

Christology in the Reformation Tradition: The Development of Christological Reflection in the Modern Era

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Abstract

Christology remains a central theological discourse that continuously evolves in response to historical and contemporary challenges. However, modern developments particularly philosophical shifts, cultural pluralism, and digital transformation have created tensions between doctrinal fidelity and contextual relevance in understanding Jesus Christ. This study aims to critically analyze the development of Christological reflection within the Reformation tradition and examine its relevance in the modern era. The research employs a qualitative approach using library research with a historical-theological and analytical-critical framework. Data were collected from primary theological texts and recent scholarly works (2020–2025), and analyzed through condensation, categorization, and critical interpretation. The findings reveal that Reformation Christology maintains a stable doctrinal core centered on *solus Christus*, yet undergoes significant reinterpretation influenced by modern epistemology and contextual demands. The study also identifies a structural fragmentation in contemporary Christological discourse, characterized by a dichotomy between doctrinal rigidity and contextual adaptation. This condition arises from the absence of an integrative framework capable of bridging classical theology and contemporary realities. The study concludes that a synthetic approach is required – one that preserves doctrinal integrity while engaging critically with modern contexts, including digital realities. This research contributes to theological scholarship by offering an integrative analytical model for reconstructing Christology that is both normatively grounded and contextually relevant.

Keywords

Christology, Modern Era, Reflection, Reformation Tradition.



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INTRODUCTION

Christology constitutes one of the most central domains within Christian theology, as it systematically examines the person, nature, and salvific work of Jesus Christ. Ideally, Christological reflection functions not merely as a doctrinal formulation, but as a dynamic theological framework that shapes the faith, ethics, and lived experiences of believers across contexts. Within the Reformation tradition, Christology is grounded in the principles of *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, and *solus Christus*, emphasizing the exclusive mediatory role of Christ and the authority of Scripture as the primary source of theological knowledge. This ideal framework presupposes a coherent integration between doctrinal fidelity and contextual relevance, whereby theological reflection remains both normatively rooted and

existentially meaningful. In this sense, Christology is expected to continuously engage with changing historical realities while maintaining doctrinal integrity.

However, the empirical reality demonstrates that Christological understanding has undergone significant transformations influenced by socio-cultural, philosophical, and technological developments. Contemporary studies indicate that the rapid advancement of digital technology and globalization has reshaped religious consciousness and modes of theological engagement. According to recent global data, more than 60% of religious activities among younger generations involve digital platforms, including online worship, theological discussions, and virtual communities (Campbell, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2022). In the Indonesian context, internet penetration reached over 77% of the population by 2024, fundamentally altering how religious identity and theological knowledge are constructed (We Are Social, 2024). These developments challenge traditional Christological formulations, particularly regarding the concept of incarnation and the presence of Christ in non-physical, mediated environments.

Furthermore, modern philosophical currents such as rationalism, postmodernism, and religious pluralism have critically influenced Christological discourse. Thinkers like Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher reinterpreted Christology through ethical and experiential lenses, reducing its metaphysical claims into anthropological or moral categories. While these approaches contribute to the contextualization of theology, they also risk diluting the doctrinal core of classical Christology. Recent scholarship (e.g., Kärkkäinen, 2021; McGrath, 2022) highlights an ongoing tension between maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy and responding to contemporary epistemological frameworks. This tension becomes even more pronounced in pluralistic societies such as Indonesia, where interreligious dialogue necessitates a more inclusive yet theologically responsible articulation of Christological claims.

In addition, empirical studies in Asian and Indonesian theological contexts reveal a growing emphasis on contextual Christology that seeks to reinterpret the figure of Jesus Christ in relation to local cultures, social justice issues, and interfaith relations (Bevans, 2020; Banawiratma, 2021). While such approaches successfully bridge theology with lived realities, they often lack a systematic integration with the foundational principles of Reformation Christology. In particular, recent Indonesian studies (Sijabat & Nainggolan, 2025; Florenzia et al., 2025) demonstrate that contemporary Christological reflections tend to be fragmented either overly doctrinal without contextual engagement or excessively contextual without sufficient doctrinal grounding. This dichotomy suggests a methodological gap in constructing a Christology that is both faithful to the Reformation heritage and responsive to modern challenges.

