

A consideration of the impeccability of Christ



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The following study seeks to investigate the impeccability of Christ from a historical-theological point of view. Two camps emerge on either side of the debate. The one camp is those who hold to the *posse non peccare* view, which is to say the ability not to sin, otherwise known as the peccability view. The other camp holds to the *non posse peccare* view which is to say inability to sin, otherwise known as the impeccability view. While both camps affirm the sinless perfection of Christ they oppose each other about whether he could have sinned if he had wanted to. It boils down to a case of 'could have but did not' or 'did not because He could not have'. It is the view of this article that the *non posse peccare* view squares with historical theology. By surveying church councils up to the present time, we aim in the introduction to prove that the history of this issue matters in that it establishes the relationship between Christology and history in relation to the origin of sin. In the first section of the main body we survey and evaluate the position from a peccability viewpoint while, at the same time, proposing and validating our points of departure. In the second section we assess and acknowledge the argument for impeccability by proving the necessity of it for the exoneration of Christ's Person.

Introduction

It is a verifiable fact that every major religion in this world, such as Islam, Buddhism, leave alone Judaism, and Catholicism has some view of Christ and for the most part that view would be one of respect at best (Cassidy 2005:79). An effort to survey the history of the Church will show her slowness to see the implications of the faith (Trueblood 1967:72) and thus her weakness to spot the danger of her detractors. Issues within the church ranged from denying Christ's divinity (Ebionitism, Subordinationism, Adoptionism, Arianism and Semi-Arianism) to denying his humanity (Docetism, Gnosticism, Apollinarianism, Monothelism). Church history demonstrates that the pendulum has swung to both extremes. Furthermore the doctrine of Christ was also subjected to the confusing of his two natures (Monophysitism and Eutychianism) on the one hand, and the division of his two natures (Nestorianism) on the other. The Council of Nicea (AD 325), Constantinople I (AD 381), Chalcedon (AD 451), and Constantinople II (AD 681), covering, as they do a period of 356 years, combined to bury these bones of heresies. The Early Church was on a quest to harmonise Jesus' humanity and deity. The Early Church accepted this matter of the two natures of Christ as sound Christian doctrine (Berkhof 2003:305) and it was only as controversy arose that they contemplated this issue more seriously (Reymond 1998:584).

Scholars and theologians on both sides were found to be defending his humanity to the exclusion of his deity and then found to be defending his deity at the expense of his humanity – and when they found some means to harmonise his two natures, they fused these so indistinctly that they robbed Christ of his separate natures, thus depriving him of his uniqueness. If the history of this issue proves anything, it proves the consistency of confusion and the challenge to clearly define sound doctrine. Notwithstanding, we also agree with Frame (2002:763) that 'historical schools of thought are useful categories for analysis, but poor guides for thought because one cannot resolve issues of truth by historical description; attempts to do that are called *genetic fallacies*'.

That having been said, the consideration of the impeccability of Christ remains a productive engagement, the absence of which will not allow the theologian to delve into the part of Christ's glory that is necessary to understand the gospel.

Problem statement

The main thrust of apostolic preaching is to prove that 'Jesus ... is the Christ' (Ac 17:3;¹ Childs 2011:458). Luke informs us in this verse that the apostles explained and demonstrated from the

1. Cf. also Acts 18:5 and 28.

Note: This article is based on research done for the MA in Dogmatics (Kanniah 2015).

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Scriptures that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead. These very words of Luke reveal to us that they acknowledged the harmony of these two natures and accepted their mystery. In the same context, the apostolic message indicates that such a union formed the premise of the Gospel (Enns 1989:288). Therefore to deny the Gospel of this element is to rob it of its vital statistic, which component of apostolic preaching reaped multitudes of the elect harvest as documented by Luke in Acts.

Warfield (1950:280) advises that we are to 'seek for our Christianity a less unstable basis' and by unstable he is referring to the confused contributions of 17th century Liberalism which removed the 'dogmatic Christ' or 'historical Jesus' and substituted him for a myth. Added to this problem is the fact that the process that theology undergoes leaves vestiges of blight. Origen's allegorical paradigm was, e.g. replaced by Augustine's (Bellitto 2008:12), which, as explained by Frame (1987:313), 'was in turn replaced by Aristotle's brand of Christianity, which in turn was overthrown by the Reformation only recently in modern history to be supplanted by Postmodernism'. In an article in *Christianity Today*, Mark Noll (2011) points out that 'The great relevance of the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian definition is to affirm that Jesus Christ was fully human and fully divine.'² However, this *great relevance* took at least 126 years to arrive at a conclusive formulation that reflected biblical teaching. Although this illustrates a time consuming path, it is also illustrative of the care that the church exercised in formulating doctrine.

Elton Trueblood (1967) warns:

If the Christian thinker, in his admirable effort, to be understood by those outside the faith, ends by saying essentially what the enemies of Christ are already saying, nothing is accomplished. (p. 58)

The Christian gospel is a unique message that is completely and totally different in every respect, propounding as it does the majesty and uniqueness of Jesus Christ. In the view of these writers nothing is more relevant today given our penchant for reinventing Christ to suit our commercial culture (Zacharias 2012:43 & 210). Therefore the message of impeccability is counter-cultural.

