

THE STARTING POINT OF CHRISTOLOGY:
FROM BELOW OR FROM ABOVE?

Part I

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Introduction

For centuries, the Church has held the Christ of faith as the starting point of Christology. Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, “from above” came down to earth. During the medieval period, people rarely debated whether the Jesus depicted in the New Testament is exactly the Jesus who walked in the land of Palestine or whether the Christ of faith is identical to the historical Jesus who walked along the Sea of Galilee. People were content with the truth as claimed to be revealed in the Bible.

In our time, also, the Christ of faith is preached much more than the earthly man Jesus depicted in the New Testament. Even in the process of evangelization, the effort and focus is not on describing how Jesus lived his earthly life and then leading people into acknowledging Jesus’ divinity. Rather, Jesus’ divinity is proclaimed to unbelievers who may not have any background in Christianity at all. As time goes on, the image of the earthly man Jesus is dimmed or even ignored. This dimming or ignoring of Jesus’ humanity has become a part of Christian tradition for many churches worldwide. Today, however, “we no longer live in an age which takes the need for salvation for granted.”¹ After the Enlightenment, some scholars who carried on the quest for the historical Jesus brought challenges to the Church. This quest, often divided into three separate quests, has caused some conservative scholars and church ministers to turn their focus on the earthly man Jesus and start trying to describe Jesus Christ from below. The results of the historical Jesus quests are diverse and indicate some strengths and weaknesses of Christology from below. As the historical Jesus

¹William M. Thompson, *The Jesus Debate: A Survey and Synthesis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 49.

quests and the from below approach arose, traditional scholars defended the from above approach. Thus, the debates on the starting point of Christology emerged and developed.

Jesus' first disciples initially knew the earthly man Jesus, and only after some time acknowledged him as the Son of God. Historically, the earthly man Jesus was the starting point of Christology. However, when both the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith were discovered and acknowledged, people were able to move between them from both directions. Both approaches, from below and the from above, have strengths and weaknesses, and they are not inherently contradictory. The search for an alternative approach indicates that integration of the two approaches is needed. Each approach has its own role and cannot be replaced by the other. Thus, in the contemporary context we can and we should use both approaches.

This paper's aim is to discuss the issue of the starting point of Christology: from below or from above. Part I of this paper will discuss both the arguments for and weaknesses of these two starting points. The historical Jesus quests are included due to their intertwined relationship with a genuine search for the historical Jesus. In Part II, I will explore and discuss scholars' searches for an alternative approach. After that, I will propose my solution for constructing Christology in the contemporary context and give a suggestion for the Christology of Chinese house churches.

The From Below Approach

The from below approach has been advocated by scholars like Jon Sobrino and backed up by Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology. They emphasize the practical benefits of this approach. Wolfhart Pannenberg upholds this approach by inputting cognitive insight. The quests for the historical Jesus heat up this approach by exerting great efforts toward discovering the historical Jesus.

The Quests for the Historical Jesus

The quests for the historical Jesus were launched and carried on mainly by liberal scholars.² Results of these quests triggered some historical issues worth studying, pondering and responding to and in

²Evangelicals insisted on the historicity of Jesus, therefore, they were involved in the quests for the historical Jesus, and on many occasions, in reactions against the results of the liberals' studies.

some way reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the from below approach.

A Brief Overview of the Historical Jesus Quests

Scholars engaged in the quests for the historical Jesus hold a suspicion about the difference between the identity of the historical Jesus and the Jesus Christ narrated in the New Testament and described by church doctrines. It is generally believed that so far there are three quests for the historical Jesus.

