

Tough Topics

Biblical Answers to 25 Challenging Questions

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Sam Storms

“Tough Topics offers every questioning person an opportunity to press thoughtfully into the Bible’s answers. Sam Storms is that rare guide we all are looking for—fair-minded, with no axe to grind. I cheerfully commend *Tough Topics* for your tough questions!”

Ray Ortlund, Lead Pastor, Immanuel Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“Let’s face it, the church has not always done the best possible job at fielding the hard questions posed to it by both skeptics and members. In the case of the first group, skeptics end up discounting Christianity, dismissing it as irrational, head-in-the-sand religious fanaticism. In the case of the second group, members become frustrated with the Christian faith and often drift away from what they have found to be a shallow, inconsistent, and quite unsatisfying worldview. Sam Storms is a leader whom the Lord has wonderfully gifted not only to answer the tough questions, but also to provide an accessible resource for Christian leaders to be better prepared to engage skeptics and church members who wrestle with these issues rather than to rebuff them and discount their difficulties. Sam’s passion is to deal with twenty-five of the most challenging questions you will ever face, and to do it in such a way that you become convinced of the answers and are prepared to offer help to others who face them as well. He accomplishes this goal, not by offering his own good ideas and the best of human counsel, but by relying on the wisdom of God as found in Scripture.”

Gregg R. Allison, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* and *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*

“Sam Storms’s *Tough Topics* is equally the work of a deeply concerned and caring pastor and that of a thoughtful, seasoned, and biblically saturated theologian. As I read this book, specific people kept coming to mind who would be helped greatly by one or more of its chapters—such wisdom, balance, and biblical clarity. Readers will likely differ at points with their pastor-theologian guide, but they will rise up and thank him for offering such wise counsel on a wide array of difficult and important questions. There’s something here for everyone. Pick up and read, and see how faithful pastoral theology really does bless the church.”

Bruce A. Ware, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Some questions about God and the Bible intrigue us. Others get completely under our skin and frustrate us. The chances are good that if a question is bothering you, you are not the first to ask it! Sam Storms draws on all his pastoral experience in this helpful book as he honestly answers questions some people like to avoid.”

Adrian Warnock, author, *Raised with Christ*; blogger

“People are inquisitive by nature. It is the way God made us. We have all kinds of questions about him. When people learn that I teach theology for a living, the first thing they do is begin to ask questions—*tough questions*. Sam Storms has given us an incredibly useful resource in his book *Tough Topics*. He has braved the minefield of some of the most difficult questions people have concerning God, the Bible, the church, and Christianity in general. What I like about this work is not simply its accessibility, but also Sam’s gentle and balanced scholarship. When we have questions about God, that is no casual thing requiring the opinions of sages on street corners. These are serious questions requiring someone who is well versed in the Bible. Sam has always been one to whom I go when I have questions. Now I have the book! And, as Sam says, the answers to these questions do not drive us to be puffed up in knowledge—they drive us to worship.”

C. Michael Patton, President, Credo House Ministries; author, *Increase My Faith* and *Now That I’m a Christian*; blogger, Parchment and Pen

“Sam Storms is an ideal guide to help us navigate through difficult theological questions. He brings a pastor’s heart and four decades of caring for souls to the journey. Along with that, he brings the brilliant mind of a trained theologian. He writes because he cares deeply about the truth and because he loves people. The answers in this book bring clarity instead of confusion. The stated goal of the book is knowledge that leads to worship. Mission accomplished!”

Erik Thoennes, Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University; Pastor, Grace Evangelical Free Church, La Mirada, California; author, *Life’s Biggest Questions*

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Preface

Lucy and Linus are gazing out the window at a staggering down-pour.

“Boy, look at it rain,” Lucy says, fear etched on her face. “What if it floods the whole world?”

“It will never do that,” Linus responds confidently. “In the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow.”

“You’ve taken a great load off my mind,” Lucy says with a sigh of relief.

Linus replies, “Sound theology has a way of doing that!”

That is my aim in this book: to articulate good theology in order to put worried minds at rest. All of us are familiar with the sorts of problems and questions and doctrinal conundrums that plague the human mind and agitate the human heart, questions like the one lingering in the thinking of Lucy: Will God ever flood the entire earth again?

In my experience these nearly forty years of Christian ministry, I’ve seen countless people worried and angry and fearful and just plain confused when it comes to some of the more perplexing issues that life poses and the Bible provokes, such as:

- Sam, is my baby in heaven?
- Is it ever okay to divorce your spouse, and if it is, can I get re-married?