Peccability theologians insist that if Christ were truly found to be in the flesh, then he must have possessed the ability to do as the flesh was wont to do albeit subjugated to his sovereign power (Sproul 1996:34). The trouble with this view is that the Christadelphians³ believe that Jesus had a sinful nature which was exactly what every human had (Geisler & Rhodes 2008:94). The claim of peccability theologians is that Christ would have had to possess a sinful nature in order to be genuinely tempted (Geisler & Rhodes 2008:95; Sproul 1996:34).

2. We prefer that his divinity be asserted prior to his humanity as this is in accordance with Scripture, but we have to let it go for now.

3. The Christadelphians is a Christian sect which were originally called Thomasites after John Thomas (1805–1871), who founded them in America in 1848. The name, Christadelphians ('Christ's brethren'), was Thomas' substitute for 'Christian', which term he rejected, teaching that the beliefs and religious development which it connoted constituted an apostasy.

This is questioned on the basis that the account of his temptation was not to prove that he was temptable but rather to prove that he was impeccable (Martin 2010).

The impeccability theologians (Berkhof 2003; Chafer 1993; Grudem 2007; Ryrie 1986; Shedd 2003 & Walvoord 2008), on the other hand, insist that the possession of flesh does not equate to the possession of 'the flesh', which is a principle of the fall as recorded in Genesis 3. Trueblood (1967:59) reckons that 'any theology which is not a direct challenge to the assumptions of the philosophical naturalist is not worth elucidating'. The articulation of Christian theology is not for the homogeneity of secular culture into the church. That is to say, we are not trying to find common ground. We are trying to assess why we are different.

Sanders (2009) observes:

Most errors have their rise in a defective view of the person of Christ, and this in turn is reflected in an inadequate or erroneous view of the nature of His work. (p. 15)

Thomas and Thomas (1947:160–161) quote the famous sceptic David Hume as saying: 'If He [Jesus] has human interests, He must also have human weaknesses. And the chief of those weaknesses would be a complete disregard for inferior creatures.' For Hume the measure of a person's weakness makes for his inferiority. Thus applied to Christ, he would conclude that he is inferior as his weakness suggests. It is lamentable yet expected that sceptics like Hume reason thus. In this sense 'the ogres of unbelief storm the citadel of truth' (Thomas & Thomas 1947:161). Sproul (2000) reminds us:

Foundational thinking cares about the difference between truth and falsehood because it cares about good and evil. The ancient maxim probably from the mouth of Socrates still applies: 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' (p. 11)

With this in mind we proceed to 'care about the differences between truth and falsehood'. We accept that it is foundational and recall the words of king David who once warned that 'if the foundations be destroyed what can the righteous do?' (Ps 11:3) and being foundational it is consequently crucial. The following is to prove that there is a difference with a Christ that could have sinned and one that could not have sinned.

The empathy for peccability

The view of peccability is the view that though Jesus did not sin, but given his human nature, he did possess the proclivity to do so. The discussion of this issue has been around for a very long time (Wong 1997:128). There is something inherently appealing in a peccable saviour (Anon 1996). It is that we then have one who is similar instead of superior to us. This is the Arian heresy all over again, sympathetically providing one who can defeat sin and who encourages us to do the same. The Buddhist Scholar Machida (1999:84) argues, regarding the passage in John 8:3–8 where Jesus silently wrote on the ground before handling the incident regarding the woman taken in adultery that Jesus' 'silent gesture' was him 'revealing an awareness within himself of the same evil

nature as the woman's. According to this scholar, in that he sympathised with her was proof of his sinfulness and not his sacredness. This may be of immense comfort to many that if Jesus can overcome sin then we too can do the same. A peccable saviour seems more approachable than an impeccable one. However, what appeals to a fallen nature cannot be licensed to reconstitute the Son of God for the purposes of empathy.

Peccability based on his humanity

The humanity of Jesus as an occurrence through the incarnation is called by Warfield (1950:19) 'the portrayal of a human episode in the divine life'. He goes on to argue that the supernatural is its very substance and 'the elimination of which would be the evaporation of the whole'. The gospels neither mention nor infer that his divinity swallowed up his humanity and neither do the epistles. 1 Timothy 6:15–16 declares that he is 'the blessed and only potentate, the king of kings and Lord of lords'. This is a categorical assertion of him not only being transcendent, but according to this language, indistinguishable. Although written in Greek it is evidently a Hebrew construct as Greek thought would think of them as separate (Lea & Griffin 1992:174). The apostle Paul goes on to state that he 'alone has immortality' (1 Tm 6:16) and this is what he has. Then he writes that Christ is 'dwelling in unapproachable light' and because of this he has a limited audience and therefore man cannot see him. Consequently 'honour and everlasting power' are ascribed to him. Sentiments such as these not only make God and Christ indistinguishable, but they serve to reinforce the indivisibility of his two natures. His divinity is inextricably linked to his humanity and such fusion is beyond the scope of any scientific distinction. His human nature enabled him to die but it was his divine nature that placed an infinite value upon that death (Gromacki 1984:152). It is not to be reduced (Arius), divided (Nestorius), or confused (Eutychus). The subtraction of Christ from the conception of God is the confusion of all, therefore peccability should not be discussed based on his humanity alone, but should be seen as contiguous with his divinity. Grudem (2007:538–539) makes clear that his human nature never existed apart from union with his divine nature. This union took place at his conception. This is why one cannot compare his human nature to that of Adam and Eve prior to the fall. Therefore, if the proclivity to sin is to be assumed in his human nature, it must also be assumed in his divine nature which is a Scriptural improbability for God cannot sin nor can he be tempted with evil (Ja 1:13). The humanity of Jesus was to demonstrate the authenticity of his incarnation and not the weakness of divinity in him (Guthrie 2010:60).

