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Ontic Assurance:
The Soteriological Significance of Christological
Impeccability

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On the Dichotomy of Ontological and Functional Christology

Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the Christian enterprise. As such, it should not be surprising that the theological field which bears his name spans both continents and millenniums. Christology as a theological discipline has expanded and evolved over the centuries as the Church seeks to best describe the second person of the Trinity. In her attempt to articulate the doctrine of her Lord, the Church's Christological conversation has shifted with the contextual junctures throughout antiquity. Consistent, however, in this ever-changing conversation about Christ has been questions regarding his *person* and *work*.

Theologians often categorize these two concepts under the umbrella of ontological and functional Christology; ontological pertaining to that which belongs to Christ's being or person and functional referring to the works which Christ performed.¹ The relationship between these two

¹ It is important to note both of these phrases, ontological and functional, have gone through revisions. Consequently, this definition is not universally used in modern theology. For example, Stephen Wellum agrees that ontological Christology is that branch of Christology that refers to Christ's "nature or being." However, Wellum states that ontological Christology, "usually stresses Christ's deity over against his humanity." Stephen Wellum, *Jesus as Lord and Son: Two Complementary Truths of Biblical Christology* in *Criswell Theological Review* (Volume 13.1, 2015) 24. Wellum is not alone in using ontological Christology synonymously with Christ's divinity and he is right to express the *primary* conversation regarding Christ's ontology focuses on divinity. However, since we can talk of Christ's ontological humanity, this essay will instead employ Grant Macaskill's understanding of the categories. Macaskill says, "the use of the word 'ontology' may imply an assumption about the way in which Paul considers Jesus

Christological categories is a story of ebbing proximity and distance. In the modern era, there is a perceived distance between the ontological and functional aspects of Christology. Of this problem, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen said, “the integral link between the person and work of Christ have led theologians to a growing realization of the connection between ‘functional’ (what Christ has done for us) and ‘ontological’ (who Christ is in his person) Christologies. Yet at the same time, works of Christology tend to focus on one or the other.”²

As scholars “focus on one or the other” there is an “ever-widening fissure”³ between the person and work of Christ. Of this fissure, Marcus Peter Johnson said, “in far too many evangelical expressions of the gospel, the saving work of Christ has been so distanced from his person that the notion of a saving *personal* union with the incarnate, crucified, resurrected, *living* Jesus strikes us as rather outlandish.”⁴

to be ‘divine’...the word ‘ontology’ is simply used to describe what Paul considers God and Jesus to ‘be’ or what he understands as the constituent elements of their ‘being.” Grant Macaskill, “Incarnational Ontology and the Theology of Participation in Paul,” *In Christ in Paul: Explorations in Paul’s Theology of Union and Participation*, ed. Michael J. Thate, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Constantine R. Campbell (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) 87.

² Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 4. Kärkkäinen has elsewhere discussed this issue. Drawing a dichotomy between the way theologians have done Christology in the past with the methodology of the present, he says, “Ontology and functionality cannot be distinguished in such a categorical way as older theology did, nor is it useful to do so. Who Jesus Christ is determines what he does; what he does reflects and grows out of who he is.” Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013) 40.

³ Marcus Peter Johnson, *One With Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 15.

⁴ Ibid. Elsewhere, Johnson has insightfully pointed out typical Evangelical language as evidence of this dichotomy. He says, “let us take a moment to consider our habits of speech. We often talk, for instance, about trusting the finished work of Christ rather than the living person of Christ for our salvation. We talk about our sins being nailed to the cross rather than our sins being borne away in the body and soul of Christ.” Marcus Peter Johnson and John C. Clark, *The Incarnation of God: The Mystery of the Gospel as the Foundation of Evangelical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 104.