The first quest was initiated by Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) who claimed that the New Testament view of Jesus is not historical; rather, it is the false dogmatic interpretation of Jesus created by the early disciples and later church.³ Considering miracles unacceptable, the early modern historical researchers including Reimarus proposed naturalism and rationalism against supernaturalism. Gregory W. Dawes elaborates David Friedrich Strauss (1808-74), whose famous book *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* was firstly published in 1835, stating, “much of what we find in the Gospel is neither history nor deception but ‘myth’ and needed to be interpreted accordingly The new message about Jesus was the product of the disciples’ religious imagination, an imagination which clothed spiritual truths in narrative form.”⁴

Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), well-known for his book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906), is considered the person who ended the first quest. He claimed, “The historical investigation of the life of Jesus did not take its rise from a purely historical interest; it turned to the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma.”⁵

William M. Thompson noted the skepticism at the end of the first quest (early 20th century). A number of factors converged and indicated that “a historical quest was neither possible nor desirable.”⁶ Thompson further stated that redaction criticism and form criticism were two of the factors that undermined the possibility of reconstructing an accurate

³Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *Wolfenbuttel Fragments* (G. E. Lessing, 1774-78). Paraphrased in Thompson, *The Jesus Debate: A Survey and Synthesis*, 91.

⁴Gregory W. Dawes, ed., *The Historical Jesus Quest* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 87, 89. Dawes in his own words elaborates Strauss’s opinion. Cf. David Friedrich Strauss’ *Apology*, n.p. and *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, n.p.

⁵Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 4.

⁶*Ibid.*, 96.

historical Jesus. Ernst Käsemann (1906-98) is generally considered the initiator of the second quest which was begun when Käsemann delivered a lecture to a conference in 1953. Against the extreme downplaying of the historical dimension, Käsemann claimed, “[Primitive Christianity] is not minded to allow myth to take the place of history nor a heavenly being to take the place of the Man of Nazareth.”⁷ Käsemann invented the criterion of double dissimilarity, which says that a tradition ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament may be authentic if it is dissimilar to the typical tradition of first century Judaism or the early Christian Church because Jesus was unique in himself.

It is generally believed that from the 1950s we can see some works that are considered part of the third quest, although whether the third quest exists is open to dispute.⁸ The results of the third quest are diverse. Clive Marsh summarizes in his own words Craig Evans’ point on the presuppositions of the third quest: “a more positive assessment of the miracle traditions, a less negatively critical approach to the historical reliability of the canonical Gospels, and an absence of ideological interests.”⁹ Charles Wanamaker states,

While the Second Quest, begun by Käsemann, sought to provide a basis for connecting the teaching and activity of the historical Jesus to the figure of Christ as believed in the earliest Christian community, a number of recent studies have focused on the rediscovery of Jesus as a human figure within the social, economic, and political world of first century colonial Palestine.¹⁰

⁷Ernst. Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Naperville, IL: Alec R Allenson, 1964), 25. Quoted in Thompson, *The Jesus Debate: A Survey and Synthesis*, 99.

⁸Clive Marsh, “Quests of the Historical Jesus in New Historicist Perspective,” *Biblical Interpretation* 5, no. 4 (1997): 403.

⁹*Ibid.*, 405. Cf. Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries: Comparative Studies* (Leiden: Brill Fiorenza, E. S. 1995), 8-12, 46.

¹⁰Charles Wanamaker, “The Historical Jesus Today: A Reconsideration of the Foundation of Christology,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 94 (1996): 4.

These social, economic and political concerns are the main foci of the third quest.¹¹ However, the first two of the three presuppositions mentioned by Craig Evans favor the possibility of discovering a reliable account of the historical Jesus.

A Brief Reflection on the Historical Jesus Quests

Although some of the results of the historical Jesus quests are famous at least in academic circles, they are criticized in many ways. The first quest “leads to the kind of violent misreading so amply documented in the liberal ‘Quest for the Jesus of History’: in a Jesus made after the image of the researcher himself.”¹² Schweitzer stated plainly, “What it (the period of the older rationalism) is looking for is not the past, but itself in the past.”¹³ The historical Jesus does not receive a genuine search in the first quest.

In the second quest, the famous double dissimilarity “presuppose that [Jesus’] ‘authentic’ teaching must be ‘unique,’ ” however, Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew and his teaching would have touched his native religion Judaism, and the church’s teaching would have related to his memory since the church grew up with it.¹⁴ Although the principle of double dissimilarity is problematic, the genuine attitude toward the historicity of Jesus is a strength that offers to the from below approach.

