

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine Christology. In our last session we presented three reasons the virgin birth of Jesus Christ is theologically significant. Dr. Spencer, what do you want to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: I'd like begin by quoting the answer to Question 16 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Marc Roby: Okay. That question asks, "Did all mankind fall in Adam's first transgression?"

Dr. Spencer: And the answer is, "The covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity; all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him, in his first transgression."

Now as with all of the Westminster documents, this is a very carefully worded doctrinal statement about original sin. And I'd like to point out the importance of three words – by ordinary generation. The statement says that all mankind, descending from Adam *by ordinary generation*, fell with him. Those three words are very important because they exclude Jesus Christ. He was not represented by Adam and did not, therefore, inherit his guilt or sinful nature.

This illustrates the point we discussed last week that the virgin birth is theologically significant because it shows us how Jesus can be fully human and yet be without sin. He is unique and his conception was unique.

Marc Roby: Of course, the Roman Catholic doctrine of immaculate conception claims that the conception of Jesus' mother, Mary, was also unique. They claim that she was born without sin and lived without sin.

Dr. Spencer: And that doctrine is problematic on two grounds. First, and most importantly, it isn't biblical. There isn't the slightest hint anywhere in the Bible that Mary was born without a sinful nature and without inheriting the guilt of Adam. That alone should settle the matter. Secondly, the doctrine doesn't solve the problem it was created to solve. As we pointed out last week, there is a question left unanswered by the Bible, which is why Jesus didn't inherit a sinful nature from his mother.

Marc Roby: And the doctrine of immaculate conception tries to solve that by saying that Mary was sinless.

Dr. Spencer: Right. But that just pushes the problem back one generation and makes it a more difficult problem.

Marc Roby: Why does it make the problem more difficult?

Dr. Spencer: Well, because now the question becomes, "How on earth could Mary be conceived by a sinful mother *and* a sinful father and yet not be sinful?"! Jesus had a sinful mother, but he was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, so it is a very different and less problematic situation.

The sinless nature of Christ is an important point theologically and we would expect the Bible to deal with it. And it does by speaking of the virgin birth. It doesn't answer every question we can

ask, but it does deal with the issue. The doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary makes the problem far more difficult and is completely without biblical warrant. If it were true, we should reasonably expect the Bible to make it clear, not remain silent about it. All true Christians should reject it and the worship of Mary to which it leads.

Marc Roby: We should, though, hold Mary in high regard. In Luke 1:28 we are told that when the angel Gabriel came to tell her that she was going to have a child, he greeted her by saying, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"¹

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's quite true. Mary was favored by God and she was the mother of our Lord. We should hold her in very high regard. She was a godly and righteous woman in a relative sense, along with many other people in the history of the church, but she was also a sinner who needed a Savior herself. The Greek word translated as "favored" in Luke 1:28 is used to refer to all Christians in Ephesians 1:6, which says that God "blessed us in the Beloved." The word translated as "blessed" in that verse is the same Greek word as is translated "favored" in Luke 1:28.

Marc Roby: And, indeed, all true Christians are blessed, or favored, by God. We deserve hell, but have been given heaven instead as a gracious gift.

Dr. Spencer: And every single human being who has ever lived or ever will live needs a Savior, with the sole exception of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the unique God-man, who was born without sin.

We are told explicitly that Jesus was sinless in the book of Hebrews. In Hebrews 4:14 we are told that "we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God", and then in the next verse, Hebrews 4:15, we are told that this high priest "has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin."

Marc Roby: And he had to be perfect in order to be an acceptable sacrifice. This requirement goes back to the book of Exodus, when God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt.

On the night an angel was going to go through Egypt and kill the firstborn of every man and animal, the Israelites were commanded to sacrifice a lamb and sprinkle the blood on the doorframe of their house so that the angel would pass over their home and not kill the firstborn. In Exodus 12:5 we read that Moses commanded them, "The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats."

Dr. Spencer: And we know that this foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ. In John 1:29 we are told that when John the Baptist saw Jesus, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" And in 1 Peter 1:18-19 we read, "For you know that it was not with perishable

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things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.” And in Hebrews 9:26 we are told that Christ “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.”

