

**CHRISTOLOGY FROM BELOW:
Historical Development, Global Trends, and Contextual Proposals (Part I)**

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Introduction

That Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb.13: 8) is a biblical truth that Christians of all ages affirm. Christians, from Jerusalem to Jakarta and from the first to the 21st century, worship the same Jesus. However, the way this Jesus has been depicted throughout history and throughout different cultures has not been monolithic. The depiction has ranged, according to Jaroslav Pelikan, “from the most naïve and unsophisticated to the most profound and complex.”¹ While some of the depictions say more about the people than the Jesus of the Bible, others have challenged and enriched the Church. In all these representations, there are continuity and discontinuity. The aspect of continuity can be attributed to the fact that the focus of the investigation is the same person: Jesus of Nazareth. The reason for discontinuity can be varied. One reason beneath the different descriptions of Jesus and conclusions about him inhabits the issue of methodology and presuppositions since the latter often determines the former. Today, categorizing the Christological inquiries under the rubrics of “Christology from below” and “Christology from above” (“from above” and “from below” or just “the two approaches” henceforth) seems too restrictive, if not outdated. Many scholars have shown that the two approaches are not necessarily contradictory for one presupposes the other. However, it is also true that Christians continue to emphasize one methodology over the other (see below), inevitably yielding polyphonic images of the same person, Jesus. Therefore, while the two approaches are not mutually exclusive, they are also not necessarily collapsible, understandably prompting some to prioritize one or the other.

The question, then, is what exactly is “Christology from below” and how is it different from “Christology from above”? The objective of this article is to explore the concept behind the Christology “from below” examining its historical development, assessing its theological assumptions, and investigating its contextual applications to cultivate some biblical principles for an ongoing contextual theological conversation.

I examine the topic under three sections. First, I briefly explore the historical development and theological concept of the term “from below.” Second, I investigate how the term is being used, and the concept applied in the global context, especially in the Majority World settings, and examines the rationale for it.² Third, I evaluate the advantages and challenges of the concept and its employment while highlighting how such awareness can be

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries : His Place in the History Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 4.

² I admit that my observation relies on written literature. Often, the perspective of the non-literate, grassroots Christians is not faithfully portrayed in the written literature. A similar limitation occasioned a critique against Diane B. Stinton's work, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (2004). Francis Acquah contends that most of those Stinton interviewed were “educated Christians who live in towns and cities” (2008: 40). Therefore, Acquah concludes that Stinton’s view cannot be taken as representative of African Christians (41). My observation is not immune from such charge in addition to other possible shortages. In defense, however, I must say that all research, to a certain degree, manifest limitations of similar nature as Stinton also rightly points out in her response to Acquah in the same paper—no comprehensive research is possible.

beneficial for contextual theology. To that end, I propose some theological principles for more productive christologizing and an ongoing discussion of this topic.

Christology “from Below”: The Historical Development and Theological Presuppositions

The term “from below” concerning christological inquiry *was* commonly used to distinguish “from above.” Various accompanying terms, with respective nuances and emphases, such as Ascending vs. Descending Christology,³ Saving History vs. Metaphysical Christology,⁴ Cosmological or Political Christology vs. Anthropological Christology,⁵ and Historical Jesus vs. Kerygmatic Jesus,⁶ are also employed to capture the distinctions “the two approaches” attempt to highlight. While the precise meaning is dependent on how the terms are used and by whom, there is a basic point of departure between “the two approaches.” Whereas “from above” and its associate approaches attempt to begin by assuming the confession of the divinity of Jesus as found in the New Testament and expressed by the early Church, “from below” and its associating approaches want to begin by investigating the historical basis for faith in Jesus without first assuming the deity of Jesus.⁷ This seems to have been the initial distinction when the terms “from below” and “from above” emerged.⁸ As mentioned earlier, today, the two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but in the past adopting “from below” could have (and have) yielded conclusions that undermine the divinity of Jesus.

