Four Patristic Models of Jesus Christ’s Impeccability and Temptation

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Abstract. Early Christian theology focused on the identity of Jesus Christ according to the New Testament, and faced an apparent dilemma in Jesus’ deity (which entails his impeccability) and Jesus’ humanity (marked by his true temptations to sin). While no church council addressed the topic of Jesus’ impeccability and temptation directly, patristic theologians did explain the relationship of Jesus’ divine impeccability (considered as an a priori), his human temptation, and perfect sinlessness. The explanations vary in four types or models of dealing with the question. The description of each of the four models and a brief presentation of evidence from three patristic representatives for each model will provide the case that patristic theology shows developing sophistication in explaining the topic. In brief, these models are that Jesus was (1) sinless by his inherent impeccability, (2) sinless by deification, (3) sinless by divine hegemony, and (4) sinless by empowering grace. A brief evaluation of each of the models weighs their theological adequacy for contemporary Christological formulation.

Key words: impeccability, sinlessness, Christology, pneumatology, temptation

Introduction
The task of Christological formulation required patristic theologians to reflect on the questions of Jesus Christ’s impeccability and temptation. I will argue that these theologians formulated

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four discernible models to explain the apparent dilemma.\(^1\) If right, the analysis shows progress of patristic model construction towards greater clarity and theological adequacy that should be considered in contemporary Christological formulations.\(^2\)

For each model, I have offered brief descriptive labels as follows: (1) Sinless by Inherent Impeccability, (2) Sinless by Deification, (3) Sinless by the Divine Hegemony, and (4) Sinless by Empowering Grace. Both orthodox and unorthodox formulations are included so that we may learn from these varied attempts to explain the biblical data (despite their problems).\(^3\) For

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\(^1\) Some theologians of dubious reputation such as Apollinaris, Origen, Nestorius, and others are included because of their attention to this specific issue of impeccability and temptation, but others such as Paul of Samosata, Arius, and Pelagius are so problematic that they are unhelpful and thus excluded (e.g., diminishing the deity of Christ and the force of sin).

\(^2\) I am adopting a models approach to the theological evidence. The purpose is to discern the best explanation of the theological teaching of Scripture through sorting and evaluating the different ways that theologians have approached particular topics. After describing a distinct approach or set of explanations on a topic, we can evaluate strengths and weaknesses of the model, and test how well it fits the biblical revelation. A models approach aims to make explicit the distinct perspectives in the theological tradition and invites readers to get beyond their own perspective to see other approaches. Two examples are the books by Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church. A Critical Assessment of the Church in All Its Aspects* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), and *Models of Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1983).

\(^3\) While not exhaustive of all the patristic writers and all their writings, this study is an attempt to cover thoroughly the breadth of theology for the period. Based on what I have examined, it does not seem that extending the study in depth and breadth further would yield more models than what I have reported here. As will show in the notes, I am indebted to Aloys Grillmeier (and his collaborators) for providing the leads to a great many of the relevant patristic sources in *Christ in Christian Tradition. Volume One, From the Apostolic age to Chalcedon*, trans. John Bowden, 2nd rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975).
each model, I will generalize a description and illustrate it with three representatives. Other representatives of the models will be indicated in the notes.

The four models are not mutually exclusive of each other. Some models have significant agreement because of the presuppositions common to all contributors, such as a common response to Christological formulas later deemed heretical (e.g., Arius, Apollinaris), the Nicene faith (Jesus Christ is *homoousios* with the Father), the common soteriological requirements that link Christ’s identity with his work, and the assumptions of patristic philosophical theology that developed in its Hellenistic setting.\(^4\)

One difficulty of research is that patristic thinkers often do not treat the topics of Christ’s impeccability and temptation thoroughly or systematically. More often the case is that writers allude to a model as part of discussing a biblical text or a theological topic that is more pressing, such as the coherence of divine impassibility and Jesus’ suffering. Nevertheless, these models were clear enough to provide starting points for theologians in later periods. On the one hand, the models are similar because all contributors accept the three key factors of Jesus Christ’s actual sinlessness, his true temptations, and his divine impeccability. On the other hand, theologians disagree about how these factors should be related to one another, to other factors of soteriology, and to issues of Christology.

Sinless by Inherent Impeccability

Description

The first model of Christ’s impeccability and temptation in the patristic period is the general claim that his sinlessness was caused by his inherent impeccability as God. By his divine nature as the eternal Logos and Son, Jesus was immune to sin in his human experiences. This matches the Nicene affirmation that Jesus is homoousios with the Father. The distinctive of this model is the emphasis on Christ’s preexistence to his incarnation, whether as a perfect soul (as in Origen) or as the Logos who becomes incarnate as a man. Because Christ is God before the incarnation, and God cannot sin, then Christ cannot sin when he is tempted as a man. This inherent impeccability model is the early answer to the problem posed by the Arians that since a man would have a mutable will with liability to sin, and God cannot be mutable or sin, then Christ the man could not also be God. The simple reply was that despite his incarnation in humanity and the experiences of temptation, Jesus Christ could not sin because he is divine as the preexistent Logos. His sinlessness is a necessity of his divinity. Proponents do not specify whether this is a necessity of his nature or his person. Theologians affirm simply that because Christ was the divine Lord, it was logically impossible for him to sin. This first model is the starting point for subsequent formulations that explain further how it was that Jesus’ being God guaranteed his sinlessness as a man.

5 A summary statement of the patristic idea is given by Jacques Dupuis, Who Do You Say I Am? An Introduction to Christology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 129: “If Jesus were to commit sin, God would be the author of sinful actions, which is a contradiction.”
Representatives
Tertullian, Origen, and Augustine are examples of the first model. These three articulate the common explanation that the divine impeccability of the Logos is the efficient and material cause of Christ’s human sinlessness.