- What about the heathen in Africa who've never heard the gospel?
- My neighbor said I have to be baptized to be saved. Is she right?
- If my friend goes to hell, how can I possibly enjoy heaven?
- I'm so angry with my father. People tell me I should forgive him. What does that mean?
- I'm afraid I've committed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Have I?
- Do demons exist? What can they do to me? What can I do to them?
- Is it ever okay to lie?
- Will there be sex in heaven?

These aren't ordinary questions that yield to an easy or simplistic answer. These are among the most challenging subjects people face. The failure to provide a good and biblical answer often leaves Christians in fear or guilt or confusion and can occasionally erode their confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture to say something meaningful and satisfying. *Tough Topics* makes no claim to answer every question Christians ask. But it does propose to provide solid and scriptural answers to twenty-five of them. Sadly, many believers walk away from church or from a friend or even from a pastor, frustrated that such issues are either answered badly or met with an "I don't know," or perhaps even ignored altogether. My aim in this book is to overcome that frustration by looking deeply, not superficially, at what Scripture says and deriving clear and persuasive explanations for these thorny matters.

The chapters vary in length, often in direct proportion to the difficulty of the questions they seek to answer. All are written with the educated Christian layperson in mind. In only a few places do I appeal to the original Greek text, and when I do, it is done in such a way that the person who reads only English can follow the argument.

My hope is that in providing the body of Christ with a resource of this length and depth, much confusion will be removed, and hours of unproductive research can be reduced. In none of the chapters do I respond with a short or simplistic answer. My desire is that by looking deeply into the biblical text and by stretching

our minds to explore every possible option, we will walk away not only more informed about what the Bible teaches but also, and even more importantly, more in awe of the greatness and goodness of God. In other words, *the ultimate aim of this book isn't knowledge; it's worship*. By seeing more clearly how God acts and what he meant and why he responds the way he does, I trust that we all will love him more passionately and praise him more fervently.

I suppose some might be tempted to conclude that the easy thing to do would simply be to say “yes” or “no” or “sometimes” to the twenty-five questions posed in this book, and leave it at that. But that wouldn't be of much help to you when it comes to knowing *why* the Bible provides the answer it does. If you never move beyond the shallow one-word response to the most puzzling and pressing questions in life, you will forever remain spiritually stunted and immature. And you will be of little to no benefit to others who approach you with their curiosity about these matters. Your grasp of who God is and how and why he does what he does would not be very deep or substantive. The bottom line is this: we need to wrestle with the hard texts and the tough topics in Scripture. Only then will our thinking skills be honed, our minds expanded, our spirits enriched, and our hearts filled with joy and delight to understand the mysterious ways of our great God and Savior.

Some of these chapters may well leave you hungry for more. For that reason I've included a brief list of recommended reading to help you continue your pursuit of a more comprehensive explanation in each case.

Most of these chapters stand independent of each other. In other words, you may want to scan the table of contents and read first (or perhaps only) those chapters that intrigue you most. However, there are a few chapters that answer questions related to each other, which is to say they are concerned with the same general theme in Scripture. In those cases I recommend that you read them in order because they do build upon one another to some extent. But on the whole, I've written the book so that the person who wishes to read it more selectively can do so without significant loss.

Does God Ever Change His Mind?

All people are fickle, in varying degrees. I suspect we'd be shocked to learn how many times in the course of a normal day we change our plans, reverse course, or pull out an eraser to delete an appointment or a task we had set for the week. Changing our minds feels so natural to us as humans, it's hard to envision life without it. In most instances the changes are harmless and typically result from unforeseeable circumstances, as well as the alterations that other people make that directly affect us. But what would it mean for God to change *his* mind? Does he? Could he? Or are all his plans and purposes *immutable*?

The importance of defining our theological terms with precision is most evident in the case of divine *immutability*. Here is a word that in contemporary evangelical circles evokes either protest or praise. Some see it as a threat to the biblical portrait of a God who does indeed change: he changes his mind ("repents") and he changes his mode of being ("the Word became flesh"). Others are equally concerned that a careless tampering with this attribute of God will reduce him to a fickle, unfaithful, and ultimately unwor-

thy object of our affection and worship. It is imperative, therefore, that we proceed cautiously, and yet with conviction, in the explanation of the sense in which God both can and cannot change.