The third quest has resulted in more objective portraits of Jesus, even though the portraits remain fragmentary and inadequate.¹⁵ However, on the other hand, the possibility of having a reliable account of the historical Jesus enhances the approach of Christology from below. The third quest shows no ideological interests; rather, it looks for a Jesus as a social reformer. This indicates one of the weaknesses of the from below approach: the discovery of historical fact does not naturally lead to the Christ of faith.

¹¹Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen in his book *Christology: A Global Introduction* (106-107) summarizes the third quest into three main varieties: the radical like the Jesus Seminar, the conservative tradition represented by C. F. D. Moule who wrote *The Origin of Christology*, and the new perspective which seeks to place Jesus in the context of the religious, social, economic and political world of Judaism.

¹²Rock Kereszty, “Toward A Contemporary Christology,” *Crisis in Christology: Essays in Quest of Resolution*. ed. William R. Farmer (Livonia, MI: Truth, Inc., 1995), 337.

¹³Schweitzer, 28.

¹⁴Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 6.

¹⁵Kereszty, 348.

Arguments for Christology From Below

Generally speaking, in our contemporary atmosphere, the earthly Jesus as the starting point of Christology is preferred. This is mainly because: first, Christology from above goes hand in hand with the presupposition of Jesus' divinity and it is expressed in an abstract, concise way, which does not fit well in the contemporary world; second, Christology from below starts from the concrete Jesus and moves toward the Christ of faith, which is a logical and beneficial procedure.¹⁶ In contrast, Robert A. Krieg describes the approach of Christology from above:

Christology from above begins with the second Person of the Trinity, with the preexisting divine Word in relation to the Father and the Holy Spirit. This methodology then proceeds "downward" to the Incarnation, to the event in which the Word or Logos became man in Jesus Christ. Finally, this approach to Christology draws our attention to how the Word made flesh suffered and died for our sins, and then rose from the dead and return to God's "right hand."¹⁷

According to Erickson, James D. G. Dunn, addressing Philippians 2:6-11, which describes the preexistence of Christ, "argues that this straightforward interpretation rests on the assumption that Christ's preexistence was taken for granted by Paul's readers; it was, then, not a conclusion from the available data, but a presupposition already accepted."¹⁸ Although Paul's readers might presume Christ's preexistence, many, if not most, people in our contemporary world do not have that presupposition. Therefore, taking the second person of the

¹⁶This is my summary from many scholars' opinion. These two reasons are so general that it is difficult to credit them under a specific scholar. According to Erickson, Wolfhart Pannenberg gives three reasons of not doing Christology from above. Two of them are similar to what I summarize here. Pannenberg's third reason is that Christology from above is possible for God but not for human beings because of human limitations. See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 684-685.

¹⁷Robert A. Krieg, "Who Do You Say I Am? Christology: What it is & why it matters," *Commonweal* 129, no. 6 (2002): 12-13.

¹⁸James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 114. Quoted in Millard J. Erickson, *The World Became Flesh* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 474.

Trinity as the starting point of Christology is not adequate in the contemporary context.

Many times Christology stays at the form of dogma, which is the fundamental but abstract doctrine of the Christian faith. G. C. Berkouwer discusses whether the Chalcedonian Creed is the terminal point of Christology. According to Berkouwer, Honig says, “the doctrine of the Person of the Mediator, as it has been formulated by the church, is incapable of further development.”¹⁹ Berkouwer responds to the issue, “For the Scriptures are richer than any pronouncement of the church, no matter how excellent it be and how faithfully it has been formulated in subjection to the Word of God.”²⁰ In other words, church dogma lacks the riches found in the Scriptures. A dogma “can only be adequate in its adjustment of certain abstract concepts.”²¹ If the focus is on abstract dogma, the concrete contents in the Scriptures may be underestimated. When the concrete contents of the Scriptures are somewhat underestimated or even ignored, the riches of the Scriptures are actually lost. In our contemporary world, due to modern developments and lifestyles, people are inclined to work and understand in concrete and analytic forms rather than in a compositive manner. Abstract dogma, therefore, cannot be easily grasped by modern people. This discussion does not depreciate or deny the presupposition of Christ’s preexistence and the abstract language of dogma but points out their inadequacy in constructing Christology in the contemporary world. The formula was not wrong but limited to its own sphere of thought; therefore it needs to find new expression to suit new circumstances.²²

