

THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstrak: Penelitian ini melakukan analisis komparatif terhadap transformasi pendekatan pendidikan Kristen mulai dari era Gereja Perdana, periode Reformasi Protestan, hingga era Kontemporer. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif historis-komparatif dan teknik analisis isi, penelitian ini mengkaji berbagai sumber sekunder berupa dokumen sejarah gereja, tulisan tokoh-tokoh Reformasi, serta literatur kontemporer mengenai pendidikan Kristen. Analisis difokuskan pada tujuan pendidikan, metode pengajaran, peran pendidik, serta respons terhadap tantangan sosial dan budaya pada setiap periode. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendidikan Kristen pada era Gereja Perdana menekankan pendekatan yang holistik dan partisipatif dalam komunitas gereja dan keluarga. Pada masa Reformasi, pendekatan pendidikan bergeser ke arah literasi Alkitab dan integrasi nilai-nilai moral-intelektual yang dipengaruhi oleh humanisme Kristen. Sementara itu, pada era Kontemporer, pendidikan Kristen menghadapi tantangan sekularisme dan disrupsi digital yang menuntut pendekatan yang transformatif, kontekstual, dan holistik. Penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya adaptasi pendekatan pendidikan terhadap realitas kontekstual setiap zaman tanpa mengabaikan tujuan utama pembentukan iman secara menyeluruh. Temuan penelitian memberikan kontribusi bagi pengembangan praktik pendidikan Kristen yang relevan dan efektif dalam membentuk generasi muda yang beriman, kritis, dan mampu menghadapi tantangan zaman.

Kata-kata kunci: Pendidikan Kristen; transformasi pendekatan pendidikan; analisis historiskomparatif; Gereja Perdana; Reformasi Protestan.

Abstract: This study conducts a comparative analysis of the transformation of Christian education approaches from the Early Church era, through the Protestant Reformation period, to the Contemporary era. Using a qualitative historical-comparative approach and content analysis techniques, the study examines secondary sources including historical church documents, writings of Reformation figures, and contemporary literature on Christian education. The analysis focuses on educational goals, teaching methods, the role of educators, and responses to social and cultural challenges in each period. The findings reveal that early Christian education emphasized a holistic and participatory approach within church and family communities. During the Reformation, the approach shifted towards biblical literacy and the integration of moral-intellectual values influenced by Christian humanism. In the contemporary era, Christian education faces challenges such as secularism and digital disruption, requiring a transformative, contextual, and holistic approach. This study highlights the importance of adapting educational approaches to the contextual realities of each era without compromising the primary goal of holistic faith formation. The findings provide valuable insights for developing relevant and effective Christian education practices that nurture faithful and critical younger generations.

Keywords: Christian education; transformation of educational approaches; historicalcomparative analysis; Early Church; Protestant Reformation.

INTRODUCTION

Christian education has played a central role in the growth and continuity of the Church throughout history. Since the early Church era, education has served as a means to nurture faith, deepen doctrinal understanding, and shape the character of believers. As time progressed, the approaches and forms of Christian education have undergone transformations in response to changing social, political, cultural, and technological contexts. From house churches in the first century to digital platforms in the twenty-first century, Christian education has continually adapted to uphold its primary mission: to develop mature, relevant, and impactful disciples of Christ.

Education has been pivotal in the journey of Christian faith from the early Church to the contemporary era. From the beginning of Christianity, education has been the primary vehicle for transmitting the teachings of Jesus Christ, forming the character of disciples, and expanding the Church's mission within society. The early Church laid the foundation for education focused on spiritual transformation through small communities, while the Protestant Reformation emphasized the importance of Biblical literacy and access to education for all believers. In the modern era, Christian education faces new and complex challenges such as secularism, globalization, moral relativism, and advances in information technology.

The transformation of Christian education approaches reflects not only shifts in social and cultural contexts but also evolving theological and spiritual dynamics. The early Church emphasized catechesis as a means of faith formation under conditions of minority status and

external pressure. During the Reformation, figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin advocated for universal education based on Scripture as a form of spiritual and social emancipation. In the modern era, Christian education has developed more holistic and contextual methods, integrating faith values with scientific approaches, digital technology, and crosscultural learning.

Nonetheless, significant challenges persist in the effectiveness of Christian education today. Many Christians understand faith theories and teachings conceptually but struggle to consistently apply them in daily life (Smith, 2016). This phenomenon reveals a gap between knowledge and lived spiritual practice. Additionally, younger generations—especially Generation Z—show troubling trends of distancing themselves from religious teachings and Christian values due to influences of secularism, social media, and fast-paced, materialistic lifestyles¹. These realities demand Christian education approaches that go beyond doctrinal knowledge to engage emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of contemporary youth, enabling their faith to be alive and relevant.

This paper aims to explore and compare Christian education approaches in three significant historical periods: the Early Church era (1st–5th centuries), the Protestant Reformation (16th century), and the Contemporary era (20th–21st centuries). These periods are chosen because each marks a major turning point in the history of Christian education in terms of purpose, methods, and social influence. Through a historicalcomparative analysis, this study seeks to highlight the paradigm shifts in

¹ Fabien Martinez, Ken Peattie, and Diego Vazquez-Brust, "Faith in the Future: On a Mission to Integrate Sustainability into Management

Theory and Practice," *Futures* 125 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2020.102654>.

Christian education over time and to uncover important implications for current and future educational practice.

Specifically, the focus is on the conditions and educational approaches within each period, including educational goals, teaching methods, the role of educators, and responses to contemporary challenges. Using a historical-comparative framework, the paper attempts to identify similarities and differences across these periods and draw lessons that are relevant for developing contextual, transformative Christian education rooted firmly in Christian spirituality.

