

*Spotless Lamb of God:*

THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST'S IMPECCABILITY

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Was Jesus Christ able to sin? Raising this question is not the same as asking whether or not Jesus did sin.<sup>1</sup> Scripture testimony to the actual sinlessness of the Lord Jesus is abundant. We have his own claims, as reported in the Gospels. Speaking of his Father, Jesus could say: “He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him” (John 8:29).<sup>2</sup> He went on to challenge an increasingly hostile crowd with the demand, “Which one of you convicts me of sin?” (John 8:46). His conscious goal was to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15). Shortly before the crucifixion he claimed, “I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (John 15:10).

Moreover, there is also the testimony of his closest disciples. John can say, “You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin” (1 John 3:5); Peter asserts that he “committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth” (1 Peter 2:22).

Further, Luke particularly shows the Lord’s righteous innocence as seen by those around him. Pilate could find no guilt in him (Luke 23:4, 14, 22), and said that Herod had likewise failed (Luke 23:15). One of the crucified thieves acknowledged his lack of wrongdoing (Luke 23:41). The centurion presiding over the crucifixion confessed Jesus’ innocence (Luke 23:47).

Another important testimony appears in Hebrews. In contrasting the Melchizedekian priesthood of Jesus Christ with the Aaronic priesthood the author concludes: “For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens” (Heb. 7:26). This sets out a fourfold sinlessness of Christ. John Owen explained the first two terms (*holy* and *innocent*) by noting that “[t]he first includes all positive holiness; the other, an abnegation of all unholiness.” The third term (*unstained*) meant

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<sup>1</sup> I owe a considerable debt to Dr. Cornel Venema’s Christology class at Mid-America Reformed Seminary and my former classmate, Mr. Jeremy Baker, for stimulating discussion and bibliographic pointers for this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotes are taken from the ESV.

that he “contracted” no evil from anyone or anything. Finally *separated from sinners* indicated that “He was every way, in the perfect holiness of his nature and his life, distinguished from all sinners; not only from the greatest, but from those who ever had the least taint of sin...”<sup>3</sup>

Whether the details of Owen’s distinctions seem compelling or not, the heaping up of terms relating to moral purity establish the sinlessness of Christ on unshakeably solid ground.

There are additional Scriptural testimonies to the actual sinlessness of Jesus, some of which will be referenced below. What has been cited is sufficient to show why, writing in the early 1970s, J.A.T. Robinson could say that the judgment of Jesus as being without sin “was never seriously questioned till a hundred years ago.”<sup>4</sup> So also Donald Macleod writes about the unfallen purity of Jesus, “Until the nineteenth century this was the virtually unanimous confession of the church.”<sup>5</sup>

Where Scripture was taken more or less seriously, the assertion that Christ sinned was largely unthinkable. Even after the testimony of Scripture was widely questioned, many held on to this point. For instance Wolfhart Pannenberg—though discarding much of the Scriptural testimony—felt able to assert the sinlessness of Christ on the basis of the resurrection.<sup>6</sup>

The question to be treated here is whether it was theoretically possible for Christ to have committed sin. I maintain that this question must be answered in the negative: it was not possible for Jesus Christ to sin, because he was strictly and absolutely impeccable. This paper will proceed by giving four positive arguments for Christ’s impeccability,<sup>7</sup> answering three

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<sup>3</sup> John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Vol. 5. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 554, 555, 558.

<sup>4</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 88. Already by 1863 Carl Ullmann devoted considerable attention to defending the sinlessness of Jesus against those who denied it. See his *The Sinlessness of Jesus: An Evidence for Christianity* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1870), 107–177.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 222.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus— God and Man* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), 363–64.

<sup>7</sup> Additional arguments have been used, but these four seem simplest and best.

objections, and briefly touching on the value and status of the doctrine, interacting with previous writers along the way.

## **I. Arguments in favor of Christ's impeccability.**

There are multiple ways to argue for the impeccability of Christ. Thomas Oden divides arguments for the sinlessness of Jesus into two viewpoints: deductive and inductive. As his inductive arguments relate primarily to Scriptural testimonies about actual sinlessness, it is the deductive arguments that are most relevant for my purpose here.<sup>8</sup> In what follows I maintain that the work of the Triune God with regard to the incarnation of Christ and our redemption through him excluded all possibility of sin for the Lord Jesus.

