

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

Part II

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The Search for an Alternative

Besides the two approaches discussed above, some scholars argue for an alternative approach. It is commonly known that the “from below” approach stresses a “functional” process while the “from above” approach is an “ontological” perspective, which views Jesus Christ according to his “ontological” identity despite what he said and did.¹ According to Erickson, Reginald H. Fuller insists that in the early Jewish stage the reference to Jesus was primarily “functional”; only in the Gentile mission an “ontic” statement began to emerge.² However, the “functional” language assumes “ontological” realities.³ Ratzinger states explicitly, “The person of Jesus is his teaching, and his teaching is he himself.”⁴ This suggests that we cannot divide Jesus’ work and his person, or divide his function and his identity. Regardless of what Jesus said and did, Jesus’ “ontological” identity implies that he was God incarnate even though mankind might not know this from the beginning. Thompson makes a point that reveals the intertwined relationship between the functional and ontological:

¹The idea and the terms “functional” and “ontological” are shared by many scholars. For example, Maurice Casey says, “John saw an ontological rather than merely functional difference between Jesus and other people, and its significance is brought out particularly well at John 5.17ff” Maurice, Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd.; Louisville: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1991), 23. See more examples of “functional” and “ontological” below.

²Reginald H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Scribner, 1965), 247-48. Quoted in Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, 509.

³William R. Baker, “The Chalcedon Definition, Pauline Christology, and the Postmodern Challenge of ‘From Below’ Christology,” *Stone- Campbell Journal* 9, no. 1 (2006): 77.

⁴Ratzinger, 151.

Incidentally, one major objection to the use of the categories of the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of faith” is precisely that it can foster the kind of separationism that Chalcedon wants to avoid. The categories of “christology from below” and “from above” can suffer from the same deficit. One can all too easily gain the impression that the Jesus of history is not in union with the incarnate Word.⁵

While realizing the unity of the Jesus of history and the incarnate Word, Ratzinger elaborates the tension between them:

The two fundamental structural forms of “incarnation” and “cross” theology reveal polarities which cannot be surmounted and combined in a neat-looking synthesis without the loss of the crucial points in each; they must remain present as polarities which mutually correct each other and only by complementing each other point towards the whole.⁶

The above-mentioned statements both explain the complicated relationship between the “functional” and the “ontological” and provide insights for constructing a Christology that tries to consult both the “functional” and the “ontological.” However, in trying to harmonize both approaches, the “ontological” actually gains the upper hand because the result of a steady combination is usually ontological since the functional process can be absorbed into the ontological end. On the other hand, in a from below process, without Jesus’ divinity as presupposition, any combination of the functional and the ontological is impossible. Therefore, the effort of trying to combine both approaches cannot do justice to those who insist on doing Christology from below and do not take Jesus’ divinity as presupposition from the outset.

Erickson cogently explains an alternative approach: “The content of the kerygma serves as a hypothesis to interpret and integrate the data supplied by inquiry into the historical Jesus.” This model follows “neither faith alone nor historical reason alone, but both together in an intertwined, mutually dependent, simultaneously progressing fashion.”⁷ In this model, the kerygmatic Christ is the key that unlocks the historical Jesus, and Jesus’ earthly life supports the claim that he is the

⁵Thompson, “‘Distinct but Not Separate’: Historical Research in the Study of Jesus and Christian Faith,” 134.

⁶Ratzinger, 171.

⁷Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 690.

Son of God.⁸ Erickson's alternative is helpful because it somewhat avoids the two approaches' weaknesses and absorbs their strengths. However, his alternative is Christology from above. It is a from above approach which remembers to include some ingredients of the from below approach, in contrast to the usual from above approach which forgets some from below ingredients. Tilley insists that we need both approaches. The problem is not where "Christologists" start; rather, the real issue is mutually working out the plots of Jesus' "ascending stories" and "descending stories."⁹ Only by combining them can we properly describe the real Jesus Christ. Tilley brings great insight in this issue. However, he does not elaborate sufficiently his point in his two-page article. I will describe this insight with my own words and understanding in the following section.