Before the rise of the quest of the historical Jesus, the historical reliability was assumed rather than argued. Thus the dominant orientation of Christology of the Church until the modern era had been the approach “from above” as defined above.⁹ However, the beginning of the modern historical-critical study changed the dynamic. Bringing an *a priori* christological assumption to the study was considered misguided (note the irony here), and the search for Jesus began purely from a historical approach. Thus the Christ of faith was jeopardized. Erickson notes¹⁰ that the Jesus that emerged as a result of employing such methodology during the nineteenth century was often “Jesusologies” as opposed to real Christologies. By “Jesusologies,” he means the resulting Jesus was “a human being and a little more.”¹¹

This Jesus that emerged from a purely critical study is stripped away from any divine distinctive such as that of Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar.¹² Funk had predetermined that the Jesus he discovers “will subvert the Jesus we think we know, the Jesus we venerate and cherish.”¹³ Funk’s Jesus, whom he claims to have discovered purely from the historical-critical

³ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1955), 337–338. In this particular English translation of Sobrino’s work, I do not see the word “ascent,” although the concept is repeated. The word “descent” is present.

⁴ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations: Theology, Anthropology, Christology* (Bourke D (trans). Vol. 13. NY: The Seabury Press, 1975), 215.

⁵ Colin J. D. Greene, *Christology in Cultural Perspective: Marking Out the Horizons* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2003).

⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 682.

⁷ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 4.

⁸ Albrecht Ritschl, who is believed to have coined the term “from below to above,” situated the historical Jesus at the central of christological inquiry (Greene: 19 n. 56).

⁹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospel as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 1–2. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 682. Steven J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton, ILL: Crossway, 2016), 86. Kärkkäinen, *Christology*, 5.

¹⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 684.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19

approach, turns out to be in contrast to that of the biblical writers. As many have shown and rejected, Funk speaks more for himself and the Jesus Seminar he founded than that of the Jesus of the Bible. Oliver D. Crisp rightly claims that a purely historical-critical inquiry of the life of Christ is not bound to yield the whole truth about the historical Jesus.¹⁴

Understandably, therefore, some evangelicals like Steven J. Wellum maintain a sharp distinction between “from above” and “from below,” seeing no redeemable element in the latter. For him, prioritizing one over the other is more than a preferred methodology; it is affirming or denying doctrinal commitment *a priori*. Wellum reasons,

While these phrases [“from below” and “from above”] are defined in different ways, *from below* is best understood as the attempt to do Christology from the vantage point of historical-critical research, independent of a commitment to the full authority of Scripture; *from above* refers to starting with Scripture as God’s own accurate and authoritative word written in texts, so that we do Christology from the point of view of these texts . . . [Thus] Jesus can be rightly identified only *from above*, never *from below*.¹⁵

Wellum points out three main concerns with the approach of Christology from below. First, such an approach denies the Scripture the necessary and sufficient condition to warrant and ground Christology. Second, it fails to reach the uniqueness and universal significance of Jesus. Third, it cannot sustain Christian faith.¹⁶

However, Moltmann noted, “Jesulogy is not [necessarily] the opposite of Christology.”¹⁷ By this, he means that whereas christological inquiries took an anthropological and subjective turn, it does not necessarily compromise the kerygmatic affirmation of the early Church. Justifiably, therefore, few are satisfied with driving too sharp a wedge between the two approaches, although they may favor one over the other.

Not necessarily considering the two methods as antithetical, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jon Sobrino opt for an approach “from below.” For Sobrino, to start “from below” is to “avoid abstractionism and the attendant danger of manipulating the Christ event . . . [because] focusing on the Christ of faith jeopardize the very essence of the Christian faith if it neglects the historical Jesus.”¹⁸ It is evident from his emphasis that he is not necessarily eschewing the Christ of faith but rather wants to begin epistemologically from the Jesus of history. In doing so, he was following Pannenberg, who also refused to adopt a “from above” approach.¹⁹ One of Pannenberg’s objections to the “from above” methodology is that it already presupposes that which must be first enquired: instead of inquiring the reasons for the confession of Jesus’ divinity, we have already presupposed it.²⁰ However, he goes on to declare, “In spite of our rejection of a Christology ‘from above,’ we shall later show the relative justification for such a way of approaching the question. . . .”²¹ Later he affirms, “Thus, while Christology must begin with the man Jesus [from below], its first question has to be that about his unity with God.”²²

¹⁴ Oliver, Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered*. Current Issues in Theology (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 162–163.