The difference between his humanness and fallenness

Peccability assumes from Galatians 4:4 that 'born under the law' automatically implies being 'born under the curses of the law' (Bruce 1982:196). However, as Horton (2011:469) accurately points out, 'having been born "under the law" in no way entails having been born under its condemnation'. It is not denied that he became 'a curse for us' (Gl 3:13) but this

curse was clearly for the sins of the people. To put it another way: he was not cursed because he became a man, but because as a man he bore sin (Warfield 1950:144). In explaining Augustine's view on this issue, Berkhof (1949:138) summarises that man was created with the ability not to sin and would have eventually passed to the state of inability to sin, but because he sinned he thus entered the state of inability not to sin. The operative clue here is the word *created* which Jesus wasn't; therefore Augustine's explanation cannot be transferred to Jesus. It is a fallacy to suppose that his humanity implies his peccability (Anon. 1996) just because this is legitimately so for us. We are not the prototype of his person. We must remember that he was first God before he took on the form of human flesh (Phlp 2:7–8). Warfield (1950:139) argues that the human nature of Jesus was not generic or general but specific and individual. This is clearly evidenced from a study of his emotions which were unique to his personality. When the generic nature of his humanity is asserted then peccability is easily melded into that personality, but when the uniqueness is affirmed the restrictions upon such a view are severely curtailed.

The difference between flesh and 'the flesh'

It is not denied that Jesus had flesh as in a physical body, for this is what he tangibly displayed to his disciples after his resurrection (Lk 24:39). What is denied is that because he had flesh it follows that he had 'the flesh'. At the fall, as recorded in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve sinned against God and because they did this, they added a principle of havoc to their life that had not initially been there. Whereas prior to the fall they were *posse non peccare* [ability not to sin]; after it they had become *non posse non peccare* [inability not to sin] (Sproul 2000:63). God had made them body, soul and spirit (1 Th 4:23 & Heb. 4:12; Hinson 2001:80 & Lloyd-Jones 1994:40)⁴ and they existed superbly like that. However, now that they abandoned God's will they added to their nature something the New Testament writers like to call, *the flesh*. The fall accounts for the loss of man's standing before God, but it also records what man gained as a result of his choice. Prior to this they had flesh and blood but they did not have 'the flesh'. This was a new addition that the New Testament writers never speak of positively. Jesus had flesh and blood too, but he did not have 'the flesh' which is the principle of the self-will (Kelly n.d.:67). It is never said that 'the flesh' has the potential to sin; it is accepted that 'the flesh' is sinful. Paul declared this rather emphatically when he cried: 'For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells' (Rm 7:18). Moreover the tension between 'the flesh' and the Spirit is notoriously and irreconcilably legend (cf. Gl. 5:17). When Paul uses this phrase, *the flesh*, he uses it as a technical term for the sinful nature (Pearcy 2005:76). Pearcy further concludes, 'Indeed, if the body were inherently sinful, the Incarnation would have been impossible, for Jesus took on a human body yet had no sin.' It is not my flesh and blood that

⁴The tripartite nature of man, which is also referred to as Trichotomism, will always be an ongoing debate as some theologians only acknowledge two parts, but go on to suggest that the latter, the non-material, is in two parts, i.e. soul and spirit (Lloyd-Jones 1993:155). The reader is left to fend for himself on this terrain as we are not attempting to solve that issue here. Our view is stated in the paragraph itself and is, as far as we are concerned, pertinent to the argument itself.

makes me to transgress the law, it is the flesh in me that does that. Jesus had flesh but he did not have 'the flesh'. As Gromacki (1984:152) asserts, 'He was positively holy and negatively sinless. He had no sin principle.' According to Paul in Romans 8:3 God did not send his Son in 'the flesh', but 'in the *likeness* of sinful flesh'. Although his flesh and blood were real, it was in the *likeness of sinful flesh* and not in sinful flesh (emphasis – LEK & CFCC). As Warfield (1950:144) makes clear, 'He assumed the flesh of unfallen man' (cf. also Evans & Coder 1998:57). 'The flesh' is always commensurate with sin and for that reason alone cannot be associated with Christ. Paul wrote clearly in Romans 8:3 that God 'condemned sin in the flesh' and not in his flesh. So as natural as this body was, it was unlike any other natural person. For man, sin of the flesh is a natural consequence and a result of the sinful flesh. For Christ, who clearly did not possess 'the flesh', however, sin is unnatural because he had no 'sinful flesh' but just flesh and therefore sin was not a natural consequence. Therefore we conclude that flesh does not necessarily have to encapsulate sin for it to be real.

