

THE MAN CHRIST JESUS

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I. INTRODUCTION

The theological question that has given rise to the reflections of this paper is as follows: What dimensions of the life, ministry, mission, and work of Jesus Christ can only be accounted for fully and understood rightly when seen through the lens of his humanity? Put differently, while Christ was (and is) fully God and fully man, how do we best account for the way in which he lived his life and fulfilled his calling—by seeing him carrying this out as God, or as man, or as the God-man? I would argue that the most responsible answer biblically and theologically is the last, “as the God-man,” but that the emphasis must be placed on the humanity of Christ as the primary reality he expressed in his day-by-day life, ministry, and work.

The instinct in much evangelical theology, both popular and scholarly, is to stress the deity of Christ, but the NT instead puts greater stress, I believe, on his humanity. He came as the second Adam, the seed of Abraham, the son of David, and he lived his life as one of us. Now again, he was fully and unequivocally God, and some of the works of Jesus, in my view, displayed this deity—e.g. his forgiving of sin (Mark 2), the transfiguration of Christ (Matthew 19; Mark 9; Luke 9), his raising of Lazarus from the dead as the one claiming, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11), and most importantly the efficacy of his atonement whose payment for our sin, only as God, was of infinite value—these and others show forth the truth that he lived among us also as one who was fully God.

But while he was fully God, and while this is crucial to understanding rightly his full identity, life, and the fulfillment of his atoning work, the predominant reality he experienced day by day, and the predominant means by which he fulfilled his calling, was that of his genuine and full humanity. Paul captures the significance of the humanity of Christ with his assertion, “There is one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5).

In this address, I wish to support this claim by appeal to two features of the life and ministry of Christ.¹ Though there are many other factors we could consider, both of these are central to his identity and mission, and

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¹ An expanded discussion of these and other factors will be offered in my forthcoming book *The Man Christ Jesus: Reflections on the Significance of the Humanity of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway).

both are explicable ultimately as we see them lived out, as it were, through the lens, primarily, of the humanity of Christ. First, we will consider what it means that Jesus came as the long-awaited Spirit-anointed Messiah. Second, we will explore the reality of Jesus' impeccability and consider the means by which he resisted temptation. In both of these features, while the deity of Christ certainly is evident, his humanity is prominent such that apart from his full and integral humanity, we cannot account for these central and pivotal identifying features of his person and work.

II. JESUS, THE SPIRIT-ANointed MESSIAH

One of the clearest and strongest evidences that Jesus lived his life and carried out his mission fundamentally out of his humanity is that Jesus came as the Spirit-anointed Messiah. That is, Jesus was empowered by the Spirit to accomplish the work he came to do. As Gerald Hawthorne claims in his seminal study, *The Presence and the Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus*, the Holy Spirit's presence and work in Jesus' life is one of the most significant biblical evidences "of the genuineness of his humanity." According to Hawthorne, "the significance of the Spirit in his life lies precisely in this: that the Holy Spirit was the divine power by which Jesus overcame his human limitations, rose above his human weakness, and won out over his human mortality."²

Now, one must ask this question: Why did Jesus need the Spirit? After all, he was fully God, and being fully God, certainly nothing could be added to him, for as God, he possessed already, infinitely and eternally, every quality or perfection that there is. Yet, Jesus was indwelt with the Spirit and ministered in the power of the Spirit. So, we ask: What could the Spirit of God contribute to the deity of Christ? And the answer we must give is: Nothing! As God he possesses every quality infinitely and nothing can be added to him. So, then, we ask: What could the Spirit of God contribute to the humanity of Christ? The answer is: Everything of supernatural power and enablement that he, in his humanity, would lack. The only way to make sense, then, of the fact that Jesus came in the power of the Spirit is to understand that he lived his life fundamentally as a man, and as such, he relied on the Spirit to provide the power, grace, knowledge, wisdom, direction, and enablement he needed, moment by moment and day by day, to fulfill the mission the Father sent him to accomplish.

Consider with me just a few texts which fill out and support this way of understanding Jesus:

Isaiah 11:1-3: Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch from his roots will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, The spirit of wisdom and understanding, The spirit of counsel and strength, The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And He will delight in the fear of the Lord. . . .

² Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power: the Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus* (Dallas: Word, 1991) 35.

The teaching and implications of this text are massive. Ask yourself these questions: Did Jesus, in his interactions with the Pharisees, or the crowds, or the Samaritan woman, or Nicodemus, or Peter, or the high priest—did Jesus exhibit extraordinary wisdom and understanding? Was his counsel and insight marked by discernment? Did he fear the Lord and so obey his Father from his heart every step of the way? Yes, indeed, he did. Now ask yourself this question: How would Isa 11:2 encourage us to account for these features that marked all of his life and ministry? Answer: The Spirit rested on him and granted him wisdom, understanding, knowledge, discernment, strength, and resolve to fear God his Father. In other words, these qualities did not extend directly or fundamentally from his own divine nature, though divine he surely was! Rather, much as the “fruit of the Spirit” of Gal 5:22–23 are the evidences outwardly of the Spirit at work in a believer inwardly, so too here, these qualities are attributed to and accounted for by the Spirit who rested upon Jesus, empowering him to have the wisdom, understanding, and resolve to obey that he exhibited.

Consider another text. Luke 2:40 and 52 tell us of Jesus in his youth, “The Child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him. . . . And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.” Increasing in wisdom—is this something God does? Clearly, no. Rather, these are references to the growth in the humanity of the boy Jesus as he grew—he grew physically and he grew in wisdom and understanding, for “the grace of God was upon Him,” likely a reference to the Spirit at work in his life.³

One more comment on this text is needed. These verses—Luke 2:40 and 52—bracket the one inspired story of Jesus we have in the Gospels, the account of Jesus in Jerusalem at the temple while his parents begin their trip back to Nazareth. Mary and Joseph returned only to find Jesus holding his own, as it were, with the teachers of the law at the temple in Jerusalem. “All who heard him,” Luke comments, “were amazed at His understanding and His answers” (Luke 2:47). Now, the common evangelical intuition for accounting for this event in Jesus’ boyhood is this: Of course Jesus astonished these teachers of the law in Jerusalem; after all, he was God! And while he was God, this answer misses the very hints Luke himself has given in the verses that bracket this account. Jesus astonished these Jewish teachers, not because he was God, although he was; rather, he astonished them because as a 12 year-old human boy, he had devoted himself to the mastery of the law of the Lord, and the grace of God by the Spirit had given him extraordinary insight, so that at merely 12 years old, he could astonish these greatest of all teachers in Jerusalem by the questions he asked and the answers he gave. He truly was, then, the Psalm 1 prototype. He loved the law of the Lord, and on that law he meditated day and night. And he became like a tree planted by rivers of water that yields its fruit in season, its leaf does not wither, and in whatever he did, he prospered. This is Jesus. His knowledge of the Scriptures, his insight and understanding, are not

³ Ibid. 101.

automatic, but are hard won through the work of the Spirit in his life and his own diligence in studying God's word. In short, Jesus grew in wisdom and understanding of the Scriptures, day by day and year by year, as he grew into full adult life, because as a human, the Spirit worked in him to grant him these abilities.

We would be remiss not to mention Jesus' self-declaration as he began his public ministry. Following being tempted by the devil, Luke tells us that Jesus "returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14), and he entered the synagogue in Nazareth, his home town, on the Sabbath. Luke writes:

And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, And recovery of sight to the blind, To set free those who are oppressed, To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:17-21)

The fact that we are told that Jesus "opened the book and found the place where it was written," and then quotes from Isaiah 61, indicates that Jesus chose this text! Think of it: he could have turned instead to Isaiah 53, but no, he turned here. Obviously, this indicates something of the significance of Jesus' identity as the Spirit-anointed Messiah. At the heart of who he is, we must see him as coming in the power of the Spirit.

Another important text is Matt 12:28. Jesus had exorcized a demon from and healed a man who was blind and mute, but the Pharisees claimed that he had done this by the power of "Beelzebul the ruler of the demons" (Matt 12:24). Jesus gives three stinging rebukes, the last of which is this: "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt 12:28). Of course, the main point Jesus is making is that as the Spirit-anointed One foretold over and again in the OT Scriptures, he comes as the Messiah who brings in the kingdom. But do not also miss the other obvious lesson from this text. Jesus does not claim to have performed this miracle by his own divine power and authority as God. Rather, he attributes the power used in this miraculous exorcism and healing to the Spirit at work in and through him. Indeed, he accomplished these works as none other than the Spirit-anointed Messiah.

