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Could Jesus Have Sinned?

The Temptations and Triumph of Christ

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ABSTRACT: The author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was “in every respect . . . tempted as we are, yet without sin” ([Hebrews 4:15](#)). Jesus Christ, the God-man, was truly tempted in his humanity, though not in all the same ways as sinners are. Temptations came at him from without, while inside he remained “without sin.” Though Satan and a rebellious world assaulted him, temptation never found a home within him. He is, therefore, both impeccable in his moral purity and sympathetic to tempted sinners.

Scripture is clear that Jesus, the sinless Son of God, was tempted to sin ([Matthew 4:1–11](#); [Mark 1:13](#); [Luke 4:2](#); [22:28](#); [Hebrews 2:18](#)).¹ In addition, the author of the book of Hebrews assures Christians that it is because he was “tempted as we are” ([Hebrews 4:15](#)) that our ascended Savior is able to sympathize with our weaknesses as fallen people. However, the same verse adds that the tempted Christ was also “without sin.” That is, we Christians have a Savior who has shared our experience with temptation, but who, as the spotless Lamb of God, was perfectly suited to be our substitutionary sacrifice at Calvary and now lives as our High Priest in heaven. All who look for divine sympathy and relief from the persistently alluring hand of sin may be supremely comforted.

Majestic though Christ’s provision for us is, it is also mysterious. It leaves us with significant Christological questions: For Christ’s temptations to parallel our own, must he have been able to sin? In theological terms, was he *peccable*?² Or was Christ *impeccable* — that is, incapable of sinning?³ If so, how can he truly sympathize with his tempted disciples? At a more basic level, how does Jesus’s deity relate to his human

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² Advocates of the peccability position include Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (London: James Clarke & Co., 1960), 2:457; Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 418–19; Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 720.

³ Advocates of the impeccability position include Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 537–39; Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free, 1966), 358; William G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 659–65; Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1986), 265–66.

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nature in temptation? Is there a way through this theological conundrum that extols the Savior and comforts our souls?

This article contends that the eternal Son was impeccable, that his assumption of a true human nature — with its creaturely understanding, genuine feeling, and responsible will — entailed (or necessarily implied) that he would be sinless during his earthly life without diminishing the authenticity of his temptations. Specifically, the Son's incarnation entailed a harmony between his divine and human wills⁴ that precluded any possibility that he would ever fail to obey his Father in heaven. Yet, at the same time, the holiness of Jesus's humanity had to be worked out through a progressively intense, and ultimately excruciating, struggle against the temptation to sin and in the face of his genuine dread of divine judgment and death. Together, these truths commend to needy sinners an all-sufficient Christ who, exalted in heaven, is both sinless and sympathetic, both majestic and merciful.

Two central concerns will guide our reflections on the impeccable yet tempted God-man. First, we will consider Christ's human will within the context of the union of the eternal Logos with his human nature, showing that the final ground of Christ's impeccability was his personal identity as the divine Son of God. We will observe how Jesus's will as a man necessarily reflected the moral purity of his underlying person, including his indefectible divine will to save sinners in submission to his Father. Second, we will see how Christ's impeccability as a man did not undermine his temptability, even though his sinlessness confined the category of the temptations he faced to external enticements alone. Far from diluting his experiential awareness of human weakness, his sinless humanity meant that he endured the full force of temptation during his earthly ministry, so that he now possesses maximum sympathy for tempted sinners.

How one answers the question of whether Christ could have sinned does not determine one's salvation, but the theological realities that inform our answer — Christ's divine personhood and genuine humanity — are critical to the gospel. And together, they help us to see how Christ's

“Sinners who necessarily and freely rebel need a Christ who necessarily and freely obeyed.”

⁴ Seventh-century theologian Maximus the Confessor (ca. AD 580–662) answered misguided attempts by Apollinaris and the Monophysites to preserve the *homoousion* of the Council of Nicaea by asserting that Christ possessed a true human will in addition to his divine will. Though his “dyothelitism” was disputed until the sixth ecumenical council, Maximus's understanding of Christ's two wills stands today as an entailment of his two natures.

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impeccability magnifies his glory as our Savior. With this goal in mind, let us turn, first, to the character of his incarnation.

Incarnation and Impeccability

Proponents on both sides of the peccability/impeccability debate wrestle with the fact that Christ's humanity does not exist in a vacuum; it is rather forever united to his divine person by the power of the Spirit (cf. [Luke 1:35](#); [Philippians 2:6–7](#)). As Michael Canham puts it, "The difference between the peccability and impeccability positions essentially boils down to how one explains the relationship between the two natures of Christ."⁵ What exactly is this relationship?