The difference between suffering and sinning

At the height of Jesus' sufferings he uttered the words 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' (Mk 15:34). While Machida (1999:81) admits that Jesus is 'the most sacred object of the Christian faith', he also avers that the degree of the suffering as expressed in Mark 15:34 is the key in showing him up as a sinful human being. He (1999:82) confesses that Jesus did not commit any 'specific sin' and therefore deserves high admiration, but not excessive mystification because he too like us was burdened with 'Original Sin'. Machida's argument, as stated syllogistically, is that because Original Sin is at the core of human existence and Jesus was human, it follows that he was under this 'burden'. His conclusion is: 'If Jesus were completely transcendent, He would not have had to "suffer many things"' (Mk 8:31–33; 1999:82). Summarising Irenaeus, Van de Beek (2002?:73) states that 'The Son suffers the experience of the disobedience of the world even without the incarnation. The incarnation means that he [He] begins to bear *our* suffering.' Van de Beek, along with Irenaeus, attempts to rescue this issue of suffering by not reducing it to just the incarnation. Granted the brunt of suffering was carried in the incarnation, but the fact of suffering existed along with sin.

The difference between limited and unlimited perception

An article for Liberty University (Anon 1996) quotes Sahl in defence of this view. He objects that:

if it is possible that the Lord Jesus Christ could succumb to or be deceived by sin, then one must also conclude that it is possible for Him to have given inaccurate information about eternal things when He was growing in wisdom and stature and favour with God and man.

As one can see, such a view is preposterous and would certainly impugn our righteous Lord. Horton (2011:478) correctly concludes as follows: 'As God he remains transcendent, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and

eternal, while as human he remains finite, limited in soul and body, and spatio-temporally circumscribed.'

Peccability based on his testimony

Was Christ good? Pertinent to this issue is a conversation recorded in Matthew 19:16–22, Luke 18:18–23 and Mark. 10:17–22. Jesus is confronted by a young ruler who addresses him as a 'good master' which Jesus allegedly denies. Jesus is not questioning his view of himself, but the young man's view of him. What is contrasted is the young man's concept of *good* and God's expectation as laid out in the Law, which is good. To put it rather crudely, his understanding of good was bad. Warfield (1950) summarises that:

[t]his declaration ... is no evidence against the sinlessness of Jesus; rather, it is the true expression of the distance which human consciousness – even the sinless consciousness of being human – recognizes between itself and the absolute perfection of God. (p. 174)

Did Christ repent? Given that John's baptism was one of repentance (Mk 1:4) one might be forgiven for assuming that Christ needed repentance to be baptised by John. It must also be remembered that John's 'law' was not a Mosaic law but a requirement for Israel to prepare to meet their expected Messiah (MacDonald 1966:5). For Jesus to submit to this 'law' is to suggest that he too must prepare to meet his expected Messiah which, as can be seen, is ludicrous. Matthew records clearly that the baptism was 'allowed or permitted' as the text clearly reads and implies a special dispensation, so to speak, and therefore no repentance was recorded.

Was Christ's baptism like ours? The account in Luke's Gospel (3:21) clearly portrays that his baptism was after that of the people, which is to say that there was a difference. Wong (1997:131) implies that given the issue of John's baptism, being one of repentance, it is likely that Jesus, by virtue of his submission to it, became sinless (*non posse peccare*) after the baptism. However, this is only plausible if he confessed his sin, which is nowhere recorded for us to assume. He goes on to conclude (1997:137) that the issue of his 'sinfulness through the implication of His baptism did exist among Christians at the time of the gospel redactions'. This also exists among Christians today, but that does not mean that there is credibility to that view, albeit popular.

How did Christ learn obedience? This issue of Jesus' learning (Heb 5:7–8) is directly related to his humanity because it is connected to his 'suffering' and the context relates this learning to his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane where he is seen to be at odds with his Father's will. Moreover, as Witherington (2011:140) points out, it was until death and not beyond it. It was till the point of the cross and not after it. Furthermore the learning mentioned here is to be understood as Christ 'accepting' his Father's will (Anon 1996) which he did whilst in prayer in the Garden (Mt 26:39 & 42). Additionally, it also reflects Jesus' attitude as being controlled by Scripture as he willingly went to the cross

(Ellingworth 1993:292). The issue of 'learning obedience' tends towards sub-ordinationism, which is the idea that the Son is lower in rank of being than the Father. However, as Van de Beek (2002?:72) clarifies, 'obedience is just as divine as power'. The Father and Son are One; therefore the Son's obedience is an extension of the Father's will through the Son's incarnation and consequently a manifestation of his power. Communion is the essence of the relationship of the Trinity and obedience as a factor must reside within this relationship and therefore cannot speak of one being superior or inferior, but equal. His communion with his Father was unbroken and thus his obedience to the Father's will was nothing but perfect (Scott 2011:1).