The key questions addressed in this study are: 1) How were Christian education approaches formed and implemented in these three historical periods? 2) What factors influenced the shifts or continuities in educational approaches across these eras? 3) What implications do these findings have for contemporary Christian education practices, particularly in addressing the challenges of discipling today's youth?

By understanding the history and dynamics of Christian education, we can critically reassess the direction of current Christian education and design strategies that are more relevant, contextual, and faithful to the primary mission: forming disciples of Christ who think critically, possess strong character, and make meaningful impact in an ever-changing world.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative historical-comparative approach aimed at exploring and analyzing the transformation of Christian education approaches across three significant

historical periods: the Early Church Era (1st–5th centuries), the Protestant Reformation Era (16th century), and the Contemporary Era (20th–21st centuries). The primary goals of this study, aligned with the research questions, are: To describe how Christian education approaches were formed and implemented in each historical period, To analyze the key factors that influenced shifts or continuities in educational methods, philosophy, and context across these eras, to draw implications for contemporary Christian education practices, particularly in discipling today's youth amid secularization, technological change, and cultural fragmentation.

These three periods were selected methodologically because each represents a critical turning point in the history of Christian education. The Early Church period laid the spiritual and structural foundation of Christian pedagogy under conditions of cultural and political pressure within the Roman Empire. Thinkers such as Clement of Alexandria in *Paedagogus* and Origen in *On First Principles* emphasized education as a means of moral formation and spiritual transformation. Additionally, Augustine of Hippo, through works like *Confessions* and *On Christian Doctrine* (*De Doctrina Christiana*), contributed a deep theological vision of education as the process of knowing God both intellectually and affectively².

The Reformation Era marks a paradigm shift in both access to education and the role of Scripture in educational philosophy. Reformers like Martin Luther, particularly in his treatise *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That*

² Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God*, The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God, 2005, <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.410266>; Everett Ferguson, *Church History, Volume*

One: From Christ to Pre-Reformation: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context (michi: Zondervan Academic, 1999).

They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools (1524), advocated for universal education rooted in Scripture as a tool for spiritual and social emancipation. Similarly, John Calvin, through his Institutes of the Christian Religion, proposed a systematic educational vision grounded in biblical instruction and moral discipline ³.

The Contemporary Era represents a complex and rapidly changing global context in which Christian education faces new challenges, including secularism, moral relativism, and digital culture. In response, contemporary Christian education has become more holistic and contextually sensitive. Key figures such as Thomas Groome (Christian Religious Education), Parker J. Palmer (To Know as We Are Known), and James K. A. Smith (You Are What You Love) have reimagined Christian education to include emotional engagement, spiritual practices, community involvement, and cultural relevance ⁴.

The research is based on secondary data, relying on a comprehensive literature review of both classical sources (e.g., patristic writings and Reformation texts) and modern academic works on Christian education. Data were analyzed using document and content analysis techniques to identify key themes related to educational goals, instructional methods, the role of educators, and responses to sociocultural changes ⁵. Triangulation was applied by integrating insights from historical and theological sources to strengthen the credibility of the findings ⁶.

Although the study does not include empirical or ethnographic

(Number 73), no. 1 (1982), <https://doi.org/10.3366/more.1982.19.1.6>.

⁴ Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology, Ordinary* Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315247595>; Trevor Cooling and Robert A. Bowie, "Christian Theology and School Religious Education (RE): Exploring the Relationship," *Theology* 125, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X211068154>.

⁵ Sharan B Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation, The JosseyBass Higher and Adult Education Series*, vol. 2nd, 2009, <https://doi.org/10.1097/NCI.0b013e3181edd9b1>.

⁶ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods, Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, vol. 53, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1177/109634809702100108>.

fieldwork, its strength lies in its depth of historical interpretation and theological contextualization. The research aims to offer significant insights into the formation and evolution of Christian education approaches and to inform the development of contextual, historically rooted, and spiritually transformative educational models for the contemporary Church.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

To answer the key questions of this study, it is important to explore how Christian education approaches were developed and applied throughout different historical periods, highlighting the factors that influenced their shifts or continuity. By examining these approaches in their specific contexts, we gain valuable insights into the underlying

³ Lowell H. Zuck, "Reformation Thought: An Introduction," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 20, no. 4 (1989), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2541309>; James Michael Weiss, "The Age of Reform

12501550. An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe," *Moreana* 19

principles and practices that shaped Christian pedagogy. This understanding enables us to critically reflect on current educational methods and better address the challenges of discipling today's youth, ensuring that Christian education remains relevant, faithful, and effective in forming thoughtful, morally grounded, and impactful disciples of Christ.

EDUCATION IN THE PRIMITIVE CHRISTIANITY

A Portrait of Christian Religious Education in The Primitive Era

Christian religious education in the era of primitive Christianity was characterized by a deeply holistic and integrated approach. It was not limited to doctrinal knowledge alone, but instead embraced all aspects of life — theological teaching, moral development, spiritual growth, social responsibility, and the practical application of faith in daily living. As Augustine stated, "Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe"⁴, emphasizing that faith is not merely an intellectual concept, but a way of life grounded in experience.

This education was profoundly relational and community-centered. The early Church saw the faith community and the family as the primary spaces for nurturing faith. The Apostle Paul wrote, "We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Romans 12:5, New International Version), underscoring the importance of community as a vital environment for spiritual growth and instruction. The family functioned as the first "school of faith," where parents were

expected to teach and model Christian values for their children⁸.

Moreover, early Christian education was transformational in nature. Its goal was not only to inform the mind but to bring about a real and lasting change in one's character and lifestyle. Paul encouraged believers, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom. 12:2, NIV). Faith education aimed to shape individuals who reflected the love and truth of Christ in all areas of life⁹.