At a minimum, orthodox christology affirms that in the incarnation the divine Son of God did not convert his deity into humanity, but rather assumed our human nature to himself, with no alteration or diminution of his deity or personal identity as the Son, so that, in the words of Herman Bavinck, his human nature became "the splendid, willing organ of his deity."⁶ Though the efficient power that enabled Christ's assumption of his human nature was precisely the divine nature that belongs equally to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the assumption itself was an act in and upon the human nature in the person of the Son.⁷ The result is a mysterious coinherence of two distinct natures, one divine and the other human, in the same person, constituting a relation that is fittingly called the *hypostatic* union (from the Greek *hypostatikē*, or "personal"). It is the singular privilege of Christ's human nature to be joined to the eternally divine Son, the second person of the Trinity, who at every point upholds and gives personal existence to the human nature, including all of Jesus's creaturely thoughts and emotions.

Upholding Both Natures in the Divine Son

One challenge related to Christ's two natures is to preserve the integrity of Christ's human will *as it functions via the divine Son*. This is especially true when advocates of the peccability and impeccability positions describe the volitional activity of the God-man. Both camps run the risk of reaching their conclusions by expanding one nature beyond its proper limit such that it overtakes and diminishes the other. In this writer's opinion,

⁵ Michael McGhee Canham, "Potuit Non Peccare or Non Potuit Peccare: Evangelicals, Hermeneutics, and the Impeccability Debate," *MSJ* (2000): 107.

⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 3:308.

⁷ See John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 24 vols., ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1862), 1:225.

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the most severe distortions are committed by peccability advocates who discount Christ's divine person as the subject of Christ's incarnate activity.

For example, Michael Canham, a peccability advocate, has argued that "the exercise of his [i.e., Christ's] human attribute of peccability apparently limited the exercise of His divine attribute of impeccability."⁸ Canham's thesis mistakenly conceives of Christ's two natures as equally ultimate realities where one can occasionally trump the other. In doing so, his defense of Christ's alleged peccability overlooks the role of the divine person behind and with the human nature at every point. Given that it is *persons* who are either peccable or impeccable, Christ's divine personhood means that it is impossible to speak of the human nature as peccable in itself, for it does not, and never did, exist separately or independently from the divine in the person of the Son.

Unfortunately, on the other hand, impeccability advocates who appeal to the relationship between Christ's two natures are also not immune from distortions. Mirroring Canham, William G.T. Shedd argues that Christ's human nature was peccable, but then he adds that Christ in his human nature succumbed to his intervening divine nature such that he was, as a complete person, impeccable. Shedd writes,

The omnipotence of the Logos preserves the finite human nature from falling, however great may be the stress of temptation to which this finite nature is exposed. Consequently, Christ while having a peccable human nature in his constitution was an impeccable person. Impeccability characterizes the God-man as a totality, while peccability is a property of his humanity.⁹

On the surface, Shedd's explanation seems plausible. But the accuracy of his christology depends upon his use of the term *preserves*. Shedd clarifies that the divine nature "supports the human nature under all the temptations to sin that are presented to it" by "empower[ing] it with an energy of resistance."¹⁰ While Shedd's thesis is commendable in its effort to preserve the authenticity of Christ's temptations while upholding Christ's essential divinity, it suffers from a few defects.

"The divine Son was truly tempted in his humanity, making his triumph over sin and suffering all the more glorious."

First, by tracing Christ's "energy of resistance" to the divine nature alone, Shedd disqualifies Christ's earthly obedience from being robustly human in character. If, at the

⁸ Canham, "Potuit," 96–97.

⁹ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 661.

¹⁰ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 662.

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moment of Satan's most powerful urging, Christ's divine strength invaded, intercepted, and alleviated the agony of temptation, how may Christ's triumph be that of a sinless man for other men who are sinful? From a redemptive-historical perspective, Shedd risks overturning the Adam-Christ parallel that frames the blessings lost by "one *man's* trespass" and regained by "one *man's* obedience" ([Romans 5:17, 19](#); my emphasis).

Second, insofar as he understands Christ's obedience as requisitely human, Shedd risks transferring to the human nature the divine attributes of immutability and omniscience to explain Christ's overall impeccability.¹¹ Contra Shedd, orthodox christology maintains that each nature must retain properties unique to it.