Tertullian (ca. 155-220) insists that the normally sinful humanity was emptied of sin when assumed by Christ so that his was a sinless, transformed humanity. That explains his initial state of sinlessness as a man. Tertullian elsewhere affirms the idea that Christ’s sinlessness is based on his deity, explaining that just as God alone is without sin, so also Christ is the only man without sin. For Tertullian, Christ’s sinlessness is an entailment of his deity, and no other explanation than this is given for how Jesus remained sinless.

Origen (ca. 184-ca. 253) exemplifies principle of a preexistent cause of Christ’s human sinlessness. He also deviates from others by employing the Platonic doctrine of preexistent human souls in understanding the Incarnation (which is contrary to Scripture). Origen writes that the preexistent human soul as-
sumed by the Logos became immune to the possibility of sin because this soul chose to cling to the Logos. The result was that “what formerly depended upon the will was by the influence of long custom changed into nature.”

Origen’s idea is that the human soul merited its assumption by the Logos, and the miraculous birth in a human body was the divine action to secure that impeccability which the human soul had merited, “so that the soul may be able to remain without having tasted evil.” Few accepted Origen’s notion of a merited assumption by the Logos, and others readily condemned it. Nevertheless, Origen affirmed the generally recognized idea of this first model that Jesus was “incapable of all evil because he was the divine Word.”

Augustine (354-430) represents this model with a clear declaration in his sermon on the temptations that Jesus endured: “That Christ was the conqueror there, why should we be sur-

Christology. All souls have pre-existed, and God used the one soul that did not fall away—that of Jesus—to be united with his Logos or Wisdom which in turn became united with human flesh thus providing a way of redemption for the race.” Cf. or. “Canticum Canticorum 2.8” in PG 13, ed. C. and C. Vincentii Delarue, (1857): 126C.


An exception is Evagrius Ponticus, who developed Origen’s preexistent soul application in Christology by which the preexistent human soul in Christ is “the seat of moral decisions and of sinlessness” (Grillmeier, Christ in Christian Tradition 1: 379).

E.g., Augustine denounces the idea of merit in the incarnational assumption repeatedly, as in “Enchiridion 36” and “Letter 187.”

Or., “Celsum 4.15”: 229.
prised? He was almighty God.”¹⁵ Augustine also affirms that the sinlessness of Christ as a man was caused by his exceptional constitution, because Christ “is in His nature not man only, but also God, in whom we could prove such perfection of character to have existed.”¹⁶ Again, the plain logic of the model shows in the connection between the impeccability of God the Son and the sinless human action of Jesus Christ as a direct result.

**Sinless by Deification**

*Description*

The question asked in the second model is this: How does the union of Jesus’ divine nature with his human nature make him sinless as a man? The answer given is that Jesus’ sinlessness is the result of the deification of his human nature by his divine nature. The divinity in Christ dominates his humanity, deifying and strengthening it against natural human weaknesses. As in the first model, the deification model affirms that the divine impeccability of the Logos is the main factor securing and transforming Christ’s moral life as a man; thus, sin is impossible for Christ. Temptations never threaten him, just as a bar of heated iron cannot admit cold because of its union to the fire. Unlike the first model, this model counts the deifying union to specify the way that Jesus’ divine nature affects his humanity for the result of a sinless life. The general principle of necessary sinlessness is defined as the deification of Jesus’ humanity by transformation in union to his divinity, making a deiform humanity. Proponents of the model would deny any substantial


change to his human nature (just as iron is unchanged when united to fire). Nonetheless, the effect of the union is that Jesus’ humanity is made impeccable (just as hot iron receives the burning properties of fire) in a way that is not normal for human nature.

The theory of salvation by divinization deals especially in terms of transforming the human mutability and liability to sin. The Logos assumes and deifies universal human nature to heal and restore it for others as immutable and impeccable. The deification of Christ’s humanity by his divinity is a type of all believers’ deification and their future sinlessness through sharing in the divine nature of the Logos.

In the model’s dependence on the divinization concept, Christ’s divine nature is the efficient cause of the human impeccability, which is then the material cause of Christ’s human sinlessness. Proponents assert the unity of the two natures so strongly that the incarnational union is often summarized with the monophysite maxim: “One incarnate nature of the Son.”

Since the humanity in Christ has become divinized by union to the Logos, it is a humanity that is sinless by natural causation—between the natures—through union with the divine nature. However, this is not a change or absorption of the humanity in union to deity (as Eutyches was accused of saying). The moral immutability and impassibility of the Logos constitute

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the moral immutability and impassibility of his human nature.\textsuperscript{18} Accordingly, Christ’s temptations are said to have occurred merely for the instruction of humanity—not that he really had to struggle to obey God when tempted to sin.

\textit{Representatives}

Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215) is one of the first to express the deification model.\textsuperscript{19} Clement writes that Christ is “sinless” and “passionless in soul” because he is the Son of the Father and God the Logos who possesses “the nature of God.”\textsuperscript{20} At first glance, this seems like the first model. However, Clement also explains the divinizing elevation of Christ’s humanity by communication of the divine impassibility to his humanity.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, Clement explains that Christ’s humanity is the “heavenly flesh sanctified.”\textsuperscript{22} For Clement, impassibility was the highest ethical ideal, the moral likeness of God.\textsuperscript{23} Accordingly, he exhorts his readers to follow Christ’s example of being free from human passions in their own striving against temptations.\textsuperscript{24} For Jesus, however, the divine attribute of impassibility is determinative of his human action of sinlessness (or, positively, righteousness and faithfulness to God). Clement understands the divine


\textsuperscript{19} “Paedagogus” was written ca. 190, as noted in the introduction to \textit{Clement of Alexandria. Christ the Educator}, trans. Simon P. Wood, \textit{FOC} 23 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1954), xi.