Immutability as Consistency of Character

The immutability of God is related to, but clearly distinct from, his eternity. In saying that God is eternal, in the sense of everlasting, we mean that he always has existed and always will exist. He was preceded by nothing and shall be succeeded by nothing. In saying that God is immutable we mean that he is consistently the same in his eternal being. The Being, who eternally is, never changes. This affirmation of unchangeableness, however, is not designed to deny that change and development take place in God's *relations* to his creatures. Consider the following:

- We who were once his enemies are now by the grace of Christ his friends (Rom. 5:6–11).
- The God who declared his intention to destroy Nineveh for its sin “changed” his mind upon its repentance (more on this below).
- Furthermore, this affirmation of immutability must not be interpreted in such a way that “the Word became flesh” is threatened (John 1:14). We must acknowledge (our salvation depends upon it!) that he who is in his eternal being very God became, in space-time history, very man. Yet the Word who became flesh did not cease to be the Word (no transubstantiation here!). The second person of the Trinity has taken unto himself or assumed a human nature, yet without alteration or reduction of his essential deity. He is now what he has always been: very God. He is now what he once was not: very man. He is now and forever will be both: the God-man. It is a simplistic and ill-conceived doctrine of immutability that denies any part of this essential biblical truth.

Thus, to say without qualification that God cannot change or that he can and often does change is at best unwise and at worst misleading. Our concept of immutability must be formulated in such a way that we do justice to every biblical assertion concerning both the “being” and “becoming” of God.

Clearly, then, to say that God is immutable is not to say that he is immobile or static, for whereas all change is activity, not all activity is change. It is simply to affirm that God always is and acts in perfect harmony with the revelation of himself and his will in Scripture. For example, Scripture tells us that God is good, just, and loving. Immutability, or constancy, simply asserts that when the circumstances in any situation call for goodness, justice, or love as the appropriate response on the part of the Deity, that is precisely what God will be (or do, as the case may be). To say the same thing, but negatively: if God ought to be good, just, or loving as the circumstances may demand, or as his promises would require, he will by no means ever be evil, unfair, or hateful.

Immutability means that the God who in Scripture is said to be omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent has not been, is not, and never will be—under any and all imaginable circumstances—localized, ignorant, or impotent. What he is, he always is. To be more specific, God is immutable in respect to (1) his *essential being* (which is to say that God can neither gain nor lose attributes); (2) his *life* (God neither became nor is becoming; his life never began, nor will it ever end); (3) his *moral character* (God can become neither better nor worse); and (4) his *purpose or plan* (God's decree is unalterable). Let's look briefly at each of these in turn.

Constancy of Being, Life, Character, and Plan

Immutability is a property that belongs to the divine essence in the sense that God can neither gain new attributes, which he didn't have before, nor lose those already his. To put it crudely, *God doesn't grow*. There is no increase or decrease in the divine Being. If God would increase (either quantitatively or qualitatively), he would necessarily have been incomplete prior to the change. If God were to decrease, he would be, necessarily, incomplete after the change. The Deity, then, is incapable of development either positively or negatively. He neither evolves nor devolves. His attributes, considered individually, can never be greater or less than what they are and have always been. God will never be wiser, more loving, more powerful, or holier than he ever has been and ever must be.

This is at least implied in God's declaration to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex. 3:14), and is explicit in other texts:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (James 1:17)

I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. (Mal. 3:6)

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Heb. 13:8)

When we talk about the immutability of God's life, we are very close to the notion of eternality or everlastingness. We are saying that God never began to be and will never cease to be. His life simply is. He did not come into existence (for to become existent is a change from nothing to something), nor will he go out of existence (for to cease existing is a change from something to nothing). God is not young or old: he simply is. Thus, we read:

Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
They will perish, but you will remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,
but you are the same, and your years have no end.
(Ps. 102:25–27)

Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
(Ps. 90:2; cf. 93:2)

Immutability may also be predicated of God's moral character. He can become neither better (morally) nor worse than what he is. If God could change (or become) in respect to his moral character, it would be either for the better or the worse. If for the better, it would indicate that he was morally imperfect or incomplete antecedent to

the time of change, and hence never God. If for the worse, it would indicate that he is now morally less perfect or complete than before, and hence no longer God. It will not do to say that God might conceivably change from one perfect Being into another equally perfect Being. For one must then specify in what sense he has changed. What constitutes God as different in the second mode of being from what he was in the first? Does he have more attributes, fewer attributes, better or worse attributes? If God in the second mode of being had the same attributes (both quantitatively and qualitatively), in what sense would he be different from what he was in the first mode of being?

