

Could Jesus Have Sinned?

Orthodox theologians generally agree that Jesus Christ never committed any sin. This seems to be a natural corollary to His deity and an absolute prerequisite to His work of substitution on the cross. Any affirmation of moral failure on the part of Christ requires a doctrine of His person which would deny in some sense His absolute deity. A question has been raised, however, whether the sinlessness of Christ was the same as that of Adam before the fall or whether it possessed a peculiar character because of the presence of the divine nature. Could the Son of God be tempted as Adam was tempted and could He have sinned as Adam sinned?

The point of view that Christ could sin is designated by the term “peccability,” and the doctrine that Christ could not sin is referred to as “impeccability”.

Adherents of both views agree that *Christ did not sin*, but those who affirm peccability hold that *He could have sinned*. Those who declare the impeccability of Christ believe that *He could not sin* due to the presence of the divine nature. The doctrine of impeccability has been questioned especially on the point of whether an impeccable person can be tempted in any proper sense. If Christ had a human nature which was subject to temptation, was this not in itself evidence that He could have sinned?

In order to solve the problem as to whether Christ is peccable, it is necessary to first examine the character of temptation itself to ascertain whether peccability is involved in any real temptation and, second, to determine the unique factor in Christ: He had two natures, one a divine nature and the other a sinless human nature.

Can an impeccable person be tempted? Christ did not commit sin because He had no sin nature. Whatever temptation could come to Him would be from *without and not from within*. There was no sin nature to tempt sin from within.

Christ had no sin nature, but it is also agreed on the other hand that as to His person He was tempted. The ultimate solution of the problem of the impeccability of Christ rests in the relationship of the divine and human natures. Each of the natures, the divine and the human, had its own will and desire. The human nature *is temptable*, and might desire to do that which is contrary to the will of God. In the person of Christ, however, *the human will was always subservient* to the will of God and could and would never act independently. All agree that the *divine will of God could not sin*. This quality means that Christ becomes impeccable.

Temptation came to Christ because He possessed a human nature, as James states: “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; God cannot be tempted with evil, and God himself tempts no man” (1: 13, ASV). On the one hand, Christ was tempted in all points though His human Nature, not a sin nature and, on the other hand, His divine nature could not be tempted because God cannot be tempted. While His human nature is temptable, His divine nature is not temptable. On these points all can agree. The question

is, then, Can such a person as Christ, possessing both human and divine natures, be tempted if He is impeccable?

The answer is yes.

The question is simply, "Is it possible to attempt the impossible?" Yes. It is *possible* for a rowboat to attack a battleship, even though it is *impossible* for the rowboat to conquer the battleship. While the temptation may be real, there may be infinite power to resist that temptation and if this power is infinite, then the person is impeccable. William G. T. Shedd points out, "*temptability depends upon a constitutional susceptibility to sin, whereas impeccability depends upon omnipotent will not to sin.*" Shedd writes: A person who cannot sin, it is said, cannot be tempted to sin. This is not correct; *any more than it would be correct to say that because an army cannot be conquered, it cannot be attacked.* Temptability depends upon the constitutional susceptibility, while impeccability depends upon the will. So far as his natural susceptibility, both physical and mental, was concerned, Jesus Christ was open to all forms of human temptation excepting those that spring out of lust, or corruption of nature. But his peccability, or the possibility of being overcome by those temptations, would depend upon the amount of voluntary resistance which he was able to bring to bear against them. Those temptations were very strong, but if the self-determination of his holy will was stronger than they, then they could not induce him to sin, and he would be impeccable. *And yet plainly he would be temptable.*

Were the temptations of Christ real? If the temptation of an impeccable person be considered possible, can it be said of Christ that His temptations were real?

This question must also be answered *Yes*.

A proper doctrine of the impeccability of Christ affirms the reality of the temptations of Christ due to the fact that He had a human nature which was temptable. If the human nature had been unsustained, as in the case of Adam, by a divine nature, it is clear that the human nature of Christ might have sinned. The possibility of failure is completely removed by the presence of the divine nature. *The omnipotence of Christ makes it impossible for Him to sin.*

Peccability always implies weakness on the part of the one tempted; he is weak to the extent that he can sin. On the part of Christ, this is clearly out of the question. While the human nature of Christ, left to itself without a divine nature, would have been both *peccable and temptable*, because it was joined to the omnipotent divine nature, the person of Christ was thereby made *impeccable*.

It is foolish speculation to attempt to decide what the human nature of Christ would have done if it had not been joined to the divine nature. The fact is, the human nature was joined to the divine nature and, while its own realm was entirely human, it could not involve the person of Christ in sin. Christ could not sin because He had infinite power to resist temptation.

John F. Walvoord, Jesus Christ Our Lord
(Chicago: Moody, 1969), pp. 148-152