Christology from below is in opposition to Christology from above: it starts from the earthly Jesus and moves toward the Christ of faith.²³ The from below approach has been advocated primarily due to an understanding of human experience. Thompson offers a reasonable statement, “For better or worse we exist in a present moving into the future, and the only way in which the Christian past can become

¹⁹A. G. Honig, *De person van den Middelaar in de nieuwere Deutsche dogmatiek*, 1910, 74. Quoted in G. C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954), 87.

²⁰G. C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954), 91.

²¹Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Evelyn Whitehead, 1954), 126.

²²*Ibid.*, 131.

²³Whether starting from the earthly Jesus can arrive at the Christ of faith is another question.

contemporary for us is if it finds an echo within our own experience.”²⁴ Through our Christian experience today we may understand better the experiences of Jesus and his first disciples. In the other direction, the experiences of Jesus and his disciples may shed great light on our Christian understanding today – they tell us the past and what we can expect and experience today. The from below approach, which pays primary attention to the narratives of the historical Jesus, provides human beings a better understanding of Jesus.

Wolfhart Pannenberg makes a significant contribution to the from below approach in his book *Jesus - God and man*. For Pannenberg, the obvious reason of starting Christology from the earthly man Jesus, as Tokiyuki Nobuhara summarizes, is that “through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, God the Father has confirmed, legitimated, and verified Jesus’ earthly claim to authority.”²⁵ In other words, we can arrive at Jesus’ divinity only when we have seen the Easter event. As human beings, we observe God’s revelation in the process of human history.

Instead of emphasizing the legitimacy of a historical approach as Pannenberg does, Jon Sobrino, in his work *Christology at the Crossroad*, emphasizes the practical reasons of Christology from below: 1) starting from the historical Jesus maintains the concrete Christian faith and prevents it from turning into religion;²⁶ 2) the earthly Jesus revealed a very concrete path of “filiation”; human beings have been shown that path therefore can follow Jesus and become children of God.²⁷ Namely, people can become Jesus’ disciples when they can observe the vivid picture of how Jesus obeyed the Father rather than observe abstract and static dogmas. Dietrich Bonhoeffer highly valued the man Jesus as an example for Christian discipleship, “Just as Christ is Christ only in virtue of his suffering and rejection, so the disciple is a disciple only in so far as he shares his Lord’s suffering and rejection and crucifixion.”²⁸ While suffering and rejection is only

²⁴Thompson, *The Jesus Debate: A Survey and Synthesis*, 53.

²⁵Tokiyuki Nobuhara, “Analogia Actionis: A New Proposal for Christology ‘From Below,’” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 39, no. 4 (1984): 269.

²⁶Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (London: SCM Press, 1978), 275.

²⁷Ibid., 340. Although Sobrino uses “become children of God” here, in many other places of the book he emphasizes “become Jesus’ good disciples.”

²⁸Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Translated from the German *Nachfolge* first published by Chr. Kaiser Verlag Munchen by R. H. Fuller, with some revision by Irmgard Booth. London: SCM Press, 1959. First Touchstone edition, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 87.

part of Jesus' experience, the whole picture of the earthly Jesus as at least depicted in the New Testament gives people a concrete model and numerous inspirations for Christian living.