A Solution for Constructing Christology in the Contemporary Context

The debate of the starting point of Christology is concerned with which approach we can and should choose today. Tilley states, the distinction of from below/from above "describes the plots of the Christological stories as we tell them, but not the genesis or the source of those stories."¹⁰ There was a time in history that no one on earth knew that Jesus was Christ the divine Son of God and the second person of the Trinity. Jesus' first disciples came to acknowledge his divinity only after they knew the man Jesus for some time. The starting point of Christology becomes an option-issue only when we discuss it in our contemporary perspective. Jesus' first disciples did not have the options of choosing the starting point of Christology that we have today. In light of this, the earthly Jesus was the starting point of Christology historically and logically. It is like a civil airplane that flies between two airports A and B. It had a historical starting terminal A during its maiden flight. After that, it keeps flying between A and B. Either A or B can be considered the starting point of a specific flight. This is the case in our contemporary perspective. Integration of the two approaches is needed because both have strengths and weaknesses. However, integration does not mean one approach replaces the other

⁸Ibid., 691.

⁹Terrence Tilley, "Why We Need Both Stories," *Commonweal* 129, no. 6 (March 22, 2002): 16.

¹⁰Ibid.

like Erickson suggests.¹¹ Each approach has its legitimate role.¹² Because the maiden Christology from below was done, and the New Testament and the Christian faith have been handed down through generations, we are able to inherit a Christian legacy; therefore, Christology from above is available and valuable today. Regardless of the diverse versions of the historical Jesus, the authenticity of the New Testament and a sufficient account of the historical Jesus are at least held by conservatives. Therefore, Christology from below is available today.

The analogy of civil airplane indicates that except for the maiden flight, each flight's starting point is established by the airplane's last flight. Whenever we start Christology either from the historical Jesus or from the Christ of faith, we always need to consider the other terminal as the place where we come from. We should not forget the process that establishes our present starting point. They are correlated and neither can replace the other. Starting from the Christ of faith needs the earthly man Jesus to be comprehensive, and starting from the earthly man Jesus needs divine aid to reach the Christ of faith.¹³ Under certain situations, we may choose one of them as the starting point just because of the specific needs of that situation. At the same time, we are free and able to move from the other direction to support our situational needs.

When doing Christology from below, we are not doing the "maiden flight" as Jesus' first disciples once did. The presupposition of Jesus' divinity may already be there when we start with the historical Jesus. According to Erickson, Norman Perrin claims the idea that "Early Christian preaching . . . was interested in historical reminiscence [is an assumption] for which we have absolutely no evidence. The opposite view, that it was theologically motivated, is the one for which we have evidence."¹⁴ This judgment can be backed up by Wilhelm Wrede's work *The Messianic Secret in the Gospels*, in which Wrede argues, according to Thompson, "that Mark, far from being a direct link with the historical Jesus, represented an elaborate theological interpretation of Jesus."¹⁵ In light of this, even if we do not take Jesus' divinity as a presupposition, the New Testament narratives of the

¹¹See footnotes 7 and 8.

¹²Cf. Ratzinger's statement at footnote 6.

¹³This is my additional description on Tilley's point. See footnote 9.

¹⁴Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 24. Quoted in Erickson, *The World Became Flesh*, 387.

¹⁵Wilhelm Wrede, *The Messianic Secret in the Gospels* (Cambridge: T. and T. Clark, 1971). Paraphrased in Thompson, *The Jesus Debate: A Survey and Synthesis*, 96.

historical Jesus were written by authors who already had Jesus' divinity in mind and wrote the narratives accordingly.

Our presupposition may determine what kind of from below approach we exercise: in order to find out whether we can move from the historical Jesus to the divine Christ, or just to develop the benefits of the from below approach. Without Jesus' divinity as a presupposition, one is tempted to find more historical materials beyond the New Testament narratives, or to distort the New Testament narratives in order to demythologize them.¹⁶ Different presuppositions and motivations can result in different versions of the historical Jesus. The results of the debate on the authenticity of the New Testament narratives can lead to totally different conclusions: Christian faith, no faith or another faith. Those who have genuine belief in the authenticity of the New Testament narratives, like Pannenberg, need to explain sufficiently the divine aid in the leap from historical fact to faith. For those who take Jesus' divinity as a presupposition, the purpose of the from below approach is to develop the benefits of it: being identified with the historical man Jesus and cultivating Christian discipleship. This is the greatest benefit for the Church and therefore should be employed frequently.

To sum up the above statements, Jesus' first disciples witnessed the historical starting point of Christology, i.e. the earthly man Jesus, and in the contemporary context we can and we should do both Christology from above and from below.