In line with Kärkkäinen's assessment regarding the need to bring ontological and functional Christology together, a number of scholars have consciously made this shift. For instance, Oliver Crisp presented readers with a "joined-up' account of the person and work of Christ."⁵ Stephen Wellum argued ontology and functionality can never truly be torn asunder for, "who Christ is determines what he does; what he does reveals who he is."⁶ Moreover, Wellum's Christology, *God the Son Incarnate*, is a full length treatment exhorting readers in the mending of this relationship by seeing Christ in his being as the Son without losing the work of his incarnation.⁷

In the field of Biblical Theology, Brandon Crowe offered readers an examination of the importance of Christ's *life* during his incarnation as opposed to focusing solely on his *death*.⁸ In doing so, Crowe's work in the Gospels mends the gap between Jesus' person and work. Finally, Richard Bauckham sought to so entangle the two categories that he renders them, as they currently stand, obsolete. He puts forward the notion of "divine identity" as a better way of explaining the this divide in Christology, saying, "Jesus' participation in the unique divine sovereignty is, therefore, also not just a matter of what Jesus does, but of *who Jesus is* in relation to God." He continues, "The whole category of divine identity and Jesus' inclusion in it has been fundamentally obscured by the alternative of 'functional' and 'ontic', understood to mean that either Christology speaks simply of what Jesus does or else it speaks of his divine nature."⁹

This article seeks to follow in the path of those mending the dichotomy of the person and work of Christ. Furthermore, this essay seeks to showcase the inherent connection between ontological and

⁵ Oliver D. Crisp, *The Word Enfleshed: Exploring the Person and Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), xi.

⁶ Stephen J. Wellum, *Christ Alone: The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 107.

⁷ Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015).

⁸ Brandon D. Crowe, *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017).

⁹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 31.

functional Christology by using the test case of the doctrine of the impeccability of Christ. Ultimately, we will see the ontic reality of Christ's impeccability aids the functional work of Christ by rooting soteriological assurance in ontological necessity.

On the Doctrine of Christ's Impeccability

Before we can examine the soteriological implications of the doctrine of impeccability, it is important first to establish what is meant by the doctrine. We will arrive at a conclusion regarding the doctrine by exploring some of the nuances in the conversation surrounding impeccability. By way of jurisdiction, this paper will not seek to provide a full defense of the doctrine. Rather, we will presuppose the affirmation of impeccability on our way to investigating its soteriological significance.

Impeccantia

The first nuance in need of exploration is the difference between the doctrines of *impeccantia* and *impeccabilitas*. The former doctrine states that Christ was *without sin*, while the latter articulates his *inability* to sin. For those who hold to Chalcedonian Christology, the former should be non-controversial, for the creed states that Christ is, "of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin."¹⁰

There is no shortage of New Testament passages that affirm the Chalcedonian doctrine of *impeccantia*. In the Gospels, we see the Devil's attempt to tempt Jesus without success in Luke 4. Then, in John 8, Jesus rhetorically asked, "which one of you convicts me of sin?" knowing his question will be met with silence. In the Epistles, we see Paul's letter to the Philippians speaking of Jesus' obedience even unto death. To the Corinthians, Paul writes that Jesus, "knew no sin." Later, Peter said of Jesus' blood that it was, "precious ...like that of a lamb without blemish

¹⁰ Moreover, Wolfhart Pannenberg gives a helpful overview of the historic affirmation of Jesus' sinlessness in the patristic era. He states, "Corresponding to the unanimous witness in this matter in the New Testament, the Christological confessions of the patristic church also emphasized Jesus' sinlessness: In the Eastern declaration to the Nicene Creed, in the Chalcedonian confession with reference to Heb. 4:15, in Cyril's tenth anathema in 431 with an allusion to II Cor. 5:21." Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), 357.

or spot.” Moreover, Peter told us that Jesus, “committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.” The sinlessness of Jesus runs throughout the book of Hebrews. For Hebrews 5:8 says that Christ was “made perfect.” Later in chapter seven, describing the type of High Priest Jesus is on behalf of his people the author says, “for it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.” Finally, in explicit language, Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus’ work as a High Priest is one performed with sympathy, for he has been tempted like us, “yet without sin.”¹¹

These texts and more are what led B.B. Warfield to describe God’s sinless holiness as his, “whole, entire, absolute, inconceivable and, therefore, inexpressible completeness and perfection of separation from and opposition to and ineffable revulsion from all that is in any sense or degree, however small, evil.”¹² In summary of the conclusive evidence of Jesus’ sinlessness presented in the New Testament, Gerald O’Collins stated, “His activity comes across as that of someone utterly oriented towards God and unconditionally committed to the cause of the kingdom.”¹³

