

The
Person
of Christ;
An Introduction

STEPHEN J. WELLUM



SHORT STUDIES *in*
SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Edited by Graham A. Cole & Oren R. Martin

“In harmony with the Bible and Christian tradition, Stephen Wellum has provided us with a robust defense of a high Christology, one ‘from above,’ which is desperately needed in our day of confusion and groundless speculation about the identity of Christ. This work shows us biblically and theologically why the church must affirm the full deity and full humanity of Christ. A five-star rating!”

Michael A. G. Haykin, Chair and Professor of Church History, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Jesus’s pressing question to his disciples ‘But who do you say that I am?’ remains as urgent as ever. In contrast to modern historical critics who ‘go low’ in their quest for the historical Jesus, Stephen Wellum ‘goes high,’ engaging Christology ‘from above’ in order to identify Jesus as the Christ. He rightly views Jesus’s person and work in the interpretive framework of the Bible’s storyline and the tradition of historic orthodoxy to which the faithful reading of Scripture has given rise.”

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Stephen Wellum’s study of the person of Christ is the first I recommend on the subject. His grasp of the historical, theological, and exegetical issues is firm, and his exposition is precise, clear, and contemporary—just what you want in a Christology.”

Fred G. Zaspel, Executive Editor, Books at a Glance; Pastor, Reformed Baptist Church, Franconia, Pennsylvania

“Stephen Wellum distills years of reflection and scholarly writing on Christology into an easy-to-read form. In brief compass, he leads the reader through the biblical foundations for the doctrine of Christ’s person and work and then through the historical debates in which the language of Christological orthodoxy was forged and refined. There is deep material here, but Wellum has a gift for expressing even the most subtle of theological issues with clarity and conciseness.”

Carl R. Trueman, Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies, Grove City College

“To this day, there is no shortage of answers to Jesus’s question ‘Who do you say that I am?’ That is why Stephen Wellum’s *The Person of Christ* is sorely needed. Wellum offers the church a vital resource to help us regain a biblical and orthodox understanding of the person of Christ. If you want to grow and help others grow in the knowledge of Jesus, pick up this book.”

Juan R. Sanchez, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas; author, *The Leadership Formula*

“Clearly written, biblically driven, and historically grounded, this volume paints a theologically faithful portrait of Jesus. What could be more important for the church?”

Christopher W. Morgan, Dean, School of Christian Ministries and Professor of Theology, California Baptist University

“I require my seminary students to read Stephen Wellum’s *God the Son Incarnate* because he masterfully answers seemingly contradictory claims about Jesus by integrating exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology, and systematic theology. This book is shorter, more accessible, and less intimidating—an ideal entry point for someone who wants to better understand who Christ is.”

Andy Naselli, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and New Testament, Bethlehem College & Seminary; Elder, Bethlehem Baptist Church

“Drawing on the biblical witness and on the insights of the greatest minds of the Christian centuries, this volume by Stephen Wellum, set firmly in the context of classical theism, provides a comprehensive answer to the most important of all questions: ‘Who is Jesus Christ?’ Clear but not cold, accessible but not shallow, this book will both inspire the novice and refresh the veteran.”

Donald MacLeod, Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology, Edinburgh Theological Seminary; author, *A Faith to Live By* and *The Person of Christ*

“Stephen Wellum is the first contemporary guide I would turn to for a scripturally faithful, confessionally orthodox Christology. This brief but meaty work not only feeds the mind but is a rich feast for the whole soul. You will worship Christ with fresh vigor at every turn of the page.”

Scott Christensen, Associate Pastor, Kerrville Bible Church, Kerrville, Texas; author, *What about Free Will?* and *What about Evil?*

“Stephen Wellum has proved himself to be a trusted guide through the lurking dangers that scatter the theological landscape. This volume is concise and accessible, written for folks who desire to engage theological depth without being overwhelmed. It will serve well students who desire serious consideration of the second person of the Trinity, our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Ardel B. Caneday, Retired Professor of New Testament Studies and Greek, University of Northwestern, St. Paul, Minnesota

“This book presents the basic biblical, historical, and systematic material essential to understanding the orthodox and biblical doctrine of Christ. It is an ideal first book to read on the central doctrine of the person of Christ for students and a great review for pastors and lay leaders.”