A Suggestion for Christology in the Chinese Context

As stated earlier, the starting point of Christology became an issue when the quests for the historical Jesus emerged and developed, and some conservative scholars responded with a positive view toward a from below approach. It is noted that the issue is mainly discussed in countries where Christian scholarship has developed to a high level. It has not become a concern in China, where the churches do not have the available scholarship and ability to participate in a sophisticated theological discussion. However, this does not mean that the issue is irrelevant to the churches in China. Rather, the issue might come as an opportunity for the Chinese churches to develop their Christology.

¹⁶For example, Rudolf Bultmann is famous for his demythologization of the Bible.

While we have not seen Christians, especially in house churches in China, thinking about Christology in the framework of Western scholars, they do have their understanding and emphasis on Christology. Chinese house churches have gone through decades of religious persecution. Although the level of this persecution has shifted time after time, generally speaking, it has been a constant struggle which in one way or another affects house church Christians' understanding of faith. While house churches have been Christocentric, they mostly identify themselves with Jesus in His suffering for the kingdom of God. In their long experience of suffering which includes being forced to leave home, difficult living conditions, imprisonment, physical torture and even martyrdom, they understand Jesus as the suffering servant who was persecuted and killed but now inspires and strengthens them. They consider themselves blessed to partake in Jesus' suffering for the kingdom of God.¹⁷ In this sense, house church Christians might be considered as having a from below mindset. At the same time, this from below mindset comes with a presupposition of Jesus' divinity and His relation to the Father since in their experience of persecution and suffering they confess "Jesus is Lord," and they claim to have power from the Holy Spirit in their suffering.¹⁸

Although house churches are still illegal, the situation has gradually changed since around the year 2000. Religious persecution has generally declined as the Communist government gains a more positive understanding about house churches and now holds a relatively lenient religious policy. This is more obvious in some urban areas since city government officials are more open-minded than rural government officials. The situation of house churches now in urban areas is a new situation. Their church members usually have better education, a relatively open mind, more social contact, greater aspiration and much less persecution than rural house church Christians have. In such a relatively favorable time, urban house churches grow fast.

However, house churches face new challenges in urban areas. While the good news of salvation has not been widely heard and accepted by the massive Chinese population, wickedness has dramatically increased. The market economy entices people into materialism and the Communist ideology has actually been abandoned in people's daily lives. Urban people are living in moral deterioration

¹⁷Wen-jie Xie and Zhi-ming Yuan, *The Cross: Jesus in China* (Rohnert Park, CA: China Soul for Christ Foundation, 2003), the Third Episode: the Bitter Cup.

¹⁸Luke Wesley, *The Church in China: Persecuted, Pentecostal, and Powerful* (Baguio, Philippines: APTS Press, 2004), 42.

and social corruption, having no committed faith or religion. In the contrast between hopeless moral deterioration and the power of salvation, Jesus could be portrayed as a great redeemer who comes and cures the long lasting and hopeless moral disease of the people. It would be the great task of urban house churches to introduce Jesus as the redeemer who redeems the people from their sin. Since personal redemption does not deal with the massive effect and destruction of social sin in urban areas, it would be an imperative but difficult task for house churches to provide an understanding of how Jesus would redeem and cure the people from their personal sin and social corruption. When Jesus is emphasized as the redeemer, the Christology of house churches no longer just reflects a mainly “from below” mindset. Jesus, as the redeemer of mankind, suffered and died on the cross on sinner’s behalf, and this redemption is efficacious because Jesus is the Son of God rather than any mere man. When house church Christians perceive Jesus primarily as the redeemer, they have moved from an emphasis on the suffering servant, a vivid from-below figure, to a combination both human and divine.

Besides Jesus the redeemer, house churches are increasingly concerned about the Christ of faith which has led to a focus on Church unity, evangelism and missions. The Christ of faith could also be called the cosmic Christ in the sense that this Christ of faith, or cosmic Christ, is understood as for all people, all churches and all nations in all areas. The movement in this direction can be seen from some of the top house church network leaders’ meetings, as house churches start to realize a cosmic Christ who also has concern for other churches.¹⁹ Besides church unity, house churches have a great concern for the people of China as they believe that Jesus shed His blood for the Chinese. After years of itinerant ministry throughout the vast areas of China, house church leaders realize that it is God’s good will for them to scatter in order to spread the Gospel, and they cite “Jesus is Lord” as a common confession for themselves and for the millions of unbelievers in China.²⁰ Another impetus that drives house churches’ understanding of a cosmic Christ is their zeal for missions. The Back to Jerusalem Movement is a well-known vision proclaimed by house churches as

¹⁹A house church network meeting in 1998 is mentioned by Luke Wesley in *The Church in China: Persecuted, Pentecostal, and Powerful*, 48.