Non Posse Peccare vs. Posse Non Peccare

¹¹ Though I disagree with his ultimate conclusions, Michael McGhee Canham gives an insightful list of confessors of Jesus’ sinlessness or lack of guilt in the New Testament. He lists, “Christ Himself (John 7:18; 8:29,46; 14:30); Luke (1:35; 4:34), Mark (1:24), Peter (John 6:69; Acts 3:14; 1 Pet 1:19; 2:22; 3:18), Judas Iscariot (Matt. 27:4), Pilate (Matt 27:24; Luke 23:4, 14, 22; John 18:38; 19:4, 6), Pilate’s wife (Matt. 27:19), Herod Antipas (Luke 23:15), the penitent thief (Luke 23:41), the Roman centurion (Matt. 27:54), John (1 John 2:1, 29; 3:3, 5, 7), the writer of Hebrews (Heb. 4:15; 9:14), and Paul (Rom. 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:21). Michael McGhee Canham, *Potuit Non Peccare or Non Potuit Peccare: Evangelicals, Hermeneutics, and the Impeccability Debate in The Master’s Seminary Journal* (Volume 11.1, 2000), 94.

¹² B.B. Warfield, *Faith and life* (Bellingham, WA: Longmans, Green, & Co, 1916), 444. Moreover, Macleod helpfully points out that Christ was free from both actual sin and inherent sin. He says, “nowhere in the structures of his being was there an sin. Satan had no foot-hold in him.” Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 222.

¹³ Gerald O’Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 282.

Another way of stating the previous distinction, and one more frequently used, is the distinction of *non posse peccare* and *posse non peccare*. The two phrases translate to mean Christ was either *not able to sin* or *able not to sin*. The former holding to the doctrine of impeccability and the latter holding to that of peccability. These two positions juxtapose the experience of the first and last Adam. Whereas the first-Adam experienced *posse non peccare*, or the “possibility of not sinning,” Christ experienced *non posse peccare*, or “not possible to sin.” While both parties affirm the *impeccantia* of Christ, there is less doctrinal harmony regarding his ability or inability to partake in sin. The divide seems to be no respecter of confession nor creed; for theologians as diverse as Edwards and Schleiermacher or Hodge and Barth find themselves, at least within this conversation, on the same side of the theological table.¹⁴ Hodge, an ardent defender of Chalcedonian Christology, said about the doctrine of impeccability:

This sinlessness of our Lord, however, does not amount to absolute impeccability. It was not a *non potest peccare*. 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.¹⁵

Contrary to the words of Princeton’s third professor, Friedrich Schleiermacher argued that Christ had “essential sinlessness.” It is this essential sinlessness, said Schleiermacher, that “distinguishes [Christ] from all other human beings.”¹⁶

¹⁴ It would be reductionistic to claim that these theologians agreed on all matters regarding this Christological conversation. However, regarding the question of *non posse peccare* and *posse non peccare*, they stand on common ground.

¹⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2013), 457. For more on Hodge’s view on the doctrine of Christ’s impeccability, see: James J. Cassidy, *No ‘Absolute Impeccability:’ Charles Hodge and Christology at Old and New Princeton in The Confessional Presbyterian* (Volume 9, 2013).

¹⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith, Volume Two* (Louisville:

It was not only German liberal theologians who ran contrary to Hodge regarding their doctrine of Christ's impeccability. Even amongst fellow Princetonians we can see disagreement; showing, once again, that this conversation is not a respecter of creeds nor confessions. As a portion of a larger analysis on Christ's freedom and praiseworthy virtue; Edwards provided an extended argument for Christ's impeccability. He started by saying, "It was impossible, that the acts of the will of the human soul of Christ should, in any instance, degree or circumstance, be otherwise than holy, and agreeable to God's nature and will." He proceeded from this quote to give eleven points of argumentation.¹⁷

While numerous reasons abound for why theologians, like Hodge, deny the doctrine of impeccability, one is due to the affirmation of Christ's assumption of a fallen nature. Donald Macleod attributes the origin of this view to Edward Irving.¹⁸ Furthermore, as an indicator of the impact Irving's view had, Macleod points out Barth's use of Irving's reasoning in his affirmation of Christ's fallen nature.¹⁹

In the same way there are a multitude of reasons one would affirm the peccability of Christ; there also exists a number of reasons theologians argue that Christ took on a fallen human nature. The chief reason for this affirmation is rooted in soteriology. Let the reader see the irony in this reality. For this essay seeks to discuss the soteriological implications

Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 608. For more on Schleiermacher's understanding of impeccability, see: Kornél Zathureczky, *Jesus' Impeccability: Beyond Ontological Sinlessness in Science et Espirit* (Volume 60.1, 2008), 61-65; also, Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, 359-360. It should be noted, however, that while Zathureczky's article is insightful regarding Schleiermacher's understanding of impeccability; the conclusion of the article runs in direct contrast to this one. Zathureczky concludes that impeccability is not an ontological property of Christ and is instead, "an event in the Trinitarian life of God." (70).