One last text confirms what we've seen and provides even more reason for understanding the life and ministry of Jesus being lived and conducted as a man in the power of the Spirit. In Peter's sermon to Cornelius and the Gentiles gathered with him, recorded in Acts 10, he takes a moment to summarize the whole of Jesus' life, his moral actions, and his supernatural power, with these stunning and instructive words: "You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him" (Acts 10:38). Now, clearly Peter understands that Jesus is fully God. After all, Peter worshipped Jesus (Matt 14:33); Peter was granted revelation from the Father that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living

God (Matt 16:16); and Peter was present with Thomas and the other disciples when Jesus appeared in the room, and Thomas responded, saying to Jesus, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:26–29). Peter knows Jesus is God—which is what makes this statement in Acts 10:38 all the more remarkable. As Peter contemplates Jesus' day-to-day life, the good deeds he did and the truth he taught, the exorcisms and miracles he performed, and when Peter considers how Jesus did these things, he says that, "God *anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power*," and that "He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for *God was with Him*" (Acts 10:38). Clearly, the template Peter had in mind in understanding and accounting for the life and ministry of Jesus was this: Jesus was the Christ, a man born in the line of David, anointed and empowered by the Spirit to live out his life and carry out his mission. Was Jesus also fully God? Indeed, he was. But it was as "the man Christ Jesus," filled with the Spirit, whom we see living in obedience, exercising supernatural power, and fulfilling the mission the Father sent him to accomplish.

And also, notice one further point. Can you imagine that the similarity in language between Acts 10:38 ("You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the *Holy Spirit* and with *power*") and Acts 1:8 ("You will receive *power* when the *Holy Spirit* comes upon you") is accidental? I highly doubt it. It seems rather that Luke's point would be this. The very power by which Jesus lived his life and carried out his mission is now ours, as the Holy Spirit who was on him is given to us, his followers. What incredible new covenant reality now is ours in Christ, by the indwelling Spirit! The long-awaited internalization of the Spirit is granted only as that Spirit first dwelt in Jesus, empowering his life and obedience, only then to be granted to Jesus' followers, that we, too, may live lives marked by that same supernatural Spirit-wrought empowerment for obedience and faithfulness. How important it is to see that Jesus lived his life as a man, empowered by the Spirit, since we, too, are called to "follow in his steps" (1 Pet 2:21)—a point to which we shall return at the end.

III. JESUS, THE IMPECCABLE, TEMPTABLE, AND SINLESS MESSIAH

The second line of support for the central importance of understanding Jesus' life and ministry being lived fundamentally as a man is this: he was really, genuinely tempted. Immediately we understand that Jesus' humanity must be involved in his temptations in a way in which his deity could not be, for James tells us, "God cannot be tempted by evil" (Jas 1:13). But Jesus was tempted. In fact, Hebrews tells us that he was "tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). But there is more: Jesus was also fully God, and as such it has seemed to most theologians⁴ (myself included) that

⁴ M. E. Osterhaven ("Sinlessness of Christ," in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984] 1018) clearly overstates the historical acceptance of the

he was impeccable,⁵ that is, he could not sin. So, how do we account for the reality of the genuine temptations of Jesus if one holds also that the One tempted, viz., the theanthropic Person who was both fully God and fully man, was himself genuinely impeccable and as such, could not sin? And how does our understanding of the deity of Christ and the humanity of Christ relate to our accounting for his impeccability, his temptability, and his sinlessness?

1. *Sampling of evangelical treatments.* Perhaps a bit of background might help from some who have addressed this issue. Louis Berkhof treats this problem briefly, presenting the issue but then offering only the most teasing and indecisive of responses. After discussing several biblical texts that affirm clearly that Christ experienced real and regular temptations throughout his ministry, Berkhof continues, “We may not detract from the reality of the temptations of Jesus as the last Adam, however difficult it may be to conceive of one who could not sin as being tempted.”⁶ He then offers some suggested resolutions without committing himself to any of them, concluding: “But in spite of all this the problem remains, How was it possible that one who *in concreto*, that is, as He was actually constituted, could not sin nor even have an inclination to sin, nevertheless be subject to real temptation?”⁷ End of discussion.