\textsuperscript{20} Clem., “Paed.” 1.2.4.1-2: 3-4.

\textsuperscript{21} Clem., “Paed.” 1.2.4.1-2: 3-4.

\textsuperscript{22} Clem., “Paed.” 1.6.43.3: 28.


\textsuperscript{24} Clem., “Paed.” 1.2.4.1-2: 3-4.
attribute of impassibility to be the single answer to the question of why Jesus could not sin, and the question of why Jesus did not sin. Thus, Christ’s sinlessness is explained by the deification of his assumed humanity.

Athanasius (328-373) is an example of the deification model by his emphasis on Jesus’ divinized humanity for the divinization of all. This shows in his comment that the power of the Logos “destroys” the sinful corruptions of the flesh for Christ and others so that they may share in his eternal life to be “immortal and incorruptible” as he is. Athanasius suggests that the transformation in Christ is a microcosm for the universal humanity because Jesus has broken the power of sin in human nature through union to the divine Word. Athanasius connects the divine incorruption and purification with Christ’s sinlessness. This association shows that even though Athanasius’s main concern is death, the problem of sin is still important in his soteriology. In his view, God has solved both problems by means of a universal human nature that the Logos takes up and deifies in Christ. Therefore, Athanasius reasons that the Logos accomplished a sinless human life and the divinization of Christians by enhancing the human nature he assumed for redemption.

Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330-379) reflects the Cappadocians’ concern with human passibility in its relation to sin. He distinguishes between the natural pathe that Christ assumed, and those pathe that arise “from wickedness.”

must be transformed by eclipse of the evil pathe because these are unworthy of Christ’s divine purity. Basil explains that the divine nature in Christ absorbed his humanity, thus transforming his humanity. By this transforming union, the divine nature destroys both death and sin in Jesus’ humanity to make it immortal and impeccable—“not liable to sin.” Christ’s divinization of his human nature by his divinity is a type of the divinization that Christians will share in through union with Christ (2 Peter 1:4).

Cyril of Alexandria (378-444) gives many examples of the deification model because of his soteriological concern for the divinization of a universal humanity in Christ, similar to the Cappadocians and Athanasius. Cyril writes about the need for deification of Christ’s humanity in relation to sin: “As God he wished to make that flesh which was held in the grip of sin and death evidently superior to sin and death.” This example fits the model closely by affirming that the divine nature of the Logos enhances his assumed humanity to make it impeccable by nature. Cyril insists on Jesus’ impeccability as a man who is not subject to sin as others are, and that his temptations were given by God’s love for the sake of other humans who are tempted and need to know how to resist these dangers. Cyril argues

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 82.
30 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 754.22-26: 434.
that the union of the divine nature with the human nature in Christ was a transformation that he likens to dyeing cloth: the Logos effectively immersed his human soul in divine immutability as wool that is set in a bath of dye.\(^{35}\) The purpose of this deification was to make the humanity of Christ more powerful than sin by means of the divine immutability.\(^{36}\) In light of this view of Christ’s humanity as enhanced by his deity to be impeccable, Cyril was shocked to hear that some people thought sin was a possibility for Jesus, since it was so obvious from his sinlessness that no danger existed for him in being tempted to sin.\(^{37}\) Instead of peccability, Cyril’s view was that salvation required that Christ be impeccable, and he explained it in terms of what we have summarized as the model, sinless by deification.\(^{38}\)

**Sinless by Divine Hegemony**

*Description*

The question asked in the divine hegemony model is this: How does Christ’s operation in two natures result in his sinlessness as a man? The answer given is that the divine Logos directs his assumed humanity sinlessly in all the actions of his human experience. Like the deification model, the divine hegemony model explains Christ’s impeccability and temptation as the predominance of his deity over his humanity. Different from


\(^{38}\) Other representatives of the deification model are Origen, Hilary of Poitiers, Didymus the Blind, Gregory of Nyssa, Leo the Great, and Leontius of Jerusalem. See McKinley, *Tempted for Us*, ch. 4.
second model is the way that this model explains this predo-
minance as personal and volitional hegemony, not natural pre-
dominance. The hegemony is the Logos’s personal leadership of
his humanity to resist his temptations sinlessly. Christ’s sin-
lessness is not a necessity of his human nature or the union to
his divine nature; it is a necessity of his divine will. The Logos
is personally the efficient cause of his human sinlessness, direct-
ing his assumed humanity in sinless action, not by natural ne-
cessity, but by his prevailing divine will. Jesus can be tempted
as a man, but he cannot sin because he is the divine Son who
will never choose to sin. His human will is subordinate and
submitted to his divine will.39 Consequently, Christ’s attitudes
and actions as a man are elevated and deified de facto, only
functionally, because of the overriding will and choice of the
divine agent-operator.

In contrast to deification, the divine hegemony model has no
room for a transformation of Christ’s humanity. Emphasis on
the recapitulation of a human victory over Satan and tempta-
tion demonstrates the godly life of Jesus as a human example
for Christians to follow. Emphasis on the integrity of the two
natures and the Word’s personal action prevents a change of
the human nature to become divine. Instead, the hegemony of
the Logos over his humanity leads to the communication of di-
vine attributes without changing human nature. This model
pictures an enabling communication instead of the transform-
ing communication of the deification model. Important to ad-
vocates of the divine hegemony model are the likeness of Jesus’
humanity to common humanity, the example Jesus demon-

39 Cf. Gregory of Nazianzen’s statement: “[Christ’s] human will cannot be
opposed to God, seeing it is altogether taken into God; but conceived of
simply as in our nature.” “Fourth Theological Oration,” Christology of the
strates for others, and his achievement of sinlessness as a human accomplishment in the face of temptations. Some representatives of this model suggest the idea that Christ’s humanity is instrumental in the redemptive program, and he directs his manhood as a tool.