Marc Roby: You know, no matter how many times you read or think about the sacrifice of Christ, it is astounding each and every time.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, this is the heart of the gospel, which is absolutely amazing. We made the point before that God had to become man in order to pay for our sin. Our sin is against an infinite God and the penalty therefore is infinite; more than any mere man can pay. Therefore, Jesus had to be fully God for his sacrifice to have sufficient value. But he also had to be man because it was man who sinned and therefore had to pay the price. But the man Jesus had to be a perfect, sinless sacrifice.

Marc Roby: And he clearly was a perfect, sinless sacrifice. What else do you want to say about the human nature of Christ?

Dr. Spencer: We should note that the Bible is clear that Jesus had a real physical body just like you and me and all of our listeners. He was born just like us, had to grow and learn how to walk and talk just like us. He became thirsty and hungry and tired just as we do. There are many places in the New Testament where this is clear, but let me just share a couple. In Matthew 4:2 we are told that “After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.”

Marc Roby: I would call that a huge understatement. He must have been famished.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, just like any man would be. One time when Jesus was walking through Samaria, we read in John 4:6 that “Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.” So he also got tired just like we do.

And in Luke 2:52 we read that “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.” Now, not all people grow in favor with God and men, but all healthy people do grow in wisdom and stature as they grow up.

Marc Roby: It is a bit puzzling that Jesus, being God and man, could grow in wisdom though.

Dr. Spencer: That idea can be troubling to people. But when we say that Jesus Christ has two natures, one human and one divine, we must also mean that he had a human mind and spirit. After all, that’s what makes us who we are. We discussed this at length in Sessions 103 through 105, but we have both a material and an immaterial part; a body and a soul, or spirit. God is pure spirit, but Jesus Christ is not just a human body with a divine spirit, he is truly human *and* divine. The two natures are distinct. He is not a mixture of human and divine, he is both natures in one person.

Marc Roby: Now, that is truly impossible to understand.

Dr. Spencer: It is impossible to understand fully. But as I noted last week, we can have a correct understanding of something we don’t understand fully. And the dual nature of Christ is a clear

teaching of the Bible, which is our ultimate standard for truth. The only fundamental difference between his human spirit and ours is that his is, and always has been, sinless.

Marc Roby: And the fact that he has a true, finite, human spirit explains how he could grow in wisdom. When we discussed the material and immaterial parts of man in Session 114 you made the point that the spirit is the seat of our intellect, emotions and personality.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And so, in his humanity, Jesus learned new things throughout life just as we do, even though in his deity he was, and is, omniscient. We see this in Mark 13:32 where Jesus spoke about his second coming and said, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

Marc Roby: That's amazing. Jesus himself, in his humanity, didn't know when he would come again.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, there is great mystery here of course. We are not told how Jesus' divine nature interacts with his human nature. There were clearly times when things were communicated to his human nature by either his own divine nature or by the Holy Spirit, but we aren't told exactly how that took place, we just see the effects.

Marc Roby: I assume you're speaking about when Jesus knew what people were thinking and things like that.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. Look at Mark 2 for example. We read about Jesus healing a paralytic. But the first thing he did was say to the man, in Mark 2:5, "Son, your sins are forgiven." And some of the people there were thinking to themselves that Jesus was blaspheming by doing this because only God can forgive sins. And we are then told in Mark 2:8 that "Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, 'Why are you thinking these things?'"

Marc Roby: That's a great example. Jesus "knew in his spirit" what they were thinking, but we are not told exactly how his human spirit obtained this information.

Dr. Spencer: As I said, there is great mystery here. But, as we expect, there are no logical contradictions because this is a clear teaching of the Word of God, which is infallibly true. We also see that Jesus had a human spirit because he had a full range of human emotions.

Marc Roby: Although, given how often our sinful natures show up in our emotions, we should be careful to point out that Jesus' emotions were sinless.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's a great caveat. But let's look at just a few examples. In John 12:27 we read that after Jesus had indicated to his disciples that his death was imminent, he said, "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour." So his heart was troubled, just as any person would be at such a terrifying thought. Then, in Matthew 15:42 we read that Jesus said to his disciples, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way." So he had the normal human emotion of compassion for those in need.