Herman Bavinck’s treatment is more satisfying. He affirms that Scripture teaches both the real temptations of Christ and his real sinlessness. Concerning the latter, Bavinck asserts that Scripture “prompts us to recognize in Christ, not just an empirical sinlessness, but a necessary sinlessness as well.”⁸ In other words, it is not merely a matter of historical record that Christ did not sin; more to the point, it was logically impossible for him to sin. So, Christ was genuinely tempted while he was genuinely impeccable. What supports the Christian belief in Christ’s impeccability? Bavinck understands two equally problematic implications of denying impeccability and saying, as did Arius, Pelagius, and some medieval nominalists, that Christ in principle could have sinned. Either it would be the case that “God himself would have to be able to sin—which is blasphemy—or the union between the divine and the human nature is considered breakable and in fact denied.”⁹

doctrine of Christ’s impeccability when he says, “The teaching that Jesus Christ was sinless (impeccable) . . . has been a universal conviction of the Christian church.” Nonetheless, he rightly points to the fact that even advocates of the most notorious Christological heresies in the early church typically did not deny the sinlessness of Christ even if they were less certain about his impeccability.

⁵ As traditionally defined, “impeccability” asserts of Christ not merely that he *did not sin* (which is true) but more strongly that he *could not sin*. As impeccable, Christ not only was *posse non peccare* (able not to sin), more importantly he was *non posse peccare* (not able to sin).

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1939) 338.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume Three: Sin and Salvation in Christ* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 314.

⁹ Ibid. In support of this claim, Bavinck cites Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 36, 40–41, and Peter Lombard, *Sentences*, III, dist. 12.

But how then can we understand the temptations of Christ? Bavinck suggests a distinction between the innate holiness of the divine nature of the Person of Christ and the ethical holiness of his human nature. In brief, the innate holiness of his divine nature renders Christ genuinely impeccable, while the ethical holiness of his human nature renders Christ open to temptation, struggle, obedience, and growth. He concludes that in Christ's temptations "he was bound, fighting as he went, to remain faithful; the inability to sin (*non posse peccare*) was not a matter of coercion but ethical in nature and therefore had to be manifested in an ethical manner."

William G. T. Shedd has an extended treatment of this question, devoting a full chapter of his *Dogmatic Theology* to "Christ's Impeccability."¹⁰ Shedd accounts for the impeccability of Christ by asserting the superiority of the will of his divine nature over the will of his human nature. Obviously affirming the dyothelitism of the 6th ecumenical council, Constantinople III in 680, he writes, "An impeccable will is one that is so mighty in its self-determination to good that it cannot be conquered by any temptation to evil, however great."¹¹ Christ's divine nature, then, is impeccable, since the will of this divine nature cannot be tempted toward evil, much less to do evil. Christ's human nature and will, however, are peccable. But even though Christ's human will could sin, his divine will strengthened the human will such that the human will, so divinely empowered, could not sin. On its own, the human nature could sin, but in union with the divine nature, Christ could not sin. Shedd provides a helpful analogy:

Consequently, what might be done by the human nature if *alone*, and by itself, cannot be done by it in this *union* with omnipotent holiness. An iron wire by itself can be bent and broken in a man's hand; but when the wire is welded into an iron bar, it can no longer be so bent and broken. . . . A mere man can be overcome by temptation, but a God-man cannot be. . . . 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.¹²

Furthermore, Shedd holds that the main reason that Christ's human nature, when in union with the divine nature, could not sin (though it could sin on its own), is that the holiness of the divine nature is such that it could not tolerate sin. But if the human nature were able to sin when joined to the divine nature, this would inevitably compromise the holiness of the divine nature itself—which is both unthinkable and impossible. In such a case, "the guilt would not be confined to the human nature" but the divine nature also would be stained.¹³ Since this cannot occur to the immutably holy divine nature, once the union of human and divine natures has occurred, the human

¹⁰ William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (2d ed.; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, repr. 1980), Vol. II. Chap. V, 330–49.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 330.