¹⁵ Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 86–87.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 87–92.

¹⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 55.

¹⁸ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 9.

¹⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus, God and Man*, translated by Lewis L. Wilkins, et al. (PHL: Westminster Press, 1977[1968]), 34ff.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²² *Ibid.*, 36.

Both Sobrino and Pannenberg take “from below” approach as the starting point to reach the Jesus of faith.

On the other hand, Colin E. Gunton argues that such an approach demonstrated by Pannenberg and others that “attempts to evade, or to postpone consideration of, the explicitly theological content of talk about Jesus, has not shown to be successful.”²³ However, Gunton acknowledges, “Nevertheless, there are, in Pannenberg’s theology possibilities for what may be called a purified Christology from below, in which the defects of his over-rationalist approach are avoided.”²⁴ The point here is that although one approach is favored over the other, they are cautious not to over-dichotomize the two.

Today, for many, a neat distinction or exclusive preference of one approach over another is not desirable. Timothy Tennent understands “from below” as a means of approaching the christological study from the existential life experiences of ordinary Christians as opposed to coming to the “puzzle from the upper side, that is, from the divine initiative of God’s perspective in becoming man.”²⁵ In this approach, the practical and existential encounter with Jesus is emphasized as opposed to starting from the ontological and metaphysical contemplations. Myk Habets avows that both “methodologies are now considered a starting point, not a single orientation.”²⁶ Kärkkäinen vies that the preferred adoption of the two approaches should not be seen as a test case that differentiates “conservatives” and “liberals”; rather, it is a preference for methodology.²⁷ Others like Erickson, Gerald O’Collins, Stanley Grenz,²⁸ and Roger Haight,²⁹ with distinctive emphases and nuances, concur that both approaches could be united in theologizing. O’Collins’ speaks on their behalf when he declares: “a genuine Christology ‘from above’ begins from the divinity of Christ but it will go on to do justice to his humanity. Conversely, a true Christology ‘from below’ begins from the humanity of Christ but it will go on to do justice to his divinity.”³⁰ For them, Christology “from below” does not necessarily have to imply a quest for Jesus detached from the historic affirmation of the Church since what is historically false cannot at the same time be true of Christian faith. A correlation that “from below” produces truncated Christology and “from above” a robust Christology cannot be sustained anymore.

Thus, Christology “from below” no longer represents the intentional rejection of the kerygmatic Jesus (Jesus of faith). Today, many evangelicals affirm that “from below” approach can be used positively. For Tennent, Christology “from below” may “help restore the biblical integration of the person and the work of Christ by shining light on the ‘underside’ of the Christological puzzle.”³¹ Erickson contends that when discussing the question of Christology from above and from below, one must differentiate the ontological and epistemological issues and place a proper emphasis on each. He continues, ontologically, one takes the deity of Christ for granted, but epistemologically one does not merely assume the deity of Christ. Rather, one

²³ Colin E. Gunton, *Yesterday & Today: A Study of Continuities in Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1983), 30.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 108.

²⁶ Myk Habets, *The Anointed Son: A Trinitarian Spirit Christology*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series: 129 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 42.

²⁷ Kärkkäinen, *Christology*, 4.

²⁸ Stanley J. Grenz SJ, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000).

²⁹ Roger Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1999).

³⁰ Gerald O’Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 17.