### *1. God the Father willed that he should not sin.*

It was not in God's decree that Jesus Christ would sin, and therefore, ultimately, he could not sin. The force of this argument depends on a recognition of God's overarching decree as genuinely directing all things. In the language of the Westminster Larger Catechism, God "hath, for his own glory, unchangeably foreordained whatsoever comes to pass in time, especially concerning angels and men."<sup>9</sup>

Herman Hoeksema argued for Christ's impeccability in this way. If Christ could have fallen into sin, that would have denied "God's immutable decree that Christ should be made

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life: Systematic Theology*, Vol 2. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 254–260. These three deductive arguments—from the impossibility of a contradiction in God's will, the requirements of salvation, and the implication of forgiving sins (*Ibid.*, 254–55)—are subsumed in my first two arguments.

<sup>9</sup> WLC 12. Citations from the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms are taken from *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church: With Proof Texts* (corrected reprint; Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education, 2008).

perfect as the captain of our salvation.”<sup>10</sup> Because God decreed to provide salvation through the work of a sinless redeemer, Christ was hypothetically impeccable (i.e., not able to sin in view of the divine decree).<sup>11</sup>

To expand on Hoeksema’s point, there are two ways to demonstrate God’s decree that Christ should not sin. The first is simply from the events. The witness of Scripture to Christ’s freedom from sin is quite clear. In addition to the texts previously cited, one could think of Pilate’s wife acknowledging him as a “righteous man” (Matt. 27:19) and Paul’s forceful declaration that he “knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21). Since “in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the First Cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly” (WCF 5.2), the event sufficiently reveals God’s decree concerning it. Because Christ did not sin, we know God decreed he would not.

A second way to demonstrate that God’s decree included Christ’s sinlessness is to highlight the Scriptural statements about Christ’s necessary qualifications for and success in his work. In other words, because it was prophesied that Christ would be successful in the work of redemption, and because that work of redemption required sinless perfection, it becomes evident that God’s decree included Christ’s sinless perfection.

In order for Christ to succeed in the work of redemption, he needed to be sinlessly perfect.<sup>12</sup> His holiness was no small part of what suited him to be our high priest (Heb. 7:26).

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<sup>10</sup> Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), 512. Rather similar is the remark of R.L. Dabney, “There must have been then, at least a decretive necessity, that all his actions should be infallibly holy.” (*Lectures in Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985], 471.)

<sup>11</sup> Along similar lines, Mark Jones writes: “...apart from the question of natural impeccability, it was hypothetically impossible for Christ to sin as it was not in God’s decree.” *A Christian’s Pocket Guide to Jesus Christ* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2012), 29.

<sup>12</sup> Preaching on Hebrews 1:9 Thomas Manton gave detailed consideration to the extensiveness of and need for Christ’s holiness, both as to his person and his mediatorial office. See *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, Vol. 17. (Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008), 408–412.

Had there not been the exchange of “the righteous for the unrighteous” he could not have brought us to God (1 Pet. 3:18).<sup>13</sup>

Now Scripture predicts and proclaims Christ’s successful accomplishment of the work of redemption.<sup>14</sup> Centuries before his advent, Isaiah had already announced the infallible success of the Suffering Servant’s justifying work. “Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied.... he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death...” (Isa. 53:11–12). After the fact, Paul stated it succinctly: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13).

The main lines of the argument should be sufficiently clear. There is direct testimony to the sinlessness of Christ. Redemption demanded a sinless Redeemer, and has in fact been accomplished: there is another line of evidence for the sinlessness of Christ. These evidences bear witness that this sinlessness was part of God’s decree—perhaps most clearly of all when seen in conjunction with predictions of the accomplishment of redemption.<sup>15</sup>

This argument needs to be carefully qualified, lest it seem to claim too much. Strictly speaking, it is not an argument for the *intrinsic* impeccability of our Lord. God’s decree rendered certain the event, but without taking away “the liberty or contingency of second causes” (WCF 5.1).<sup>16</sup> By itself the decree in no way restricted Christ’s “freedom” to sin. It shows that

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<sup>13</sup> This is the second of Oden’s deductive arguments for sinlessness. See *The Word of Life*, 254.

<sup>14</sup> Edwards deployed a similar argument for Christ’s impeccability. See *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 42–43: “God’s absolute promise makes the things promised *necessary*, and their failing to take place absolutely *impossible*: and, in like manner, it makes those things necessary, on which the thing promised depends, and without which it cannot take effect. Therefore it appears, that it was utterly impossible that Christ’s holiness should fail, from such absolute promises as these...” (emphasis original)

<sup>15</sup> Edwards expands on this point: *Works* 1:43 “That it should have been possible that Christ should sin, and so fail in the work of our redemption, does not consist with the eternal purpose and decree of God, revealed in the Scriptures, that he would provide salvation for fallen man in and by Jesus Christ, and that salvation should be offered to sinners through the preaching of the gospel.”