The research gap becomes evident when examining existing literature. First, most studies on Reformation Christology focus predominantly on historical-theological analysis, emphasizing figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin without extending their insights into contemporary contexts. Second, modern Christological studies often prioritize contextualization such as liberation theology or digital theology yet insufficiently engage with classical doctrinal frameworks. Third, there remains a lack of integrative research that critically examines how Reformation Christology can be reconstructed to address the epistemological, technological, and cultural challenges of the 21st century, particularly within the Indonesian pluralistic setting. Consequently, existing scholarship has not adequately resolved the tension between doctrinal continuity and contextual adaptation.

This study is therefore significant for several reasons. Scientifically, it contributes to the development of systematic theology by offering an integrative analytical framework that bridges historical Christology and contemporary contextual needs. Practically, it provides theological insights that can guide churches, educators, and believers in articulating a relevant and responsible understanding of Christ in the digital and pluralistic era. Urgently, the study responds to the rapid transformation of

religious life in the 21st century, where digitalization, globalization, and cultural hybridity continuously reshape theological discourse. Without such critical engagement, Christological reflection risks becoming either irrelevant to modern life or disconnected from its doctrinal foundations.

Based on these considerations, this research aims to analyze the development of Christological reflection within the Reformation tradition and critically examine its relevance in the modern era. Specifically, the study seeks to (1) explore the historical and theological foundations of Reformation Christology, (2) analyze the transformation of Christological thought in response to modern philosophical and socio-cultural changes, and (3) construct a contextual yet doctrinally grounded Christological framework applicable to contemporary Indonesian society. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich Christological discourse by offering a balanced synthesis between tradition and context. Practically, it aims to provide guidance for theological education, church ministry, and faith formation in navigating the complexities of modern religious life.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a type of library research (documentary analysis) to critically examine the development of Christological reflection within the Reformation tradition and its relevance in the modern era. The selection of a qualitative design is methodologically justified by the nature of the research problem, which is interpretive, conceptual, and theological rather than empirical-quantitative. As emphasized by John W. Creswell, qualitative research is appropriate for exploring meanings, interpretations, and theoretical constructions embedded in texts and socio-cultural contexts (Creswell, 2019). Furthermore, this study adopts a historical-theological and analytical-critical framework, integrating diachronic analysis (tracing developments from the Reformation to the contemporary period) and synchronic analysis (examining present-day contextual challenges). The primary objects of analysis include classical theological works from key Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, as well as modern and contemporary theological writings from scholars such as Karl Barth and Alister E. McGrath. These sources are selected purposively based on their relevance to the research objectives, particularly in representing both doctrinal foundations and contextual developments of Christology.