³¹ Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 131.

begins the inquiry by considering "the possibility of reliable historical knowledge of Jesus."³² He believes that the kerygmatic Christ is "the key that unlocks the historical Jesus."³³ As representatives of the broader evangelical Christians, Tennent and Erickson show us the utility of the approach "from below" while upholding a kerygmatic Christ.

Michael Bird argues that the kerygmatic Jesus formulated by the New Testament writers were also dependent on their prior historical experience.³⁴ He exhorts that in our search for the historical Jesus, we must maintain the historical otherness of Jesus to avoid making our experience the sole referent that inevitably will lead to subjectivism.³⁵ In Bird's words, this is a safe way "to marry the spirit of the age without divorcing the historical Jesus."³⁶

Just like for Tennant and Erickson, then, Christology 'from below' would be an approach to the person and works of Christ from the existential and historical space without denying the metaphysical and ontological reality. Such an approach leaves room for both the continuity and discontinuity in christological studies and experiences. It also seems to capture the general panorama of the christological studies of the Majority World Christians.

Christology "from Below": Global Trends

Throughout the centuries, the desire of Christians, while sometimes misguided, is to make Jesus Christ relevant to their daily lives and experience him as their Lord and Savior in their contexts. This remains true of global Christianity today. One need only skim through the vast amount of literature on the topic to realize this to be the case.³⁷ As such, Christology "from below," a method that emphasizes the existential and experiential encounter with Jesus while assuming the ontological reality of Christ, seems to be their favored christological reflection. The approach takes one's experience of Jesus as an epistemological lens to make sense of the fullness of the Jesus of the Bible. Therefore, such an approach does not automatically fall into the limitations of the earlier advocates of historical-critical study—whose projects Wellum raised the alarm. Majority World Christians generally operate on the assumption that the Word of God is the infallible truth and the supreme authority for Christian life and theology. The precise application of the Scripture is neither monolithic nor without ambiguity, and there is always a room for dialogue and improvement, yet most affirm the preeminence of the Scripture. Therefore, Christology "from below," an approach the Majority World Christians opt for, need not be automatically set in opposition to the high view of Scripture.

³² Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 625–626.

³³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 691.

³⁴ Michael F. Bird, "The Peril of Modernizing Jesus and the Crisis of Not Contemporizing the Christ." *Evangelical Quarterly* 78, (4): 306–307.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 309.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 302.

³⁷ Two particular works that survey the Global Christological orientations demonstrate the case. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 143–174. Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001). A few examples include Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology*, Faith and cultures series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004). J. N. Kanyua Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa, *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology* (Nairobi, Kenya: Initiatives Ltd., 1989). Martin R. Forrest, *Christology from below: An Examination of the Black Christology of Takatso Mofokeng in the Context of the Development of Black Theology in South Africa and in Critical Relation to the Christological Ethic of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.*, M.A. Dissertation (University of Cape Town, 1987), 78–83. Choan-Seng Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

A particular aspect of Majority World Christology "from below" is to reflect on the person of Jesus Christ by taking imageries and titles that have immediate contextual relevance with biblical christological resonance. This approach is, in some sense, a departure from a more traditional Christology in which various titles of Christ found directly in the Bible—Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, Son of David, etc.—are taken and reflected from contextual realities. Of African christological approaches, Charles Nyamiti distinguishes two types: "from the Bible to African reality" and "From African reality to Christology."³⁸ And he asserts thus, "This second type of theologising . . . is the one which is most frequently used."³⁹ Although slightly dated, such observation seems to remain valid, as demonstrated by Stinton's approving reference of the same distinction.⁴⁰ Titles such as the Great Ancestor, Ideal Healer, Mediator, Great Chief, etc. as opposed to the biblical titles like the Messiah, Son of Man, Son of David, etc., are considered to make Jesus more relevant to the worldview of the African communities.⁴¹ For instance, one of the roles of an Ancestor in African belief is to mediate between God and their living relatives.⁴² The familiarity then is invoked as a bridge to understand Christ more fully.