Dealing with the issue of the necessity of history for Christology, a scholar like Dale C. Allison downplays the role of history in the Christian faith. Allison emphasizes that faith does not need much history. He explains, "So if meaning is to stay after history has gone, the former cannot inevitably depend on the latter... The Synoptics are not primarily records of what Jesus actually said and did but collections of impressions."²⁹ Allison supports his point, "The larger the generalization and the more data upon which it is based, the greater our confidence; the more specific the detail and the fewer the data supporting it, the more room we have for doubt."³⁰ After trying to do justice to a general and blurred picture of Jesus, Allison casts a proposal saying that New Testament narratives are parables.³¹ Allison somewhat successfully proposes that Jesus' disciples and the New Testament writers were not able to remember every single detail of all events in the New Testament. However, since Jesus' disciples could still record what Jesus said and did, even though this might not be historically accurate, it is not a corollary to claim that New Testament narratives are theological parables, which inherently have no historical basis at all. The gospels were redacted according to theological concerns. However, this does not imply that the gospels are non-historical. Sobrino explains the danger of downplaying history in the Christian faith, "Whenever Christian faith focuses one-sidedly on the Christ of faith and wittingly or unwittingly forgets the historical Jesus, and to the extent it does that, it loses its specific structure as Christian faith and tends to turn into religion."³² By "turn into religion" Sobrino means turning into religion that has no concrete historical basis but is just a product of human reasoning. Christian faith should be "historical and real in the this-worldly sense rather than magical, superstitious, and gnostic."³³ Magical, superstitious and Gnostic belief is often associated with the abuse of imagination. Rational religions at best are just products of human wisdom. They may lead people to some kind of

²⁹Dale C. Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 35, 95.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 62.

³¹*Ibid.*, 66.

³²Sobrino, 275. See Sobrino's explanation of the difference between Christian faith and religion (275-278).

³³William M. Thompson, "'Distinct but Not Separate': Historical Research in the Study of Jesus and Christian Faith," *Horizons* 21, no. 1 (1994): 135.

extreme mental and intellectual satisfaction and depreciate historical basis. The Christian faith has basis in historical events such as Jesus' incarnation, actual resurrection, etc. Since God's revelation occurred in human history, seeking to interfere with the unfolding of historical truth is trying to stop the process of revelation.³⁴ Although we know history through limited available materials that we possess today, the truth of God is indeed revealed in history. The historical basis of faith shall not be downplayed just because we are not living in the past. Today will become tomorrow's past, but by no means will today be depreciated in the future. The from below approach, which pays much attention to the historical Jesus,³⁵ is at a vantage point to maintain the necessity of history for the Christian faith.

Weaknesses of Christology From Below

Christology from below has certain limitations when it is tied to historical study and history. Limitation is not necessarily weakness, but it can be considered a disadvantage. Allison elaborates how weak historical study is in pursuing the historical Jesus. He makes three strong points: 1) scholars³⁶ never have consensus on the results of their historical study on Jesus; 2) nobody including scholars can actually eliminate their personal predilection while doing historical study; 3) Jesus' disciples were not able to remember and then record what exactly Jesus said and did due to human limitation, therefore, the New Testament account of Jesus is not historically accurate.³⁷ The limitations of historical study can be seen in the quests for the historical Jesus.

The first limitation is the lack of a suitable standard for historical study. Explaining the modern method of gaining knowledge, Joseph Ratzinger says,

³⁴Paul Johnson, "An Historian Looks at Jesus" ed. Farmer, 28.

³⁵The historical Jesus and the gospels as historical records are not exactly the same thing. No matter the historical Jesus is studied based on the gospels or plus something else, it does not affect the point here: focus on the earthly man Jesus (as recorded in the gospels, if you may confine), therefore maintain the necessity of historical basis of the Christian faith.

³⁶Allison does not explain whether all scholars or scholars from certain branches do not have consensus.

³⁷Allison, 8-21, 53-78.

In the final analysis all that man could really know was what was repeatable, what he could put before his eyes at any time in an experiment. Everything that he can see only at second hand remains the past and, whatever proofs may be adduced, is not completely knowable. Thus the scientific method, which consists of a combination of mathematics (Descartes!) and devotion to the facts in the form of the repeatable experiment, appears to be the one real vehicle of reliable certainty.³⁸

Here Ratzinger addresses the modern methodology of gaining certain knowledge. Because history is unrepeatable and is not subject to experimentation, gaining any certain historical knowledge through the modern method is hopeless. However, because history is unrepeatable, it is a soft science and thus should not be proved according to the standard of modern hard science. Even so, it is not easy to define by what standard history should be proved. Not addressing the issue of what standard historical studies should employ, Martin Kahler states startlingly, “we have no sources for a biography of Jesus of Nazareth which measure up to the standard of contemporary historical science.”³⁹ Normally speaking, an active claim bears the burden of proof while a simply passive denial does not.⁴⁰ Introspectively, I would say that this saying of Kahler does not bear the burden of proof. Because the New Testament is not a historical document that mainly intends to record historical facts we do not see the whole picture of the historical Jesus. Jesus’ first disciples saw a larger picture of the historical Jesus.