Craig A. Carter, Professor of Theology, Tyndale University; author, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition*

“This is a superb introduction to Christology. Stephen Wellum helps readers think about the very nature of theology itself at the most profound level, explicated for the reader with Christology as a test case in how to do theology. And the reader is given a rich treatment of how to think about Christology in terms of the biblical-theological substructure of the Bible itself and how to wrestle with contemporary challenges. Excellent.”

Bradley G. Green, Professor of Theological Studies, Union University

“There is nothing more important than getting the right response to the question ‘Who do you say that Jesus is?’ In *The Person of Christ*, Stephen Wellum answers the question by grounding the response in the Scriptures, by guiding readers through historical theology, and by summarizing these teachings and truths theologically. As a tour de force on the person of Christ and the doctrine of Christology, this work also serves as a model for how one moves from the Bible to theology to life.”

Gregory C. Strand, Executive Director of Theology and Credentialing, Evangelical Free Church of America; Adjunct Professor of Pastoral Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Stephen Wellum is a theologian who loves the church, and in *The Person of Christ*, he brings his seasoned expertise on Christology to equip thinking Christians with a concise introduction to the subject. In three accessible sections, he provides a biblical foundation for who Christ is, surveys how the church came to understand and express Christological orthodoxy, and explains why churches need to keep Christ at the center of their life and gospel ministry. If you are looking to understand Christology more clearly and worship Christ more deeply, this is your book.”

David S. Schrock, Pastor of Preaching and Theology, Occoquan Bible Church; Professor of Theology, Indianapolis Theological Seminary

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The Person of Christ

An Introduction

Stephen J. Wellum

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To my in-laws, Charles and Margaret Hackenberry:

Thankful for your faithfulness in marriage and as parents,
and grateful for your example to know, love,
and proclaim Christ Jesus as Lord.

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Series Preface

The ancient Greek thinker Heraclitus reputedly said that the thinker has to listen to the essence of things. A series of theological studies dealing with the traditional topics that make up systematic theology needs to do just that. Accordingly, in each of these studies, a theologian addresses the essence of a doctrine. This series thus aims to present short studies in theology that are attuned to both the Christian tradition and contemporary theology in order to equip the church to faithfully understand, love, teach, and apply what God has revealed in Scripture about a variety of topics. What may be lost in comprehensiveness can be gained through what John Calvin, in the dedicatory epistle of his commentary on Romans, called “lucid brevity.”

Of course, a thorough study of any doctrine will be longer rather than shorter, as there are two millennia of confession, discussion, and debate with which to interact. As a result, a short study needs to be more selective but deftly so. Thankfully, the contributors to this series have the ability to be brief yet accurate. The key aim is that the simpler is not to morph into the simplistic. The test is whether the topic of a short study, when further studied in depth, requires some unlearning to take place. The simple can be amplified. The simplistic needs to be corrected. As editors, we believe that the volumes in this series pass that test.

While the specific focus varies, each volume (1) introduces the doctrine, (2) sets it in context, (3) develops it from Scripture, (4) draws the various threads together, and (5) brings it to bear on the Christian life. It is our prayer, then, that this series will assist the church to delight in her triune God by thinking his thoughts—which he has graciously revealed in his written word, which testifies to his living Word, Jesus Christ—after him in the powerful working of his Spirit.

Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin

Introduction

Who Do You Say That Jesus Is?

The question Jesus asked his disciples many years ago is still alive and well today: “Who do people say that I am?” (Mark 8:27). As in the first century, so today there is much confusion regarding Jesus’s identity, even though from a merely historical perspective, Jesus is the most towering figure in all history.¹ The disciples responded to Jesus’s question by listing some of the diverse answers of their day: “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets” (Mark 8:28 NIV). What all these answers have in common is the acknowledgment that Jesus is extraordinary, but they all keep him in the category of a mere human.