Due to limited literacy among many believers at the time, early Christian education was often symbolic and oral. Teaching relied heavily on storytelling, sacred symbols, liturgical practices, and shared worship experiences. According to David Merrill early Christian catechetical instruction, as reflected in Origen's educational practice, relied heavily on oral transmission, sacred stories, and ritual practices to embed the faith deeply in the

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467052300058X>.

⁸ Edward P. Mermilliod, "A Synthesis of Academic Research Related to Church-Based Family Ministry," *Christian Education Journal* 18, no. 3 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739891320974383>.

⁹ Peter John McGregor, "The Universal Work of the Holy Spirit in the Missiology of Pope John Paul II," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021140011427227>.

lives of believers⁵. This approach allowed for deep and lasting spiritual formation through experiential learning⁶.

⁴ Daniel E. Burns, "A New Approach to Augustine's Dialogues," *Review of Politics*, 2024,

⁵ M. David Merrill, "First Principles of Instruction," *Educational Technology Research and Development* 50, no. 3 (2002), <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02505024>.

⁶ Warren Treadgold and Peter Brown, "The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity AD 200-1000.," *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (1997), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2171097>.

Lastly, faith education in this era was lifelong and continuous. It began with catechesis—the period of instruction before baptism—and continued afterward as an ongoing journey of spiritual growth and discipleship. According to Heuss, Tertullian understood Christian formation as a progressive process that moves believers from initial instruction toward spiritual maturity and perfection in Christ⁷. Through worship, teaching, and communal life, believers were constantly being nurtured and equipped to live as faithful witnesses of Christ in the world⁸.

Educational Approaches in Early Christianity (Primitive Christianity)

Community- and Social-Relation-Based Approaches Community-Centered Approach.

In the early Christian era, the church was not merely a place of worship but a living school of faith. Faith formation took place through communal life—shared meals, acts of service, prayer, and mutual support (Acts 2:42–47). According to Battles, the early church functioned as both the context and the curriculum of Christian instruction⁹.

Believers learned through authentic relationships, modeling of life, and shared experiences. Theology was not just taught; it was lived in community.

This community-centered approach remains deeply relevant in today's Christian education. Rather than isolating doctrine from practice, it integrates faith learning with daily life. This is consistent with John Dewey's experiential learning theory, which stresses that values and knowledge are best internalized through social

interaction and lived experience¹⁵. Communities, in this sense, are not just supportive environments but also meaning-making agents.

Likewise, James Fowler's theory of faith development underscores that faith matures within relational contexts¹⁶. Dialogue, reflection, and interaction with others are essential for the transition from inherited to owned beliefs.

Theologically, this model reflects the incarnational nature of the Gospel—that faith is embodied, relational, and communal. Jesus Himself nurtured His disciples not through lectures, but through shared life. This aligns with the conviction that formation precedes information; relationships shape belief before doctrine is formally articulated.

As a researcher, I find this model not only historically grounded but urgently needed today. In a fragmented world shaped by digital individualism and spiritual isolation, the church must reclaim its role as a learning community. From my perspective, Christian education should prioritize authentic fellowship, life

History 41, no. 3 (1972),
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3164228>.

¹⁵ John Dewey, "Experience and Education," *Educational Forum* 50, no. 3 (1986),
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131728609335764>.

¹⁶ Richard A. Hoehn and James W. Fowler, "Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning," *Review of Religious Research* 25, no. 1 (1983),
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3511314>.

modeling, and mutual care—elements that modern classrooms or digital platforms often neglect. While

⁷ Hans Ludwig Heuss, "Tertullian: Apologeticum," in *Kindlers Literatur Lexikon (KLL)*, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-47605728-0_22191-1.

⁸ John Anthony McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine,*

and Spiritual Culture, The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture, 2009,
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444301229>.

⁹ F. L. Battles, "Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries," *Church*

technology and formal curricula have their place, they must not replace the communal core of faith formation.

Ultimately, the church as both context and curriculum offers a powerful corrective to contemporary challenges. It invites educators and faith communities to recover the formative power of belonging, presence, and shared life—hallmarks of early Christianity that remain vital for shaping mature, resilient faith today.

Women and Family as Educational Agents Approach.

This historical-comparative study reveals that families—especially women—played a pivotal role in the religious education of early Christian households. The home functioned as the *ekklesia domestica*, a primary space for informal spiritual formation, consistent with Berger theory of primary socialization, which emphasizes the family as the initial context for identity and value formation¹⁰.

Women like Lois and Eunice served not merely as supporters but as active role models¹¹, transmitting faith through storytelling, hymn singing, and daily spiritual practices. This aligns with Carolyn Osiek's assertion that women were "vital transmitters" of the Christian faith, actively shaping the beliefs of the next generation.

From the perspective of affective education, the love and nurturing provided by women within the family created a foundational environment for authentic and enduring faith development. This emotional and relational approach proved more effective than formal, theoretical religious instruction alone¹².

Comparative analysis with the Reformation and Contemporary eras shows that despite the rise of formal education structures, the family's role in faith formation remains essential. In facing modern challenges such as secularization and digital culture, reinforcing the educational role of women and families is crucial to ensure holistic transmission of Christian values.

In conclusion, effective Christian education must center on the family, particularly women, as primary agents of faith formation. This approach, deeply rooted in early church tradition, offers valuable insights for developing contemporary educational models that respond meaningfully to today's social and cultural complexities.

Catechetical and Progressive Spiritual Formation Approaches

Catechization Approach.