This gives way to the question of how much history do we need and how much do we want. From a conservative standpoint, it is correct to say that the New Testament narratives on Jesus are sufficient for the Christian faith. However, if we saw a bigger picture of the historical Jesus, would we still understand Jesus Christ in the same way or to the same level as we do now? Even Today we come to different understandings and theologies based on the same New Testament

³⁸Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 27.

³⁹Martin Kahler, *The so-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, Translated and ed. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 48.

⁴⁰This is better considered to be a legal principle rather than an academic opinion that I learned when I was in law school. Even as an academic opinion, it is already well-known to be adopted as legal principle. The situation does not allow me to trace the source, which is my legal textbook in Chinese version and in China.

narratives of Jesus. Thus, there is always an impetus to discover a larger or more authentic picture of the historical Jesus, or a deeper understanding based on the New Testament narratives. Martin Kahler and C. F. D. Moule, through their works *The so-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Kahler) and *The Origin of Christology* (Moule) indicate the conservatives' interest in an authentic account of the historical Jesus. The result of their and other conservatives' work on the historical Jesus may be endless debates.⁴¹

The third historical Jesus quest has no ideological interest but this can result in a trap because this quest is only interested in the human figure Jesus without paying heed to the fact that he was and is proclaimed as Christ. In response to this, Martin Kahler states, "The truly historic element in any great figure is the discernible personal influence which he exercises upon later generations," and for Jesus, his influence is the faith of his disciples.⁴² In other words, if the historical Jesus has nothing to do with the Christ of faith who has impacted history for centuries, if Jesus was just, at best, a social reformer (and a failed one) in the first century Palestinian world, why bother to study such an insignificant figure? Jesus impacts history as someone who was and is believed to be the only Lord and Savior of mankind. Historical study will be caught in a meaningless trap when it looks only for historical facts.

A further limitation of historical study is its failure to connect the Jesus of history to faith. Although I discussed earlier that faith must have a basis in history, history in itself does not naturally lead to faith. Ratzinger distinguishes belief (faith) from fact (history) and says that belief cannot be laid on the table as fact.⁴³ Ratzinger goes further to say,

Belief or faith is not knowledge in the sense of practical knowledge and its particular kind of calculability. It can never become that, and in the last analysis it can only make itself ridiculous if it tries to adopt its methods. But the reverse is true too: calculable practical knowledge is limited by its very nature to the apparent, to what functions, and does not

⁴¹Debates can be among the liberals, among the conservatives even though they share many basic consensuses, and between the liberals and the conservatives.

⁴²Kahler, 63.

⁴³Ratzinger, 40.

represent the way in which to find truth itself, which by its very method it has renounced.⁴⁴

So history does not inherently generate faith. In fact, people commonly come to different conclusions based on the same phenomenon. When Jesus cast out demons, the Pharisees said, “he casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons” (Mat. 9:34 NASB). When Peter confessed that Jesus was the Son of the living God, Jesus replied, “flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Mat. 16:17b NASB). Christology from below, while focusing on historical fact as the starting point, may not pay enough attention to explaining the leap from historical fact to faith.⁴⁵ While historical study aids us in looking for the earthly Jesus, Christology from below is in need of a divine aid for the leap of faith.⁴⁶ Actually, even Jesus’ first believers did not encounter the earthly Jesus with a blank mind; because of their background in Judaic dogma and the Old Testament, when they saw Jesus claimed to forgive sin, they connected it with God as the only One who forgives sin.⁴⁷ Those using the modern from below approach do not normally have a Judaic background. Thus, if the from below approach does not take Jesus’ divinity as a presupposition and if modern people cannot rely on divine inspiration, they are greatly disadvantaged compared to Jesus’ first believers and unable to connect their knowledge of history to faith.