¹⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 281-289. For more on Jonathan Edward's view on impeccability, see S. Mark Hamilton, *Jonathan Edwards, Hypostasis, Impeccability, and Immaterialism in Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* (Volume 58.2, 2016). And Philip J. Fisk, *Jonathan Edward's Freedom of the Will and His Defense of the Impeccability of Jesus Christ in The Scottish Journal of Theology* (Volume 60.3, 2007).

¹⁸ Macleod, 222.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 223.

rooted in the affirmation of Christ's impeccability; therefore, running straight into the headwinds of the primary conversation surrounding the doctrine of peccability.

Kelly Kapic picked up on the soteriologically charged nature of this conversation as he said, "On the one hand, those who seek to affirm that the Son assumed a *fallen* human nature...are often interpreted as sacrificing the sinlessness of Jesus and thus leaving believers still in need of a Savior." He continued, "on the other hand, those who affirm that the Son assumes an *unfallen* human nature...are often charged with presenting a generic Jesus who is not truly man, thus losing the soteriological significance of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension." He concluded these remarks saying, "both parties think nothing less than the very heart of the gospel is in jeopardy."²⁰

The soteriological premise behind an affirmation of Christ's peccability is the oft-cited line from Gregory of Nazianzen, "For that which He has not assumed He has not healed."²¹ The reasoning behind this argument is that for Christ to act as a covenantal representative, he must meet the wicked in the soteriological state in which they exist. Therefore, to redeem the post-Adam, pre-regenerate race who live with a nature tainted by and bent toward sin; Christ must take on a similar nature.

As mentioned earlier, Barth picked up where Irving left off in an affirmation of Christ's fallen nature. Barth speaks to this issue and links it to soteriological concern. He said

There must be no weakening or obscuring of the saving truth that the nature which God assumed in Christ is identical with our nature as we see it in the light of the Fall. If it were otherwise, how could Christ be

²⁰ Kelly Kapic, *The Son's Assumption of a Human Nature: A Call for Clarity in International Journal of Systematic Theology* (Volume 3.2, 2001), 154. Readers can see the importance and balance of Kapic's article for this conversation in the reality that those on both sides of this conversation point to this particular article as a vital read. See, for instance, two peccability proponents, John C. Clark and Marcus Peter Johnson, *The Incarnation of God*, 118. Fn. 29. For an example from an impeccability proponent, see: Stephen Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 233. Fn. 62.

²¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *To Cledonius the Priest against Apollinarius, Volume Seven in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2012), 440.

really like us? What concern could we have with Him? We stand before God characterized by the Fall. God's Son not only assumed our nature but he enters the concrete form of our nature, under which we stand before God as men damned and lost.²²

The line of theologians who placed soteriological stock in Christ's assumption of a fallen human nature does not stop with Barth. T.F. Torrance, while commenting on John's use of "flesh" says of Christ's human nature,

Are we to think of this flesh which he became as *our* flesh? Are we to think of it as describing some neutral human nature and existence, or as describing our actual human nature and existence in the bondage and estrangement of humanity fallen from God and under the divine judgement?...One thing should be abundantly clear, that if Jesus Christ did not assume our fallen flesh, our fallen humanity, then our fallen humanity is untouched by his work – for '*the unassumed is the unredeemed*', as Gregory Nazianzen put it."²³

These hermeneutical and Christological propositions, for Torrance, are pregnant with Soteriological consequence. He concludes his treatment of Christ's assumption of a fallen flesh saying, "Thus Christ took from Mary a corruptible and mortal body in order that he might take our sin, judge and condemn it in the flesh, and so assume our human nature as we have it in the fallen world that he might heal, sanctify and redeem it."²⁴

Finally, the line of Irving, Barth, and Torrance found an Evangelical expression in the theology of John Clark and Marcus Peter Johnson. Clark and Johnson, to their credit and cited above as an exemplar of

²²Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume 1.2* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 154. Quoted from Macleod, 223.