To deny immutability to God's purpose or plan would be no less an affront to the Deity than to predicate change of his being, life, and character. There are, as I understand, only two reasons why God would ever be forced or need to alter his purpose: (1) if he lacked the necessary foresight or knowledge to anticipate any and all contingencies (in which case he would not be omniscient, contrary to the claims of open theism); or (2) if, assuming he had the needed foresight, he lacked the power or ability to effect what he had planned (in which case he would not be omnipotent). But since God is infinite in wisdom and knowledge, there can be no error or oversight in the conception of his purpose. Also, since he is infinite in power (omnipotent), there can be no failure or frustration in the accomplishment of his purpose.

The many and varied changes in the relationship that God sustains to his creatures, as well as the more conspicuous events of redemptive history, are not to be thought of as indicating a change in God's being or purpose. They are, rather, the execution in time of purposes eternally existing in the mind of God. For example, the abolition of the Mosaic covenant was no change in God's will; it was, in fact, the fulfillment of his will, *an eternal will that decreed change* (from the Mosaic to the new covenant). Christ's coming and work were no makeshift action to remedy unforeseen defects in the Old Testament scheme. They were but the realization (historical and concrete) of what God had from eternity decreed.

The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.
The counsel of the LORD stands forever,
the plans of his heart to all generations.
(Ps. 33:10–11; cf. 110:4)

The LORD of hosts has sworn:
“As I have planned,
so shall it be,
and as I have purposed,
so shall it stand.” (Isa. 14:24)

I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,
declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, “My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose,”
calling a bird of prey from the east,
the man of my counsel from a far country.
I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;
I have purposed, and I will do it. (Isa. 46:9–11)

Many are the plans in the mind of a man,
but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.
(Prov. 19:21)

But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back?
What he desires, that he does. (Job 23:13)

I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. (Job 42:2)

So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of
the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guar-
anteed it with an oath. (Heb. 6:17)

Can God Change His Mind?

No treatment of the doctrine of immutability would be complete
without a discussion of the problem posed by God’s alleged “repen-

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tance.” If God’s plan is unalterable and he is immutable, in what sense can it be said that he “changed his mind”?

The Hebrew word typically translated “change his mind” or “repent” is *nacham*. This word actually has a rather wide range of meanings, including everything from experiencing emotional pain such as grief or sorrow (cf. Gen. 6:6–7; Ex. 13:17; Judg. 21:6, 15; 1 Sam. 15:11, 35; Job 42:6; Jer. 31:19), to the experience of being comforted (cf. Gen. 24:67; 27:42; 37:35; 38:12; 2 Sam. 13:39; Pss. 77:3; 119:52; Isa. 1:24; Jer. 31:15; Ezek. 5:13; 14:22; 31:16; 32:31), to the more extreme notion of relenting from or repudiating a course of action previously embraced (cf. Deut. 32:36 = Ps. 135:14; Judg. 2:18; 2 Sam. 24:16 = 1 Chron. 21:15; Pss. 90:13; 106:45; Jer. 8:6; 20:16; 42:10), as well as retracting a statement or changing one’s mind regarding a course of action (cf. Ex. 32:12, 14; Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 110:4; Isa. 57:6; Jer. 4:28; 15:6; 18:8, 10; 26:3, 13, 19; Ezek. 24:14; Joel 2:13–14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9–10; 4:2; Zech. 8:14).

This compels us to acknowledge the ambiguity of the English word *repent* and cautions us to be careful in ascribing it to God. Human beings repent of *moral evil*. We transgress God’s law and acknowledge our sorrow for having done so and our determination to change how we behave. Obviously, whatever else God’s “repenting” might mean, it does not mean he has sinned and is changing his ways. If that were the case, he would hardly be worthy of the title God; still less would he be worthy of anyone’s worship. This is why most English versions (except the KJV) use the word “relent” or “retract” or something similar.

Let’s look specifically at two passages, both of which use the word *nacham*.

God is not man, that he should lie,
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.
Has he said, and will he not do it?
Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? (Num. 23:19)

And Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is

better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.” (1 Sam. 15:28–29)

Note well that 1 Samuel 15:11 and 35 say that God “regretted” making Saul king. Yet here in 1 Samuel 15:29 and Numbers 23:19 it says that God cannot repent, “change his mind,” or “regret” an action he has taken. Scholars have generally said that there are four possible ways of responding to these texts:

- The statements in 1 Samuel 15:11, 35 and 1 Samuel 15:29 (as well as Num. 23:19) are contradictory.
- The statement in 1 Samuel 15:29 (and Num. 23:19) must be interpreted in light of 1 Samuel 15:11, 35.
- The statements in 1 Samuel 15:11, 35 must be interpreted in light of 1 Samuel 15:29 (and Num. 23:19).
- The statements in 1 Samuel 15:11, 35 use the word *nacham* to mean “regret” or “feel emotional sorrow,” whereas in 1 Samuel 15:29 it means “deviate” from or “change one’s mind” concerning a stated course of action; thus, in point of fact, there is no inconsistency between verses 11, 35, and verse 29.