Catechesis served as a structured and systematic form of religious education for catechumens—those preparing for baptism. This process involved moral instruction, doctrinal teaching, and ritual preparation through oral, symbolic, and participatory methods. According to The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus (c. 215 AD): "Let those who are to be catechized be brought... they shall be instructed in the word for three years." This multi-year journey was meant to transform not just beliefs but also lifestyles, preparing individuals to become mature, faithful members of the Christian community. The catechization approach aligns with transformative learning theory¹³, emphasizing education that changes beliefs and behaviors, not just knowledge.

¹⁰ Erich Goode, "Review of The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion, by P. L. Berger," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 9, no. 4 (1968): 352–53, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2948547>.

¹¹ Rumjaun A and Narod F., *Social Learning Theory—Albert Bandura, Social Learning Theory (Albert Bandura)*, 2020.

¹² Judith Andre, "Caring; A Feminine Approach To Ethics and Moral Education," *Teaching Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (1986), <https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil19869111>.

¹³ Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning, The JosseyBass Higher and Adult Education Series*, 1991.

Its multi-year process supports deep internalization of Christian values and lifestyle transformation, consistent with adult learning principles that stress sustained, relevant, and participatory learning¹⁴. From a social constructivist view, catechization's oral, symbolic, and ritual methods foster community engagement and identity formation¹⁵. Recent research confirms that structured, long-term catechesis enhances religious commitment and moral development, though ongoing adaptation is needed to address contemporary cultural challenges¹⁶. Thus, catechization is a holistic process that integrates cognitive, moral, and social dimensions to prepare mature, faithful members of the Christian community.

Liturgy and Daily Life Integration Approach. In early Christianity, liturgy and ritual were not mere ceremonies but powerful tools of faith education. Worship practices—especially the Eucharist—helped believers internalize the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection and apply theological truths to daily life. Justin Martyr, in his *First Apology* (ca. 150 AD), wrote: "On the day called Sunday... the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read... then the presider instructs and exhorts the imitation of these good things." Through this rhythm of communal worship, spiritual disciplines were reinforced, and theological understanding was deepened in a holistic and repetitive manner. This approach

aligns with embodied cognition theory, which asserts that learning is reinforced through physical and ritual engagement (Barsalou, 2008). The integration of liturgy with daily life reflects holistic education, where theology is not only taught but enacted, consistent with James K. A. Smith in Wiseman Research notion that "we are what we love," shaped by liturgical practices¹⁷. From a sociocultural perspective¹⁸, communal worship functions as a "community of practice," where shared rituals cultivate identity and reinforce doctrinal meaning. Research in religious education¹⁹ supports the idea that repetitive liturgical participation fosters affective and spiritual formation beyond cognitive instruction. Therefore, early Christian liturgy served as both a theological classroom and a moral training ground, embedding belief into daily rhythms and community life.

Apostolic Teaching and Oral-Written Tradition Approaches

Apostolic Teaching Approach. In early Christian education, the teachings of the apostles were considered foundational. Instruction was delivered through both oral tradition (preaching, exhortation, song, dialogue) and written texts (Gospels, Epistles). This apostolic witness became the central curriculum of the early Church. Paul reminds the Thessalonians: "So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter."

¹⁴ Malcolm S Knowles, "THE MODERN PRACTICE OF ADULT EDUCATION , From Pedagogy to Andragogy What Is Andragogy?," *Business*, 1980.

¹⁵ L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society, Mind in Society*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4>.

¹⁶ Toke Elshof, "The Challenge of Religious Education to Deal with Past and Present Catholicism," *British Journal of Religious Education* 41, no. 3 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2018.1484689>.

¹⁷ Karyn L. Wiseman, "James K. A. Smith, Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation," *Homiletic* 37, no. 2 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.15695/hmltc.v37i2.3744>.

¹⁸ Etienne Wenger, "Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity," *Systems Thinker* 9 (1998), <https://doi.org/10.2277/0521663636>.

¹⁹ Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology*.

(2 Thessalonians 2:15). Before the New Testament canon was established, the oral proclamation of apostolic teaching (kerygma) and ethical instruction (didache) shaped Christian identity and belief. Jaroslav Pelikan notes in *The Christian Tradition* (1971): “Before there was a New Testament canon, there was apostolic teaching—transmitted orally, shaping the mind and spirit of the early church.” These teachings served as the guiding authority for doctrine, discipline, and community life. This approach reflects cultural transmission theory²⁰, wherein core beliefs and values are passed down through authoritative figures—in this case, the apostles—serving as the normative foundation for community identity. The use of both oral and written instruction aligns with Walter Ong’s (1982) insights on orality and literacy, emphasizing how oral tradition fosters communal memory and relational engagement, while written texts stabilize doctrine for future generations. The apostolic teaching approach also embodies social learning theory²¹, where imitation, repetition, and reinforcement of apostolic models shaped ethical and theological behavior. Furthermore, early Christian pedagogy through kerygma and didache mirrors curriculum theory in its most foundational form: delivering essential, identity-shaping content that integrates doctrine, ethics, and communal practices²². Thus, apostolic teaching functioned not only as a method of instruction but as the very source and structure of Christian formation.

Christian religious education in the era of Primitive Christianity was deeply integrated into the fabric of everyday life. It was communal, spiritual, progressive, and rooted in living

traditions. Whether through community fellowship, household nurturing, liturgical participation, or apostolic instruction, the goal was not merely to inform the mind but to transform the heart and character in Christ. These ancient approaches offer timeless insights for rethinking holistic, relational, and spiritually formative education today.