¹² *Ibid.* 333 (*italics in original*).

¹³ *Ibid.* 334.

nature is rendered impeccable by virtue of its union to the impeccable and overpowering divine nature.

But, then, how could the impeccable Christ be truly tempted? Shedd distinguishes between the *constitutional susceptibility* of Christ's human nature, which was vulnerable to weakness, limitation, and open to both physical and mental temptations, and the *human will* of Christ, which now as joined to the divine nature and will, was not able to yield to whatever temptations he faced. So, while the temptations were strongly felt and experienced by a human constitution fully susceptible to temptation, he remained unable to sin by virtue of the divine will's supernatural empowerment that would not allow the human will to sin. Shedd explains, "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."¹⁴

Thomas Morris and Gerald O'Collins have offered variations of a proposed understanding that would account for Christ's impeccability and the genuineness of his temptations. According to this proposal, Christ could be both impeccable and genuinely tempted so long as he did not know that he was impeccable. Morris explains the idea this way:

We have said that it seems to be a conceptual truth that, in some sense, temptation requires the possibility of sinning. On reflection, we can see that it is the *epistemic* possibility of sinning rather than a broadly logical, or metaphysical, or even physical possibility that is conceptually linked to temptation. . . . Jesus could be tempted to sin just in case it was epistemically possible for him that he sin.¹⁵

Similarly, O'Collins states that "Jesus could be truly tempted and tested, provided that he did not know that he could not sin." If Christ were impeccable and knew himself to be so, then the biblical accounts of his struggle and agony in temptation would simply have been "a performance put on for the edification of others."¹⁶

As a sample of a contrary perspective we may consider the proposal offered by Millard Erickson. For Erickson, Scripture teaches clearly that Christ *did not sin* and that God *cannot sin*. But this does not logically require, he insists, that Christ could not have sinned. Hebrews 4:15 would seem to indicate that although Christ never did sin, he must have been able to sin, Erickson reasons. According to this text, Christ "in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." But if he was tempted in every respect, must this not include the fact that he could have yielded to temptation? Erickson writes, "The thrust of the passage is that he is able to intercede for us because he has completely identified with us; this seems to imply that his tempta-

¹⁴ Ibid. 336.

¹⁵ Thomas Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (1986; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001) 147–48.

¹⁶ Gerald O'Collins, *Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 271. Klaus Issler ("Jesus' Example: Prototype of the Dependent, Spirit-Filled Life," in Klaus Issler and Fred Sanders, eds., *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Introductory Christology* [Nashville: B & H, 2007] 215–16), seems also to follow the Morris-O'Collins proposal since he discusses the issue of Christ's impeccability and temptation, citing approvingly the contributions of these two scholars.

tion included not only the whole range of sin, but the real possibility of sinning."¹⁷ Erickson considers Morris's view, discussed above, and dismisses it as inadequate. I would concur.

But, hypothetically, what would have been involved in the event that Christ had sinned? Since God cannot sin, the deity of Christ could not have been involved in the act of sin that Christ, in this hypothetical scenario, would have committed. But how not, since the divine and human natures are joined in the one Person of Jesus Christ in the incarnation? Erickson suggests, "At the very brink of the decision to sin, where that decision had not yet taken place, but the Father knew it was about to be made, the Second Person of the Trinity would have left the human nature of Jesus, dissolving the incarnation."¹⁸ So, apparently Erickson considers as hypothetically possible one of the horns of the dilemma that Bavinck had wanted to avoid. Indeed, the union of the divine and human natures would be, in this case, breakable, in order to protect the divine nature from involvement in sin. And also interesting is the observation that Erickson and Shedd seem to agree that in the *union* of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ, Christ could not sin. Both accept the position that if Christ sinned in his Person, that is, in the union of his human and divine natures, this immoral act would necessarily implicate the divine nature in Jesus. Where Shedd argues from this that the divine nature overpowers the otherwise peccable human will rendering the theanthropic Person of Christ impeccable, Erickson argues that if Christ were about to commit an act of sin, in this hypothetical situation the divine nature would have first separated from the human nature in Christ so that the sin committed would be done by the human nature alone and not involve the holy and impeccable divine nature.