Data collection is conducted through systematic literature review and document analysis, encompassing primary sources (original theological texts, doctrinal treatises, and foundational works) and secondary sources (peer-reviewed journal articles, recent theological studies from 2020–2025, and contextual analyses in Indonesian settings). The research instrument is the researcher as the primary analytical tool, supported by a structured data extraction matrix that categorizes themes such as doctrinal formulations, epistemological assumptions, contextual adaptations, and methodological approaches to Christology. This instrument ensures analytical rigor and consistency across diverse sources. Data analysis follows an interactive model adapted from Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña, involving three interrelated processes: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2019). In addition, this study applies critical discourse analysis to uncover underlying theological assumptions and tensions between doctrinal orthodoxy and contextual reinterpretation. This combination of analytical techniques is particularly appropriate because it enables a systematic synthesis of historical, doctrinal, and contemporary perspectives, thereby directly addressing the research objectives. The methodological alignment between qualitative inquiry, document-based data, and critical analysis ensures that the study not only describes the evolution of Christological thought but also evaluates its coherence and relevance in responding to modern theological challenges.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Christological reflection within the Reformation tradition is not a static doctrinal construct, but a dynamic theological discourse that has undergone continuous reinterpretation across historical periods. Through a critical analysis of primary and secondary theological sources, this research identifies a consistent epistemological core in Reformation Christology namely the affirmation of the absolute centrality of Jesus Christ as the sole mediator (*solus Christus*) grounded in scriptural authority (*sola scriptura*). However, this doctrinal stability coexists with significant methodological and contextual shifts. The works of Martin Luther and John Calvin reveal that early Reformation Christology was primarily polemical and corrective, aimed at rejecting ecclesiastical mediation and reaffirming direct access to God through Christ. Yet, beyond this corrective function, their theological formulations implicitly contained a constructive framework that allowed for contextual adaptation, particularly in their emphasis on the lived experience of faith and the practical implications of Christ's mediatory role.

The diachronic analysis further reveals that post-Reformation developments introduced a gradual shift from existential and pastoral Christology toward highly systematized doctrinal formulations. Orthodox theologians of the 17th century sought to preserve doctrinal purity through scholastic precision, yet this tendency also contributed to a certain abstraction of Christology, distancing it from the lived realities of believers. This finding confirms the critical observation that excessive doctrinal systematization may lead to theological rigidity, limiting the transformative and contextual potential inherent in earlier Reformation thought. The emergence of Pietism and later modern theological movements can thus be interpreted not merely as deviations, but as corrective responses to this imbalance. In this regard, the study finds that the tension between doctrinal orthodoxy and experiential relevance is not a modern phenomenon, but an intrinsic characteristic of Christological development since the post-Reformation era.

In the modern period, the analysis identifies a significant epistemological rupture influenced by Enlightenment rationalism and modern philosophy. Thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher reoriented Christology toward human reason and religious experience, thereby redefining the ontological claims about Christ into ethical or psychological categories. While this shift enabled theology to engage with modern intellectual frameworks, it simultaneously weakened the metaphysical and revelatory foundations central to Reformation Christology. The findings suggest that this transformation represents not only a contextual adaptation but also a methodological reconfiguration, where the locus of theological authority moved from divine revelation to human subjectivity. Consequently, modern Christology often oscillates between relevance and reductionism, struggling to maintain doctrinal depth while addressing contemporary concerns.

The study also finds that the 20th century marked a critical turning point through the reassertion of revelation-centered theology, particularly in the works of Karl Barth. Barth's Christological framework reestablished the primacy of divine revelation in Christ, thereby challenging liberal theological trends that prioritized human experience. However, this return to theological orthodoxy did not fully resolve the tension between universality and contextuality. Instead, it laid the groundwork for the emergence of contextual Christologies, particularly in non-Western settings. In Asia and Indonesia, Christological reflection increasingly integrates cultural, social, and political dimensions, emphasizing issues such as poverty, injustice, and religious pluralism. The findings indicate that these contextual approaches successfully expand the scope of Christology, yet they often operate without a sufficiently articulated connection to Reformation doctrinal principles.

A critical finding of this research is the identification of a structural fragmentation in contemporary Christological discourse, particularly within the Indonesian context. On one hand, there are doctrinally oriented studies that remain heavily reliant on classical theological formulations but lack engagement with current socio-cultural realities. On the other hand, contextual and applied theological studies demonstrate high relevance to contemporary issues but frequently lack doctrinal depth and systematic coherence. This dichotomy confirms the previously identified research gap and highlights the absence of an integrative framework that can reconcile doctrinal fidelity with contextual responsiveness. The analysis shows that without such integration, Christological reflection risks becoming polarized either confined to abstract doctrinal discourse or reduced to pragmatic contextual adaptation.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the significant impact of digital transformation on contemporary Christological understanding. The shift toward digital religious practices, accelerated by global phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic, has redefined the modes of experiencing and expressing faith. The concept of presence, central to Christological doctrine particularly the doctrine of incarnation faces new interpretive challenges in virtual spaces. The study finds that existing theological responses to digitalization remain largely descriptive and lack a robust doctrinal foundation. This indicates a critical need for a renewed Christological framework that can account for mediated presence without undermining the historical and incarnational reality of Christ. In this sense, digital theology emerges not as a peripheral concern, but as a central arena for contemporary Christological reflection.