Representatives
The earliest theologian to suggest this model is Irenaeus of Lyons (130-200). He insists on the divine use of the assumed humanity in an instrumental way, which fits his view of Jesus’ whole life as a redemptive recapitulation as the second Adam. Irenaeus opposes the Gnostics’ docetic conceptions of Christ to argue instead for the likeness of “the Lord’s flesh” with “our flesh.” This claim of the essential likeness suggests that Irenaeus also opposes the idea that Christ’s humanity was deiform. Irenaeus affirms Jesus’ sinlessness without setting that moral achievement as a marker of his natural difference from the rest of sinful humanity. In his view, the Logos aided Christ’s assumed humanity to conquer his temptations to sin. Irenaeus writes, “The Logos remained quiescent during the process of temptation, crucifixion and death, but aided the human nature when it conquered, and endured, and performed deeds of kindness, and rose again from the dead, and was received up into heaven.” The model shows in Irenaeus’s insistence on Christ’s human victory that reverses the human defeat of Adam. Jesus obeys the law as a man, and answers Satan’s temptations in the wilderness through nothing else but by quot-

42 Ibid.
ing Scripture, thus demonstrating the example for others to follow.

Apollinaris of Laodicea (ca. 310-390, “the Younger”) is overtly representative of divine hegemony and shows the danger of going too far with the model. In a stiff reaction to the Arians, Apollinaris forms his Christological model in response to the supposed problem of Christ’s passible, temptable humanity.\(^{44}\) Thus, Apollinaris explains that in Christ the unconquerable divine mind “directs the flesh” in a sinless human life.\(^{45}\) When charged that he had diminished Christ’s humanity and made it unlike normal humans, Apollinaris responded that Jesus was only “found as a man” (Philippians 2:8) and so was different from humans in part. But Apollinaris also saw this as necessary that Jesus have a divine rational soul because the theologian asserted that a free human will is necessarily subject to sin. Instead, the Christ of Apollinarianism had an immutable, divine will because the Logos operated in place of the human mind. This is an instrumental view of the humanity in Christ; the Logos is the “leading” and “guiding” principle of the assumed humanity.\(^{46}\) Therefore, Apollinaris views the incarnational union as a displacement of the human mind and will by the divine mind and will, and the displacement guarantees Christ’s human sinlessness.

The third representative of this model is John of Damascus (ca. 675-754). The Damascene argues that Christ’s human will

\(^{44}\) Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 111-12.


\(^{46}\) Apollinar. L., “LOGOI” 152.16, ed. Lietzmann, 248. Lietzmann notes that this fragment is collected from a citation by Leontius Byz. Timotheus.
followed his divine will, so that his human will always worked in “subordination” to the divine will.\textsuperscript{47} By this volitional divine hegemony, Christ could assume natural passibility for a full humanity without allowing his pathe to be “controlling influences” on his divine will. Were it not for this subordination of the human will to the divine will, Christ would have been liable to sin.\textsuperscript{48} In his humanity, Christ could vicariously suffer and conquer all the pains of reported in the Gospels of hunger, thirst, grief, fear of death, agony, death, and the Devil’s temptations to sin.\textsuperscript{49} Jesus could conquer in his weak, possible humanity because of an asymmetrical enrichment from his deity—deification without transformation, a communication for elevated, deiform, “divine operation” without mingling the natures—just as fire heats steel to burn without changing the nature of the steel.\textsuperscript{50} The Damascene resists the idea of transformation to protect the integrity of the natures. Moreover, he emphasizes the value of Jesus as a model of obedience for believers since he became what they are to restore their obedience by his own exemplary life.\textsuperscript{51} John of Damascus therefore suggests the divine hegemony model by relating the divine strength and human weakness through the dominance of divine will over his humanity to live sinlessly as a man.\textsuperscript{52}


\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ibid.}, 3.20: 163.

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Ibid.}, 3.20: 162.

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Ibid.}, 3.17: 156.

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Ibid.}, 3.1: 108.

\textsuperscript{52} Other representatives of the third model are Tertullian, Gregory of Nazianzen, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, Leo the Great, Leontius of Byzantium, and Maximus the Confessor. See McKinley, \textit{Tempted for Us}, ch. 5.
Sinless by Empowering Grace

Description

The question asked by the empowering grace model is this: How is Jesus sinless as a man in a way that he can be an example for others? The answer given is that divine grace empowers Jesus to live sinlessly in his humanity. Representatives of this model explain Christ’s sinlessness as the result of cooperation between divine grace and the human will to choose right in the face of temptation. The divine nature of the Logos keeps Christ from sin (as in the first and second models), but Christ keeps himself from sin as a man who has learned to obey God. Impeccability is true of him as the Logos, but impeccability is not a factor in his actual sinlessness. The grace that empowers Christ’s humanity by the Holy Spirit preserves the integrity of the natures, the example of Jesus’ action in his humanity, and the moral reality of his actions as a human achievement. This follows from an emphasis on the moral growth in Christ (Luke 2:52; Hebrews 5:8) to be a true example for other humans in their sanctification by grace through faith (1 Peter 2:21-24). The moral reality of Christ’s human life was proven by facing temptations and resisting them in a way that can be followed by others (Hebrews 4:15). Because of his experiences, Christ can sympathize with others in their temptations. Neither the divine Logos nor the divine nature directly causes Christ’s sinlessness by communication of impeccability. Instead, divine grace works with Jesus’ human will to enable him to obey God perfectly. This grace is the divine help given to Christ by the Holy Spirit. Other models picture a relation of divine transformation or domination of Christ’s humanity, but here it is the divine grace which empowers Christ without altering his human nature or overriding his human will. Contrary to the view of salvation in the second and third models as an elevation or leading of humanity into a divinized mode of being (divinization), the em-
powering grace model emphasizes salvation as progress by grace toward perfect human life.\textsuperscript{53}