Today, similar to the first century, people continue to answer Jesus’s question with diverse and confused answers. For some, Jesus is viewed as a great prophet or a wise philosopher, an important religious leader or even a social-justice revolutionary who took on the establishment. But again, what current views

1. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 1. Pelikan writes, “Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries.”

have in common with the older answers is that Jesus is merely a noteworthy man. So as various polls demonstrate, people have diverse views about Jesus but views that are confused, often contradictory, and, sadly, not what Scripture says about him.²

In stark contrast to the diverse views of Jesus in the first century and today, Scripture, along with the creeds of the church, presents a consistent, clear answer to Jesus's question. Jesus is the divine Son, the second person of the triune Godhead, the Lord of glory, who in time assumed a human nature, so that now and forevermore he is the eternal "Word made flesh" (cf. John 1:1, 14). And he did this because it's only one individual—God the Son incarnate—who can bring about God's eternal plan by securing our redemption, executing judgment on sin, and establishing a new creation by the ratification of a new covenant in his life, death, and resurrection.

For this reason, the Jesus of the Bible who is the true Jesus is unique, exclusive, and the only Lord and Savior: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). This is also why confusion about him is a matter of life and death. Nothing is more important than getting right *who* Jesus is. The question of Jesus's identity is not merely academic, something for theologians to ponder; it's a question vital for all people to consider—and *especially* for the contemporary evangelical church.

We live in a day when people are greatly confused about Jesus's identity. We are surrounded by a growing rejection of Christian theology, a rising militant secularism, and a rampant philosophical and religious pluralism. All this has contributed to people's confusion regarding who Jesus is. But sadly, this confu-

2. George Gallup Jr. and George O'Connell, *Who Do Americans Say That I Am?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

sion is not merely outside the evangelical church; it's also within. In 2018, Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research conducted a poll among self-identified evangelicals and issued the results in their *State of Theology* report.³ Reflected in many of the answers is evidence that our churches suffer a serious lack of biblical and theological knowledge, especially regarding *who* Jesus is. Two questions are especially alarming. When given the statement “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God,” 78 percent agreed. Yet anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of Scripture and Christological orthodoxy should have recognized that this is a denial of Christ’s deity and an embrace of the ancient heresy of Arianism (or the current view of Jehovah’s Witnesses). Not surprisingly, when given the statement “God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam,” 51 percent agreed. If Jesus’s identity is misunderstood, inevitably Jesus’s exclusive work will also be compromised.

No doubt, polls are often tricky to judge, but regardless, it does reveal a serious need for the ongoing careful teaching and exposition of *who* Jesus is from Scripture and the church’s confessional standards. Repeatedly, Scripture exhorts the church in every generation to faithfully “preach the word” and to “reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). Our goal in doing so is to see the church built up “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph. 4:13). We do not want the church to be “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14), especially in regard to *who* Jesus is!

For this reason, a study in Christology that seeks to explain *who* Jesus is from Scripture and historical theology, *why* Jesus is unique, and *how* we are to think theologically about the

3. *The State of Theology*, Ligonier, accessed May 7, 2020, <https://thestateoftheology.com/>.

incarnation is always necessary but is especially urgent today given the serious confusion that exists both outside and within the church. Despite this book being only a “short study” in Christology, my goal is to equip the church to know the basic biblical teaching about who Jesus is *and* how the church has theologically confessed the identity of Jesus throughout the ages.⁴ If a longer treatment of the person of Christ is required, the reader is encouraged to consult my larger work on the same subject: *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Crossway, 2016). In that work, I place the study of who Jesus is within various debates of Western intellectual history and at every point give a more detailed exposition and defense of orthodox Christology. This shorter work, however, is designed to be more accessible to the average reader and thus is ideal for pastors, church leaders, and Christians who want to know what Scripture says about our Lord Jesus and how the church has consistently proclaimed Christ Jesus as Lord. Although some of the material in this volume is adapted from my book *God the Son Incarnate*, owing to parallel arguments and a similar arrangement of topics and material, it’s not a mere abridgment of the earlier work. This work not only thoroughly develops the previous material but also expands on a number of points that the previous work only hinted at, especially regarding the relations of persons within the Trinity and the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the incarnate Son.⁵

To accomplish the goal of equipping the church to know the basic biblical teaching about who Jesus is and the confessional tradition of the church, the book is written in three parts.

