

The Purple Pulpit

Installment #13

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The Peccability/Impeccability Question

All of us are familiar with the word “impeccable.” But we usually hear it used in a connotative sense, that is, a sense that has come to be so common in usage that it almost becomes the definition of the word, though it isn’t what the word means denotatively or etymologically. We hear of classic cars that are impeccable in their restored condition, men of impeccable character, or a singing artist who gave an impeccable performance. The American Heritage Dictionary defines this connotative use as “having no flaws; perfect.” But its original meaning was something different, and it is that original meaning that is germane to our topic this day. The above source also gives the denotative meaning that is relevant to our subject: “not capable of sinning or liable to sin.” Probably none of you have heard its opposite word: “peccable.” If “impeccable” means “incapable of sinning,” then “peccable” means “capable of sinning.” As we study the issues surrounding the incarnation and hypostatic union of Christ, the question arises as to whether it was possible for the Lord to sin in the days of His flesh.

Most would argue that because of the union of His Deity with His humanity the Lord was impeccable: that since His unipersonality is admitted, sin would implicate

Deity in evil, something that Deity is unable to do. But to argue this way would mean that the Lord wasn't even temptable, because "God is untemptable from evil." (Jas 1:13) But the Lord Jesus was certainly tempted (Mt. 4:1; Mk. 1:13; Lk. 4:1,2; Heb. 4:15). This fact sets a precedent for all other such questions, indeed for the question before us. Just as the Deity of the Lord in hypostatic union couldn't be tempted, though the humanity of the Lord in hypostatic union could and was, so the Deity of the Lord can't sin, but the humanity was capable of choosing to sin. This relates to the matter before us last week of whether the Lord in inhumanation had one or two wills. We proved that He has two. That will, from an innocent and perfect Man, had within it the real ability of choice. As Adam was a real human with a real human will, and he chose to sin, the Lord Jesus, as "the Last Adam" and "the second Man" (1 Cor. 15:45-47) was a real human with a real human will, and He chose not to sin.

Another consideration in examining this question is the reality of Christ's temptation. If it wasn't possible (as to volitional capability) for the Lord to sin, then how could His temptation be real? If He knew that He couldn't sin, it would nullify the sense of the solicitation to evil. But it was a temptation precisely because of the susceptibility to such solicitation in the will of His humanity and the humanity of His will.

Next, let's consider the main argument for impeccability, namely that of unipersonality. The thought is that if the humanity could sin, it would involve the Deity

in that sin, which is unthinkable. But just as in our treatment of the Trinity we said that there are two ways to err: a stress on oneness that minimizes threeness or a stress on threeness that minimizes oneness, so there are two ways to err relative to the hypostatic union of the Lord: a stress on His unipersonality that minimizes the distinction of essences or a stress of the distinction of essences that minimizes the unipersonality. The doctrine of impeccability is an emphasis on the Lord's unipersonality that blurs His distinction of essences.

There is one last thing that we must establish before we leave this subject. Similar to last week, how we said that the fact that the Lord Jesus had His own distinguishable human will as a faculty didn't mean that His will was ever other than that of His Father's, just so, the fact that the Lord was equipped with such a will that it was truly free (even free to choose sin) doesn't mean that He could have ever sinned. The plan of an omniscient Father and the strength of the will of the most spiritually powerful Man ever to grace this planet made victory a foregone conclusion. Therefore, we can say that while the Son of Man possessed the human capability to choose sin, the coupling of the prescience of God and the determination of the Father as Deity and the Son in humanity precluded any possibility that this could happen.

“Worthy is the Lamb, the One having been slain, to receive the ability, and the wealth, and wisdom, and might, and honor, and glory, and blessing!” (Rev. 5:12)