The empowering grace model emphasizes Christ as an example and archetype of God’s work in salvation according to the biblical evidence for his ignorance, weaknesses, struggles to obey, dependence on divine help, and the exhortations that Christians must imitate him. Central to this model is an emphasis on the integrity of the two natures. On the divine side, this means protecting the transcendence of the Logos in his immutability and impassibility, uncorrupted by the union with the mutable, passible humanity. On the human side, this means a temptable humanity in which Christ must struggle to resist sin. Because of the struggle, Christ’s victory was a real moral achievement of merit in a way not possible if he had relied upon his impeccability as the Logos. Moreover, proponents draw a parallel between the empowering grace in Christ and the elect, though with due regard to the uniqueness of Christ’s special identity as the Logos.

\textit{Representatives}

Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 352-428) is the earliest clear representative of this model; others preceding him in Antioch may have contributed to the formulation also. Theodore agrees with most others that Christ was impeccable and immutable as a man, but he uniquely holds that Christ did not become so until after the resurrection when the Logos predominated over his humanity.\textsuperscript{54} Before the resurrection, Christ needed the empo-


\textsuperscript{54} Theodore mentions impassibility and immutability that are Christ’s after the resurrection: “Post resurrectionem autem ex mortuis et in caelos ascensum inpassibilis factus et inmutabilis omnino et ad dexteram sedens Dei,” \textit{Treatises Against Apollinarius}, 3, frag. 10 in vol. 2 of \textit{Theodore of
wering grace from the Holy Spirit to resist temptations and struggle for moral virtue, as Theodore says, “Christ had need of the Spirit in order to defeat the devil, to perform miracles and to receive (divine) instruction as to the activities he should undertake.” Theodore continues to assert that if Christ did not need this help of divine grace (because he was all-sufficient in his humanity), then the indwelling of the Holy Spirit was superfluous for him. In keeping with Acts 2:22 and 10:38, Theodore sees a necessary role for the Holy Spirit in Christ; he explains that other theologians have overlooked this role because an acknowledgment seemed to imply that the Holy Spirit was

Mopsuestia on the Minor Epistles of S. Paul, ed. H. B. Swete (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1882); (reprint, Gregg: Westmead, U. K., 1969), 317-18. For patristic thinkers, impeccability is entailed by impassibility and immutability. It is likely that Theodore must have published the claim of Christ’s post-resurrection changes because Theodore is specifically anathematized for it by the Fifth Council (Constantinople II, 553): Canon 12: “Theodorum Mopsuestenum qui dixit post resurrectionem immutabilem cogitationibus et impeccabilem omnino factum fuisse,” Concilium universale Ephesenum, ACO 4.1, ed. Eduardus Schwartz, (1971): 219. Joanne M. Dewart, The Theology of Grace of Theodore of Mopsuestia, The Catholic University of America Studies in Christian Antiquity 16 (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1971), 75-76, writes, “Yet Christ was not sinless without effort. Theodore was insistent on the reality of his temptations, and that it was possible for him to sin. A man with no chance of making a truly moral choice is less than a man in Theodore’s eyes.” Theodore seems to have been the exception in affirming Jesus’ peccability.

55 The Fifth Council (Constantinople II, 553) anathematized anyone who defends Theodore’s doctrine that Christ progressed in good works by means of the grace of the Holy Spirit to become immutable and impeccable after the resurrection (“Capitula of the Council,” 12, NPNF 2 14: 315).

greater than the Logos. \(^5^7\) Theodore affirms that by grace the Logos always kept the assumed man from sin, but this enrichment of impeccability is in the background and not an active factor in Christ’s achievement of sinlessness until the resurrection. \(^5^8\) Accordingly, Theodore emphasizes that in the wilderness temptations Jesus had to struggle as a man, not as God, and is therefore an example for others:

If as God Jesus overcame the devil, it was no great accomplishment for him to defeat the apostate angel whom he himself had made. Nor is this victory to be ascribed to his humanity alone. But by long-suffering, he prevailed over him as man, teaching us that it is not through miracles but by long-suffering and patient endurance that we must prevail over the devil and that we should do nothing merely for show or for notoriety’s sake. \(^5^9\)


Theodore seems to say that the grace of God as given by the Logos is veiled to allow for the grace given by the Holy Spirit in cooperation with the grace-empowered human will. Having been made vulnerable to the contest, Christ’s human will merited virtue. The freedom of Christ’s human will is important for Theodore because this gives moral reality to Jesus’ choices for the good instead of evil. Theodore develops his idea of grace as power or aid given to Christ that is analogous to the way God empowers other human beings. Still, Theodore distinguishes Christ from other humans as uniquely gifted with grace in a degree of “operation more than” all others because of the incarnational union. Jesus’ exemplary life is the result of

60 H. B. Swete, “Theodorus 26,” A Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature. To the End of the Sixth Century AD, with an Account of the Principal Sects and Heresies, ed. Henry Wace and William C. Piercy (London: John Murray, 1911), 970, summarizes Theodore’s idea: “The perfect man, the man Christ surpassed all other men. He was absolutely free from sin, and His life was a continual progress from one stage of virtue to another, a meritorious course of which the end was victory over death and an entrance into the immortal and immutable state.”