Finally, Shedd argues that Christ's human peccability, in abstraction from its union to the divine Logos, explains his susceptibility to temptation.¹² But, as noted above, the hypostatic union makes it impossible to draw any meaningful conclusions about temptability apart from Christ's individual and individuating divine person. These errors call for more nuance in the relationship between the two natures of Christ and its impact on the fully human and impeccable character of his obedience.

Subject to the Divine Will

The explanation most consistent with the limits and demands of orthodox (i.e., Chalcedonian) christology grounds Christ's impeccability in terms of the solidarity or harmony enjoyed by Christ's free human and divine wills in the hypostatic union of his two natures. As with Christ's two natures, his two wills are not equally ultimate, but his human will was necessarily submissive to and reflective of his preexistent divine will as the Son obeyed his Father on earth. As a man, the incarnate Son necessarily expressed his inexhaustible purity as the second person of the Trinity, including his infallible divine desire to pursue only what is holy and righteous and good (cf. [Romans 7:12](#)), as he delighted in his Father's good will regarding his messianic mission (see [John 4:34](#); [Hebrews 3:1–2](#)).

While additional qualifications may be offered for Christ's human obedience,¹³ the ultimate reason for his impeccability throughout his earthly life was the deity of his

¹¹ Thus Shedd: "A finite intelligence may be deceived, but an infinite intelligence cannot be. Therefore, the omniscience which characterizes the God-man made this apostasy from good impossible" (*Dogmatic Theology*, 660).

¹² Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 662–63. Geerhardus Vos calls this argument "a facile solution." Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 341.

¹³ E.g., one should mention the integral role of the Holy Spirit in equipping and sanctifying Christ's human nature, communicating to him gifts of holiness, wisdom, and power as the one to whom the Father gave the Spirit "without measure" ([John 3:34](#)). Certainly, the Spirit (and even angels; cf. [Luke](#)

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person as the incarnate Mediator. As Geerhardus Vos explains, “Will or intellect or emotion in the human nature could not have sinned unless the underlying person had fallen from a state of moral rectitude.”¹⁴ In other words, the very act of the Son’s incarnation ensured his lifelong impeccability from its inception. In assuming a human nature and all of its essential attributes, the divine Son lived, obeyed, and suffered as one whose human will was a creaturely organ of the eternal Son, assumed “inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly,” and “inseparably”¹⁵ to himself as a member of the Godhead.

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Situating Christ’s impeccability as a consequence of his divine person’s having taken on a human mind and will in the incarnation carries significant advantages over alternative proposals by impeccability advocates. It does not consider the human nature in abstraction from the Logos, but recognizes the human nature’s place within the broader context of the hypostatic union. Just as crucially, it refuses to explain Christ’s victory over temptation in terms of divine assistance, as though his divine powers commandeered his humanity at the moment of severest anguish. Certainly, had he so desired, the one who “upholds the universe by the word of his power” ([Hebrews 1:3](#)) could have drawn upon his supernatural strength to overcome the dreadful circumstances of his suffering. But the human Christ did not alleviate the pain of temptations by drawing upon his divinity, as one might expect him to do.¹⁶ Instead, as Owen writes, he “made bare his breast unto their strokes, and laid open his soul that they might soak into the inmost parts of it.”¹⁷

Though Jesus developed his finite mind and exercised his human will in perfect conformity to his divine personality (cf. [Luke 2:52](#)), his humanity retained its creaturely integrity throughout his earthly life. This means that the same Son who enjoyed perfect fellowship with his Father had to endure every ounce of every trial he faced as a true man in order to achieve our salvation. As we will see, the

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[22:43](#)) helped Christ to obey God according to his human nature. It remains, however, that Christ was impeccably sinless by virtue of the unique relationship his human nature sustained to the presence and purity of his divine person. For an extended treatment of the role of the Spirit in Christ’s life and ministry, see Owen, *Works*, 7:159–88.

¹⁴ Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, trans. Annemie Godbehere et al., 5 vols. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012–2016), 3:58.

¹⁵ Taken from the Creed of Chalcedon, AD 451.

¹⁶ Leon Morris remarks, “Jesus’ stature was such that one would not have expected him to suffer.” Leon Morris and Donald W. Burdick, *Hebrews, James, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 50.

¹⁷ Owen, *Works*, 19:484.