Marc Roby: And that also makes me think of the shortest verse in the Bible. When Jesus went to the tomb of his friend Lazarus, who had died, we read in John 11:35 that “Jesus wept.” He had normal human sorrow at the death of a friend and the pain it had caused his loved ones, even though he knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead.

Dr. Spencer: And that is not the only time Jesus wept. In Hebrews 5:7 we are told that “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.”

The biblical record is clear that Jesus Christ was fully human. In his humanity he was subject to the same limitations we all are in terms of finite knowledge and reasoning ability. He had normal human emotions and so on. The only difference is that he was sinless.

Marc Roby: Of course, that is a *huge* difference!

Dr. Spencer: I agree. It is impossible to imagine just how different we will be when God removes our sin completely. It’s a wonderful thing to meditate on. What will it be like when there is no use for the words “should” or “ought” because there will be no difference between what I should do, or ought to do, and what I want to do and actually do!

Marc Roby: I can’t imagine. But there is one more issue about Jesus’ humanity that has engendered a great deal of discussion. We are told in Hebrews 4:15, which you read earlier, that Jesus was “tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.” So the question arises, “Was it possible for Jesus to sin?” And, if it wasn’t possible for him to sin, how could his temptation then be real?

Dr. Spencer: Those are great questions, but we must be very careful in dealing with them. I think Wayne Grudem does a good job in his *Systematic Theology*.² He begins by noting what it is that Scripture clearly teaches: First, that Jesus never actually sinned. Second, that Jesus was truly tempted, just as we are. And third, that God cannot be tempted as we read in James 1:13.

Marc Roby: Alright, those three points are clear. But they don’t really answer the questions.

Dr. Spencer: I agree, but they frame the discussion in terms of things we can know for certain. We do also know that God’s purposes and plans are certain, no one can thwart them. We can, therefore, conclude that it was *not* possible for Jesus to actually sin. If he had done so, he would no longer have been qualified to be the perfect sacrifice we need. But that leaves the question open as to *why* it was not possible for him to sin, which gets to the issue of how his temptations could be real.

Marc Roby: Yes, and that’s a difficult question.

Dr. Spencer: It is difficult, but I think Grudem makes a couple of very good points.³ First, he looks at Satan’s tempting Jesus to turn stones into bread after he had been fasting for 40 days in

² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pp 537-539

³ *Ibid*, pg. 539

the desert. The temptation was for Jesus to use his divine power to make it easier for his human nature. But that would have violated God's will, so Jesus did not do it. Grudem writes, "Therefore, Jesus refused to rely on his divine nature to make obedience easier for him. In like manner, it seems appropriate to conclude that Jesus met every temptation to sin, not by his divine power, but on the strength of his human nature alone (although, of course, it was not 'alone' because Jesus, in exercising the kind of faith that humans should exercise, was perfectly depending on God the Father and the Holy Spirit at every moment)."

Marc Roby: That's a great quote from Grudem, and it makes a very important and practical point. If we rely on our own strength, we're going to fail and give in to temptation. But, if we make use of the means of grace that God has provided to us in prayer, reading his Word, participating in corporate worship and the life of the church and so on, we will have divine power to say no to ungodliness. We read in 2 Peter 1:3 that "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."

Dr. Spencer: And we also read in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." So, Jesus is our example in depending on the Holy Spirit power to enable us to say "no" to sin. And the fact that he is truly human is extremely important. Because he didn't use his deity to cheat and make it easy, he obeyed in his human nature.

Marc Roby: And he did so perfectly. This also shows us that we have no excuse for sinning, God's grace is sufficient whenever we are tempted. Is there anything else you'd to add on this topic?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, Grudem also makes the valid point that "only he who successfully resists a temptation to the end most fully feels the force of that temptation."⁴ Therefore, we could argue that Jesus felt the full force of every temptation, whereas we sometimes yield to temptation and, thereby, spare ourselves from the full force of it.

Marc Roby: We may spare ourselves from the force of the temptation by sinning, but we bring on ourselves the pain that sin always produces.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, very true.

Marc Roby: And we are out of time for today, so I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, we'd appreciate hearing from you.

⁴ Ibid