In Latin America, the Christology has strong pragmatic lenience. There is a general tendency to prioritize doing over knowing. Hence, the beginning of Christology is no longer the theoretical reflection, but the pragmatic appropriation of Jesus' teaching. Thus, orthopraxis and orthodoxy become reciprocally related. Regarding Latin Liberation theology, Erickson observes thus, "genuine discipleship is measured not by what one thinks about Christ, but by whether one follows and obeys his teaching."⁴³ Sobrino remarks, "Pondering the real-life situation only after it has been experienced in concrete terms, Latin Americans have been prompted to see Christ in very new and different terms."⁴⁴ For Sobrino and others, the subjective starting point of Christology is faith as a lived experience.⁴⁵ In Africa, the predominant image of Jesus is Ancestor, Chief or Healer; in Latin America, it is Jesus as the Liberator.⁴⁶

While African and Latin American Christians are more prone to identify Jesus with specific titles, Asian Christians are more ambivalent in their choice. However, some would see the very uncertainty as itself a sign of their contextuality. Whether it is C.S. Song's "the crucified people,"⁴⁷ Stanley Samartha's "theocentric Christology,"⁴⁸ Yangkahao Vashums's "Jesus the Rooster"⁴⁹ or the many attempts to reconcile Jesus with the dominant understanding of the Transcendent in Asia, they demonstrate the efforts of Asian Christians to navigate the fine line of religious pluralism and exclusivity of the historical Jesus. Sometimes they are successful and sometimes they are not. At any rate, their attempts show how Christians endeavor to make sense

³⁸ Charles Nyamiti, "African Christology Today," in *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology*, edited by Mugambi JNK and Magesa L (Nairobi, Kenya: Initiatives Ltd., 1998 [1989]), 17–39.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁰ Diane Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology*. Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 23, 49.

⁴¹ Andrew M. Mbuvi, "Christology and Cultus in 1 Peter: An African (Kenyan) Appraisal," in *Jesus without Borders: Christology in the Majority World*, edited by Gene L. Grene et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 148. MI: Eerdmans, 141–161. Raymond Moloney, "African Christology," *Theological Studies* 48, (3): 506.

⁴² Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective*. Mambo Occasional Papers: Missio-Pastoral Series no. 11 (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 184), 19.

⁴³ Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, 159.

⁴⁴ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 33–34.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁴⁶ Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 51.

⁴⁷ Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (MN: Fortress Press, 1996).

⁴⁸ Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ*, 79–132.

⁴⁹ Vashum, *Christology in Context: A Tribal-Indigenous Appraisal of North East India* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2017), 113.

of Jesus within the existential reality of their context while trying to remain faithful to the Christ of faith.

The challenges posed from the socioeconomic angles in Latin America, ethnocultural issues in Africa, and religious standpoint in Asia influence the ways Christians attempt to make sense of their theology.⁵⁰ Christians who are struggling with different questions and challenges forge their understanding of Jesus through the lens of their contextual realities. The logic is that such approaches allow Christians to relate with Christ by synthesizing their familiar image with fundamental Christian values.⁵¹ In order for Christ to take deep root in their lives, their understanding of Christ must be built on the existing mental framework, so it is argued. Not to do so would be to fall into the same pitfall of the earlier missionaries who considered the nationals as a *tabula rasa* on which Christian identity is somehow to be engraved.⁵² Focusing on familiar christological themes gives them a mental framework to understand who Jesus is and how he is relevant to them, allowing Jesus to be engraved in the memory of the community. Such experience, in turn, enriches the biblical imagery of Christ and benefits the global Church, proponents contend.⁵³

What can we say of such proposals that call for materializing the known to connect the unknown, familiar to bridge the unfamiliar? What are the advantages and limitations of such an approach? We will attempt to address this issue below.

(To be continued in Part 2)

⁵⁰ Lalsangkima Pachuau, *World Christianity: A Historical and Theological Introduction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018), 118.

⁵¹ Moloney, "African Christology," 507.

⁵² Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*. Regnum Studies in Mission (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 391.

⁵³ Nyamiti, "African Christology Today," 30.