Peccability based on his temptability

Hebrews 4:15 states that He 'was in all *points* tempted as *we are, yet* without sin'. We agree with Cullman (1959:93) when he concludes that 'He lived under the very same human conditions as we, [yet] he was the one human being without sin' – that is to say that living under the same conditions does not make one conditionally the same. The writer of Hebrews is replete with laudatory tones when it comes to the work of Christ, especially in his high priestly role (Heb 2:17; 12:2) and these expressions are there to prove an exalted humanity, not a common humanity. Lloyd-Jones (1994:257–258) states with verity that 'No one has ever been tempted in this world by the devil as the Son of God was tempted'. He is referring to the degree of the temptation rather than the kind. The reason for this as Cullman (1959:95) explains, is that 'they were messianic temptations which could be imposed only upon Christ'. This means that when we are assessing his temptation we should be careful not to draw too many comparisons with ours as this was not only an unprecedented event but also an unparalleled one.

There is an assumption here that his temptation, though an official event, is reduced to just that particular episode. Zacharias (2010:82) argues that 'the temptation Satan posed to Jesus stalked Him throughout his ministry'. The assumption is that Christ never dealt with any form of temptation after or before that official event. Though an element of the Gospels, the synoptics never let him be tempted, in terms of their records, beyond the wilderness and Gethsemane, but it is the epistle to the Hebrews, as Cullmann observes (1959:94) that presupposes more occasions for his temptation. This is done not to increase the probability of peccability, but on the contrary, to confirm his impeccability given the sheer intensity of the satanic onslaught.

In an attempt to harmonise both possibilities of *can* and *can't*, John Frame (2002:134) argues that he was physically and mentally able to sin but morally not able. Regarding the temptation he writes that 'He could struggle against physical obstacles, so why not against mental and spiritual ones as well'. In answer to Frame's hypothesis we respond by stating that the struggle in the mind implies the consideration, to

some extent, of the seed thought. As Witherington (2011:134) puts it in his comment on Philippians 2:6, '*Harpagmos* does not refer to grasping after something that one does not yet have. It refers to clutching to oneself or taking advantage of something one does already have.' In this Philippian text Steve Runge (2011) reckons 'What Jesus *did* is highlighted by the contrast with what He did *not* do.' There is nothing in the text to infer that Jesus gave it some thought, so to speak, was not after what he did not have. Jesus did not have to entertain Satan's options to know the reality and force of temptation. The text nowhere intimates this! God is incapable of being tempted by evil (Ja 1:13), that is, to be drawn away into evil. However, if it was true that his Son housed a covert proclivity to sin, then being tempted by it, so as to be drawn away into it, would be something that the Devil would have capitalised on.

Moreover, at the heart of the temptation was Satan's uncontextual use of Scripture, which as Zacharias (2012:264) points out, was put back into its original context by our Lord, which enabled him to resist Satan's scheming.

The nature of sin

At this point a definition might be useful. We refer to Stott (2006: ch. 7) who, with his usual economy of words, defines sin as 'fundamentally the exaltation of self over God'. We do not find that Jesus exalted his self over his Father. On the contrary, what we do find is his determination to do his Father's will at all costs. Sproul (1996:34) argues that though Christ, like Adam, was born peccable (i.e. temptable), he was not born with original sin. The logic seems inescapable, i.e. if Adam sinned without having original sin then Christ could have too. Sproul (1996:34) concludes with a question, namely 'could Jesus have sinned if he had wanted to? Absolutely! Of course, he didn't want to. So if you ask it a different way, could Jesus sin if he didn't want to? No, he couldn't sin if he didn't want to any more than God could sin because God doesn't want to sin. Wanting to sin is a prerequisite for sinning'.

With the utmost of respect Sproul has not solved the problem, but in our estimation has exacerbated it, because wanting to sin is not only a prerequisite to sin, it is also a sin itself which he then goes on to state that Jesus could have wanted to sin.

The importance of impeccability

Sproul (2000:22) reminds us of the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction which states that something cannot be what it is and not be what it is at the same time. Aristotle maintains that this law is the 'chief principle' in logic and Augustine said that 'it cannot be disputed'. Therefore lest we violate this absolute principle we cannot accept that Christ can be both peccable and impeccable at the same time.