<sup>16</sup> The careful discussion in Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), I:319–322 (IV.Q4) is helpful for expanding on the Westminster Confession’s lapidary remark.

Christ would never have been contaminated by sin, but by itself does not specify the proximate cause(s) of his sinlessness.<sup>17</sup> In other words, while God's decree meant that ultimately Christ could not have sinned, it does not tell us by what means that impeccability was secured. Hence there is a need for something more to be said.

## 2. *God the Son was so united to a human nature as to render it incapable of sinning.*

This argument is perhaps the most pertinent, forceful, and popular of the reasons given for Christ's impeccability. Indeed, according to Dabney, "The old doctrine of the Reformed Churches asserted not only the actual sinlessness, which none but violent infidels impugn, but the impeccability of our Redeemer."<sup>18</sup>

The hypostatic union of the Second Person of the Trinity with a human nature meant that Christ was impeccable. This is quite a standard argument in Reformed Christology. Thus Bavinck,<sup>19</sup> Berkhof,<sup>20</sup> Cairns,<sup>21</sup> Dabney,<sup>22</sup> Jones,<sup>23</sup> Macleod,<sup>24</sup> Shedd,<sup>25</sup> and Tipton<sup>26</sup> all derive

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<sup>17</sup> To borrow some terminology from Bavinck, God's foreordination genuinely secured Christ's "empirical" or "factual, historical" sinlessness, but in principle and by itself leaves open the question of his innate "necessary" sinlessness. See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 3:314.

<sup>18</sup> Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 470.

<sup>19</sup> *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:314: "He is the Son of God ... the possibility of him sinning and falling is unthinkable."

<sup>20</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 318: "...it was impossible for Him to sin (*non potuit peccare*) because of the essential bond between the human and the divine natures."

<sup>21</sup> Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms*, (Greenville: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), s.v.

"Impeccability of Christ": "...when speaking of the theanthropic person it is both inconceivable and unscriptural to say that the God-man could have sinned."

<sup>22</sup> Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 471: "...it is impossible that the person constituted in union with the eternal and immutable Word, can sin."

<sup>23</sup> Jones, *Christian's Pocket-Guide to Jesus Christ*, 28: "...because of the identity of Christ's person, it was impossible for Christ to sin."

<sup>24</sup> Macleod, *Person of Christ*, 229: "If he sinned, God sinned. At this level, the impeccability of Christ is absolute."

<sup>25</sup> W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 661: "A mere man can be overcome by temptation, but a God-man cannot be. When, therefore, it is asked if the person named Jesus Christ and constituted of two natures was peccable, the answer must be in the negative."

<sup>26</sup> Lane G. Tipton, "The Presence of Divine Persons: Extending the Incarnational Analogy to Impeccability and Inerrancy" in *The Confessional Presbyterian* 6 (2010), 201: "The rationale for the impeccability of Christ ... lies in a unique relationship sustained between the divine person of the Logos and the assumed human nature."

Christ's impeccability from his identity. After a characteristically circuitous discussion Berkouwer also comes to the point of asserting a "Messianic inability to sin" in light of the personal union of Christ's two natures, and his redemptive intent.<sup>27</sup>

The impeccability of Christ as arising from the constitution of his person is not an exclusively Reformed idea, but embraces Protestant thought more widely. For instance, the Methodist William Burt Pope claimed that Christ was "sinless, as born in the flesh by miraculous generation, impeccable because He was the Son of God."<sup>28</sup> More recently, from a dispensationalist perspective, Ryrie attributes peccability to the human nature and adds, "But the person of the God-man was impeccable."<sup>29</sup> Again, Lutheran dogmatician Francis Pieper expressed it succinctly when he wrote: "To assume that the man Christ could sin is assuming that the Son of God could sin, with whom the man Christ constitutes one Person. They that assume the peccability of the man Christ thereby relinquish, whether they know it or not, the incarnation of the Son of God, the *unio personalis* of God and man, and substitute for it an *unio mystica*."<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, this affirmation goes beyond Protestantism. The Jesuit scholar Gerald O'Collins likewise grounds Christ's impeccability in the constitution of his person. On his view, Jesus "was incapable of sinning because he was not only human but also divine."<sup>31</sup>

Christ's impeccability in light of the hypostatic union has deep roots in the history of the church.<sup>32</sup> Prior to 1159 Peter Lombard asserted that "if we are speaking of the person, it is

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<sup>27</sup> G.C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954), 262–64.

<sup>28</sup> William Burt Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology: Being Analytical Outlines of a Course of Theological Study, Biblical, Dogmatic, Historical*, Vol. 1. (London: Beveridge and Co., 1879), 328.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 305.

<sup>30</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 2. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 76.