62 Fairbairn, Grace and Christology, 52. Fairbairn notes that the usual patristic view of grace was God’s giving of the divine life, or fellowship.

63 Thdr. Mops., “De Incar. 7,” ed. Swete, Theodore, 2: 298. A serious problem with Theodore’s view is that he the man assumed for incarnation was foreknown by God to live virtuously, making God’s grace contingent on human action, which resembles adoptionism in a superficial way. As partial explanation for this strange view, Greer argues that Theodore relied on a stock meaning of the relation between grace (providence) and freedom that appears commonly in patristic thought (e.g., Gregory of Nyssa and Origen) that God gives grace to those who seek to do good (Rowan A. Greer, “The Analogy of Grace in Theodore of Mopsuestia’s Christology,” Journal of Theological Studies, n.s., 34 (1983): 92. Dewart defends Theodore against adoptionism by saying that “there is no hint in his teaching that the man,
grace in a way that has not transformed Christ to be superhuman, but he is a perfect human and unique in virtue because of the special operation of grace in his life.

This view of grace as divine assistance is the distinctive element of this model as the empowerment of Christ’s human will to grow, progress, and obey in freedom to be a relevant example for others to follow. Theodore emphasizes Christ’s human struggle in cooperation with divine grace as an achievement that is relevant for the rest of humanity. Theodore also clarifies the concern of this model, how could Jesus be an example if he triumphed simply as God? Instead, the value of his life as an example is that Jesus struggled to obey as a man, according to the same scale of human life as believers have:

However, if he had not possessed a soul, but (rather) it is the Deity which was victorious—none of the things accomplished would have been to our profit. (For what likeness is there between Deity and the human soul with respect to perfection of activity?) And Jesus, was adopted by the Word as a reward for merit at some point during the course of his lifetime (Theology of Grace, 79). The incarnation was a union with the assumed man from the beginning, in the womb, “De Incar. 7,” in PG 66: 976D.

64 “Moreover, the grace given the Man does not change his nature, however much it affects the capacities of his nature,” Thdr. Mops., “De Incar. 2,” ed. Swete, 291-92; trans. Greer, “The Analogy of Grace,” 94.

65 Greer, “The Analogy of Grace,” 96, “The exceptional character of this grace explains the Man’s constant choice of the good. And it accounts for peculiar gifts given the Man, gifts which render him different from all other human beings. His sinlessness, his virtual omniscience and omnipotence—these remain human, but they differ radically from moral and prophetic gifts bestowed upon others. The unique operation of God’s grace explains the unique humanity of the Man.”

the Lord’s struggles would appear not to be of profit for us, but to have taken place for the sake of (empty) show. And if it is impossible to say this, it is certain that those things were done for our sakes, and (that) he instituted a greater battle against the passions of the soul, a lesser against those of the flesh.\textsuperscript{67}

Therefore, Theodore of Mopsuestia represents the empowering grace model by his emphasis on the example, need for grace, and struggle of Christ in his humanity to resist sin and obey perfectly. Theodore sees a role for the Holy Spirit as mediator of divine help in a way that is analogous to the grace promised by Christ to others in the midst of their temptations (Hebrews 4:16).

Augustine also exemplifies this model. Augustine notes the differences and similarities of empowering grace in Christ and other human beings. Comparing Adam and Jesus, Augustine writes that Jesus was given greater grace that made him able to overcome the “will of the flesh” by the “will of the spirit.”\textsuperscript{68} But when comparing Christ to the elect, Augustine affirms that this empowering grace is “the same grace in the man Christ” as the grace that is in the elect. The difference is that in Christ the result was impeccability—“having no ability to sin.”\textsuperscript{69} Therefore, the empowering grace that enabled Jesus to continue sinlessly throughout his human life is the same grace that is available to others by the Holy Spirit for similar results.\textsuperscript{70} Because of the similarity of empowering grace for Christ and the elect, Augustine can preserve Jesus’ impeccability alongside affirming Jesus’ value as an example for others. Because Jesus lived by empow-

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Ibid.}, 12.40, CCSL 46: 72. Grace is defined as the gift of the Holy Spirit that became natural to Christ in his humanity so that sin could not be admitted.
wering grace to achieve his sinlessness in the face of temptations, he can be an example and “through giving help” assist those who struggle with temptations to sin.\textsuperscript{71} Augustine emphasizes that grace enhanced Christ’s freedom of will in his humanity by making him unable to serve sin.\textsuperscript{72} A final representative of this model is Leontius of Jerusalem. Leontius explains that the impeccability of Christ is caused by the coordination of his human will and the Logos, described as “the divine nature being given through the Holy Spirit in Christ.”\textsuperscript{73} In this way, Leontius preserves the human freedom of Christ that participates in the divine grace so that Christ can be a model for other humans. He understands divine grace not in terms of aid or power, but as “the leading principle” that gives freedom to Christ’s humanity.\textsuperscript{74} Leontius’s formulation resembles the second and third models because of the way he sees a closeness of operation between the divine and human aspects in Christ. Leontius’s Nestorian opponents objected to this move as a denial of Christ’s human achievement of sinlessness because it was a victory of the divine nature.\textsuperscript{75} Nonetheless, Leontius claims that grace protects Christ from Satan, sin, and death by hypostatic union of Christ’s humanity to the Logos.\textsuperscript{76} The effect of the union is Christ’s human sinlessness, but this is a result coordinate with Christ’s human freedom as the necessity of empowering grace, not of the divine nature. Leontius is different from Theodore (and Nestorius) in that his meaning of grace is the operative presence of the divine nature, not simply the

\textsuperscript{73} Leontius H., “Adversus Nestorianos 19,” PG 86.1: 1484D.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 1485A.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 1505AB.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 1505CD.

