

# Doctrinal Brief: Could Jesus Have Sinned?

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Everyone who takes the testimony of the Bible seriously agrees that Jesus was without sin (John 8:46; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 7:26; 1 Peter 2:22; 1 John 3:5). But as we see from the fall of some of the angels and of Adam, sinlessness does not in itself exclude the possibility of sinning. But would it have been possible for Jesus to have sinned when he was tempted by the devil? Here the verdict is not unanimous. In recent years I have received several inquiries from called workers concerning discussions at a pastors or teachers conference in which there was a difference of opinion about this. On the one hand, there was concern that if Jesus could not sin, then his temptations, which he undertook as our substitute, were not real. What point was there in Satan tempting Christ if Jesus could not sin? It would seem to turn the temptation of Christ into a mere charade. On the other hand, some felt that since Jesus is God and God cannot sin, Jesus could not sin.

Does the Bible give us an answer to this question? First of all, it can be said that the Bible does not explicitly answer the question, "Could Jesus sin?" It does, however, make several statements that enable us to answer the question.

## **Christ was fully human. His temptations were real.**

Hebrews 2:14-18 Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.

To be our substitute Christ became fully human, with a human body and soul. He was like us in every way, but without sin. His temptations were real, and he suffered as he endured them.

## **Jesus' humanity was like that of fallen man.**

Romans 8:3 For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering (more literally: What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh).

Paul does not elaborate on what this means that Jesus came in the likeness of sinful flesh. We know that Jesus became hungry, thirsty, and tired, and that he suffered even before his Great Passion. Could he become sick? Theologians have debated this without clear scriptural basis. They have often stated that Jesus assumed general infirmities like tiredness, but not personal infirmities like specific sicknesses. Scripture does not address this issue, so we will not elaborate on this subject here.

## **Jesus was true God.**

Colossians 2:9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.

## **God is holy and immutable.**

1 Peter 1:15,16 But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

Malachi 3:6 I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.

2 Timothy 2:13 If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

## **God, as God, cannot be tempted.**

James 1:13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.

So where does this leave us? We seem to have a paradox here. Some have tried to solve the apparent dilemma by saying that though God cannot sin, Jesus could have sinned in his human nature. They speculate that if Jesus would have fallen into sin, the personal union of Christ's two natures would have been broken, and the divine and human natures separated. If this would have happened, Jesus' mission to save us would have ended in failure. Somewhat less speculatively, some have suggested that though his human nature was capable of sin, Jesus could not sin because his human nature was always united with his divine nature. In his harmony of the gospels Ylvisaker (p 122) refers to the view of Alfred Edersheim, who says:

The position of the first Adam was that of being capable of sinning, not that of being incapable of sinning. The Second Adam also has a nature capable of not sinning, but not incapable of sinning. This explains the possibility of "temptation" or assault upon him .... The Second Adam, morally unfallen, though voluntarily subject to all the conditions of our nature, was, with a peccable human nature, absolutely impeccable, as being also the Son of God—a peccable nature, yet an impeccable person (*Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Bk. III, Ch. I, p 137).

Edersheim is attempting to explain that which is probably better left unexplained. More correctly, Franz Pieper says:

Was it possible for Christ according to His human nature to commit a sin? We emphatically deny this possibility. Not because of the sinlessness of the human nature of Christ in itself, for Adam, too, was created sinless and nevertheless succumbed to temptation, but because Christ's human nature never existed as a separate person, but from the beginning constitutes one Person with the Son of God. 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. Some object that impeccability would exclude temptability, would make of Christ's temptation a sham battle. However, Matt. 4:1ff. does describe a real battle (*CD*, II, p 76).

Both Edersheim and Pieper say that Jesus could not sin. Edersheim tries to explain how it was possible for Christ to be tempted. He would have been wiser simply to have stated the fact that he could be tempted and, in fact, was tempted. Pieper does not really commit himself on the question of the "sinability" of Christ's

human nature in itself. He is content to say that this is an irrelevant question since Christ's human nature never at any time existed in itself, that is, independently of its union with the divine nature in the person of the God-man.

## **Conclusion**

The biblical doctrine of Christology—that Jesus was the God-man, with divine and human natures inseparably united in one person supports Pieper's conclusion. On the basis of a well-meant desire to affirm the authenticity of Christ's temptations some Christians have asserted that it was theoretically possible for Christ to have sinned. When the question is raised how it would have been possible for Christ to have sinned if he was truly God, the answer is usually that Jesus could have sinned only in his human nature, not in his divine nature. To claim that Jesus or his human nature could have sinned without God sinning requires that Jesus' humanity had an existence separate from God. Jesus, then, is not truly God. He is just a man inhabited or possessed by God in a special way, much like a person possessed by the devil. When we limit Christ's actions to one of his natures rather than his person, we destroy the unity of his person and end up with a Nestorian Christ, one whose two natures are just glued together like boards and which can be pulled apart. If we accept this principle, then it follows that his death was simply the death of his human nature, not the death of God's Son, that is, the death of God. Jesus certainly could not have been tempted if he had no human nature, just as he could not die without a human nature. But both of these were acts of the person, just as all his acts for our salvation were.

For Jesus to sin would have meant either that God sinned or that the personal union was broken. Biblical Christology allows neither of these possibilities.

Similar issues arise, of course, in connection with Jesus' death. Though Jesus died according to his human nature, his death was the death of the God-man. We can properly say God died: Jesus' death did not break the unity of the person, because death is the separation of body and soul. It does not end the existence of the person. We need not speculate on the relationship of the divine nature to Christ's body between his death and resurrection. We can be satisfied to know that his death was real and that it was the death of the God-man, and it was for us.

Regardless of any debate about Jesus' hypothetical capability to sin, the fact is that he did not. That is the important truth here. Jesus succeeded where Adam failed. He always obeyed the will of the Father, thereby accomplishing salvation on our behalf.

This gives us the assurance that God's promise of our salvation was never in doubt.

Genesis 3:15 And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.

Jesus crushed Satan on our behalf and we will tread Satan under our feet. Jesus' defeat of the temptations of Satan was an important part of his victory for us.