4. For a longer treatment of each of the areas covered in this shorter work, see Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

5. Any material adapted from *God the Son Incarnate* in this work is used by permission of Crossway.

Part 1 lays out the basic biblical data regarding Jesus's identity as presented across the Bible's storyline, after briefly discussing some important methodological points on how to construct a biblically faithful, theologically orthodox Christology. Part 2 turns to historical theology and thinks through how the church faithfully "put together" the biblical data and made theological judgments about Christ consistent with Scripture. In light of various false ways of thinking about who Jesus is—heresies still with us today—the church confessed Jesus's identity in faithfulness to Scripture and with theological precision, a confession and orthodoxy we need to follow today. Part 3 offers a systematic theological summary of who Jesus is as God the Son incarnate from Scripture and in light of the confessional orthodoxy of the church. In a summary way, it attempts to answer questions often asked about Christ's identity and the nature of the incarnation.

Ultimately, my goal in writing this book is to help the church know the Lord Jesus according to Scripture and thus in all his glory and majesty, to lead the church to trust him more as our only Lord and Savior, and to equip the church to articulate a Christological orthodoxy in continuity with the "faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

PART 1

Biblical Foundations

Understanding the Identity of Christ

Approaching Scripture on Its Own Terms to Identify Christ

Throughout the ages, the church has consistently confessed that Jesus of Nazareth is God the Son incarnate and thus the only Lord and Savior. On what epistemological grounds has the church made this confession? On the basis of God's authoritative word-revelation that alone warrants such a theological confession about Jesus. Thus, to know *who* Jesus is and to speak rightly of him, the church, from its first days, has done Christology *from above*, namely, from the vantage point of Scripture. The Bible—first the Old Testament and then the New—has provided not only the “facts” about Jesus but also the interpretive framework for understanding Jesus's identity. The church knows that she can correctly identify *who* Jesus is only by placing him in the context of the Bible's storyline, teaching, and worldview. In fact, any attempt to do Christology by some other means leads only to a Jesus of our own imagination.

Since the rise of the Enlightenment, starting in the seventeenth century, however, these theological and methodological convictions were gradually viewed as no longer credible. During this era, Christology was done on other theological grounds that resulted in a Jesus who is a masterful religious leader but not the Word made flesh. Why did this occur? Although the answer is complex, it was primarily due to entire worldview shifts. Over the last four hundred years, we have witnessed the truth of the old adage “Ideas have consequences.” After the Reformation era, certain “ideas” arose that challenged and then rejected the way the church, and most people in the West, thought about God and his relationship to the world. More specifically, ideas about the power of human reason, the nature of reality, and our knowledge of that reality led to crucial shifts in “plausibility structures.” Beginning with the Enlightenment and continuing through modernism and now postmodernism, the intellectual rules that determine how people think the world works and what is possible have shifted away from historic Christianity to deny its basic theological convictions. This is why many in the West stumble over the church’s confession of who Jesus is. For many, it does not seem plausible or rationally coherent.¹

In his magisterial work on the impact of secularization on our thinking, Charles Taylor traces these epistemological changes over three distinct time periods, pivoting around the Enlightenment. By doing so, he explains why our age finds it implausible to begin with the basic truths of Christian theology and why the rules that warrant belief have changed. Before the Enlightenment, people found it *impossible not to believe* the Christian worldview; starting with the Enlightenment, it became *possible not to believe* in the basic truths of Christian-

1. See Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought, 1778–1860* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985).

ity; three hundred years after the Enlightenment, most people find it *impossible to believe* in the objective truths of Christian theology.² David Wells makes the same point. He contends that today theology is done within a twofold reality: first, “the disintegration of the Enlightenment world and its replacement by the postmodern ethos” and, second, the increase of religious pluralism.³

What impact have these changes had on Christology? Many, but most significantly, they have led to people thinking that the church’s confession of Christ is implausible. People assume either that the Bible’s Jesus could not exist or that he could not do what the Bible says he did. As such, people have questioned the church’s confession of Christ’s uniqueness and exclusivity as God the Son incarnate. Gotthold Lessing’s question asked many years ago is alive and well: “How can one man who lived and died years ago have *universal* significance for all people?” Today, most people think of Jesus as one religious leader among many—a belief, sadly, that seems to have infiltrated the evangelical church.⁴

How should we respond? A full response would require a defense of the entire Christian worldview, which is not the purpose of this book. Instead, my focus is on the theological method undergirding such a defense, especially in relation to doing Christology. My argument is this: consistent with what the church has done in the past, what is needed is *not* a Christology *from below* but one that is *from above*. Before I explain why this is so, let me first define how I am using the terms *from below* and *from above*.

2. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

3. David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow’rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 5.

4. See statement nos. 3 and 6 of *The State of Theology*, Ligonier, accessed May 7, 2020, <https://thestateoftheology.com/>.

Christology from Below versus from Above

The phrases *from below* and *from above* are sometimes defined in different ways. By *from below*, I mean the attempt to do Christology from the vantage point of historical-critical research, independent of a commitment to the full authority of Scripture and a Christian-theistic worldview. Such an approach is critical of Scripture and assumes that the “Jesus of history” is *not* the “Jesus of the Bible.” Conversely, a Christology *from above* starts with the triune God of Scripture and *his* word, and it seeks to identify Jesus’s person and work from within the truth of Scripture.

Every interpretation and formulation of Christ’s identity depends on and derives from a presuppositional nexus of philosophical and theological commitments. Any attempt to say *who* Jesus is and define his significance for the world assumes entire viewpoints regarding who and what God is, humanity is, and so on, and how we warrant these beliefs. From the beginning, the church has argued that to do Christology properly, we must do so under Scripture. To know Christ, we must do so from a revelational epistemology and the truth of the biblical worldview.

On the other hand, a Christology from below attempts to reconstruct the historical Jesus by critical methods to determine what we can know from Scripture. The problems with such an approach are manifold. Its central problem, however, is that before one can theologize about Christ, the critic must first establish what is and is not accurate in the Bible’s presentation of him, which too often is governed by non-Christian theological and philosophical assumptions, specifically some form of methodological naturalism. It’s not surprising that the Jesus from below is not the Jesus of the Bible but often a reflection of the person doing the investigation. For this reason, the church has argued that what is needed is a Christology from above.

Why Christology Must Be from Above

First, Christology must be from above because if Scripture is not the necessary and sufficient condition to warrant our Christological conclusions, then ultimately we will not be able to say anything objectively true and theological about Christ's identity. A Christology from below must first decide which historical facts about Jesus in Scripture are true and, more importantly, when (if ever) the biblical author's theological interpretation of Jesus is accurate. If the historical Jesus is not identical to the biblical Jesus, then critics must establish criteria outside Scripture to warrant what is true and theological about Christ. But what exactly are those criteria? Human rationality? Religious experience? The "assured" results of biblical scholarship? And who decides on the criteria? This kind of approach assumes from the outset that the triune God has not spoken authoritatively to us.

Since the Enlightenment, this approach has been tried by various "quests for the historical Jesus"—quests that still affect us today.⁵ The goal of the quests was to recover the "Jesus of history," who is not identical to the "Jesus of the Bible," by peeling back the biblical layers of legend and myth via the historical-critical method. It's crucial to note that the starting point and conclusion of the quests mark a sharp turn away from orthodox Christology, as they operate on worldview assumptions foreign to Scripture.

The old, or first, quest (1778–1906)⁶ refused to interpret the biblical text in terms of its own claims, content, and interpretive

5. On the quests, see Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought*; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2 in *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 1–124; Alister E. McGrath, *The Making of Modern German Christology, 1750–1990*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005).