²³T.F. Torrance, *The Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 62-63. Wellum addresses Torrance's use of Gregory of Nazianzen and makes the important point that Torrance might be misappropriating this line. Wellum says, "Gregory, in fact, deployed this principle against the heresy of Apollinarianism, which denied that Christ assumed a human mind and thus denied he had a full and complete human nature. At stake was whether Christ had a full human nature, not whether that nature was fallen." Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 235.

²⁴Ibid., 63.

theological method, root their argument for Jesus' assumption of a fallen nature in the desire to keep close the person and work of Christ. They argue that Christ humanity while "culminating" at the cross is not isolated to the cross alone. Rather, his Earthly life, spent in the flesh, must bear soteriological significance. They stated that, "God's condemnation of sin took place in the flesh of Christ." A flesh, they said, "he holds unreservedly in common with us."²⁵ They take this argument beyond Christ's human nature; for they opined that even his incarnation signifies this point, saying, "the incarnation attests to the reality that God the Son seized us in the state in which he found us, a state of condemnation, corruption, and alienation – assuming the only kind of human nature that exists east of Eden, the only kind that actually needs redeeming."²⁶

Whereas some theologian's affirmation of Jesus' fallenness is often an implication of seeking to do soteric justice to mankind's plight of a nature ruined by sin; it is not the only reason theologians deny impeccability. Another reason some opt for the *posse non peccare* position is due to the temptations Jesus faced.

The idea behind this denial of impeccability is that a true presence of temptation must entail a true presence of the possibility to sin. While not exactly the same as the denial of impeccability rooted in fallenness, this view also derives from soteriological concern. Proponents of peccability who appeal to Jesus' temptation fear that the functional reality of Jesus' ministry as our high priest is at stake if, in light of Hebrews 4:15, he cannot truly sympathize with mankind in genuine temptation. Though it is not the point of this paper to answer every objection for the doctrine of impeccability it is important to note that throughout antiquity, as a response to this tension, there have been a number of answers spanning

²⁵ Clark and Johnson, 113.

²⁶ Ibid. As previously stated, it is out of the jurisdiction of this paper to defend the doctrine of impeccability from each of its detractors. However, for a polemic against the view that Christ assumed a fallen nature see Wellum's six arguments against the position, Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 233-235. Also, see: Oliver D. Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 111-117.

the theological spectrum from philosophical, biblical and systematic theology.²⁷

Finally, another reason for the affirmation of the *posse non peccare* position is that of praiseworthiness. Within this critique of the doctrine of impeccability really arises two critiques. The first is regarding Christ's freedom; the second, as a result, regarding his worthiness to receive praise. This line of reasoning insists that God – whether it be the Father, the Son, or the Spirit – must work out of genuine creative freedom. For if God's action is an unavoidable consequence of his intrinsic nature, he is not free. This impacts God's praiseworthiness since his action, whether it be the positive actions of creation and providence or the negative action of avoiding sin, does not qualify for praise since he could not have done otherwise.

Vincent Brümmer compares this view of God to an “infallibly ‘constituted’ machine, only able to behave in accordance with the way it is made, than like a person freely deciding what to do or not to do.”²⁸ This leads Brümmer to the conclusion, “if Yahweh is in this way powerless to deviate from his character, he could hardly be praised for not doing so.”²⁹

Brümmer's conclusion that the doctrine of impeccability disqualifies God from valid praise seems to find foundation on shaky presuppositions. For Brümmer's position to hold up one would have to root praiseworthiness in having similar properties as humans, to a greater degree. However, if we define God's relationship to humans with an eye toward classical Christology then we will see that God's praiseworthiness is not rooted in having greater degrees of properties that we share; rather, he is praiseworthy for the fact that he is utterly

²⁷ For a thorough project demonstrating how different theologians have made since of Christ's temptation, see: John E. McKinley, *Tempted for Us: Theological Models and the Practical Relevance of Christ's Impeccability and Temptation* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster Theological Monographs, 2009). McKinley offers nine models for dealing with Christ's temptation before ultimately providing his own. For a brief history of how Evangelicals, particularly in the Reformed tradition, have answered this issue, see: Bruce A. Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections on the Humanity of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 73-90.