<sup>31</sup> Gerald O'Collins, S.J., *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 269.

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps seminally already in Tertullian, though a great deal of the conceptual framework remained to be forged: "...the only man without sin is Christ, since Christ is also God." "A Treatise on the Soul" XLI in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. III: Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 221.

manifest that he could not sin, nor was he able not to be God.” The point of the final phrase is that Peter had already stated “if he could sin, then he could be damned; if he could be damned, he could not be God....”<sup>33</sup>

Peter’s phrasing hints at a vital clarifying element in the doctrine of Christ’s impeccability. That is, it is an assertion of the impeccability of Christ’s person, not of the human nature considered in abstraction. In order to explain this it is necessary to consider briefly the incarnation of the Son of God. The Westminster Larger Catechism explains this point well:

Q.36. *Who is the Mediator of the covenant of grace?*

A. The only Mediator of the covenant of the grace is the Lord Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, of one substance and equal with the Father, in the fullness of time became man, and so was and continues to be God and man, in two entire distinct natures, and one person, forever.

Q.37. *How did Christ, being the Son of God, become man?*

A. Christ the Son of God became man, by taking to himself a true body and a reasonable soul, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance, and born of her, yet without sin.

The vital points for this discussion is that the pre-existent (indeed, eternal) Son of God became man through assumption of an entire human nature. This resulted not in two persons, but in one person with two natures. This could work because it was not a human person that was assumed, but an anhypostatic human nature. T.F. Torrance explains: “This one person means that his human nature had *no independent subsistence or hypostasis*, no independent centre of personal being.”<sup>34</sup> To this point must be immediately added also the *enhyposstasis*,<sup>35</sup> namely, “the human nature from the first moment of its existence had its *hypostasis* or personal subsistence *in* the personal subsistence of God the Son.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, Vol. 3. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2008), 48.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 229, emphasis original.

<sup>35</sup> Turretin discusses both points together: *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, II:311–12 (XII.6.5).

<sup>36</sup> Torrance, *Incarnation*, 229, emphasis original.

The reason for Christ's impeccability, then, was not some unusual quality of the human nature that was assumed.<sup>37</sup> In itself, that genuine and complete human nature was as peccable as Adam's.<sup>38</sup> Human nature is peccable until glorification. Considered abstractly, the humanity of Jesus was therefore able to sin—but only considered abstractly.

And the abstraction of Jesus' human nature from his person is merely hypothetical. In fact, the human nature of our Lord never existed for a moment apart from him. God the Son, a concrete divine hypostasis subsisting from eternity, assumed human nature in such a way that the individualization of that human nature took place by virtue of the assuming act. The anhypostatic human nature was enhypostasized by its assumption into union with God the Son.

Because the nature assumed was anhypostatic, the unity of Christ's person is maintained. He did not assume a man—a human nature already “particularized” into a person. On the contrary, the Word gave that human nature his own personhood.<sup>39</sup>

It is the hypostatic union which makes any thought of peccability in Christ so inconceivable. Sin is the act of a person. Jesus Christ is God the Son, and thus attributing peccability to him is attributing peccability to a divine person.<sup>40</sup> This is therefore the strongest and clearest argument for impeccability in the strictest sense of the term, grounded on the unique constitution of the person of the God-man.

A further argument arises from Christ's anointing for the work of redemption.

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<sup>37</sup> Tipton says, “The rationale for the impeccability of Christ therefore does not arise first from his sinless human nature (since Adam likewise had a sinless, yet peccable, human nature)....” “Presence of Divine Persons,” 201.

<sup>38</sup> So also apparently Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 512.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1985), s.v. “anhypostasis”: “the human nature of Christ ... has no subsistence or person in and of itself but rather subsists in the person of the Word, for the sake of the incarnation.”

<sup>40</sup> This would seem to be the point behind the statement of W.E. Best, that even “the possibility of sinning would disqualify Christ as Savior, for a peccable christ would mean a peccable god. (...) To say that He could have sinned is to deny positive holiness.” *The Impeccable Christ* (Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1971), 8.

3. *God the Holy Spirit so filled Christ that any lack of righteousness is inconceivable.*

Jesus Christ was supremely the Spirit-filled man.<sup>41</sup> The contention in this argument is that Christ was so filled with the Holy Spirit that it was impossible he should sin. The work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Christ is frequently emphasized in the Scriptures. The predictions of Isaiah 11:1–5, 42:1–3, and 61:1–3 (cf. Luke 4:17–21) are well known. Peter describes Christ as “anointed ... with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38). The statement that God does not give him the Spirit by measure means that he received the Spirit without measure (John 3:34). All his works were carried out by the power of the Spirit.<sup>42</sup>

The relevance of all this to the question of impeccability is apparent particularly in the temptation narratives in the Synoptic Gospels. It was the Spirit who led or drove Christ into the wilderness to be tempted (Matt. 4:1; Mark 1:12–13). He faced temptation not in his own strength or due to any wandering of his heart, but as one freshly anointed and entirely under the direction of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:1). He was thus fully equipped to conquer, and entirely certain of success.

