the Reformers invites us to build a fellowship within diversity, where differences in Christological interpretation are not ignored but integrated into a deeper communion of faith in the one Christ.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the Christological differences among the Reformers—Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli—not only represent the theological diversity of the Reformation, but also form the foundation of the identity and practice of the Protestant church to this day. Luther's

theology of the cross, emphasizing humility, Christ's solidarity in suffering, and human dependence on grace, gave birth to a spiritual tradition centered on God's mercy and the consolation of the Gospel. Conversely, Calvin's thought, articulated in the *triplex munus*, broadened the Christological horizon of the Reformed church by presenting Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King—a framework that comprehensively shaped the ethics of Christian life, liturgical patterns, and ecclesiastical leadership structures. Meanwhile, Zwingli's symbolic Christology, particularly in his understanding of the Lord's Supper, emphasized the rationality of faith and a clear separation between sacramental signs and spiritual realities, thus strengthening the Protestant tradition that places the Bible as the sole normative authority in church life.

Although grounded in the same foundation of faith, these three approaches yield distinct theological emphases—from Lutheran pastoral spirituality and the Reformed ethos of ethical discipline to the liturgical simplicity and emphasis on rationality in the Zwinglian tradition. This diversity not only creates a denominational spectrum within Protestantism but also opens up space for the formation of a rich and dynamic ecclesial identity.

In the context of the contemporary church, the legacy of Reformed Christology continues to have significant transformative power. Amid the challenges of globalization, pluralism, the humanitarian crisis, and a post-truth culture, Reformed Christology renews the church's call to live from and for Christ. The contemporary church is reminded to uphold the authority of Scripture as the foundation of truth, make the proclamation of the Word central to the life of faith, and make Christ a tangible presence through social solidarity, humanitarian service, and justice. Furthermore, Reformed Christological understanding serves as a corrective to the modern church's tendency to overemphasize institutional management, religious entertainment, or shallow motivational narratives. By returning to the Christocentric core of the Gospel, the church is called to reject syncretism, moral relativism, and deviant teachings.

As a theological synthesis, this study demonstrates that the uniqueness of the Reformers' Christology is not merely a historical legacy, but a living source of theological inspiration. When applied creatively and contextually, Reformed Christology can enrich spirituality, deepen discipleship, guide worship practices, and shape the church's mission to be relevant and transformative for today's world. Thus, Reformed Christology presents an integrative framework that enables the contemporary church to remain faithful to the Gospel while simultaneously responding to the complexities of contemporary reality, so that the church's identity and mission are continually renewed in the light of the same Christ—yesterday, today, and forever.

Competing interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests in relation to the research, writing, or publication of this article.

Author contributions

H.A.B. was responsible for the conceptualisation and design of the study, data collection, data analysis, and the preparation of the manuscript. R.P. also participated in the data analysis and the writing of the article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for academic research. It is a library-based study that did not involve direct contact with human participants, animals, or the environment; therefore, formal ethical approval from an ethics committee was not required.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data used in this study were derived from library sources, including books, journal articles, and theological documents relevant to the research topic. All data supporting the findings of this study are available in the sources cited in this article.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the result of academic research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funding body, publisher, or other related party. The author is responsible for the results, findings, and content of this article.

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