6. As the first, the old quest received its name from the English title of Albert Schweitzer's book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. William Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

framework. These theologians assumed that the Bible is wholly unreliable and proceeded to reconstruct the “historical” Jesus without reliance on and almost without reference to the biblical presentation. The first half of the twentieth century brought an interim period (1906–1953)—called the “no quest”⁷—in which some theologians determined that historical facts were not necessary for the Christian faith. The difficulty of establishing any historical knowledge consistent with Enlightenment epistemologies and the tools of the historical-critical method shifted the problem momentarily from the Bible’s historicity to its mythology. For example, Rudolf Bultmann simply replaced the New Testament’s so-called mythological framework with an existential framework, but he rejected the Bible’s own theological framework and worldview understanding.⁸

The new, or second, quest (1953 to present) focuses on the *kerygma* (“proclamation”) about Jesus in Scripture, being dissatisfied with the doubts of the old quest and the radical skepticism of the no quest.⁹ These theologians agree with the other quests that the Gospel traditions are interpretations of the early church, but they believe that the Gospels contain true historical facts, which they seek to recover. Yet the new quest remains firmly committed to methodological naturalism, and the rules they employ to discover the historical Jesus are independent of historic Christian theology.¹⁰

7. W. Barnes Tatum, *In Quest of Jesus: A Guidebook* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 71.

8. Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 5–6.

9. For example, see Ernst Käsemann, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W. J. Montague (1964; repr., London: SCM, 2012), 15–47; James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus and Other Essays* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983).

10. *Methodological naturalism* is the view that for any study of the world to be legitimate, including the study of history and theology, all cause-effect relationships must be explained naturalistically and without reference to God’s unique and extraordinary action in the world. As such, this view rejects the possibility of God’s miraculous action in the world from the outset.

At the same time, the third quest (early 1980s to present)¹¹ follows its own modified version of historical-critical criteria. In general, it applies the rules for authenticity more generously in an attempt to take the New Testament texts seriously as literary documents with basic (but not full) reliability. These theologians also take seriously the Jewish context of early Christianity—a context often disregarded by the other quests. But for many in this movement, these conciliatory efforts are still not a return to the full authority of Scripture, which results in the problem of not saying anything theological and universally significant about Jesus.

Ultimately, each quest struggles to establish criteria and warrant. If Scripture is unreliable because it's a mixture of fact and fiction, then it alone cannot serve as the theological warrant for our Christology. The authority and reliability of Scripture is the precondition for the possibility of doing Christology in an objective, normative way. Without divine speech that reveals both the true facts about Jesus and the authoritative interpretation of his identity, Christology loses its truthfulness, and Christ's uniqueness is set adrift in the sea of pluralism. As Francis Watson correctly observes, "Historical research is unlikely to confirm an incarnation or a risen Lord."¹² And even if a reconstructed Jesus is a figure of some significance, "he cannot be identified with the Christ of faith acknowledged by the church."¹³ The heirs of the Enlightenment only exacerbate the problem of reconstructing the past by assuming that historical events are self-interpreting and transparent to historical

11. On the third quest, see Ben Witherington, III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

12. Francis Watson, "Veritas Christi: How to Get from the Jesus of History to the Christ of Faith without Losing One's Way," in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 104.

13. Watson, "Veritas Christi," 105.

investigation. Historical research alone can never yield an objective and infallibly true interpretation of Jesus's identity and significance.

Correctly identifying Jesus, then, requires God himself to disclose the historical facts *and* the theological significance of those facts. A Christology from below undercuts the epistemological grounds for orthodoxy and leaves a normative Christology problematic. Only a Christology from above provides the warrant for the Bible's and the church's *theological* confession of Christ.

Second, a Christology from below fails to ground the uniqueness and universal significance of Jesus because it removes him from the Bible's storyline and interpretive framework. Orthodox Christology requires a specific soil in which to grow, and a Christology from below removes Jesus from the life-giving soil of Scripture. We can grasp Jesus's uniqueness and universal significance only by leaving him firmly planted in the triune God's eternal plan given in Scripture. If Jesus is removed from it, he will lose his true identity as the divine Son who has become human for us and our salvation (John 1:1–18); he will become an enigma to us, susceptible to various imaginative and arbitrary constructions. This is the problem for those who think that historical facts about Jesus, specifically his bodily resurrection, carry their own meaning apart from placing Jesus and his resurrection within the overall plan of God given by Scripture.