2. *An alternate proposal.* For some time now, I have considered another possible way of dealing with this issue, one that flows from a strong sense in which Christ should be understood to have lived his life of sinless obedience as a man, anointed and empowered by the Spirit, to live his life and carry out his calling, obedient to the end.¹⁹ Essentially this proposal runs as follows: Jesus was genuinely impeccable owing to the fact that in the incarnation it was none other than the immutable and eternally holy Second Person of the Trinity who joined to himself a full human nature. Nevertheless, this impeccability of his Person did not render his temptations inauthentic or his struggles disingenuous. How so? Jesus resisted these temptations and in every way obeyed his Father, not by recourse to his divine nature but through

¹⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 562.

¹⁸ Ibid. 563. Another who argues similarly to Erickson is Thomas P. Flint, "The Possibilities of Incarnation: Some Radical Molinist Suggestions," *RS* 37 (2001) 307–20.

¹⁹ I appreciate much Gerald Hawthorne's profound study, *The Presence and the Power*. More recently, John E. McKinley has produced a work of major significance on this issue, arguing in ways that are similar to the proposal I here describe briefly. See his *Tempted for Us: Theological Models and the Practical Relevance of Christ's Impeccability and Temptation* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 2009).

the resources provided to him in his full humanity. In short, this proposal suggests that coming to terms with the distinction between why it was that Christ *could not sin*—viz., he was God—and why it is that he *did not sin*—viz., he was the human Jesus, anointed and empowered by the Spirit—in fact presents us with an answer to this theological problem that promises to account fully for the genuineness of his impeccability and the genuineness of his temptations. Having given a summary of this proposal, allow me to develop it just a bit.

First, we begin by affirming what is in some ways both the clearest and most important truth in the whole of this discussion, viz., that Christ in fact did not sin. Scripture here is abundantly clear. Consider the following passages: 2 Cor 5:21: “God made Christ who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him”; Heb 4:15: “Christ was tempted in every way as we are yet without sin;” 1 Pet 2:21ff: “you have been called for this purpose, since Christ suffered also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth” (with a quotation here from Isa 53:9); and 1 John 3:5: “You know that he appeared in order to take away sins; and in him there is no sin.”

Second, the impeccability of Christ is a reasonable inference from Scripture’s teaching about who the incarnate Christ is, and an inference so clear and compelling that it is unreasonable to imagine Jesus not considering this inference thereby knowing the truth of his own impeccability. I agree here with Shedd who argued that if Christ could sin, in this hypothetical act of sin “the guilt would not be confined to the human nature” but the divine nature also would be stained.²⁰ Since this cannot occur to the immutably holy divine nature, once the union of human and divine natures has occurred, the human nature is rendered impeccable by virtue of its union to the impeccable divine nature. Or one might think of the issue in these terms: Since the holy One born of Mary was fully God as well as fully man, this would imply, it would seem, some limitations in expression both for his divine and human natures. That is, not only would the union of natures require some limitation in the expression of certain divine attributes in order for him to live an authentic human life—e.g. Christ both grew in wisdom and had limited knowledge (e.g. Luke 2:40, 52; Mark 13:32) as we saw above—but also some limitation of his human choice and activity would likewise be entailed, so that no action that might threaten the integrity or holiness of his divine nature could occur.

Now, this is not to say that there cannot be experiences that Christ had that are distinctive and unique to his deity or humanity, respectively. It rather is to say that no expression of his deity, and no expression of his humanity, could violate the integrity of the other nature. So, for example, Jesus can forgive sin as God (e.g. Mark 2:5ff.), yet this action does not violate the integrity of his human nature while it surely does extend beyond the abilities and limitations of that human nature. Similarly, Jesus can become hungry

²⁰ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* 334.