Open theists contend that Numbers 23:19 means that whereas God generally can repent, in this particular case he chooses not to. However, were that true, Bruce Ware asks, “does it not follow from this text [Num. 23:19] that, while it is *generally* true that God *can lie*, in this *particular* case he chooses not to? That is, the parallelism of lying and repenting indicates that just as God cannot lie, he cannot repent. The question becomes, then, can God *ever* lie?”¹ Assuming that all would answer the latter question no (cf. 2 Tim. 2:13; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18), it would appear that “the parallel relation of God’s repentance with lying would lead one to conclude that this passage is teaching more than simply that in this particular historical situation God chooses not to lie or repent. Rather, just as God *can never* lie, so He *can never* repent.”²

One should also take note of the contrast made between God

¹Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 87.

²Ibid.

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and man. God is said *not* to be like humans, who both lie and repent. Ware observes:

Does not the force of this claim evaporate the instant one reads it to say, *in this particular situation* God is not like a man and so does not repent? Do men (i.e., human beings) *always* repent of what they say they will do? If so, the contrast can be maintained. But if human beings *sometimes* carry out what they say and *sometimes* repent and do otherwise, and if God, likewise *sometimes* carries out what he says and *sometimes* repents and does otherwise, then how is God different from humans? The only way the contrast works is if God, unlike men, *never* repents. It is generally true, not merely situationally true, that God does not repent.³

This applies as well to the texts in 1 Samuel 15. In other words, “to say that God sometimes repents (e.g., 1 Sam. 15:11, 35) and sometimes doesn’t (1 Sam. 15:29) would be to argue that he sometimes lies and, in the same sense as with ‘repent,’ sometimes doesn’t. But the truth is that God never lies, and so this text requires also that he never repents.”⁴

Two additional observations are in order. First, many have appealed to a common figure of speech known as *anthropopatheia* or *anthropopathism* (from the Greek *anthropos*, “man,” plus *pathos*, “affection, feeling”). Thus, an anthropopathism is a figure of speech in which certain human passions, feelings, mental activities, and so on are predicated of God. This, of course, is related to the more well-known figure of speech called *anthropomorphism* (again, from the Greek for “man” plus *morphē*, “form”), in which there are ascribed to God human body parts (e.g., eyes, mouth, nostrils, hands). Ware defines *anthropomorphism* as follows: “A given ascription to God may rightly be understood as anthropomorphic when Scripture clearly presents God as transcending the very human or finite features it elsewhere attributes to him.”⁵ Thus, God is *figuratively portrayed* as “relenting” from a course of action or “changing his

³Ibid., 88.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Bruce A. Ware, “An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29, no. 4 (1986): 442.

mind,” but in *literal fact* he does not. Open theists often contend that we adopt this approach to the problem because of an extra-biblical presupposition concerning the nature of God derived from the Greek ideal of perfection. This alien, philosophical criterion is imposed on Scripture rather than allowing God’s Word to shape our concept of God himself.

However, contrary to this assertion, most evangelicals appeal to anthropopathism because of what they believe Scripture explicitly teaches concerning the omniscience and immutability of God. It is the “analogy of faith,” Scripture’s harmonious interpretation of itself, not Greek philosophical presuppositions, that governs their treatment of such problem texts. Passages such as Numbers 23:19 and the others cited earlier are unequivocal: God is not a man. Therefore, he does not lie. He does not change his mind the way people do. He does not promise and then fail to fulfill. Those who appeal to anthropopathism insist that we are justified in interpreting the unclear in the light of the clear and utilizing a figure of speech generally acknowledged as entirely legitimate.

Second, and even more importantly, we must recognize the difference between unconditional divine decrees and conditional divine announcements (or warnings).⁶ The former *will* occur irrespective of other factors. The latter *may* occur dependent on the response of the person or persons to whom they apply. Occasionally something explicit in the context will indicate which of the two is in view. Most often, however, statements of divine intent are ambiguous. That is to say, one must determine from other data whether the declaration or determination of God is unconditional or conditional. For example, what we find in the case of Jonah and the Ninevites is most likely *not* an unqualified and unconditional declaration of purpose. Consider carefully the nature of this passage from Jeremiah (18:5–12):

Then the word of the LORD came to me: O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold,

⁶ Examples of an unconditional decree would be Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 110:4; Jer. 4:28; Ezek. 24:14; Zech. 8:14. Examples of conditional announcements or warnings would be Ex. 32:12, 14; Jer. 15:6; 18:8, 10; 26:3, 13, 19; Joel 2:13–14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9–10; 4:2.

like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: "Thus says the LORD, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds."