REFORMATION AND CHRISTIAN HUMANISM

A Portrait of Christian Religious Education in the Reformation and Christian Humanism The period of the Reformation and Christian Humanism marked a pivotal transformation in the trajectory of Christian religious education. This transformation was deeply rooted in a desire to return to the authority of Scripture, to reclaim a more personal and authentic faith, and to reform the moral and intellectual foundations of both the Church and society. The cry of the Reformers was not merely political or theological—it was educational in nature, demanding a reorientation of how Christian truth was taught, internalized, and lived.

The emphasis on sola scriptura—Scripture alone as the foundation of faith and practice—became a dominant feature of religious education during this era. Reformers and their predecessors like Peter Waldo and John Wycliffe challenged the authority of Church tradition and the papacy, insisting that the Bible alone was the ultimate source of divine truth. Wycliffe, in particular, made groundbreaking strides by translating the Bible into Middle English, making it accessible to laypeople and democratizing religious learning. As historian Ballito argues, this return to Scripture laid the

²⁰ Jenri Ambarita, Agusthina Siahaya, and Uci Purnama Sari, “Tradition and Sprituality : Cultural Symbolism of Papuan Bakar Batu and Korean Chuseok,” *Jurnal SMART (Studi Masyarakat, Religi, Dan Tradisi)* 10, no. 2 (2024): 216–29, <https://doi.org/10.18784/smart.v10i2.2374>.

²¹ Rumjaun A and F., *Social Learning Theory—Albert Bandura*.

²² J. R Estep, *Christian Formation: Integrating Theology and Human Development* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010).

groundwork for a theological and educational awakening that placed the Word of God at the heart of personal and communal life²³.

Equally transformative was the shift toward a deeply personal faith experience. Reformers like Wycliffe and Huss emphasized that salvation was not mediated through Church rituals or hierarchy, but through a direct relationship with God. This experiential dimension of learning resonated with what contemporary educational theorist David Kolb described as experiential learning—a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience³¹. In the Reformation, religious education became more than doctrinal instruction; it became a pathway of spiritual renewal, inviting individuals to encounter God personally and intimately through Scripture, prayer, and community.

This renewal was not solely theological—it was profoundly moral. Figures like Gerhard Groote, founder of the Brethren of the Common Life, modeled a life of simplicity, service, and devotion. His movement championed the view that education should not only inform the mind but also reform the heart. Christian schools inspired by Groote sought to nurture ethical behavior, humility, and compassion, laying a foundation for future character education movements. As Thomas Lickona later emphasized, effective moral education integrates moral knowledge, moral feeling, and moral action. Groote's vision of religious education embodied this integration³².

Parallel to these reform movements was the rise of Christian Humanism, most notably represented by

Books 33, no. 2 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1080/03612759.2005.10526512>.

³¹ David A. Kolb, "Experiential Learning: Experience as The Source of Learning and Development," *Prentice Hall, Inc.*, no. 1984 (1984), <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-7506-72238.50017-4>.

³² Anne Wescott Dodd, "Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility," *NASSP Bulletin* 76, no. 545 (1992), <https://doi.org/10.1177/019263659207654519>.

Desiderius Erasmus. Educated among the Brethren of the Common Life, Erasmus became a towering intellectual figure whose humanistic scholarship bridged the gap between Renaissance learning and Reformation ideals. Though he never fully joined the Reformation cause, his critiques of Church corruption, his promotion of critical biblical study, and his call to return

ad fontes—to the original sources—greatly influenced Protestant thought. Paul Ramsey notes that Erasmus and the Christian humanists were instrumental in revitalizing religious education by encouraging a thoughtful, reasoned, and historically grounded engagement with Scripture²⁴. His *Novum Instrumentum*, a Greek edition of the New Testament, profoundly influenced Luther and others in their biblical translations and theological formulations.

The courage and sacrifice of many precursors and Reformers also highlight the cost of educational and religious reform. John Huss was burned at the stake for denouncing ecclesiastical abuses, while Girolamo Savonarola faced execution after leading a moral revival in Florence. These figures demonstrated that religious education, when truly transformative, often challenges entrenched power structures and calls

²³ Christopher M. Bellitto, "The Reformation: A History," *History: Reviews of New*

²⁴ Lucy Wooding, "CHRISTIAN HUMANISM: From Renaissance to Reformation.," *History Review*, no. 64 (2009).

individuals to costly faithfulness. In this light, Max Weber interpreted the

Reformation as not only a religious event but a cultural and ethical reorientation, giving rise to values like personal discipline, responsibility, and integrity—values that became embedded in the educational systems of Protestant communities²⁵.

In sum, Christian religious education in the Reformation and Christian Humanism era was a dynamic blend of theological renewal, moral reform, and intellectual rigor. It rejected passive tradition in favor of active engagement with Scripture, emphasized personal and communal transformation, and encouraged critical thinking and ethical responsibility. It laid the foundations for a form of education that was both deeply rooted in faith and boldly oriented toward human flourishing. It serves as a reminder that true education is not merely the transmission of information but the formation of conscience, the awakening of faith, and the shaping of character in the light of divine truth.

Educational Approaches in the Reformation and Christian Humanism

Theocentric Approach

During the Reformation era, education was placed firmly within a theocentric framework, where God and His Word were the central focus and purpose of education. Martin Luther explicitly stated, “Education must lead humans to know God and live according to His will”²⁶. In his *Small Catechism* and various writings, Luther emphasized that the Bible is the absolute source of truth, not only to be taught but to be lived out in daily life. This approach underscores that education is not merely intellectual

development but a spiritual calling that connects humans with their Creator.

Similarly, Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* argued that the Protestant values of hard work, discipline, and responsibility reflect a personal relationship with God, internalized through education²⁷. Weber asserted that theocentric education shapes individuals who are not only knowledgeable but also possess moral and religious integrity.