PERICHORESIS 9.1 (2011)
power or aid given by God.\textsuperscript{77} Despite this difference, Leontius suggests the empowering grace model by his emphasis on Christ’s human need and the corresponding grace to choose obedience perfectly as he did, in full freedom.\textsuperscript{78}

**Conclusion**

If this analysis is right, I have reported a summary of research that supports my claim about four models of Christ’s impeccability and temptation in the patristic period. The resources that patristic theologians passed on are rich in the different ways of explaining Christ’s impeccability and temptation, as a subset of the interaction of divinity and humanity in the incarnational union. Few advances have been made beyond what the patristic thinkers developed in these four models, and much of what is later considered to be fresh formulation of models in modern theology has drawn significantly upon one or another of the patristic models, particularly the fourth model. I conclude by offering a brief evaluation of each model.

The first model, Sinless by Inherent Impeccability, is the baseline affirmation of Christ’s human sinlessness as the result of his inherent divine impeccability. One part of the explanation is right: the ultimate outcome of Christ’s temptation was never in doubt (he was unable to sin because of his deity). But this is distinct from the question about how Jesus got to that outcome (sinlessness as an achievement). On this second question the model seems to be theologically inadequate for the explanation of his sinlessness in terms of his impeccability. If this had been true, Jesus seems to have endured a vastly different experience

\textsuperscript{77} Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology*, 166, sees the usual patristic view of grace as God’s gift of himself, as here in Leontius, in contrast to Theodore of Mopsuestia’s view of grace as divine aid or power given as something.

\textsuperscript{78} Other representatives of this model are Nestorius and Theodoret of Cyrrhus. See McKinley, *Tempted for Us*, ch. 5.
of temptation than what other humans do, and this undermines his relevance. Consequently, the model fails to explain the significance of Christ’s victory over temptation. The marvel of God’s rout of the devil is that the incarnate Son regained lost ground on the same terms within the limitations of his frail humanity, just as the first Adam. The victory of the second Adam is empty if the inherent impeccability model is the fullest explanation we may give for Christ’s triumph over Satan’s temptation. Were this model true, then Christ’s obedience would not be a human obedience learned through suffering (Hebrews 5:7-8) or a human faithfulness that God counts as a gift of righteousness to believers for justification (Romans 5:17-19). Finally, the first model does not explain how impeccability becomes a shareable property in Christ’s human nature communicated from his deity. Is this deification, by which the human nature of Jesus is elevated to function in perfection because of union with the divine nature? That other models would be developed to explain these questions suggests that patristic theologians recognized the inadequacy of this first model, so they kept on formulating other proposals.

The second model, Sinless by Deification, explains the relation between Christ’s divine impeccability and his human temptability as a natural predominance by which an elevated, divinized humanity results in his sinlessness. At this point it may be best to consider this model as giving part of the answer to the dilemma of impeccability and temptation, that is, explaining precisely why Jesus could not have sinned because of his immutable divine nature. Where the model seems to fall short as theologically inadequate is in the way the model explains how Jesus resisted sin. The model depicts Jesus as having cheated through using the internal effects of deification (analogous to using performance-enhancing drugs in sports), which I think is false. If Jesus possessed an unequal advantage of dei-
fication in temptation relative to the rest of us, then the praise-
worthiness of his triumph (as the second Adam) and his exam-
ple for others (as the pattern for faithfulness) may be called into
question. It seems that if deification were the cause of his sin-
lessness, this would have also precluded the struggle necessary
to Jesus learning empathy (Hebrews 4:15) and obedience
through that suffering (Hebrews 5:7-8). Scripture does not spe-
cify anything like deification in the actual means Jesus em-
ployed in resisting temptation, or as the means that believers
are exhorted to rely upon as assistance for meeting their tem-
thations.\(^{79}\) Instead, the only clear reference to deification that I am
aware of (2 Peter 1:4) is the fulfillment and completion of salva-
tion, synonymous with glorification, and is not specified as the
generative means of progressing in salvation on this side of
glory.\(^{80}\) Proponents of this model could argue that deification
for Christ occurs by the Holy Spirit, and a parallel sort of deifi-
cation by grace is available to believers. This is not the way they
have explained the deification of Christ’s human nature. On the
contrary, Cyril of Alexandria, for one, was extremely hostile to
the suggestion that the Holy Spirit had this sort of role.\(^{81}\) Thus,
in the deification model, the role of the Holy Spirit for the Mes-

\(^{79}\) The argument from silence is not best, but I think here it is at least good
because specific things are mentioned in Scripture (e.g., prayer, community,
the Holy Spirit, angels) as the support accompanying Jesus in his
temptations, while the idea of deification is never indicated in this
connection.

\(^{80}\) I think the deification in view is relational engagement with God. Psalm
82:6 might be considered in regard to deification, but even here the concept
is a status of those engaged by God relationally, not an ontological trans-
formation of their nature.