A final weakness of historical study is that no one can actually eliminate personal presupposition while doing it.⁴⁸ One’s presupposition may predetermine the result of the study: Christology from below will move to conclude either Jesus was a mere man or that he was the God and man Jesus Christ. As mentioned earlier, the nature of historical study and history is the objective limitation in Christology from below, but personal presupposition may become the subjective weakness. For example, personal presupposition determines how one perceives the miracle narratives in the New Testament. Since there is

⁴⁴Ibid., 46.

⁴⁵For example, Nobuhara Tokiyuki points out that Pannenberg “does not analyze the content of the Easter event itself in relation to the disciples’ confession of Jesus as the Christ.” In other words, Pannenberg does not explain what made the disciples’ leap from the historical Easter event to faith. See Tokiyuki Nobuhara, “Analogía Actionis: A New Proposal for Christology ‘From Below’” 273.

⁴⁶Surely, besides divine aid (God’s initial work), man’s choice of accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior is needed.

⁴⁷Kay Fountain, Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, 2012.

⁴⁸Allison, 8-21, 53-78.

no way to prove the miracles scientifically, even though they were witnessed by multiple eyewitnesses, one's presupposition determines whether he/she accepts these multiple eyewitness accounts.

The From Above Approach

Arguments for Christology From Above

Christology from above was the dominant approach in the Church for a long time in the past when the question of the historical Jesus was not in hot debate. Emil Brunner plays an important role in supporting Christology from above in modern times. He claims, "Christian faith springs only out of the witness to Christ of the preached message and the written word of the Scriptures. The historical picture is indeed included in the latter ...; but this picture itself is not the basis of knowledge."⁴⁹ With this as the prior point, "inevitably the preference for the Synoptic Gospels and for the actual words of Jesus, which was the usual position of the last generation, will disappear."⁵⁰ Erickson summarizes another point made by Brunner: to know "Christ in the flesh" (God incarnate) is to know something more than "Christ after the flesh" (the Christ known by the historiographer with the method of research).⁵¹ In other words, faith is beyond observation of facts. To Brunner, Christian faith is not based on historical facts. Faith does not come from the historical Jesus event. Rather, faith comes from the image of Jesus Christ preached by the Church. Therefore, starting Christology from the second person of the Trinity is preferred.

Ratzinger advocates the from above approach from an "ontological" perspective:

The real being of the man Jesus remains static behind the event of "being-God" and "being-Lord", like the being of any man, fundamentally untouched by the event and only the chance kindling-point at which it comes to pass that for some one as he hears the Word an actual encounter with God himself becomes reality.⁵²

⁴⁹Brunner, 158.

⁵⁰Ibid., 172.

⁵¹Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 683.

⁵²Ratzinger, 169.

Ratzinger goes further, “Phenomenology and existential analysis, helpful as they are, cannot suffice for Christology.”⁵³ In other words, although historical facts and studies are helpful, they are not sufficient for Christology. The from below approach does not appreciate the “ontological” identity of Jesus as Christ from the very beginning. Because Jesus’ “ontological” identity exists from the very outset, the from above approach advocates starting Christology from Jesus’ divinity. Since Jesus’ divinity is accepted as a presupposition, the from above approach is committed to a genuine supernaturalism, which is sometimes missing in Christology from below.⁵⁴