For example, Wolfhart Pannenberg represents a Christology from below with all its attendant problems.¹⁴ Pannenberg first argues that historical facts, discerned by historical research, carry their own meaning and thus allow us to say something

14. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977); Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 1:277–396.

theological about Christ. He fudges slightly, however, because he also knows that to say something truly theological (universal, objectively true), Christ's resurrection must be placed within the "apocalyptic framework" of later Judaism.¹⁵ Why? Apart from placing Christ's resurrection in this "universal" framework, we could not conclude that Jesus is unique and thus say anything theological about him. Thus, for Pannenberg, historical research, set in a specific "universal" framework, allows us to do Christology from below.

Pannenberg is correct on one point. To say anything theological about Jesus, we must place him within a universal interpretive grid. Pannenberg, however, faces a serious problem: the universal framework he depends on comes from Scripture, but for him, Scripture is not fully authoritative and true. How, then, can he appeal to Scripture if at many points it is inaccurate? What if the apocalyptic framework he uses is simply the mythological construction of Judaism and the early church? If so, then it carries no authority for Christology.

Colin Gunton asks these very questions of Pannenberg. Even if we grant, Gunton contends, that Pannenberg's Christology affirms the divine significance of Jesus, it's difficult to see how he has done so in a manner consistent with his method. As Gunton argues, to place historical facts within the Bible's interpretive framework without warranting it entails that he is "*either* presupposing some dogmatic beliefs ('context of meaning') and thus not arguing genuinely from below at all; *or* failing to establish what is wanted, namely, the divinity of Jesus."¹⁶ Furthermore, Gunton charges Pannenberg with confusing two separate questions: "The first is that about the significance of Jesus within the context of interpretation—what

15. Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, 98.

16. Colin E. Gunton, *Yesterday and Today: A Study of Continuities in Christology*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1997), 21.

he meant to his contemporaries. The second is that concerning his significance now.”¹⁷ What has to be warranted, Gunton insists, is the acceptance of the Bible’s framework of meaning for us today, but given Pannenberg’s rejection of Scripture’s full authority, how can he do so?

In truth, the only way we can warrant the theological claim that Jesus is the divine Son and that his incarnation and work have universal significance is by placing Christ’s entire person and work within the plan of the triune God as given in Scripture when it is viewed as authoritative. Only a Christology from above will result in the *theological* Jesus of the Bible.

Orthodox Christology is rooted in a specific conception of God, Scripture, humans, and so on, and apart from that worldview, it cannot stand. To do Christology faithfully today, we must articulate and defend the theological system on which it stands. We must defend Trinitarian theism and Scripture as more than basically reliable. Orthodox Christology depends on specific truths for its coherence—truths that are warranted by the Bible alone. Scripture gives us a true account of history and a God’s-eye viewpoint. Scripture is the word of the triune God speaking in and through human authors (2 Tim. 3:15–17; 2 Pet. 1:21), and as such, Scripture gives us God’s own interpretation of his plan, centered on Christ. Apart from grounding who Jesus is in Scripture, orthodox Christology is not only implausible but impossible.

Third, a Christology from below cannot sustain Christian faith. As David Wells astutely observes, “Christologies constructed from ‘below’ produce only a larger-than-life religious figure, the perfection of what many others already experience.”¹⁸ Doing Christology from below never leads us

17. Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 21.

18. David F. Wells, *The Person of Christ: A Biblical and Historical Analysis of the Incarnation* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1984), 172.

to faith in God the Son, who came from above for us and our salvation. It's simply not possible to construct a biblical and orthodox Christology out of the fabric of human experience by historical-critical reconstruction. He will never be worthy of our worship.

For these reasons, it's necessary to do Christology from above. In doing so, we also stand in continuity with the church. The church has always done Christology from above. In fact, it's only a Christology from above that helps us see why we need Jesus as our only Lord and Savior. When we read Scripture, we discover how serious our sin is before God and why it's only God the Son incarnate who can save us. To stand justified before God, we need *this* Jesus alone in his representative and substitutionary work for us. Far from such an approach depreciating Jesus's humanity, it enhances it, because we learn that the kind of Savior we need must be fully God *and* fully human, Christ Jesus our Lord.

Doing Christology from Above and the Use of Scripture

The triune God and his word give us the epistemological warrant and worldview necessary to identify Jesus as God the Son incarnate and thus to speak theologically about him. A biblical Christology, then, must formulate Jesus's identity and the nature of the incarnation by carefully attending to the Bible's canonical presentation of him.