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Bible is resolute in affirming that the divine Son was truly tempted in his humanity, making his triumph over sin and suffering all the more glorious.

Christ's Temptations and Triumph

To grasp the mysterious reality that the impeccable Christ endured a full battery of temptations in this fallen world, we must understand something of the complex nature of temptation itself. Limitations of space prevent a full examination in this article of the types, conditions, circumstances, and degrees of temptation.¹⁸ It will suffice to explore a more basic question dividing proponents on either side of the peccability/impeccability debate: what does it mean to be tempted?

External and Internal Temptation

Seventeenth-century Puritan John Owen provides a helpful model for understanding temptation and the endless shifting channels through which temptations flow in their quest to drown fallen sinners. He defines temptation as “any thing, state, way, or condition that, upon any account whatever, hath a force or efficacy to seduce, to draw the mind and heart of a man from its obedience, which God requires of him, into any sin, in any degree of it whatever.”¹⁹ According to Owen, the “thing[s],” “state[s],” “way[s],” or “condition[s]” which attempt to steer the mind toward wickedness find their source in (a) Satan alone, (b) the world at his disposal, (c) the sinful cravings of the human heart, or (d) some combination of the above.²⁰

¹⁸ One should note, for example, the semantic range of the Greek word *peirazō*, which includes, but is not limited to, the senses of “to put to the test” and “to tempt” (or to “attempt to cause to sin”). See BDAG, s.v. *πειράζω*. Cf. L&N §27.46, §83.308. The former meaning carries the positive connotations of, for example, self-examination (“Examine [*peirazete*] yourselves,” [2 Corinthians 13:5](#)) and refining (“[The fiery trial] comes upon you to test [*peirasmon*] you,” [1 Peter 4:12](#)). By contrast, the latter meaning always implies a wicked objective (cf. [James 1:14–15](#)), even if the goal (i.e., sin) is not realized (cf. [Mark 1:13](#)). While context is determinative, occasionally the identity of the one doing the testing/tempting makes obvious which of the two meanings applies. James, for example, assures his readers that “God cannot be tempted [*apeirastos*] with evil, and he himself tempts [*peirazei*] no one” ([James 1:13](#)). Conversely, when *peirazō* describes the actions of Satan, “the tempter” (*ho peirazōn*) himself in whom “there is no truth” ([John 8:44](#)), one can safely assume it always means “to tempt (to evil).” While the negative act (“to tempt”) is primarily in view in the peccability/impeccability debate, the two meanings may converge in the same event or even life span. For example, the intersection of divine power with all subordinate, even malevolent, powers illumines how Christ could describe the entire scope of his earthly mission, which was fraught with satanic and worldly opposition at every turn, as both “the will of him who sent me” ([John 4:34](#)) and “my trials” ([Luke 22:28](#); “my temptations” in KJV).

¹⁹ Owen, *Works*, 6:96.

²⁰ Owen, *Works*, 6:95.

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These founts of temptation may be classified as those that arise from *external forces* (a and b) and those that rather arise from or are exacerbated by the influence of the *inward lusts* (c) of the one tempted. The sinful craving endemic to all fallen men's wills voluntarily concocts, compels, and consummates temptations we experience every day. Moreover, this inner influence, a chronic feature of temptations confronting fallen sinners, means that a sinner's corrupted will often serves, to varying degrees, as *willing and voluntary* liaise to Satan's and the world's snares.²¹ Our desperate situation signals our need for a Redeemer whose own volitional orientation was equally vulnerable to temptations, but whose moral rectitude impelled him to resist all of their allure. This we find in Christ alone.

The uncorrupted human nature of Christ, including a human will utterly inclined to holiness, confirms a similarity, but not an identity, between the temptation experiences of Christ and those of fallen sinners. When fallen sinners suffer the coordinated attack of Satan, the world, and their own voluntarily complicit flesh, they are morally compelled to sin. By contrast, Christ's human will, situated within the matrix of his incarnate person, was endowed with an undiluted moral impulse to choose the good. In other words, the structures of Christ's and sinners' wills are identical by virtue of their common humanity, but their respective orientations are dimensionally opposed.²²

Due to the thoroughly holy disposition of his heart, Christ assured his disciples that Satan "has no claim on me" ([John 14:30](#)). In other words, Satan could not find, "for the compassing of . . . his ends, a sure party within [his breast]."²³ Owen explains that precisely because demonic temptations enjoy "assistance from ourselves also . . . [i]t is not with us as it was with Christ when Satan came to tempt him."²⁴ Though temptable along