But they say, "That is in vain! We will follow our own plans, and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart."

That God declared his intention to destroy Nineveh, only to withhold his hand when they repented, is thus no threat to the doctrine of immutability. On the contrary, had God destroyed Nineveh notwithstanding its repentance, he would have shown himself mutable. William Shedd explains:

If God had treated the Ninevites after their repentance, as he had threatened to treat them before their repentance, this would have proved him to be mutable. It would have showed him to be at one time displeased with impenitence, and at another with penitence. Charnock . . . remarks that "the unchangeableness of God, when considered in relation to the exercise of his attributes in the government of the world, consists not in always acting in the same manner, however cases and circumstances may alter; but *in always doing what is right, and in adapting his treatment of his intelligent creatures to the variation of their actions and characters*. When the devils, now fallen, stood as glorious angels, they were the objects of God's love, necessarily; when they fell, they were the objects of God's hatred, because impure. The same reason which made him love them while they were pure, made him hate them when they were criminal." It is one thing for God to will a change in created things external to himself and another thing for him to change in his own nature and character.⁷

⁷William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1 (1889; repr., Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1979), 352–53 (emphasis mine).

All this is simply to say that God's immutability requires him to treat the wicked differently from the righteous. When the wicked repent, his treatment of them must change. Therefore, according to Strong, God's immutability "is not that of the stone, that has no internal experience, but rather that of the column of mercury, that rises and falls with every change in the temperature of the surrounding atmosphere."⁸

Thus we see that it is a principle of God's immutable being (as revealed by him in Scripture) that he punishes the wicked and recalcitrant but blesses and forgives the righteous and repentant. If God were to reveal himself as such (as, in fact, he has done), only to punish the repentant and bless the recalcitrant, this would constitute real change and thus destroy immutability. God's declaration of intent to punish the Ninevites because of their sinful behavior and wickedness is *based on the assumption that they are and will remain wicked*. However, if and when they repent (as they did), to punish them notwithstanding would constitute a change, indeed reversal, in God's will and word, to the effect that he now, as over against the past, punishes rather than blesses the repentant.

Conclusion

What all this means, very simply, is that God is dependable! Our trust in him is therefore a confident trust, for we know that he will not, indeed cannot, change. His purposes are unfailing, and his promises unassailable. It is because the God who promised us eternal life is immutable that we may rest assured that nothing, not trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword, shall separate us from the love of Christ. It is because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever that neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, no, not even powers, height, depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35–39)!

⁸Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907; repr., Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1970), 258.

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Could Jesus Have Sinned?

I “know” sin. I say this not because I can define sin, although I can. I say this not because I can identify sin when I see it, although I can also do that. I say it because I am a sinner. I “know” sin because I commit it, sadly, on a daily basis. My acquaintance with sin, therefore, does not come from associating with others who transgress or from reading a book on *hamartiology* (the technical, theological term for the study of sin). I “know” sin, as I said, because I, like David, was

brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me. (Ps. 51:5)

I “know” sin because I sin.

Jesus, on the other hand, “knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21). Again, the apostle Paul doesn’t mean by this that Jesus was unaware of the existence of sin or that he lived in isolation from those who committed sin. He was not intellectually ignorant of sin or unacquainted with its devastating consequences. He “knew no sin” in the sense that he never personally committed one. He was sinless.

How often do we pause and give thanks for the sinlessness of Christ? Were he not sinless, the entire scheme of reconciliation that Paul outlines in 2 Corinthians 5:18–21 would fall flat on its face. The glorious and gracious work of God in reconciling the world to himself hinges on God “not counting” our trespasses against us because he has counted our trespasses against Christ. But this would be to no avail if Christ himself had committed trespasses that ought to have been “counted” against him. The reckoning or imputing of our guilt to Jesus, for which he then suffered the wrath of God in our stead, is only redemptive if he was himself personally guilt free.

The New Testament is crystal clear on this point. Although 2 Corinthians 5:21 is the only explicit affirmation of Christ’s sinlessness in Paul’s writings, we should also take note of his reference to the “obedience” of the Son in both Romans 5:19 and Philippians 2:8.