Based on these findings, this study argues that the development of Christology in the Reformation tradition should be understood as an ongoing dialectical process between continuity and change. The enduring relevance of Reformation Christology lies not in its static formulations, but in its methodological openness to reinterpretation grounded in scriptural authority. Therefore, the reconstruction of Christological reflection in the modern era requires a dual commitment: first, to preserve the doctrinal core articulated by the Reformers, and second, to critically engage with contemporary epistemological, cultural, and technological challenges. This integrative approach enables a more coherent and contextually meaningful Christology, capable of addressing the complexities of modern religious life without sacrificing theological integrity.

The findings of this study reveal that Christological reflection within the Reformation tradition demonstrates a persistent tension between doctrinal fidelity and contextual adaptation. This result aligns with recent theological scholarship which argues that Christology has never been a closed system, but rather an evolving discourse shaped by historical and epistemological shifts (Kärkkäinen, 2021; McGrath, 2022). The centrality of Jesus Christ as *solus Christus* remains a non-negotiable doctrinal core; however, the ways in which this core is interpreted and applied vary significantly across contexts. This study confirms that such variation is not accidental, but arises from the interaction between theological authority (Scripture) and changing human experiences. In contrast to earlier studies that tend to treat Reformation Christology as a fixed doctrinal system, this research demonstrates that its original framework—particularly in the works of Martin Luther and John Calvin already contains an implicit openness to contextual reinterpretation. This suggests that the perceived dichotomy between orthodoxy and contextual theology may be overstated in previous research.

The study's findings also corroborate and extend prior research on the epistemological shift in modern Christology. Scholars such as Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher redefined theological knowledge by prioritizing human reason and religious experience, a trend widely discussed in contemporary literature (Vanhoozer, 2020; McCall, 2021). However, this study critically demonstrates that such a shift is not merely a philosophical development but a structural transformation in the locus of

authority from divine revelation to human subjectivity. This explains why modern Christology often appears fragmented: it attempts to remain relevant to modern consciousness while lacking a stable doctrinal anchor. Compared to previous studies that describe this transition as a necessary modernization of theology, the present research argues that it also introduces a risk of reductionism, where the ontological claims about Christ are diminished into symbolic or ethical representations. This critical perspective adds nuance to existing discussions by highlighting not only the benefits but also the theological costs of such epistemological reorientation.

Furthermore, the findings resonate with recent studies on contextual Christology, particularly in non-Western settings. Research conducted in Asian and Indonesian contexts (Banawiratma, 2021; Bevans, 2020; Sijabat & Nainggolan, 2025) emphasizes the importance of interpreting Christology in relation to local cultures, social injustices, and interreligious dynamics. This study confirms these findings, showing that contextual approaches significantly enhance the relevance of Christology for contemporary believers. However, it also identifies a critical limitation: many contextual Christologies lack systematic integration with classical doctrinal frameworks. This divergence occurs because contextual theology often prioritizes praxis over doctrine, leading to what can be described as “methodological imbalance.” Unlike earlier studies that celebrate contextualization as an unequivocal advancement, this research argues that without doctrinal grounding, contextual Christology risks losing its theological coherence. The implication is that contextual relevance must be accompanied by doctrinal accountability, a balance that remains underdeveloped in current scholarship.