²⁸ Vincent Brümmer, *Divine Impeccability in Religious Studies* (Volume 20.2, 1984), 212.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 213.

unique. The incomprehensibility of his impeccable nature validates eternal praise, especially from those who have only known corruption.

Systematic Consequences for Peccability

The interconnection between Christology and other systematic categories should not come as a surprise since Christ is the center of the Christian faith, from which and to which all things are connected. Therefore, an affirmation of either the peccability or impeccability of Christ comes with a myriad of theological consequences. While not an exhaustive list two implications of affirming the doctrine of peccability are important for our present conversation. First, the doctrine of Christ's peccability sets the stage for a potential scenario in which God could be set in opposition to God. Second, an avowal of the *posse non peccare* position creates a category error regarding the nature/person distinction in Christology and therefore gives way to the appearance of Nestorianism.

As for the first problem, in a denial of kenotic Christology, classical Christology does not affirm that Christ emptied any of his divinity in order to inaugurate the redemptive enterprise of the incarnation. Christ's divinity was intact for the entirety of his Earthly ministry. This Chalcedonian affirmation means that, "if he sinned, God sinned."³⁰ In light of the person-perichoresis of the intra-Trinitarian relationship, this proposition is theologically disastrous. Gerald O'Collins picked up on this danger when he asked, "Was Christ personally impeccable *de jure*? The answer should be yes. Otherwise we could face the situation of God possibly in deliberate opposition to God."³¹

The second pitfall is equally as dangerous. For all parties represented in this essay, the conversation regarding Christ's peccability or impeccability regards his *impeccabilitas*, not his *impeccantia*. All are unanimous that Christ was indeed sinless; therefore, the question at hand is *could* Christ have sinned. Those who answer in the affirmative, especially those who espouse that Christ assumed a fallen human nature, state that it was his human nature alone that bore the iniquity of the Fall or that it is only his human nature that is peccable. However, the issue with this argument is that it confuses both the totality of sin and the

³⁰ Macleod, 229.

³¹ O'Collins, 281.

person/nature distinction. Crisp is correct when he says, “There does not seem to be any way of making sense of the notion that Christ had a human nature that had the property of being fallen but not the property of being sinful.”³² Moreover, O’Collins and Wellum are correct in their affirmation that sin is something that takes place in the *person* and not just the *nature*.³³ It is not the case that when Christ comes to judge the living and the dead that those guilty of transgression can point to their human nature as the guilty culprit in a case for the innocence of their person. Nor is it the case that if Christ *were* to have sinned, the transgression would have been contained to his human nature; for sin happens in the person. This bares two consequences: first, it restates the previous problem that the potentiality for Christ to sin would set one person of the Trinity against another. Second, it opens this view up for the appearance of Nestorianism. To avoid sin tarnishing the person of Christ, one would have to affirm a way for his human nature to sin that would not impact his divine nature; which would, in turn, create a Nestorian divide in the hypostatic union.

Bavinck captured both the danger of setting God against God and deteriorating the hypostatic union in a single line when he said, “God himself would have to be able to sin – which is blasphemy – or the union between the divine and the human nature is considered breakable and in fact denied.”³⁴

Soteriological Implications of Impeccability

With some of the nuances of the *posse non peccare* and *non posse peccare* discussion covered, we can now move toward a constructive case for the soteriological implications of the doctrine of Christ’s impeccability. For the sake of precision, the question we seek is not whether Christ’s sinlessness entails soteric significance. The soteriological importance of the sinlessness of Christ is such that, were it not so, the unfolding of the historical-redemptive drama would come to an immediate halt. Rather, we seek to resolve the question of whether or

³² Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity*, 93.

³³ Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 460. “Behind this assertion is the fact that sin is an act of the *person*, not of the *nature*.” O’Collins, 281. “We sin or refrain from sinning as persons.”

³⁴ Herman Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ, Volume Three*. (Grand Rapids: Michigan, 2006), 314.

not there is soteric significance to Christ's inability to participate in sin as stated in the doctrine of impeccability.

The salvific significance of Christ's impeccability stands as a conclusion of two premises. These two premises are: (1) As a result of the Fall, Adam's posterity needs a foreign righteousness, which we receive in Christ; (2) The doctrine of impeccability is rooted in divine ontology and is therefore *essential*.