At this point the Westminster Confession’s emphasis is intriguing (VIII:3):

The Lord Jesus, in his human nature thus united to the divine, *was sanctified, and anointed with the Holy Spirit*, above measure, having in him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge: in whom it pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell; *to the end that, being holy, harmless, undefiled*, and full of grace and truth, he might be thoroughly furnished to execute the office of a mediator, and surety. (Emphasis added)

It would seem that as part of Christ’s total furnishing for the work of redemption, one

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<sup>41</sup> Abraham Kuyper provides a detailed treatment of this in *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1900), 79–111.

<sup>42</sup> As Thomas Goodwin observes from Acts 10:36 and Matt. 12:28: “The Holy Ghost anointed him with power to do all his miracles and all the good he did....” (*The Works of Thomas Goodwin* [Eureka: Tanski Publications, 1996], 6:12).

purpose for the Spirit's sanctification and anointing was that Christ would be holy, harmless, and undefiled.<sup>43</sup> Since the Spirit could not fail, this effectually rendered Christ unable to sin.

Jonathan Edwards specifically relates the Spirit's work to Christ's impeccability:

I. It was *impossible*, that the Acts of the Will of Christ's human soul should, in any instance, degree, or circumstance, be otherwise than holy, and agreeable to God's nature and Will. The following things make this evident.

1. God had promised so effectually to preserve and uphold him by his Spirit, under all his temptations, that he could not fail of the end for which he came into the world; but he would have failed, had he fallen into sin.<sup>44</sup>

In what follows, Edwards expositis a number of texts highlighting how the Holy Spirit so upheld Christ as to preserve him completely from sin.<sup>45</sup>

Because the Holy Spirit sanctifies, where he is present in fullness above measure, sanctity must be so absolute as to be above any possibility of defilement. Thus Christ was officially impeccable, in view of his equipping for the work of redemption. A similar flow of thought appears in Craig's Catechism:

Q. Why was He conceived by the Holy Spirit? (Matt. 1:20)

A. That He might be without sin and so sanctify us.

Q. What if He had been a sinner?

A. Then He could not have delivered us.

Q. Was He only made free from sin? (John 3:34)

A. No, but He was also replenished with the Holy Spirit without measure.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to the arguments from God's decree, from the manner in which the Son assumed human nature, and from the Spirit's work in our Lord, there is one further argument, from the heart of Christ himself.

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<sup>43</sup> It would not have been uncommon at the time of the Assembly to speak of the Spirit's sanctification of Christ in connection with his virgin birth. See, for instance, Thomas Goodwin, *Works*, 5:60. James Ussher had already taught that Christ was born of a virgin "that he might be Holy and without Sin." (*A Body of Divinity* [Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2007], 144.)

<sup>44</sup> Edwards, *Works*, 1:42.

<sup>45</sup> Dabney also notes that the "lower nature ... was imbued with the full influences of the Holy Ghost" (*Systematic Theology*, 471).

<sup>46</sup> "Craig's Catechism (1581)" in James T. Dennison Jr., ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries in English Translation*, Vol. 3. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 557.

*4. Jesus Christ was so fully consecrated to God that he was indefectibly holy.*

It is not possible to question the depth and vigor of Christ's commitment to his Father. His whole life and death stand as a witness to this fact. Thus even as a child he was constrained to be in his Father's house (Luke 2:49). Zeal for that house consumed him, as the disciples observed (John 2:17; cf. Ps. 69:9). Even when faced with the most dreadful hour of all, Christ's commitment to his Father's will led him to seek God's glory at whatever cost (John 12:27–28 and Matt. 26:39, 42). This depth of commitment constituted a sort of functional impeccability. It is inconceivable that someone so zealous and committed to God should depart from the path of righteousness.

The argument can be expressed more compactly. Christ is supremely the man in whose heart is the law of God. This was his own confession (Ps. 40:8 and Heb. 10:5–9). "The law of his God is in his heart; his steps do not slip" (Ps. 37:31). The law of God was perfectly, entirely, constantly in Christ's heart; it was not therefore possible that any of his steps should slip. The word in the heart preserves from sin (Ps. 119:11), and Christ meditated in the Lord's law day and night (Ps. 1:2).