A significant point of divergence between this study and previous research lies in its identification of structural fragmentation within contemporary Christological discourse. While earlier studies tend to categorize theological approaches into distinct schools orthodox, liberal, contextual this research demonstrates that the real issue is not diversity per se, but the lack of integrative frameworks that can mediate between these approaches. This fragmentation is particularly evident in the Indonesian context, where doctrinally oriented studies often remain disconnected from socio-cultural realities, while contextual studies frequently lack theological depth. Theoretically, this finding can be explained through the lens of dialectical theology, particularly in the work of Karl Barth, who emphasized the need to hold together divine transcendence and human context. However, the study shows that Barth’s model, while corrective, has not been sufficiently operationalized in contemporary contexts. This gap explains why theological discourse continues to oscillate between extremes rather than achieving synthesis.

Another critical dimension emerging from the findings is the impact of digital transformation on Christological understanding. Recent studies (Campbell, 2021; Hutchings, 2022) highlight how digital media reshape religious practices and theological imagination. This study confirms that digitalization introduces new challenges, particularly concerning the concept of presence in Christology. The doctrine of incarnation, which affirms the historical and embodied presence of Christ, encounters interpretive tension in virtual environments where presence is mediated and disembodied. Unlike previous research that primarily describes digital religion as a sociological phenomenon, this study advances the discussion by framing it as a theological problem requiring doctrinal rearticulation. The lack of robust theological engagement with digital realities explains why current responses remain superficial. This finding suggests that the future of Christological reflection will depend significantly on its ability to engage with digital epistemologies without compromising its incarnational foundation.

The convergence and divergence between this study and previous research carry important scientific implications. First, the confirmation of Christology as a dynamic and context-sensitive discourse supports the broader theoretical framework of contextual theology. Second, the identification of

epistemological shifts and structural fragmentation calls for a re-evaluation of methodological approaches in theological research. Third, the recognition of digital transformation as a central theological challenge expands the scope of Christological inquiry beyond traditional boundaries. Taken together, these implications suggest that future research should move toward integrative models that combine doctrinal rigor, contextual sensitivity, and technological awareness.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Christological reflection within the Reformation tradition is best understood as a dynamic and dialectical theological process that integrates doctrinal continuity with contextual transformation. The analysis demonstrates that the foundational principles articulated by key Reformers particularly the centrality of Jesus Christ as *solus Christus* and the authority of Scripture remain epistemologically normative, yet require continuous reinterpretation in response to evolving philosophical, cultural, and technological contexts. The study answers the research problem by showing that the development of Christology from the Reformation to the modern era reflects not a linear progression but a complex negotiation between orthodoxy and relevance. The identification of structural fragmentation in contemporary discourse between doctrinal rigidity and contextual over-adaptation constitutes a key scientific contribution, as it highlights the absence of integrative frameworks capable of sustaining both theological coherence and contextual applicability. Moreover, the study contributes theoretically by proposing that the future viability of Christological reflection depends on a synthetic approach that is simultaneously scripturally grounded, contextually responsive, and epistemologically self-critical, particularly in addressing emerging challenges such as digital mediation and religious pluralism.

Nevertheless, this research is not without limitations. Its reliance on qualitative library research restricts the empirical dimension of analysis, particularly in capturing lived theological practices and the reception of Christological ideas among contemporary believers. Additionally, the focus on selected theological figures and texts may not fully represent the diversity of global Christological developments, especially from marginalized or non-Western perspectives. Therefore, future research should adopt interdisciplinary and empirical approaches such as ethnographic studies, digital theology analysis, or mixed-method designs to explore how Christological concepts are actually interpreted and practiced in specific communities. Further studies are also recommended to develop concrete methodological models for integrating Reformation Christology with contextual and digital theology, particularly within pluralistic societies like Indonesia. Such research would not only deepen theoretical discourse but also enhance the practical relevance of Christology in shaping faith, ethics, and religious engagement in the contemporary world.

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