Furthermore, John Milton, a post-Reformation Christian humanist, wrote in *Areopagitica* (1644) that education is “a divine instrument to liberate the human soul from ignorance and sin.” Thus, theocentric education functions as both a means of self-purification and spiritual empowerment.

Christian Humanism Approach

Christian humanism combined rational and moral Christian aspects within education. Philip Melancthon, known as the “Praeceptor Germaniae” (Teacher of Germany), wrote in *Loci Communes* (1521) that education should cultivate virtue and balanced knowledge between reason and faith. He viewed education as a means to improve individuals and society by developing the whole human being — intellectually, morally, and spiritually.

Erasmus, the most influential Christian humanist, argued in *Institutio Principis Christiani* (1516) that “True education forms the mind and heart of humans to act justly and wisely, based on the teachings of Christ.” He emphasized the importance of classical language literacy (Latin and Greek) so that people

²⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 2005, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203995808>.

²⁶ Timothy J. Wengert and Mary Jane Haemig, *The Small Catechism*, 1529: *The Annotated*

Luther Study Edition, The Small Catechism, 1529: *The Annotated Luther Study Edition*, 2017.

²⁷ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

could access original sources and understand moral values more deeply.

According to Wilhelm Dilthey, humanistic education aims to develop a “holistic life experience” that includes spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions (Dilthey, 1883). Thus, this approach nurtures a complete human being with both faith depth and rationality.

Universal Education Approach

One of the great legacies of the Reformation was the idea that education should be universal and inclusive. Luther, in his letter To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany (1524), asserted, “Every child, without exception, must learn to read the Bible for a personal understanding of God.” He opposed education being exclusive to elites and males only, promoting the participation of women and the general population in education.

This idea is also reflected in Protestant state documents that began regulating public education as a state responsibility. John Amos Comenius, called the “Father of Modern Education,” advocated universal education in his book *Didactica Magna* (1657), with the principle “everyone learns everything” (*omnes omnia*), emphasizing that education must be equitable across all social classes.

John Dewey, a 20th-century educational philosopher, emphasized that universal education is the foundation of modern democracy because it enables every individual to develop fully and contribute to society²⁸. This approach

promotes the development of a just and egalitarian society through education.

Participatory-Dialogical Approach

Learning during the Reformation began shifting from dogmatic methods to dialogical processes involving active participation by learners. Huldreich Zwingli, through the *Prophezei* in Zurich, introduced learning based on discussion and communal interpretation that fostered critical thinking and collaboration. He stated, “Students must not only passively receive God’s word but be able to understand and critically examine it through healthy dialogue”²⁹.

Paulo Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, emphasized the importance of dialogue as a tool for liberation, where education is a reflective and critical process rather than just knowledge transmission³⁰. This principle was essentially present in the Reformation approach, which sought to liberate humans from dogmatic authority and allow freedom of thought and responsibility.

This approach aligns with constructivist theories from Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, who asserted that effective learning occurs through social interaction and active cognitive engagement. Hence, education in the Reformation era had already adopted modern concepts of inclusive and critical learning.

Moral and Practical Education Approach

During the Reformation, education was strongly viewed as a means to shape moral character and prepare individuals for societal life. Melancthon emphasized

²⁸ A. C. Kazepides, “Introduction to Philosophy of Education,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 1972, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00368029>; Robin Barrow and Ronald Woods, *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education, An Introduction to Philosophy of Education*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003120476>.

²⁹ Rajmund Pietkiewicz, “Ulrich Zwingli as a Biblical Scholar,” *Rocznik Teologiczny*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.36124/rt.2020.14>.

³⁰ Paulo Freire, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” in *The Community Performance Reader*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003060635-5>.

the importance of hard work, discipline, and responsibility as expressions of living Christian faith³¹. He wrote that “Education must connect knowledge with real life so learners are ready to serve others and devote themselves to God.”

Max Weber also analyzed how the Protestant work ethic, cultivated through moral-practical education, was a key factor in social and economic progress³². This approach integrates religious values with practical life aspects so education focuses not only on theory but also on positive attitudes and behaviors beneficial for society.

John Locke, a 17th-century philosopher, emphasized character education and good habits, stating, “Good education is education that forms moral habits and discipline in daily life”³³. This moral-practical approach laid an important foundation for education aimed at developing morally responsible individuals.

MODERN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

A Portrait of Christian Religious Education in the Modern Era

Christian religious education in the modern era must be understood within the broader context of rapid cultural

change, digital transformation, religious pluralism, and global socio-political tensions. Traditional models of catechesis and doctrinal instruction—while still essential—are challenged to remain contextually relevant and transformative. As Groome proposed, education must adopt a “shared praxis” approach that invites learners to reflect on their life experiences through the lens of the Gospel and act faithfully in response³⁴. In an age marked by secularism, individualism, moral ambiguity, and technological saturation—often resulting in spiritual emptiness among youth³⁵. Christian education must go beyond mere information transfer to become a formational and transformational journey that nurtures identity in Christ and vocational purpose. Foster emphasizes that spiritual formation is not solely a private endeavor, but a communal process shaping both character and mission³⁶. This modern portrait of Christian education integrates several interrelated elements: structured religious instruction to provide theological literacy³⁷; communal and relational learning that fosters faith within church communities³⁸; and a holistic, lifespan development perspective informed by faith development theories³⁹. It further includes a prophetic and liberative

³¹ Rafał Marcin Leszczyński, “Filip Melanchton i 500 Lat Jego Loci Communes (1521),” *Biuletyn Historii Wychowania*, no. 44 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.14746/bhw.2021.44.14>.

³² Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

³³ Sorana Corneanu, “Some Thoughts Concerning Education,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Locke*, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.98.1.62>.

³⁴ Don Browning, “On Religious Education in a Pluralistic World Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision,” *The Journal of Religion* 62, no. 4 (1982), <https://doi.org/10.1086/486967>.

³⁵ Dave McIntire, “Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives

of American Teenagers,” *Journal of College and Character* 8, no. 3 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.2202/1940-1639.1179>.

³⁶ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007).

³⁷ Elizabeth F. Caldwell, *Making a Home for Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Your Children* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press., 1998).

³⁸ Philip W. Butin, “Book Review: Flawed Church, Faithful God: A Reformed Ecclesiology for the Real World,” *Anglican Theological Review* 102, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/000332862010200127>.

³⁹ Hoehn and Fowler, “Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning.”

engagement that draws from liberation theology to inspire action for justice and dignity⁴⁰; spiritual formation rooted in contemplative disciplines to deepen awareness of God's presence (Harris, 1989); and interpretive engagement that connects Scripture with real-life issues through theological reflection and cultural relevance⁴¹. Thus, Christian education becomes a living, participatory, and prophetic process—equipping believers with doctrinal understanding, critical consciousness, spiritual maturity, and ethical commitment. It aims to form disciples who live out the Gospel in everyday life, actively contribute to community transformation, and embody values of justice, peace, and love. As society continues to evolve, Christian education must likewise draw from theology, pedagogy, psychology, and cultural studies to creatively and faithfully respond to modern challenges. As Estep, Anthony, and Allison affirm, the ultimate goal of Christian education is to shape lives for God's glory and the world's good"⁴².

Educational Approaches in Modern Era

Transformational Approach:
Education as a Path to Social Change and Faithful Citizenship

The transformational approach views education not merely as the transmission of knowledge, but as a means of awakening critical consciousness and fostering social change grounded in faith. In this approach, the teacher acts as a sponsor who invites learners into a partnership of reflection and action. The educational process

follows the model of "See – Judge – Act," encouraging individuals to observe the realities of life, evaluate them through the lens of gospel values, and take transformative action.

This aligns with Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which emphasizes that education must liberate rather than oppress. Freire believed learners are free and responsible historical agents, not passive recipients⁴³. Mezirow later developed this into the theory of transformative learning, where true learning occurs when individuals reflect on their assumptions, shift their perspectives, and act in more conscious and meaningful ways⁴⁴.

In ministry, this approach empowers the church to become a prophetic community that not only preaches but actively serves as an agent of change. Brookfield emphasized that a church that adopts a transformational approach helps believers see the world through eyes of compassion and act critically for social justice.⁴⁵

"Church-based education that adopts a transformational approach cultivates prophetic imagination and equips believers for public discipleship"

54.

Faith Community Approach:
Building Togetherness as a Space for Formation

Unlike approaches that emphasize the individual, the faith community approach situates education within relational and communal contexts. Here, the church is not merely a place of worship but becomes a growth environment for shared faith and mission.

⁴⁰ Freire, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed."

⁴¹ Jack L. Seymour, "Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education" 19, no. 5 (2016).

⁴² Estep, *Christian Formation: Integrating Theology and Human Development*.

⁴³ Freire, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed."

⁴⁴ Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*.

⁴⁵ Redactie KITLV, "Book Reviews," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 160, no. 2–3 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003732>.

The teacher acts as a facilitator, forming small groups and structuring congregational life to support holistic and missional faith development. The learning process involves service, reflection, and action as expressions of living faith.

Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism asserts that cognitive and moral development is strongly influenced by social interaction. Thus, community becomes a laboratory for value formation. When believers share stories, challenges, and hopes, learning becomes deeper and more contextual ⁴⁶.

Amit found that both youth and adults who grow within faith communities tend to develop a stronger spiritual identity and are more likely to engage in social ministry ⁴⁷.

"Christian formation is not only about personal development but about participation in a shared narrative and communal practices that shape identity and mission" ⁴⁸.

This approach challenges churches to go beyond doctrinal teaching—to become vibrant communities of mutual learning, support, and outreach. The church becomes a home of formation and a base for mission.

Spiritual Growth Approach: Aligning Inner Life and Outward Action

The spiritual growth approach focuses on deep inner formation and sensitivity to God's presence in oneself, others, and creation. In this model, the

educator is not a traditional teacher but a fellow pilgrim or spiritual guide walking alongside learners. The educational process involves silence, listening, sabbath, study, and service as rhythms of a healthy spiritual life.

Wood taught that spiritual formation requires sacred space and time—"active silence"—where individuals grow in their awareness of God and social compassion ⁴⁹. Palmer stated that authentic spiritual education connects the teacher's identity, the subject matter, and the learner's soul ⁵⁰.

"Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; it comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher who connects the soul of the student to the subject and to the world" ⁵¹.

In ministry, this approach urges churches to create spiritual spaces not only for doctrinal teaching but for contemplative practices and social engagement. The church becomes a sanctuary where inner life and social responsibility are integrated.

Religious Instruction Approach:

Grounding Faith in Knowledge and Practice

This approach emphasizes the importance of systematically teaching the Christian faith, rooted in Scripture and church tradition. The goal is for believers to gain a strong theological foundation and the ability to relate their faith to life. Teachers act as partners in the learning process, creating safe and meaningful

⁴⁶ Vygotsky, *Mind Soc.*

⁴⁷ Ronaldo A. Amit, "Assessment of Student Welfare Programs in the State Universities and Colleges of Samar Island," *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development* Volume-3, no. Issue-3 (2019): 832–36, <https://doi.org/10.31142/ijtsrd23175>.