An argument along these lines for the impeccability of Christ appears quite early in the history of the Church. Origen maintained that "we must believe that there did exist in Christ a human and rational soul, and yet not suppose that it had any susceptibility to or possibility of sin." His explanation of how both elements could be maintained is worth repeating in full:

It cannot be doubted that the nature of his soul was the same as that of all souls; otherwise it could not be called a soul, if it were not truly one. But since the ability to choose good or evil is within the immediate reach of all, this soul which belongs to Christ so chose to love righteousness as to cling to it unchangeably and inseparably in accordance with the immensity of its love; the result being that by firmness of purpose, immensity of affection and an inextinguishable warmth of love all susceptibility to

change or alteration was destroyed, and what formerly depended upon the will was by the influence of long custom changed into nature.<sup>47</sup>

Of course, there are elements of Origen's conception that one cannot adopt. He appears to think of Christ's human soul as pre-existing the incarnation and having established itself in the habit of obedience before that event.<sup>48</sup> Yet the holy flame of zeal in Christ's soul was no insignificant matter. If nothing further can be said, at least it is clear from the temptation narratives (Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13) that unwavering commitment to the word of God was the instrument Christ used to overcome the devil.<sup>49</sup>

In spite of this pervasive evidence for the impeccability of Christ, not all have been persuaded. Thus it is necessary also to consider some arguments against it.

## II. Answering objections to Christ's impeccability.

Confession of Christ's impeccability is not unanimous. Philip Schaff was one dissenting voice. In an editorial note to his English edition of J.P. Lange's commentary, Schaff wrote:

The sinlessness of Jesus must not be confounded with the sinlessness of God: it is the sinlessness of the *man* Jesus, which implied, during His earthly life, peccability (the possibility of sinning, *posse-peccare*), temptability and actual temptation, while the sinlessness of God is an eternal attribute above the reach of conflict. If we view Christ merely in His human nature, we may say that His sinlessness was at first relative (*impeccabilitas minor, posse non peccare*) and, like Adam's innocence in paradise, liable to fall (though such fall was made impossible by the indwelling divine Logos); nevertheless it was complete at every stage of His life in accordance with the character of each, *i.e.*, He was sinless and perfect as a child, perfect as a boy, perfect as a youth, and perfect as a man; there being different degrees of perfection. Sinless holiness grew with Him, and, by successfully overcoming temptation in all its forms, it became absolute impeccability or impossibility of sinning (*impeccabilitas major, non posse peccare*). Hence it is said that He *learned* obedience, Heb. 5:8.—The historical fact of the sinlessness of Jesus overthrows the pantheistic notion of the necessity of sin for the moral

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<sup>47</sup> G.W. Butterworth, trans., *Origen on First Principles* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1936), 112–113 (*De Principiis* II.5).

<sup>48</sup> Compare on this point Pannenberg, *Jesus— God and Man*, 356.

<sup>49</sup> As Berkouwer put it, "In his life there is a mysterious incapacity for sin stemming from his love and mercy." (*Person of Christ*, 261)

development of man.<sup>50</sup>

The imposing figure of Charles Hodge likewise registered an objection to the strict doctrine of Christ's impeccability.

A sinful Saviour from sin is an impossibility. He could not have access to God. He could not be a sacrifice for sins; and He could not be the source of holiness and eternal life to his people. This sinlessness of our Lord, however, does not amount to absolute impeccability. It was not a *non potest peccare*.<sup>51</sup> If He was a true man He must have been capable of sinning. That He did not sin under the greatest provocation; that when He was reviled He blessed; when He suffered He threatened not; that He was dumb, as a sheep before its shearers, is held up to us as an example. Temptation implies the possibility of sin. If from the constitution of his person it was impossible for Christ to sin, then his temptation was unreal and without effect, and He cannot sympathize with his people.<sup>52</sup>

Because of Hodge's importance within the Reformed tradition and the clear language he employs, this statement will provide the template for the three objections to be considered below.<sup>53</sup> If impeccability does not fail any of these important tests, the case against it is quite scanty indeed.

### *1. Does impeccability make Christ less than truly human?*

Hodge's objection runs: "If He was a true man He must have been capable of sinning."

The force of this is that only rank heretics deny that the Lord Jesus was a true man. Its weakness is to take peccability as intrinsic to true humanity.

In reply to this, O'Collins stands the objection on its head: "...sin makes us less than fully

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<sup>50</sup> John Peter Lange and Philip Schaff, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: John* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 295 (emphasis original).

<sup>51</sup> This is quite the opposite of, e.g., Mark Jones: "Only for him during his earthly life could it be said '*non posse peccare*', 'not able to sin'." (*Knowing Christ*, 102)

<sup>52</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 457.