²¹ By this I do not imply that every sin is explicitly voluntary, since even spontaneous impure thoughts constitute sin. However, because the fallen will plays not only an antecedent, craving role to sin, but also a consequent, approving role, there is a sense in which all sin involves the will. Even when the regenerate Paul cries, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" ([Romans 7:15](#)), his final action betrays his driving desire. Herman Bavinck concludes, "[S]ince a human being, also the born-again person for as long as he or she is in the flesh, always to some degree desires what is forbidden, even though he or she fights it in the restricted sense, it can be said that at the most fundamental level all sin is voluntary. There is nobody or nothing that compels the sinner to serve sin" (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:144).

²² Cf. Calvin, who writes, "Still the weakness which Christ took upon himself must be distinguished from ours, for there is a great difference. In us there is no affection unaccompanied by sin, because they all exceed due bounds and proper restraint; but when Christ was distressed by grief and fear, he did not rise against God, but continued to be regulated by the true rule of moderation." John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 3 vols., trans. William Pringle (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 3:227–28.

²³ Owen, *Works*, 6:95.

²⁴ Owen, *Works*, 6:95; emphasis added. In fact, Owen says that to ascribe mutability to the disposition of Christ's will such that he could desire sin is nothing short of "blasphemous" (Owen, *Works*, 18:215). See

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with the rest of Adam's offspring, Christ's unyielding will necessarily confined the type of his temptations to exclusively external ones.

Opponents might rejoin, Does not the absence of any possible inclination to sin eliminate the authenticity of the temptations? No. Jesus endured the full force of temptation not by any potential flaw of his will, but, as Owen writes, "by voluntary condescension for our sakes."²⁵ This act of condescension, while admittedly enshrouded in mystery, allowed Satan to strike at the same point he does with sinners — the human will — but with an intensity never felt by acquiescing sinners. Christ submitted himself as a complete man to the unmitigated power of temptations that were riled, not abated, by his stubborn refusal to yield any holy ground.

So committed was Christ to completing his heavenly task, so staggeringly pure was he in his motives in the face of intensifying temptations, that his victory over sin and Satan's schemes are all the more praiseworthy.²⁶ Satanic and worldly temptations from without challenged a Savior who remained thoroughly "without sin" ([Hebrews 4:15](#)) within.²⁷ In this way "[Christ] came into the closest relation to sinful humanity that it was possible for him to come without thereby becoming himself sinful."²⁸ Sinners who necessarily and freely rebel need a Christ who necessarily and freely obeyed. Out of this asymmetrical

also Francis Turretin, who concurs: "That Christ, although he never sinned, still was not absolutely unable to sin; and that it was not repugnant to his nature, will or office to be able to sin? This blasphemy Episcopius and other Remonstrants have not blushed to put forth." Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George M. Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992–1997), 1:666.

²⁵ Owen, *Works*, 18:215.

²⁶ Gerald O'Collins's suggestion that Jesus "could be truly tempted and tested, provided that he did not know that he could not sin" makes it hard to see how Christ's victory over temptation was not more a function of delusion than praiseworthy obedience. See O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 271.

²⁷ There is debate over whether the phrase "without sin" in [Hebrews 4:15](#) refers to the sinless *result* of Christ's temptations or the inward *source* from which temptations emerge in sinful men but not in Christ. Peccability advocates argue the former to assert that Christ could have sinned, but did not do so. In response, Daniel B. Wallace contends that the result of Jesus's temptations (i.e., no sinful acts) as maintained by peccability advocates, while surely true, is not the focus of [Hebrews 4:15](#), which is to set a visible difference between the types of temptations endured by Christ and sinners. He reasons from the cognates of the *homoi-* word group featured in [Philippians 2:7](#) ("in the likeness of men") and [Romans 8:3](#) ("in the likeness of sinful flesh"), both of which indicate the unique ontology of Christ as an uncorrupted man different from fallen sinners, to argue that [Hebrews 4:15](#) qualifies Christ as the only post-fall human being who was never tempted by an inward compulsion to sin. Despite his compelling lexical and syntactical arguments, Wallace concludes that this text still falls short of serving as proof of Christ's impeccability. See Wallace, "A Preliminary Exegesis of Hebrews 4:15 With a View Toward Solving the Peccability/Impeccability Issue," Bible.org (accessed June 5, 2019).