\(^{81}\) Cyril’s ninth anathema against Nestorius, included in the declarations of
the Third Ecumenical Council (Ephesus, 431), was against all who counted a
dynamic role of the Holy Spirit in Christ. I assume that this anathema is to
 guard against Adoptionism.
siah’s spiritual life and ministry was counted as superfluous because the divine nature of the Logos deified his human nature.\(^{82}\) Therefore, I find the deification model to be theologically inadequate to explain how Jesus did not sin. The causative force of deification in his human nature raises too much difference between Jesus and the rest of humanity (unnecessarily) and cannot be harmonized with the relevance of his temptation that Scripture highlights. Patristic contemporaries also seem to have found the model lacking because two other models were formulated during the period as alternate explanations.

The third model, Sinless by Divine Hegemony, explains Christ’s human temptation and sinlessness as the relation of hypostatic predominance—the personal direction of the Logos over his human nature. I think the model is helpful to shift the focus away from properties or attributes of the divine and human natures to the person who is Jesus Christ and the Logos. This double-natured, double-willed person is the one who was tempted and then triumphed as a man. Christ’s human will is truly human, and enjoys no special powers that are not also available to other humans. However, the model makes it difficult to see how a single person (the theanthropic Godman) can genuinely suffer temptation when his human will is perfectly anchored to, supervened by, and deified in concurrence with God’s will. The problem of temptation seems to be much more

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\(^{82}\) This is the critique of a patristic contemporary, Theodore of Mopsuestia, “Fragmenta Dogmatica, ex libris contra Apollinarium,” in *PG* 66 (1859): 996B. According to G. J. Reinink, “Quotations from the Lost Works of Theodoret of Cyrus and Theodore of Mopsuestia in an Unpublished East Syrian Work on Christology,” *Studia patristica* 33, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 565, Theodore charged that many had obscured or ignored the Holy Spirit’s involvement in the life of Jesus. The quotations noted by Reinink are from Theodore’s “De Incarnatione” 5 and 12. Unfortunately, Reinink does not give the text, reference, or translation that is the basis of his claim that Theodore was critical in this way.
the existential struggle to enact that choice of conformity to God’s will instead of disobedience. How can a human will that is antecedently conformed to the divine will be tempted in a way that constitutes some recognizable temptation experience and struggle that might be sufficient for Christ’s empathy for others and his demonstration for them of a reasonable way out? The instrumental relation of his humanity to his personal choice and divine will is more like a theophany than an incarnation because the role of his human will is so greatly reduced to little more than an assent to divine volition. Such reduction counts against Christ’s function as an example and an empathetic priest because he does not seem to be engaged with temptations, despite the way that the biblical accounts portray him. These inadequacies are perhaps the sorts of things perceived by others who formulated the fourth model, which brings Jesus much closer to us than the earlier three models dared.

The fourth model, Sinless by Empowering Grace, affirms that Jesus could be an example in his temptations and sinlessness as a man because he was helped in an external way by divine grace through the Holy Spirit. While it is unfortunate that one proponent of the model denied the impeccability of Jesus before the resurrection (Theodore of Mopsuestia), and three were judged as heretics for divisive Christology (see below), the model is not thereby tainted, since medieval and Reformation theologians have ably taken it up (listening to Augustine). At least two reasons for favoring this model should be mentioned. First, the empowering grace model follows the biblical evidence for Christ’s temptations closely with a reasonable theological explanation for how Jesus could truly experience these trials—he suffered them in his humanity without the intrusion of his deity. This explanation alone (of the orthodox proposals thus far in the history) secures his true empathy with others who are not God incarnate as he is, and the reasonableness of
his pattern in sinless victory requires some sort of limitation to struggle within human means. Second, the model’s account for Christ’s success as based on the empowering grace of the Holy Spirit satisfies the difficult factor of Jesus’ human freedom (despite the incarnational union with his divine nature) and builds the analogy to Christian experience receiving the same Holy Spirit from the risen Lord. Jesus has provided both the path and the means to walking through life as he did, and by employing that means instead of his inherent deity, Jesus became constituted through his experiences with empathy for others, fully qualified to be their priest to help them in the time of need when they are tempted (Hebrews 4:16).

Why was the empowering grace model not favored in its day? Church councils held at Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), and Constantinople (553) repeatedly condemned the eastern proponents of the fourth model. Theodore of Mopsuestia, Nestorius, and Theodoret of Cyrus were charged with emphasizing Christ’s humanity and the action of divine grace so much that the divisive Christology obscured due regard for his deity. Antiochene proponents of divisive Christology were fond of referring to Christ’s humanity as “the assumed man” (but this is not the case with Augustine). The specter of Adoptionism also seems to have haunted patristic thinking, which may have raised suspicions against a model that explains Christ’s unique sinlessness in terms of grace that is similarly operative in other people. So, does the model reduce Jesus to a mere man who is specially empowered by divine grace to function as the adopted Son of God? I think the proponents are clear to exclude adoptionism (especially Augustine!). The model seems acceptable and orthodox if we maintain Christ’s essential likeness to humanity (he is truly human, and thus can be a pattern of being empowered by the Holy Spirit) and his essential difference from humanity (he is truly God) as two of the orthodox mark-
ers of describing his identity properly. What remains to be done is to explain how such empowering grace works in Christ and others. Medieval and Reformed theologies have developed this further.83

Finally, the empowering grace model recognizes a significant, ongoing role for the Holy Spirit in the Incarnation. The model counts the Spirit as providing grace to Christ’s humanity in a way that matches the biblical evidence the Messiah’s earthly life and the analogous role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians. To patristic theologians these were risky ideas, but a few theologians have favored a pneumatological aspect to the Incarnation since the Reformation (e.g., John Calvin and John Owen), and especially in recent decades (e.g., Gerald Hawthorne), and owe a debt to the patristic formulations that have paved the way to better understanding of this mysterious question.

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Four Patristic Models of Christ’s Impeccability


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