²⁰Wen-jie Xie and Zhi-ming Yuan, *The Cross: Jesus in China*, the Third Episode: the Bitter Cup.

their common vision.²¹ This vision expresses the idea that Chinese people will take the responsibility of bringing the gospel back to Jerusalem, which would be the last journey of the gospel on the earth. House churches want to focus on a cosmic Christ who intends for the gospel, after moving around Europe, North America, Latin America and Africa, to reach its birthplace in Asia.

However, there are unsolved problems in house churches' understanding of a cosmic Christ. House churches, having more connections with one another, have not had reconciliation with three-self churches nor have they yet formed a clear and strategic understanding of whether or not and how the Church of Christ would include three-self churches. With the passion of evangelizing urban Chinese, house churches have to explain how the redemptive Jesus, and the cosmic Christ, actually redeems people from their personal sin and social corruption. However, being influenced by the past experience of severe persecution, many house church Christians hold a generally passive attitude towards social involvement and cultural transformation. They do not appear to understand how the cosmic Christ, i.e. the Christ of faith, would dialogue with their Chinese culture and society. Reflecting on the passive attitude, the Back to Jerusalem Movement, though indicating house churches' kingdom mindset, is limited in the realm of spreading the gospel to more peoples and has not resulted in a Christology which would tell how the cosmic Christ deals with other cultures and religions.

For these reasons, house churches are facing unsolved problems in their understanding of the cosmic Christ. Despite these problems, it is likely that increased numbers of educated and open-minded Christians and resources in a more open environment will help enable house church Christians to deal with the unsolved problems. In this way, in due time, the cosmic Christ, i.e., the Christ of faith, may become their frequent starting point of Christology. By frequently addressing the Christ of faith, house churches would have a better starting point to dialogue with other religions, philosophy, ideology and social groups and therefore have a stronger impact on culture and society. Meanwhile, house churches should continue the emphasis of being identified with the suffering Jesus. This emphasis would help house churches to maintain the beneficial element of the from below approach: edifying the church by learning from the suffering Jesus.

²¹David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2003), 192.

Conclusion

The current Christological debates pay major attention to which approach should replace the other, or which approach should be dominant, or how to integrate the two approaches. If the discussion is limited to “what we teach today,” we may never convincingly solve the issue. Tilley points to “the genesis of those stories.”²² The man Jesus, initially known by his first disciples, was the historical starting point of all stories and doctrines that we have today. This does justice to the historical beginning of Jesus Christ and at the same time leaves the issue of what we teach today open for discussion. Thus, the historically legitimate starting point is settled, and what we do about Christology today does not affect that historical starting point.

Today we start Christology either from the Christ of faith or the earthly Jesus. However, we do not have to exclusively stay with one of them for long. In preaching or oral conversation, the earthly Jesus may follow the Christ of faith within a minute and vice versa. Thus, starting from one or the other bears little significance in Christian practice. In academic work, in some cases we may need to elucidate one of them (Christ or the earthly Jesus) sufficiently before going into the other. However, in the whole framework, the most important issue is how we integrally describe the “ascending and descending”²³ Jesus Christ. Which one to start with becomes less important. In any case, we can start with one and decide how long we need to stay there before moving to the other, but the goal is to describe Jesus Christ well in order to meet the needs in specific situation.

This is also true for the Chinese context. While an emphasis on the suffering Jesus may give house church Christians a from-below mindset, the Christ of faith is becoming a rising concern as house churches grow and face unsolved problems. By basing the starting point of Christology on specific situations, the from below and from above approach could be integrated. In this way Chinese house churches may work hard on the Christ of faith in dealing with their culture and society and at the same time, maintain their emphasis on the suffering Jesus as a way of edifying the Church.

²²See footnote 10.

²³See footnote 10.

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