Jesus gave the religious leaders of his day every opportunity to identify some sin in his life. “Which one of you convicts me of sin?” he asked them in public (John 8:46). The author of Hebrews reminds us that “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, *yet without sin*” (Heb. 4:15). Jesus, he later tells us, was “holy, innocent, [and] unstained” (Heb. 7:26). He was “a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:19) and “committed no sin” (1 Pet. 2:22).

The Main Question

That he *didn’t* sin is a settled and undeniable fact. But *could* he have sinned? Was it in any way a *possibility* for him to have sinned, or was it in every way *impossible* that he should ever have transgressed? Or, to use theological terms, was Jesus *impeccable* (incapable of sinning), or *peccable* (capable of sinning, although remaining sinless)?

I intentionally avoid technical theological language, but bear with me for a moment as I appeal to four Latin phrases that shed light on this issue. The first is *non posse non peccare*, which means

“not able not to sin.” This describes unregenerate people and the fallen angels (i.e., demons). In other words, they necessarily sin.

Two other phrases are *posse peccare* (“able to sin”) and *posse non peccare* (“able not to sin”). These describe Adam before the fall, regenerate people, and Jesus if one *denies* his impeccability. Finally, there is *non posse peccare*, or “not able to sin.” This would be true of God, the saints in heaven, and Jesus if one *affirms* his impeccability.

My question is this: Was Jesus Christ sinless because he *could* not sin (*non posse peccare*) or because he *would* not sin? Was he constitutionally *incapable* of sinning or merely volitionally *unwilling* to sin? To say that Jesus could have sinned, even though he did not, is to say he was peccable. To say that Jesus could not have sinned, and therefore didn’t, is to say he was impeccable.

The most helpful concrete illustration of this issue is the confrontation Jesus had with Satan in the wilderness (cf. Luke 4:1–13). When Satan came to him with those three temptations, *could* Jesus have succumbed? We know he didn’t, and we are eternally grateful. But was it *possible* for him *not* to have resisted? Those who affirm impeccability respond with a definitive *no!* Those who deny impeccability counter with three observations, only two of which, in my opinion, are helpful.

First, those who deny impeccability argue that if he could not sin, he was not truly human. After all, “to err is human.” This argument is weak, for it is not necessary to human nature that one be capable of sinning. When finally in heaven, having been glorified, the saints will be incapable of sinning, but they will not for that reason be less human than they are now on earth.

A second argument often heard is that if Jesus could not have sinned, he was not genuinely tempted. True temptation requires the possibility of sinning. That he refused to yield to Satan’s temptations no one denies. But yielding must have been *possible* or the encounter was a sham.

Some respond by saying that perhaps *Jesus didn’t know* he was impeccable. In other words, even though he couldn’t yield to temptation, he was unaware of the impossibility. Therefore, at least so far as his own conscious experience is concerned, the temptation

would have been quite genuine. But I find it hard to believe that Jesus lacked such self-awareness. Even if he did, we don't, so what benefit is there to us in his having resisted the Devil's overtures? In other words, we find encouragement in Jesus's example only if we know he could have sinned, but didn't (1 Pet. 2:21–23). So long as *we* know that his sinning was absolutely impossible, the force of his example is undermined, regardless of what *he* may have known.

A third and final argument by those who deny impeccability is that the doctrine is based on the belief that Jesus resisted the Devil from the strength of his divine nature. Satan was tempting God, and God, by definition, cannot sin. Regardless of the strength of his seductive appeals, Satan didn't stand a chance. After all, the finite cannot conquer the infinite. The presence of a holy and omnipotent divine nature within the incarnate second person of the Godhead made it impossible for him to have yielded to Satan's overtures.

For many years I strongly advocated the impeccability of Christ, insisting that because he was God incarnate, he was incapable of sinning. Now, make no mistake, he was and forever is God incarnate. But I'm not so sure about his impeccability, and here's why.

I believe Jesus lived and ministered as a *human, dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit*. Because he was human, the possibility existed that he *could* have sinned, but by virtue of his unceasing reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit he *did not* sin. Like the first Adam, Jesus could have sinned. But as the second Adam, he chose not to.

This means that in becoming a man, says Gerald Hawthorne, “the Son of God willed to renounce the exercise of his divine powers, attributes, prerogatives, so that he might live fully within those limitations which inhere in being truly human.”¹ That which he had (all the divine attributes), by virtue of what he was (the second person of the Trinity), he willingly chose not to use. Thus we see a human being doing superhuman things and ask *how?* The answer is: *not from the power of his own divine nature, but through the power of the Holy Spirit.*

¹Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 208.