⁴⁸ Aaron Klink, "Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church – By Kenda Dean," *Religious Studies Review* 37, no. 2 (2011), https://doi.org/10.1111/j.17480922.2011.01509_8.x.

⁴⁹ A. Skevington Wood, "Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life," *Evangelical Quarterly: An International Review of Bible and Theology* 51, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1163/27725472-05101013>.

⁵⁰ T Palmer, *Fifteen Characteristics of a 21st-Century Teacher, Edutopia (Online)*, 2015.

⁵¹ Parker J. Palmer, M Jackson, and E Tucker, "COURAGE TO TEACH: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life - 20th Anniversary Edition.," *John Wiley & Sons*, 2017.

spaces for inquiry, reflection, and faith development. The learning process follows theological reflection: knowing, interpreting, living, and practicing faith.

Thomas Groome (1991), in *Sharing Faith*, proposed the shared Christian praxis approach, inviting learners to connect their life stories with the Christian narrative and act based on collective reflection.

“Christian religious education is at its best when it invites learners into a shared process of reflecting on life in the light of the Christian story and vision”⁵².

Astley and Francis (1996) emphasized that quality religious instruction remains faithful to tradition while being responsive to the learner’s context and questions.

“Religious instruction must be both faithful to the tradition and responsive to the learner’s context and questions”⁵³. In church ministry, this approach is vital for nurturing strong, lifelong faith and equipping believers to live responsibly and faithfully in the face of contemporary challenges.

The four educational approaches—Transformational, Faith Community, Spiritual Growth, and Religious Instruction—offer distinct yet complementary frameworks for Christian education. The transformational approach fosters critical awareness and faithful action, resonating with liberation pedagogy and the Church’s prophetic mission. The faith community approach emphasizes relational formation and communal practices that shape identity and purpose. The spiritual growth approach highlights inner transformation through contemplative disciplines, nurturing compassion and integrity. The religious instruction approach anchors learners in

Scripture and doctrine, fostering theological depth and moral responsibility.

Together, these models affirm that Christian education must be dynamic, contextual, and holistic, engaging the mind, heart, relationships, and soul. Churches and educators are called to integrate these approaches to form mature, discerning disciples who embody their faith with wisdom and courage. As Parker Palmer (2004) writes, “Good teaching is an act of hospitality toward the young,” inviting the Church to become not only a space of instruction, but a community of transformation, belonging, and hope.

Although these four approaches overlap in their ultimate goal of Christian formation, each possesses a distinct pedagogical orientation. The transformational approach emphasizes social engagement and public discipleship; the faith community approach focuses on relational and communal identity formation; the spiritual growth approach prioritizes inner transformation and contemplative practices; and the religious instruction approach centers on theological understanding and doctrinal literacy. This differentiation demonstrates an expansion of Christian educational concerns in the modern era beyond the predominantly communal and doctrinal emphases of previous periods.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the development of Christian educational approaches is characterized by both continuity and adaptation. Across the early Christian era, the Reformation, and the modern period, Christian education has consistently pursued the holistic formation of believers while continuously reshaping

⁵² Philip E. Devenish, “Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis,” *The Journal of Religion* 74, no. 2 (1994), <https://doi.org/10.1086/489375>.

⁵³ Cooling and Bowie, “Christian Theology and School Religious Education (RE): Exploring the Relationship.”

Table 1. Synthesis of Educational Approaches in Modern Christian Education

Agent	Educational Goal	Key Activities	Primary	Distinction	from Approach	Main Focus
Transformational Approach	Previous Eras					
	Social	Form believers who actively and critically engage with Gospel values and discipleship.	Reflection, Church as agent according to agent	Christianity as advocacy, See–Judge–	Unlike and Reformation, addresses social justice, Act	Primitive the this structural issues, and public
	Transformational society prophetic social action, approach explicitly and consciousness					
Faith Community Approach	Communal community	identity through mentoring, model but intentionally shared identity communal worship,	Form	Christian Fellowship, and relationships and communal practices service	Extends the early	Faith groups
	Inner spiritual formation and maturity and mentor relationship with contemplative	Spiritual silence, emphasizing personal and meditation, spirituality individual sabbath,		Prayer, catechetical models by	Differs from earlier	
	God			discipleship believer spiritual disciplines instruction alone.	reflective practices rather than doctrinal	
Religious Instruction Approach	Theological literacy and doctrinal understanding	Build disciples	informed Teacher and reflection, contextualizes	Bible study, Reformation's emphasis on Scripture but faithful church teaching challenges and lived experiences.		

its pedagogical practices in response to changing theological, social, and cultural contexts. The findings reveal a pedagogical progression from community-based and apostolic formation, to scriptural and humanistic renewal, and finally to transformative and contextual approaches that address the complexities of contemporary society.

The study further shows that the historical development of Christian education offers important implications for discipling today's youth. Effective Christian education can no longer rely solely on doctrinal transmission or cognitive instruction. Rather, it requires an integrative model that combines spiritual formation, critical reflection, communal

participation, moral development, and social engagement. Such an approach enables young people to develop a mature Christian identity and faithfully respond to the challenges of pluralism, secularism, and digital culture.

The novelty of this study lies in its historical-comparative synthesis of Christian educational approaches across three major periods of church history. Unlike previous studies that tend to examine Christian education within a single historical context, this study identifies the enduring principles and transformative shifts that connect these periods and proposes a conceptual framework for contemporary Christian education. This framework emphasizes

the integration of historical wisdom and contextual adaptation as the foundation for holistic youth discipleship. Therefore, Christian education in the twenty-first century should be understood as an adaptive and transformative process that forms whole persons—spiritually, intellectually, morally, and socially—equipping them to embody God's love and justice in an increasingly complex world.

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