Besides Brunner and Ratzinger, some other scholars define or argue for the from above approach from other angles. Starting Christology from above needs a doctrine or dogma to start with since Christ’s divinity is expressed in a form of doctrine or dogma. Sobrino says, “A dogma is a doxological formulation that marks the culmination of a whole process of Christian living and Christian reflective thinking.”⁵⁵ In the early church history, dogmas emerged due to the living and reflective thinking of the church fathers, and the dogmas were based on the living and reflective thinking of Jesus’ first disciples. When a dogma emerges, it plays a role that cannot be replaced by specific Christian experience and thinking. In the biblical context, a dogma plays a role that cannot be replaced by specific narratives in the Bible. When a dogma functions, it does not appear in a form of process such as historical stories. Concrete stories, or thinking, do not formulate and systematize the Christian belief into rational or confessional concepts that bring certain benefits like “vivid realization, effectiveness, apprehension of width of scope, and survival.”⁵⁶ For example, the doctrine of Trinity is the result of systematizing many concrete narratives concerning Jesus and many sayings about God and the Holy Spirit. Once the doctrine of Trinity is formed, it gives a rational understanding of the triune God that cannot be concluded from a specific narrative of Jesus or a specific saying regarding God or the Holy Spirit. By the same token, the doctrine that Jesus was both fully God and fully man is the result of systematizing many narratives concerning Jesus, and specific narratives do not plainly state this doctrine. Therefore, dogma can function in its own way and definitely

⁵³Ibid., 170.

⁵⁴Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 688.

⁵⁵Sobrino, 324. Although pointing out some benefits of the from above approach, Sobrino in the book argues for a from below approach.

⁵⁶Whitehead, 57, 122.

bring certain benefits. The Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Creed are the examples of dogma that make Christ the second person of the Trinity as the starting point of Christology. If we look into only concrete stories about Jesus without consulting dogma or creed, we lose certain benefits. Since Christology from above starts with dogma, the advantage of dogma is used by the from above approach.

Sobrino explains that some Christian doctrines are the products of early Christian apologists' combat against Hellenistic philosophers.⁵⁷ Likewise, doctrines and dogmas are the products as well as the weapons of the Church in defending its belief against heresy throughout history. When doctrines and dogmas are used as weapons for defending the Christian faith, they do not focus on the concrete stories of Jesus the earthly man. Rather, they take on the form of philosophy in order to function effectively for certain purposes.

Weaknesses of the From Above Approach

Erickson points out two weaknesses of Christology from above: 1) the substantiality of the belief is not clear and not highly valued; 2) "without an empirical referent, the Christ of faith is somewhat unreal and vague."⁵⁸ To elaborate his first point, Christology from above often does not make clear and highly value who Jesus was and what he said and did in the past. We can have faith without being an eye witness of the earthly Jesus. People may obtain faith through the preached message of the Church and the Scriptures today. However, we have the preached message and the Scriptures today because there was a historical Jesus event. If there was no historical Jesus event, in other words, no God incarnate, we would not have Jesus Christ the Mediator today. To Erickson's second point, Sobrino states a similar opinion which says that central dogmas "deal with realities such as God, creation, and grace, which are not comprehensible in themselves and which cannot be adequately grasped by human understanding, even if the human being in question is a believer."⁵⁹ Without a vivid example of the earthly Jesus, people cannot explain why some dogmas and doctrines are what they are. What is more, the presupposition of Jesus' divinity is not taken for granted in our contemporary context.

⁵⁷Sobrino, 287.

⁵⁸Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 688.

⁵⁹Sobrino, 321.

“Access to the Christ of faith comes through our following of the historical Jesus.”⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer states, “Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.”⁶¹ This means that to be true believers we must obey and follow Jesus. However, unless we know how Jesus lived his earthly life, we cannot really obey and follow him and become true believers. The from above approach is not sufficient for identifying common people with the man Jesus because it does not pay much attention to what the historical Jesus said and did. It cannot remind people that Jesus is our high priest “who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15 NASB). Without being identified with the man Jesus, people can hardly appreciate that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8 NASB). Thus, the from above approach does not provide a sufficient account of an earthly Jesus for Christian discipleship, which was commanded by Jesus (Mat. 28:19). Because of these deficiencies, the from above approach cannot provide the passion that a dynamic Christian community and individuals as well should have.

In Part I of this article, both the From Below and the From Above Christological views have been discussed, including the arguments for each view as well as some of the weaknesses of these two perspectives. The quests for the historical Jesus were also included in the From Below discussion. In Part II, alternatives to each of these two views will be presented along with my solution for constructing Christology in the contemporary context and a suggestion for the Christology of Chinese house churches. Final thoughts for both Parts I and II will be presented in the Conclusion.

⁶⁰Ibid., 305.

⁶¹Bonhoeffer, 63.