His deity

Warfield (1950) is correct to summarise that:

[w]e can never hope to comprehend how the infinite God and a finite humanity can be united in a single person; and it is very easy to go fatally astray in attempting to explain the interactions in the unitary person of natures so diverse from one another. (p. 70)

The explanation that goes by the nomenclature *peccability* is that which has gone *fatally astray*, hence the need for the Council of Chalcedon in 451 to provide a creed for the church, so she does not stray into this fallacy. The Early Church never overtly debated the deity of Christ (Harris 2011:81) and was quick to condemn those who did. It is noticeable that when Satan pitched his foolish schemes on to our first parents, he closed with the words 'you shall be like God' (Gn 3:5). These or similar words are noticeably absent when he confronted Christ, the Last Adam, for he knew full well that he was God and that that line would self-destruct so he cleverly did not attack the person and character of Christ but opted to seduce him with his own Scriptures (Zacharias 2012:264). As the text shows, Jesus did not fall for that but put those texts back into its respective contexts. It seems inconceivable to conclude that if he (Jesus) knew, that he could have sinned to knowingly equate himself with God in this act. Such an equation would necessarily assume this proclivity in God as well. He would, by such an act, implicate his Father as being prone to sin as well. Walvoord (2008:151) declares that 'the concept of peccability in the person of Christ is contradicted principally by the attributes of immutability, omnipotence and omniscience' and for this reason we offer the forthcoming section.

Impeccability based on his omniscience

The omniscience of Christ is crucial to the current debate, for sin appeals to ignorance (Anon 1996). God knew that Adam would sin and this is stated unapologetically in Romans 8:20–21. This further testifies to God's full knowledge of Adam's proclivity to sin but in either exact terminology or similar sentiments he nowhere affirms this of his *last Adam* (1 Cor 15:45).

Impeccability based on his immutability

Admittedly this doctrine has always been a problem when considering the incarnation (Berkhof 2003:323), but a problem is not insurmountable just because it's a problem. As Walvoord (2008:151) exclaims, 'the fact of the immutability of Christ is the first determining factor of His impeccability'. However, for Christ to be peccable would imply an ability to change which goes against the grain of what immutability actually is (Anon 1996). The writer of Hebrews with only two verses dismisses this as inadmissible. Hebrews 1:12 reads: 'You are the same, and Your years will not fail' and 13:8 reads, 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever'. John 1:1 says that the Word (Logos) was in the beginning and not the beginning was in the Logos. One could argue that the flesh of Christ was created and thus mutable but it must be borne in mind that his flesh was not on 'probation' (Pink 1932) as was the flesh of others. From the moment of his conception his humanity was taken into union with his deity

and added to this fact is that Christ is said quite explicitly to be immutable even while ageing in his flesh. In John 5:19–21 he himself points to this fact concerning his incarnational ministry by saying:

for whatever He (Father) does, the Son *also does in like manner* ... For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, *even so* the Son gives life to whom He will.

This kind of sovereign omnipotence cannot yield to sin. It would be a contradiction in terms if it could. There is a significant difference in being tempted and being temptable. If as Hebrews 13:8 affirms, viz. that 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever' then it must follow that as he was in eternal glory so was he in incarnational glory. The two states are not oppositionally divergent but operationally different. If it was impossible for him to sin before the incarnation it was equally impossible for him to sin during his incarnation (Martin 2010).

Impeccability based on his quality⁵

In his famous Pentecost sermon Peter declares the sinlessness of Jesus (Ac 2:22–23). The very next day in Solomon's portico he followed up that sermon and preached again and enhanced that very same theme (3:14–15). In the Pentecost sermon he was proven externally to be the Son of God by his 'miracles; wonders and signs' (2:22). In the next sermon Christ was proven by his inward purity and perfection of character. In defence of his own sinless perfection he was able to say in John 8:29 'I always do those things that please Him.' There is not a single person in history that can make that claim. In John 8:46 'Which of you convicts Me of sin?' There was no one then nor now who could charge him with anything. Twice the Father had said that his Son pleased him (Mt. 3:17 & 17:5). Here we have his own testimony and the testimony of his Father. The testimony of the apostles was equally clear. Peter called him 'the Holy One and the Just' (Ac 3:14). He later wrote, 'He did/committed no sin' (1 Pt 2:22). John writes that 'in Him there is no sin' (1 Jn 3:5) and it is important to note that John has his *manifestation* in view, which we would call the incarnation, which Edwards (2005:229) insists is 'the most unique and essential characteristic of Christianity'. It was while he was incarnate that 'in Him there is no sin' applies. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:2 he 'knew no sin'. Aside from the testimony of the apostles the Scriptures also provide testimonies from impartial witnesses. Pilate's wife said to him: 'Have nothing to do with that just Man' (Mt 27:19). The criminal crucified next to him said: 'This Man has done nothing wrong; (Lk 23:41). The Roman centurion who oversaw the proceedings of the crucifixion event exclaimed: 'Certainly this was a righteous Man!' (Lk 23:47). William Kelly (1901?:198) observes that 'He was so perfectly transparent, that not one thing in Him deflected from the truth ... there was no object but God before His soul.' It is inconceivable to think that a proclivity to peccability could lie dormant and never surface at all during his incarnation. As if that were not enough,

5. By *quality* I am not attempting to 'measure' Christ against something or someone similar. That would be heresy! I am attempting to highlight his general incomparable excellency in Peter's Pentecost sermon.

the testimony of evil men was just the same. Pilate said three times, 'I find no fault in Him' (Jn 18:38; 19:4, 6). The betrayer Judas who was conscious of his guilt and overcome thereby, cried out: 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood' (Mt 27:4). According to Arndt, Danker and Bauer (2000:24) the word *innocent* means *guiltless* (cf. also Friberg *et al.* 2000:36). We would like to add one more from the most unlikely source of testimonies. Demons were not without a word on this subject too. In Mark 1:24 they cried: 'I know who You are – the Holy One of God!' Mark 1:34 says of Jesus that 'He did not allow the demons to speak, because they knew Him.' Through possessing a man at Gadara they cried out saying: 'What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God?' (Mt 8:29). In Acts 16:17 again through possession a demon cries out against the apostles, saying 'These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation'.