²⁸ John Murray, "The Person of Christ," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:133.

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matrix the sympathy of Christ reverberates most clearly, beckoning sinners to find refuge in him.

Obedience Through Suffering

One biblical example will suffice to prove the thoroughly voluntary quality of Christ's human obedience, highlight the misery of his temptations, and illustrate how his human will flawlessly reflected his divine will as the Son in obedience to his Father. Fully aware of the inexpressible pain and suffering that would attend his final acts of earthly obedience, Jesus faced his most intense trial of temptation in the garden of Gethsemane, which Luke describes as such "agony" that "his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" ([Luke 22:44](#)). The weight of impending judgment that would be undeservedly his was so horrendous that Jesus the man even pleaded for another way to fulfill his messianic mission. Mark recounts, "He fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, 'Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me'" ([Mark 14:35–36](#)).

This was not a moment of Trinitarian schizophrenia, with the divine Son wavering in his commitment to save, but was instead a sorrowful cry issuing from the human heart of Christ. Facing the excruciating final demand of his holy mission, Christ displayed the capacity to think and will as a man in distinction from his divine mind. As an innocent and holy man, Jesus *wanted* the cup removed. He did not *want* to face the wrath of God for sin. And yet, the impeccable character of his human will impelled him to offer himself as a human sacrifice to the Father ("Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done," [Luke 22:42](#)). Despite the disrupting thoughts of his imminent pain, the uncoerced human will of Christ, united to the eternal Son, cherished obedience to the Father above all else.

"These truths commend to needy sinners an all-sufficient Christ who is both sinless and sympathetic, both majestic and merciful."

What a comfort it is to know that each temptation our Savior faced was God's instrument to further increase his sinless resolve to please his Father. From the sorrow of his soul, to Peter's lying lips, to the anguish of his mother, to the betrayal of his friends, to the direct blows from Satan's hand, Jesus "learned obedience through what he suffered" ([Hebrews 5:8](#)) such that his death on the cross was the culminating moment of a life skilled in solidarity to the Father's will. John Murray articulately describes this confluence of Christ's free human will as the Son, his agonizing temptations, and his loving commitment to the Father:

[Christ's] obedience was forged in the furnace of trial, temptation, and suffering. By these ordeals throughout the whole course of humiliation, his heart, mind, and

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will were framed, so that in each situation as it emerged in the unfolding of the Father's design he was able to meet all the demands, and at the climactic point of his commission, freely and fully to drink the cup of damnation and pour out his soul in death.²⁹

As Paul concludes, "He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" ([Philippians 2:8](#)). At Gethsemane, the reality of Christ's suffering displayed the human quality required for his priestly office. The depth of Christ's suffering there proclaims him as the One who can offer grace and mercy to those who undergo severe trials ([Hebrews 4:16](#)) and reflects how the harmony between Christ's human and divine wills in obedience to the Father led him to glory as the impeccable Champion over sin.

Sympathetic and Impeccable

Any treatment of the temptations endured by the incarnate Christ must reckon with the fact that "mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics."³⁰ The union of the eternal Son of God with a finite human nature confronts readers of Scripture with the relentless incomprehensibility of God. That the God-man voluntarily experienced the greatest of temptations during his earthly ministry further confounds the human mind. Holy Scripture alone is sufficient to guard the curious from straining for that which does not belong to them and to exhort the faithful to pay careful attention to that which does (cf. [Deuteronomy 29:29](#)).

This article finds Scripture piercing through the shroud of mystery to present a Savior who voluntarily and uniquely endured the endangering darts of the evil one. The utterly human quality of his obedience, flowing from an undefiled but free human will that reflected the purity of his divine person, authenticates Christ's suffering and secures his sympathy for sinners. Taking humanity to himself meant assuming a true human nature — with its creaturely mind, affections, body, and will — but one that, in perfect harmony with his deity, could seek nothing but wholehearted delight in the Father's purposes (cf. [John 6:38](#)).

For this reason, Christ was, and continues to be, both sympathetic and impeccable. Christians today may rejoice that the obedient Christ has fulfilled God's holy purpose to redeem them from sin, suffering, and death, and that he will carry forward his sacred

²⁹ John Murray, "The Obedience of Christ," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:156.

³⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:29.

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mission until its magnificent completion. When we see him, we will be like him ([1 John 3:2](#)) and will no longer be able to sin. What a glorious day that will be.

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