<sup>53</sup> The intention is not to single Hodge out for negative treatment, but simply to draw on his wonderfully concise statement of the main objections. For an extended treatment of Hodge on impeccability, see James J. Cassidy, "No 'Absolute Impeccability': Charles Hodge and Christology at Old and New Princeton" in *The Confessional Presbyterian* 9 (2013): 143–156.

and perfectly human. Hence to allow for the possibility of Christ sinning would be tantamount to allowing for the possibility of his being less than fully and perfectly human.”<sup>54</sup> Peccability is a practically universal human quality; but it is not essential to the character of humanity. Hence the blessed, and superlatively Christ himself, are in fact more fully human because of their impeccability.

There is also a subsidiary point, but one not entirely lacking weight. The bright constellation of defenders of Christ’s impeccability does not include anyone who denies his true humanity. So whether it is clear to Hodge and others or not, many able theologians found no inconsistency between asserting both true humanity and genuine impeccability.

But if Christ can be impeccable and truly human, can he also be genuinely tempted? This is the second objection.

## *2. Does impeccability make Christ’s temptations meaningless or easy?*

Here again Hodge expresses the point with lucid brevity. “Temptation implies the possibility of sin. If from the constitution of His person it was impossible for Christ to sin, then his temptation was unreal and without effect....”

This is probably the most forceful of the objections. The strain of being enticed to sin might seem to be eliminated if sinning is simply impossible. Given inevitable resistance, how could anyone really feel the lure of enticement?

Yet according to Berkouwer, the contention is precisely backward. Because Christ’s temptation was related not solely to the law of God but to his mission of suffering, “we can never say that the reality of the temptation is nullified by his Messianic inability to sin.”<sup>55</sup> The

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<sup>54</sup> O’Collins, *Christology*, 270.

<sup>55</sup> Berkouwer, *Person of Christ*, 262.

particular temptations of Christ which are recorded for us were not simply to violate the law, but to deviate from the path marked out to him of glory through suffering. In his holy condition he was not to be enticed by some rebellious impulse. As Jesus himself affirmed in John 14:30–31, “...the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me, but I do as the Father has commanded me....”

Moreover, the presupposition behind this objection is unnecessary. It seems to hold that inevitability of success implies ease of conflict.<sup>56</sup> But why should it be the case that impeccability renders temptation meaningless? The path of full obedience was meant to be a path of difficulty (Heb. 5:7–8). And perseverance in difficulty for the sake of obedience (John 18:11), the promise (Heb. 12:2), and others (Gal. 2:20) is not rendered less noble or valuable by there being no question as to whether the person will persevere or not.

There was presented to Christ an apparently legitimate alternative to the path marked out for him of glory through suffering. His appointed road led to a destination from which every blameless human impulse drew back (Matt. 27:36–46). Perseverance in fulfilling all righteousness required the exercise of discernment, clinging to God’s word, and the self-control of entire submission to God’s will. The fact that the Son of God inevitably and invincibly chose to do this in no way diminished the effort or cost of that decision.

Finally, the objection from temptation would only be valid if desire to sin were of the essence of temptation. Real sinlessness would be a problem on that view, even without absolute impeccability. That our high priest “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15), does not mean that Jesus was tempted *to* every possible sin as we might be. After all, at no time was he tempted during the pangs of withdrawal to return to a heroin

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<sup>56</sup> On the contrary, Shedd observes that those who succumb to temptation never feel its full weight. *Dogmatic Theology*, 665.

addiction. It does mean that he was fully put to the test, and emerged with his blameless purity confirmed and manifested to all. And this leads to the last objection.

### *3. Does impeccability undercut Christ's identification with and sympathy for his people?*

The last part of Hodge's paragraph contains the final objection. If it was impossible for Christ to sin, "then He cannot sympathize with His people."

Now Christ's sympathy is a non-negotiable point. It is too essential for Christian comfort, and too clearly asserted in Scripture (Heb 2:16–18; 4:14–16), to be called into question.<sup>57</sup> The lovely words of the Belgic Confession (Art. 26) are apt: "But this Mediator ... ought in no wise to affright us by His majesty, or cause us to seek another according to our fancy. For there is no creature, either in heaven or on earth, who loves us more than Jesus Christ."<sup>58</sup> No diminution of this truth is tolerable.

The first observation to make in reply is that if Scripture teaches both the sympathy and the impeccability of Christ, then both must be held, even if we do not see how they cohere. Our limitations in systematizing and harmonizing divine truths are not the same as the existence of genuine contradictions.

The second observation is that it is mere assertion to say that an impeccable Christ could not truly sympathize. To the best of my knowledge, no one denies that Christ is currently impeccable; yet Scripture is quite clear that Christ is currently sympathetic (Heb. 4:15).