Impeccability based on his equality

That Christ is his equal is Paul's line of reasoning throughout his writings of which Philippians 2:6 is a classic case in point. His responsibility is the measure of his ability! When Jesus told his listeners that 'before Abraham was, I AM' (Jn 8:58) they knew exactly what he was saying and the mere fact that they immediately responded by picking up stones to stone him, is a clear indication of that fact. Harris (2011:81) is correct to interpret this as his claim to 'equality with the eternal God'. Beet (1890) concludes with sublime wisdom that:

our only alternative is to believe either that a complicated tissue of delusions without parallel among the errors of mankind has saved the world or to believe that with God in eternity is One who shares to the full, by derivation from Him, and with unreserved devotion to Him, whatever He has and is, the Eternal Son of an Eternal Father. (p. 409)

In John 10:30 Jesus ended a teaching session with the words 'I and My Father are one' and in response to this 'the Jews took up stones again to stone Him'. This is John's way of telling us that they understood perfectly what he said. Blanchard (2001:570) points out that the word *one* is not masculine but has a neuter meaning indicating that Jesus was not claiming to be one in Person with God, but one in essence or nature. He is indivisible enough not to be seen apart from his Father but not indistinguishable enough to be confused with him.

Impeccability based on his authority

The Gospels everywhere affirm and confirm his authority (Mt 7:29; 21:23–27; 28:18; Mk 1:27; Lk 4:32, 36; 9:1; 10:19; Jn 5:27; 17:2, etc.) and nowhere did Jesus exhibit this more profoundly than when he forgave sins (Edwards 2005:81) which was the prerogative of the Father (Ex 34:6–7; Ps 103:3; Is 43:25; Mi 7:18). The aged apostle Peter speaks of a 'more sure prophetic word' or 'the prophetic word confirmed' (NKJV). The link is rather obvious: the inerrancy of the Word is *a propos* to the impeccability of the Son who confirmed it. His pure and impeccable life accompanied his teaching (Zacharias 2012:262).

Impeccability based on his majesty

That he is 'a divine and supernatural personality' (Doornik *et al.* 1960:94) is testified to by all of his followers who were prepared to go and have gone to the death for him. The followers of Christ came to salvation because they contemplated his impeccability. The account of his transfiguration puts this into perspective for it was there that they really saw who he was.⁶ To support this inference Horton (2011:461) concludes that 'in addition to the annunciation and baptism, the transfiguration also provides a narrative account of the relation of the Son to the Father and the Spirit'. That is to say, they were given a view of the continuity between Father and Son, not in rank but in essence. Warfield (1950:78) states that 'the maxim rules that whatever the father is, that the son is also'. If there was discontinuity, i.e. the proclivity within his flesh to falter, it would have been most apparent in that setting. The overwhelming attraction of such majesty is not a trifling experience as is clearly proven by Peter's recollection of the event (2 Pt 1:17).

Impeccability comparable to impassability

The *impassibility* of God is another one of his incommunicable attributes. It means 'immunity to suffering' (Horton 2011:242). It is not that God has no emotion or is impervious to human suffering (Ex 3:7), it is that he does not respond to this human bane the same way we do because he is above it (transcendent). His impassibility cannot mean that he is impervious to human suffering any more than an invincible army cannot be attacked. In the same vein Jesus' impeccability cannot mean that he is not subject to real temptation and in the same logic cannot also imply that subjection also proves susceptibility.

Impeccability based on his resurrection

The case for the resurrection also contributes largely to the impeccability of Christ in that, as pointed out by Doornik *et al.* (1960:90), Jesus never spoke about his passion without at the same time referring to his resurrection. It is not a 'new consciousness in humankind' (Machida 1999:86) but a literal event confirming and affirming his deity (Rm 1:4; Swindoll 2010:28). It is clear that he did not want people to think of him as just a man who wished to die, but as the God-man destined to die. The hyphen is not there to, as Warfield (1950:88) explains, 'merge them one in the other but [*only to*] join the two together'. It entails among other things the sinlessness of Christ for it was, as Sproul (2000:114) asserts, based on his character that the New Testament argues that it was impossible for death to hold him.⁷ Furthermore, the homage paid to him by the apostles proved that they acknowledged their Master as the Lord of life and if their belief was false then they were in error as to his nature (Beet 1890:409).

6.Cf. Matthew 17:1–8; Mark 9:1–8 & Luke 9:27–36.

