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Could Christ Have Sinned?

WHAT MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR HIM TO SIN WAS NOT HIS DIVINE NATURE AS AN ACTING AGENT, BUT THE FACT THAT HE IS THE SON, IN RELATION TO THE FATHER AND SPIRIT, AND AS THE SON, HE SPEAKS, ACTS, AND CHOOSES, GLADLY AND WILLINGLY, TO OBEY HIS FATHER IN ALL THINGS.

By Stephen J. Wellum • April 1, 2022

Could Christ Have Been Tempted? And If So, Could He Have Sinned?

A crucial theological question in Christology is, could Jesus have sinned? This question is not easy to answer, and as such, it requires careful reflection, given the variety of issues involved.

Historically, classical Christology has argued that our Lord Jesus Christ experienced temptation like us, yet he faced it as one who was unable to sin, hence the affirmation of the *impeccability* of Christ (*non posse peccare*). The minority report, on the other hand, is that Jesus experienced temptation and that, although he never sinned, he was able to do so, hence the assertion of Christ's *peccability* (*osse non peccare*).

Both viewpoints admit that, in wrestling with the question, one must do justice to the following biblical truths: (1) Jesus never actually sinned. Scripture is clear on this point, so the issue is whether Jesus *could have* sinned, not whether he actually did. (2) Jesus was tempted, and his temptations were genuine (Luke 4:2; Heb. 4:15; 5:5–7). In fact, Kevin Vanhoozer astutely notes how the Gospels begin and end with the temptation of Christ. “The temptation narrative at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (Lk. 4:1–13) is a showcase for the same active suffering that marks another temptation narrative (Lk. 22:39–46), together with the passion narrative, at its end.” One must affirm, then, the genuineness of Jesus’s temptations: as the obedient Son, from the beginning of his ministry to the cross, he faced trials, temptations, and sufferings for us. Any view that minimizes the reality of his temptations is inconsistent with Scripture.

Yet, we must add a caveat: We must strongly affirm the reality of Christ’s temptations, but we must not make his temptations the same as ours *in every respect*. Why? Because, as much as Jesus is like us, he is also utterly unique, and his temptations reflect this fact. For example, Jesus was tempted to turn rocks into bread, a temptation that normal humans do not face. He was tempted to use his divine prerogatives instead of walking the path of obedience, and he chose to live in dependence upon the Father in order to become our merciful and faithful High Priest (Heb. 2:17–18). In addition, he faced temptation in Gethsemane, but not by anything within himself, since he was perfectly holy and righteous. Unlike us in our fallen condition, in Christ there was no predisposition to sin and no love of it. The temptation he faced was unique to him *as the Son*, and it was unique to him as our sin-bearer. He rightly and legitimately recoiled at the prospect of losing his communion with his Father for a time; as a man, he rightly wanted to avoid death in this way for many reasons. We must never deny that Christ’s temptations were real,

indeed more real than we could ever imagine or experience, but we must also affirm that they were utterly unique to him. (3) God cannot be tempted with evil, and God cannot sin (see, e.g., James 1:13).

From within these three biblical truths, the question regarding Christ's impeccability or peccability must be answered. If (2) is upheld, it would seem that the Son, by becoming a man, would be able to sin. After all, as the peccability argument goes, if Jesus could not have sinned, then how is he truly like us? Yet, given that the person of the incarnation is the divine Son, would not (3) apply to him and thus render him unable to sin? Ultimately, the challenge is to uphold all three truths simultaneously without minimizing any of them. How shall we do so?

NOT ABLE TO SIN



Our answer is that the impeccability position is best. Why? Let us first state the theological rationale for it, working within the parameters of classical Christology, and then offer a brief defense of it. Theologically speaking, if we view our Lord as merely the man Christ Jesus, even though his human nature was unfallen and sinless, he would nevertheless, like the first Adam, be able to sin. In this sense, we can say that Jesus's unfallen human nature was peccable.

But there is more to the identity of Jesus than this, especially when we think of the who of the incarnation. Jesus is not merely another Adam or even a greater, Spirit-empowered one. He is the last Adam, the head of the new creation, the divine Son incarnate, and as the Son, it is impossible for him to sin and to yield to temptation, because God cannot sin. Behind this assertion is the fact that sin is an act of the person, not of the nature, and that in the case of Christ, he is the eternal Son. As Macleod rightly reminds us, "If he sinned, God sinned. At this level, the impeccability of Christ is absolute. It rests not upon his unique endowment with

the Spirit nor upon the indefectibility of God's redemptive purpose, but upon the fact that he is who he is."

Ultimately, the explanation for why Jesus could not have sinned, similar to the explanation for when and how he acts and knows, is Trinitarian. What made it impossible for him to sin was not his divine nature as an acting agent, but the fact that he is the Son, in relation to the Father and Spirit, and as the Son, he speaks, acts, and chooses, gladly and willingly, to obey his Father in all things. Herman Bavinck captures this rationale well: "He is the Son of God, the Logos, who was in the beginning with God and himself God. He is one with the Father and always carries out his Father's will and work. For those who confess this of Christ, the possibility of him sinning and falling is unthinkable."

In fact, it is this truth that provides the grounding and assurance of the indefectibility of God's sovereign plan, and ultimately explains why, in Christ, all of God's gracious purposes cannot fail. It is also the reason why the last Adam is far greater than the first, and thankfully, why the redemption he secures is gloriously better in every way imaginable.

Editors' note: This article is adapted from *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* by Stephen J. Wellum and originally appeared at Crossway.

Notes:

1. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 430.
2. Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ, Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 229–230. Macleod goes

on to say, “We may link the subject ‘God’ with many predicates. The Son of God may suffer, may be tempted, may be ignorant and may even die. But we cannot link God with the predicate ‘sin.’ God cannot in any situation or for any purpose commit a transgression of his own will. He absolutely cannot be guilty of lawlessness” (230).

3. Herman Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 314.

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