(e.g. Luke 4:2) or thirsty (e.g. John 19:28), yet these genuinely human experiences do not violate Jesus' divine nature, since nothing in that divine nature corresponds to the experience of physical hunger or thirst. But one cannot say the same thing about the hypothetical possibility of the theanthropic Jesus sinning. Even Erickson who wants to say that Jesus could have sinned is unwilling to say that Jesus *qua* theanthropic person—that is, as the Person comprised of human and divine natures in union—could have sinned. Why? Erickson, Shedd, Bavinck, and nearly all have understood that if the theanthropic Jesus sinned, the moral nature of this action could not be divorced from his divine nature. Unlike Jesus' hunger or thirst whose experiences correspond to nothing comparable in his divine nature, so he could both hunger and thirst without compromising that divine nature, if the theanthropic Jesus sinned, this moral act (or more precisely, this immoral act) does correspond to something in the divine nature, namely, God's own holy, moral nature. Hence, unless one imagines the break of natures that Erickson proposes, the theanthropic Jesus, as God and man united indissolubly in one Person, could not sin.²¹

Third, and most important for the position I am here arguing, the impeccability of Christ by virtue of his impeccable divine nature united to his human nature, has nothing directly to do with how he resisted temptation and how it was that he did not sin. Yes, Christ was impeccable, but his impeccability is quite literally irrelevant to explaining his sinlessness. The common evangelical intuition seems to be this: if the reason Christ *could* not sin is that he is God, then the reason Christ *did* not sin must likewise be that he is God. My proposal denies this symmetry and insists that the questions of why Christ *could not sin* and why he *did not sin* require, instead, remarkably different answers.

To understand better the distinction here invoked between why something *could not* occur and why it *did not* occur, consider this example: Imagine a swimmer who wanted to attempt breaking the world's record for the longest continuous swim (which, I've read, is something over 70 miles). As this swimmer trains, besides his daily swims of 5 to 10 miles, he includes weekly swims of greater distance. On some of the longer swims of 30 and 40 miles, he notices that his muscles can begin to tighten and cramp a bit, and he becomes worried that in attempting to break the world record, his muscles may cramp severely and he could then drown. So, he consults with friends, and they decide to arrange for a boat to follow along behind the swimmer 20 or 30 feet back, close enough to pick him up should any serious problem arise, but far enough away so as not to interfere in any way with the attempted historic swim itself. On the appointed day, conditions being just right, the

²¹ See the helpful critique of Erickson's proposed hypothetical breaking of the union of the human and divine natures in Jesus, were his sinning to be envisioned, in Garrett J. DeWeese, "One Person, Two Natures: Two Metaphysical Models of the Incarnation," in Klaus Issler and Fred Sanders, eds., *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Introductory Christology* (Nashville: B & H, 2007) 128–30.

swimmer dives in and begins his attempt at breaking the world record. As he swims, all the while the boat follows along comfortably behind ready to pick up the swimmer, if needed. But no help is needed; with determination and resolve, the swimmer relentlessly swims, and swims, and swims, and in due time, he succeeds in breaking the world record. Now, consider two questions: (1) Why is it that in this record-breaking event the swimmer *could not have drowned*? Answer: the boat was there all the while, ready to rescue him if needed. But (2) Why is it the swimmer *did not drown*? Answer: he kept swimming! Notice that the answer to the second question has nothing at all to do with the boat, that is, it has nothing to do with the answer to the first question. In fact, if you gave the answer of “the boat” to question 2, the swimmer would be both astonished and dismayed. It simply is not true that the swimmer did not drown because the boat was there. The boat, quite literally, had absolutely nothing to do with why the swimmer did not drown. Furthermore, although the swimmer knew full well that he could not drown due to the boat following along behind him, that knowledge had nothing to do with why he did not drown, since he also knew that if he ever relied on the boat his mission of breaking the world record would be forfeited. So although he knew that he could not drown due to the boat, he also knew that he could only accomplish his goal by swimming as if there were no boat there at all.