Therefore there is no invincible disharmony between impeccability and sympathy for sinners.

Third, this argument cannot be followed out consistently. It appears to proceed on the

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<sup>57</sup> A classic work on this subject is Thomas Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ in Heaven towards Sinners on Earth*, found in *Works*, 4:93–150, as well as recent reprints by both Reformation Heritage Books and The Banner of Truth Trust.

<sup>58</sup> References to the Heidelberg Catechism and Belgic Confession are from *Christian Truths Summarized: The Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (n.p.: United Reformed Churches in North America, 2014).

principle that a common condition in all respects is essential to perfect fellow-feeling. Yet if the principle of needing experience in order to sympathize were extended, merely denying impeccability would not secure Christ's sympathy for us. We are not merely peccable; we have actually committed sin. A peccable but ultimately sinless Savior is still (on this view) finally lacking the prerequisites for genuine sympathy.

This objection to Christ's impeccability collapses under the weight of its unsustainable presuppositions, and thus none of the principal objections to impeccability are sturdy enough to undermine the weight of evidence in its favor.

Hopefully this investigation has made the content and fact of the doctrine of impeccability plain. It remains to inquire as to its significance.

### **III. The value of Christ's impeccability for the believer and its status in the church.**

Taking the doctrine as established by the arguments in favor and the replies to objections against, it still remains to inquire what use can be made of this doctrine. Moreover there is also the question whether Reformed confessions have addressed this point.

#### *1. What value does this doctrine hold for believers?*

Part of the value of this doctrine is that it highlights the utter holiness of Jesus' person. Without a clear apprehension of his personal holiness, it is difficult to perceive the wonder of his treatment as an unclean, unholy, condemned and cursed person. As Mark Jones put it: "Nothing is more shocking and glorious. (...) the Holy One of God was declared unholy, so that unholy sinners might stand unblemished before a holy God."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Mark Jones, *Knowing Christ* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 107.

Moreover the doctrine of impeccability yields comfort to the believer. Knowing that Jesus Christ was spotlessly holy is essential in order to grasp that his righteousness is truly sufficient to clothe me, and that I am filled in him (Col. 2:10). Certainly the resurrection reveals the fact of his perfect righteousness and infinite satisfaction; but the decree, the hypostatic union, the measureless anointing by the Spirit, and the all-pervading zeal of Christ's soul bolster our faith in this regard.

The doctrine of impeccability also holds out hope. Because Jesus was true man, and yet not only sinless but unable to sin, we can believe that in union with him we too shall be redeemed not from genuine humanity but from every defilement of sin. Faith in Christ does not annihilate me, but rather makes me truly free (John 8:32). There is an abundance of grace and power in Christ to help me in the evil day of temptation.

## *2. What is the confessional status of this doctrine?*

The Chalcedonian Definition of 451 incorporated Scripture's "without sin" in its confession of Christ.<sup>60</sup> This example was reiterated in the Belgic Confession, Article 18; the Westminster Confession VIII.2; and the Westminster Larger Catechism 37.<sup>61</sup> There is no explicit reference to impeccability proper. Likewise the Heidelberg Catechism asserts the need for a truly righteous mediator and ties that to the requirements of redemption (HC 15, 16),<sup>62</sup> but does not address the theoretical possibility of Christ sinning.

From the historical discussion engaged in above, it seems evident that the doctrine of

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<sup>60</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, Vol. 1. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 181.

<sup>61</sup> However, as seen above, the WCF may implicitly include the pneumatic form of impeccability in VIII.3.

<sup>62</sup> For a discussion of this point reflecting the language of the Heidelberg Catechism compare Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, Vol. 1. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 195–196.

Christ's impeccability as strictly defined is well within the boundaries of the confessional documents, and the mainstream of Reformed thought. Inasmuch as they assert the doctrines which support Christ's impeccability, it might be maintained with some degree of plausibility that this doctrine is implicit or latent in the confessions.

However, it would probably be going too far to say that it is absolutely required by the Westminster Standards or the Three Forms of Unity, and certainly some notable voices have dissented. This dissent is far from convincing given the extent of evidence for impeccability and the weakness of objections to it. Yet one can say that strict impeccability does not seem to have been a major point of emphasis for the reformers or their successors in the period of Reformed Orthodoxy.

In conclusion, the four arguments recited in this paper could be called the decretal, constitutional, pneumatic, and dispositional arguments for the impeccability of Christ. Though of varying strength, each of them establishes that Christ would never have sinned. All together, they serve to show how truly and thoroughly and blessedly our high priest was "separated from sinners" (Heb. 7:26).

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