Thus the Son chose to experience the world through the limitations imposed by human consciousness and an authentic human nature. The attributes of omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience were not lost or laid aside, but became *latent* and *potential* within the confines of his human nature. They were present in Jesus in all their fullness, but they were no longer in conscious exercise. The incarnation thus means that Jesus “actually thought and acted, viewed the world, and experienced time and space events strictly within the confines of a normally developing human person.”²

Look again at the various accounts of Jesus’s temptation by Satan. We are told that he not only was led *into* the wilderness by the Spirit (Matt. 4:1) but also was being led by the Spirit *in* the wilderness during the entire course of the forty days (Luke 4:1; it was, no doubt, the Spirit who led Jesus to fast).

If he was being tempted by Satan for forty days (Mark 1:13), he was being led by the Spirit for those same forty days (Luke 4:1). It is impossible to escape the conclusion that these Gospel writers want their readers to understand that Jesus met and conquered the usurping enemy of God not by his own power alone but was aided in his victory by the power of the Holy Spirit.³

He was fortified and energized by the continual infusion of divine power from the Spirit of God (see also John 3:34).

Someone might ask, But why or how did the human Jesus *always* choose to rely on the power of the Spirit and thereby not sin? The answer would be that the Spirit was always antecedent to any choice that Jesus was to make, enabling and energizing him to continue in his conscious reliance on the power the Spirit was providing. Is that not also the case with us? To whatever degree and however frequently we choose not to sin, it is because the Spirit antecedently empowered us to choose to avail ourselves of his presence and supply.

It could conceivably be said, therefore, that Jesus was peccable when it came to the *metaphysical potential* for sin in his own

²Ibid., 210.

³Ibid., 139.

human nature (in other words, there was nothing inherent within the person of Christ that made it impossible for him to sin, any more than it was so in the case of Adam), but impeccable insofar as it was impossible for the Spirit to fail to energize Jesus's will to depend upon the power that the Spirit supplied.

Conclusion

The implications of this for you and me are profound, and I defer, in conclusion, to the words of Hawthorne to make the point:

Not only is Jesus their [our] Savior because of who he was and because of his own complete obedience to the Father's will (cf. Heb. 10:5–7), but he is the supreme example for them of what is possible in a human life because of his own total dependence upon the Spirit of God. Jesus is living proof of how those who are his followers may exceed the limitations of their humanness in order that they, like him, might carry to completion against all odds their God-given mission in life—by the Holy Spirit. Jesus demonstrated clearly that God's intended way for human beings to live, the ideal way to live, the supremely successful way to live, is in conjunction with God, in harmony with God, in touch with the power of God, and not apart from God, not independent of God, not without God. The Spirit was the presence and power of God in Jesus, and fully so.⁴

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⁴Ibid., 234.



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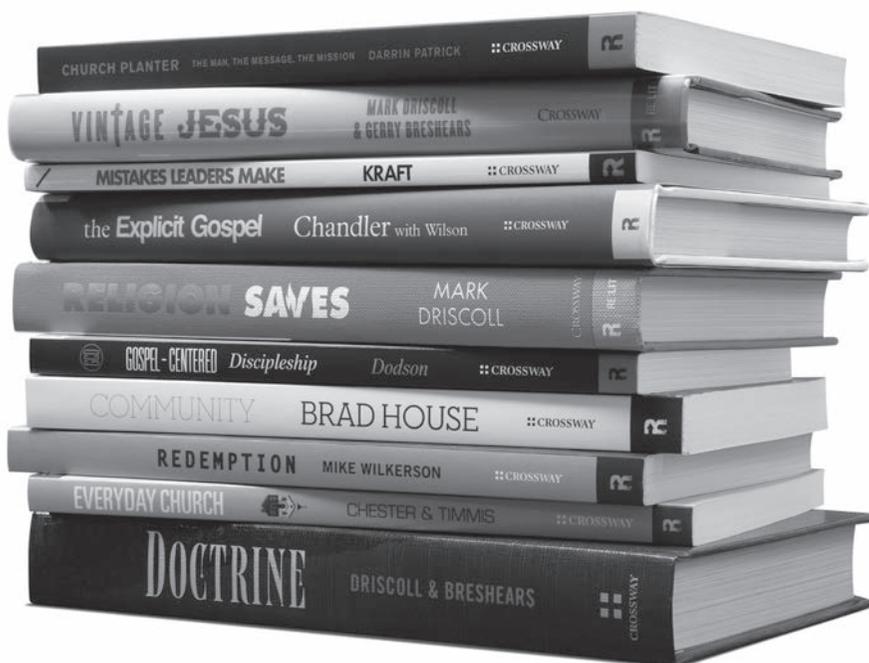


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