As one considers again the temptations of Christ, it seems that one can rightly hold that the theanthropic Jesus *could not sin* because he was God. But this does not necessarily answer the question of why he *did not sin*. And in fact, the answer Scripture suggests to us is this: Jesus did not sin, not because he relied on the supernatural power of his own divine nature or because his divine nature overpowered his human nature keeping him from sinning, but it rather is because he utilized all of the resources given to him in his humanity. He loved and meditated on God’s word (consider the significance here of Psalm 1 being the first and opening psalm, pointing obviously to Christ), he prayed to his Father, he trusted in the wisdom and rightness of his Father’s will and word, and very significantly, he relied on the supernatural power of the Spirit upon him, to strengthen him to do all that he was called upon to do. Jesus lived his life in reliance on the Spirit so that his resistance to temptation and his obedience to the will of the Father took place through, and not apart from, the empowerment provided him as the second Adam, the seed of Abraham, the son of David. Recall again Peter’s claim that God anointed Jesus “with the Holy Spirit and with power,” and that he went about doing good (the moral life and obedience of Christ) as well as healing all who are oppressed by the devil (the miracles he performed), “for God was with him” (Acts 10:38). Although he was God, and although he was impeccable as the God-man, nevertheless he did not resist temptation and obey the Father by his divine nature but by the power of the Spirit who indwelt him. Furthermore, could Christ have known that as the theanthropic Savior he was genuinely impeccable yet knowing this, could he nonetheless be genuinely tempted? Clearly the answer is yes, since he also knew that his mission was to obey where Adam failed, to live his life as the perfectly

obedient man, through the power of the Spirit. He knew that to rely on "the boat," i.e. on his own divine nature, would be to forfeit the mission on which he was sent. Hence, he had to fight temptation as a man, in dependence on his Father and by the power of the Spirit, and so he did, amazingly, completely without ever once yielding to any temptation.

IV. RELEVANCE TO SOME SELECT RELATED AREAS

As I close, permit me to extend this model to address a couple related questions. First, what does Heb 5:8–9 mean? These verses read, "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience from the things which he suffered. And having been made perfect, he became to all those who obey him the source of eternal salvation." Clearly Hebrews cannot mean that Jesus eventually learned to obey his Father having disobeyed him so many times previously. It cannot mean that he finally was perfected having been quite imperfect previously. We know this cannot be its meaning since just a few verses earlier we read that Christ was "tempted in all ways as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). So rather, Heb 5:8–9 means this: through the things that Christ suffered, through the trials, temptations, and afflictions of life, he learned to obey increasingly difficult demands of his Father until at last, he was prepared—made mature, if you will, strengthened in faith and character—to go to the cross. Even then, we know from the agony he expressed in the garden of Gethsemane that obedience to the Father was excruciatingly difficult, and it was anything but automatic. Could Jesus have gone to the cross successfully three, or five, or fifteen years earlier? The answer that seems to suggest itself is, no. He learned to obey harder and harder demands, and proved himself "obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). His resistance of temptation and obedience to the Father were not automatic since these were not brought about from his impeccable divine nature. Rather, he learned to obey as a man, and as a man he fought temptation and sought to obey in increasingly demanding situations of life. But he always did obey, and through this regular obedience he was made ready, strengthened, for the biggest challenge of all, death on the cross, in order that he would be the source of our eternal salvation.

Second and last, what relevance does this have for how we live our lives? Consider afresh the staggering command of 1 Pet 2:21–22: Christ left us an example that "we should follow in his steps, who committed no sin. . . ." If Christ resisted temptation and obeyed the Father out of his divine nature, how could he be an example for us? If Christ lived out his life and carried out his mission in the power of his divinity, how could we be commanded rightly to follow in his steps? But if Christ lived the prototype of new covenant life, by prayer and the word and the power of the Spirit, and then if he shared those same resources with us, his followers, then we can rightly be called to live like him. Indeed, the expectation is so fully right and real that Peter has the audacity to say, as we have seen, "follow in his steps, *who committed no sin*." Christ is the only Savior by virtue of his perfect and sinless obedience, and he was sinlessly obedient by virtue of living in dependence

upon his Father, in the power of the Spirit. In his temptations, and in all of his acts of obedience, it was not the divine nature to which he turned for empowerment, and defense, and resource. Rather, as Peter instructs us, he was *filled with the Holy Spirit and with power*, so he went about doing good, and healing all who oppressed by the devil, for God was *with* him. Indeed, though he was fully God, it was as “the man Christ Jesus” that he lived his life and so became the model of new covenant living we should seek, by God’s grace and Spirit-enablement, to emulate. To be like Christ is to be the kind of human he was. May God grant us vision and grace to see Jesus rightly and obey him as he obeyed the Father, by the power of the Spirit, to the glory of the one true and living God.