This task requires an intratextual approach to Scripture, namely, reading Scripture according to its own claims and presentation following the Bible's own categories and structure. For us to understand Jesus correctly, he must be placed within the Bible's own interpretive framework and authoritative teaching and not removed from it. Paul is a good illustration of this approach. When Paul goes to Athens (Acts 17:16–32), given

that the Athenians are ignorant of even the most rudimentary truths that he needs to communicate, Paul preaches Christ by first sketching the biblical worldview, so as to make rational sense of who Christ is on the Bible's own terms. By starting with the God of creation, who humans are, and the nature of our problem, Paul sets the stage to proclaim Christ. Paul, then, makes *theological* sense of Jesus and demonstrates why he alone is Lord and Savior by placing him within the framework and categories of the Christian worldview.¹⁹

Furthermore, an intratextual approach assumes certain truths about Scripture: Scripture is God's word written through the free agency of human authors. As *God's* word, it gives us an authoritative interpretation of who Jesus is. Although Scripture is not exhaustive, even about Jesus (John 21:25), whatever it says, it says accurately and infallibly. There is, therefore, no distinction between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith"—a distinction that assumes that the Scriptures are unreliable in recounting and interpreting historical events.

In fact, recognizing that Scripture is given by God is the precondition for a normative Christology. Scripture alone serves as our norm for grasping Christ's identity. Removing Jesus from the Bible's storyline or accepting some parts and not others only leads to a subjective, arbitrary, and ultimately false construction of Jesus's identity. If we do not "interpret the biblical texts 'on their own terms,'"²⁰ making theological judgments according to Scripture's own teaching, then the Jesus constructed will not be the Jesus of the Bible. To read Scripture "on its own terms" entails that we read the entire canon and take seriously what it

19. On this point, see D. A. Carson, "Athens Revisited," in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 384–98.

20. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Exegesis and Hermeneutics," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 52.

says about God's mighty acts and how it interprets them, especially in regard to Christ. This means that Scripture describes the facts of history with accuracy and explains those facts so we can rightly know Christ and formulate correct doctrine about him. In doing Christology, then, we move carefully from Scripture's own teaching (first order) to theological formulation (second order).²¹

As we move from Scripture (canon) to theological formulation (concept), we must also take seriously the aid of tradition and historical theology. This is especially true in Christology. The confessions of Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451) are catholic, or universal, *rules of faith* in the church that define Christological orthodoxy, and we depart from them at our peril. They do not have this status because they are equal to Scripture but because they "put together" all the scriptural teaching in a faithful and coherent way. Systematic theology is more than simply repeating Scripture; it's the full practice of "faith seeking understanding," as Anselm famously put it. In fact, fully attending to Scripture drives us to make sense of it. For example, how do we make sense of Jesus as the Son in relation to the Father (John 5:16–30)? How do we make sense of the relationship between the Son's deity and humanity (John 1:1, 14)? How do we make sense of the fact that Jesus as God the Son knows all things yet also says that he does not know all things (Mark 13:32)? Questions like these legitimately arise from Scripture, and if we are faithful to Scripture, they require constructive theological reflection, which is precisely what doing Christology entails.

We must also remain clear, however, that historical theology and confessions as rules of faith are always subservient

21. See Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 259–336.

to Scripture. Scripture as *norma normans* (“ruling rule”) has magisterial authority over tradition. Tradition as *norma normata* (“ruled rule”) functions in a ministerial capacity to aid our interpretation and application of Scripture. Stating the relationship between Scripture and tradition this way does not deny that reading Scripture involves a “hermeneutical spiral.”²² No one approaches Scripture as a *tabula rasa* (or “clean slate,” without preconceived ideas); we all interpret Scripture with viewpoints, assumptions, and even biases. But Scripture is able to confirm or correct our views as needed precisely because Scripture is God’s word written and is authoritative, clear, and sufficient for the doing of theology.

In the next three chapters, we turn to the biblical foundations for understanding Jesus’s identity, before thinking through the church’s confession of Jesus as the divine Son made flesh.

22. See, for example, Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

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