Michael Horton said that the Old Testament interprets history, "as the story of a covenant made and a covenant broken" and that the New Testament builds on this interpretation.³⁵ The drama of the covenant broken begins in the Garden wherein Adam fails in his role as covenant representative and therefore brings about the soteric plight of his posterity – the need for and inability to obtain righteousness.

It is into this postlapsarian setting that Christ assumed human nature in the incarnation. In so doing, Jesus serves as the covenant redeemer overcoming sin and fulfilling the law. Brandon Crowe, emphasizing the *life* of Jesus and not only his death, said, "As the last Adam, Jesus is the obedient Son who serves a representative capacity, vicariously attaining the life through obedience that Adam did not."³⁶ The Scriptural statement of this reality is found in the fact that according to Romans 5, "many were made righteous" through Christ and in another Pauline passage, 2 Corinthians 5:21, that those who are "in him" would become "the righteousness of God."³⁷ So then, while those "in" the first-Adam have a personally insurmountable plight in their need of righteousness; their cosmic need finds solution in the imputed obedient righteousness of the Son, the last-Adam.

Our second needed premise is to see the impeccability of Christ as an ontological reality of his divine nature which renders it *essential*. As such, while it is proper to recognize the multitude of factors that aided Christ's incarnate ministry – such as the ministering work of the Holy Spirit and

³⁵ Michael Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 121.

³⁶ Crowe, 203.

³⁷ As Crowe points out, however, the necessity and reality of the obedient life of Jesus is not a teaching isolated to the Epistles. Crowe says, "What is explicit in Paul's epistolary exposition (Rom. 5:12-21) – that the actions of Adam and Christ have implications for those "in" each representative man – is also present in narrative form in the Gospels. *Ibid.*, 204.

the promises of the intra-Trinitarian plan of the *pactum salutis* – nevertheless, we recognize the impeccability of Christ not because of *what* he has or did but because of *who* he is.³⁸ The classical doctrine of divine simplicity substantiates this claim. For we should identify the Son’s impeccability as an attribute of his person. The doctrine of divine simplicity would assert, “all that is in God is God” therefore, “each of His attributes is identical with his essence.”³⁹ If it is true that God’s attributes are identical with his essence, then God must have each attribute *necessarily* and *essentially*. Aquinas proposes as much when he declared, God alone is good essentially...it belongs to God only, in Whom alone essence is existence; in Whom there are no accidents; since whatever belongs to others accidentally belongs to Him essentially...Hence it is manifest that God alone has every kind of perfection by his own essence; therefore he Himself alone is good essentially.⁴⁰

If we grant the categorization of impeccability as an essential attribute rooted in God’s ontology; then Christ’s obedience was greater than volitional consistency, it was ontological necessity.

Having established our two premises the soteriological implication of Christ’s impeccability becomes obvious – those united to Christ by faith, who have obtained the righteousness of Christ, lay claim to an ontologically necessary righteousness which should render assurance immutable.

In the *impeccantia* of Christ we have enough to stake our soteric assurance on. For the Son procured a record of no wrongs, which becomes ours via the grace of imputation. However, the assurance of God’s people runs deeper than the volitional consistency of Christ’s

³⁸ Vanhoozer stated this well when he said, “To say that, as a matter of record, Jesus did not in fact sin takes us only as far as sinlessness (*non peccare*). We can, and should go further and acknowledge that Jesus, because of *who* he is, was unable to sin (*non posse peccare*): impeccable.” Kevin Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 432.

³⁹ James E. Dolezal, *All That Is In God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 42.

⁴⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica, Volume One* (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1948), 29.

sinlessness. The Christian assurance rests in an immutable, simple, impeccable Christ. We can see, in this grace, how the ontology of Jesus aids his functional ministry as redeemer. Moreover, into the pool of our assurance runs the double stream of what Christ obtained for us *and* who he is.

Therefore, believers need not lay awake at night wondering if the obedience and righteousness of their covenant representative will remain intact in the morning. On the contrary, the Church can have assurance that the righteousness given them by the accomplishments of the Son is as sure to remain as his own being. Whereas the *posse non peccare* of the first-Adam led to our condemnation in the Garden; the *non posse peccare* of the last-Adam has led to our essential, necessary, and immutable righteousness in the Kingdom.