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## THEOLOGY FROM BELOW

Cesar Lopes

**SCHOLARLEADER**  
*INSIGHTS*

*Dear friend of the church,*

*At SCHOLARLEADERS we have the opportunity to meet many exceptional women and men, devoted to building up the church in their nation and region. Ayman, author of this thoughtful essay, is one of those leaders.*

*I wish you could personally hear him share his views on this sensitive topic with Christians and Muslims. Mastery of the material is obvious as he engages people with a range of views. And his winsome manner is evident as he explores ideas with people who often hold opposing views with great passion. Somehow, in my experience, people emerge from meeting Ayman with deeper understanding, and good feelings. It is the product of careful thought presented generously, even with love. And it is a lesson for dialogue about matters of faith.*

*Hoping you are challenged, as am I, by Ayman's thoughts and manner,*

Larry Smith  
President



**W**hile we generally welcome theological differences stimulated by the cultural context, discussions that address the socio-political dimension of life often cause discomfort for evangelical believers. In my context of Latin America, we take contextual realities quite seriously. With an approach to theology that is “from below” we bring the questions of society to the truth of Scripture.

### Dimensions of the context

Most Christians today readily accept that liturgy and worship in a local church in Southeast Asia may (and perhaps should) look very different from its counterpart in a Western country. Theologically, we grasp that a western concept of sin as transgression may differ from the idea of sin as shame found in Francophone Africa (as recently addressed by friend and SL sponsored leader, Dr. Yacouba Sanon from Burkina Faso). Such differences rarely trouble evangelicals.

However, it becomes murky when issues that involve social, political, economic, or power variables arise. Topics such as such as ethnicity, gender, power, privilege and economics often polarize. They are even called less than orthodox, or “too political” for the church.

For instance, the popular Pope Francis faced an unusual wave of criticism for his harsh critique of the effect of capitalism on the underprivileged in our global society. In the US, minority and female theologians sometimes struggle to have their voices heard beyond their own ghettos – or to be heard as more than just a token representative of their groups. Closer to (my) home, for the last four decades Latin American evangelical theologians have sought a seat at the global theological table while advocating that the mission of the Church must also include concrete actions of solidarity and promotion of human dignity.

### **Location and how we do theology**

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But these topics are important. When our Christian life is viewed from other perspectives, ones that are not located at the centers but at the periphery, ones that are not developed in spaces of money and power but of poverty and powerlessness, theology will look and sound fundamentally different.

For many of us in Latin America, doing theology from below is the best way to balance our evangelical heritage with our socio-political location. I say for many of us because, as much as no one can point to a single North American theology, we cannot point to a single Latin American theology

either. The subcontinent pulses with very different perspectives regarding the mission of the church. Many of us, however, share the understanding that our broken context – marked by poverty, corruption, hunger, and lack of human dignity – not only influences theological reflection but is also something that pushes, even obliges us to look at things from the perspective of the powerless; to abandon a language of dominance in favor of one of empathy, and to replace business and military-like ecclesial structures and frameworks for ones of integral mission and service.

Very importantly, such positioning affects how we approach the theological method. Using simple and general terms, in Northern latitudes the common tendency is to read the Bible first and then develop ideas and principles to be applied in life. Latin American theologians, on the other hand, tend to prayerfully and critically analyze specific issues arising from this context of oppression they face in their Christian walk before even opening the Bible. In other words, “theology from below” looks for the right questions to ask before turning to the Bible for answers, and then looks to address them with concern for the powerless.

### **God’s People Approach Theology from Multiple Vantage Points**

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Although the idea of doing theology from below has found fruitful ground in Latin America, this concept – and the ongoing tension with theology from above – is not new. Historically, this tension is evident in how we think of Christ, as exemplified in the traditions

of Alexandria and Antioch; the tension found between Jesus as the almighty, transcendent God and the immanent Christ,

*“who being in the very nature God . . . made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:6-7).*



The creative tension between a theology from above and one from below is found in a full array of biblical texts and traditions: the Psalms emphasize the importance of the rituals in the Temple; Isaiah and many other prophets boldly challenge the traditional contemplative and liturgical life, stressing that the sacrifice God actually requires focus on the lower extracts of society:

*“Stop bringing meaningless offerings! ... Learn to do right; seek justice; defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow” (Isaiah 1:10, 17).*

Within this biblical creative tension, we must find the necessary balance. I do not claim that theology should always be done from

below, but for the necessity of the presence of such theological approaches in the Church. How different would the presence of our local or national churches be perceived by others if their statements and actions came from a position of vulnerability, and not of dominance; of service, and not of conquest; if it focused more on the “oppressed, the cause of the fatherless and the case of the widow” than on the defense of norms and standards.

### **Theology with the Powerless**

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Finally, theology done from below is not doing theology for the powerless, but with them. As a result, we are in fact aligning ourselves with the arrival of the kingdom of God, which also happens from the bottom up. After all, the kingdom is inaugurated by Jesus of Nazareth, the son of a Galilean carpenter, and continues to be evidenced and actualized by the proclamation, under the power of the Holy Spirit, of the good news and of the year of the Lord’s favor to the poor and the oppressed (Luke 4:18).

May empathy, service, and the perspective of the powerless be hallmarks of the theology done by the Global Church as we face old and new challenges in participating in the advancement of the kingdom of God!

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*Cesar Lopes was among the first graduates of South American Theological Seminary (SATS), founded by SL supported leader, Antonio Barro, joining the faculty after graduation. He completed his PhD in Educational Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School where he received support from both ScholarLeaders and Langham Partnership. Cesar and his family returned to Sao Paulo in December 2013 to continue to teach and serve the church in Brazil.*