7.This is all the more strange a comment coming from someone who subscribes to 'peccability'.

His ministry

It is not an overstatement to suggest that the work of Jesus Christ cannot be separated from his person (Cullman 1959:234). Stott (2006) eloquently states that 'if there was a paradox in his person it is not surprising that there should be one in his work'. To this adds Cullman (1959:3) who observes that 'the New Testament hardly ever speaks of the person of Christ without at the same time speaking of his work'. This is made clear when one reads the prologue of John. The 'Logos' is immediately associated with 'all things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made' (Jn 1:3).

Impeccability based on his sufferings

It is our argument here that the fullness of his deity does not detract anything from the fullness of his humanity. It is foreign to Judaism that the Messiah must suffer (Cullman 1959:58), yet it was the argument of Jonathan Edwards as quoted by (Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2007:266) in his famous essay on *Original Sin*, that 'the heinousness of a crime is determined not only by the nature of the action, but also by the dignity and worth of the person offended'. In this essay Edwards was defending the death of Christ against the view that a punishment and death comprising just a few hours can never measure up against the everlasting punishment due to the wicked. If everlasting punishment is due to the sinner then only everlasting punishment in the substitute will suffice. To use the crisp logic of Edwards as quoted by Jeffery *et al.* (2007) the answer follows succinctly that:

just as the heinousness of a sin is determined in part by the dignity of the person sinned against, so also the severity of a punishment is determined in part by the dignity of the one being punished. (p. 267)

Therefore, the '*dignity of the one being punished*' is not a sustainable argument if he was peccable. He is the one in whom 'dwells all the fullness of the Godhead *bodily*' (Col 2:9; emphasis – LEK & CFCC). Moreover concerning his sufferings, it is safe to conclude, given the account in John's Gospel, that his baptism among other things, also inaugurated this official necessity. The Baptist is clearly on record as stating at this event: 'Behold! The Lamb of God *who takes away the sin of the world!*' [Emphasis – LEK & CCFC]. Therefore this proves that his vicarious death which presupposes his impeccability and his impeccability in turn also earns him the right to suffer vicariously. Added to this is the New Testament proximity of the concepts of righteousness and suffering (2 Th 1:5 & 1 Pt 3:14). It is in this sense that his right to suffer implies his intrinsic righteousness.⁸ It is this same Peter who wanted nothing to do with his death who began preaching the relationship and the necessity of his suffering and righteousness (Ac 3:11–18). Cullman (1959) reminds us that it was:

the same apostle, who according to 1 Cor. 15:5 was later the first to see the risen Christ, was also the first after this experience to

8. Refer to 'The nature of sin' above.

proclaim in the light of the resurrection the necessity of the suffering and death of Jesus. (p. 74)

Impeccability based on his miracles

Jesus' mastery over sickness and death is usually coupled with his ability to forgive sins (Doornik *et al.* 1960:83) and this authority is never relinquished by him.⁹ Sinfulness belongs to human nature and the worldwide flood of Noah proved this (Frame 2002:281). The works of Christ in terms of his miracles as Frame argues (2002:282) 'are redemptive-historical ... and is a declaration of [his] covenant lordship, *contra peccatum*, rather than *contra naturam*.' That is to suggest that his works are rather against sin than against nature. 'The peculiarity of a miracle', suggests Doornik *et al.* (1960:91) 'is that it cannot be explained by the existing laws of nature'. This is to concur with his unique nature as well. Therefore to see his humanity as only human is to see it only with the lenses of 'the existing laws of nature'. Surely this cannot be the correct approach given that we are dealing with One who can walk on water. His is 'a divine and supernatural personality' (Doornik *et al.* 1960:94). Moreover the relationship of Christ's miracles to his impeccability is seen when Peter mouthed that marvellous confession in Luke 5:8. He confesses: 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!' This came after he witnessed the miraculous draught of fish. The power of the Holy One to perform and control the creatures gave witness to the fact that he was God the creator, and the first thing to emerge from this is Peter's sin, which condition was totally absent from the One before him. There is no incompatibility between his power to perform miracles and his nature, although this was questioned before (Jn 9:16; Ullmann n.d.: 44). As unique as his impeccable nature is, so is his work of healing blindness. It was unprecedented in that no healing of blindness is recorded before Jesus nor any after him.

Conclusion

We are reminded by Chafer (1993) that:

Christ came 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' (8:3). He took the place of vital union with the sinner (6:5, 10–11); but did not become a sinner, or participate in the sin nature (Heb. 4:15; 7:26). (p. 282)

We have thus far proven that this proclivity implies the presence of sin and the sin nature. Every facet of his life displays the billboard of impeccability. Every work and word has this as the underlying premise and the overarching principle. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that impeccability is the most manifest quality of his majesty and Person as depicted in Scripture.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

9. Refer to 'The nature of sin' above.

Authors' contributions

C.F.C.C. was the study leader for the Masters' degree. L.E.K. primarily wrote the article under the supervision and assistance of C.F.C.C.

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10. The preface was written by the author on 25 June 1863, but it was originally published in 1828.