

# **Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Christology, Session 19, Systematics, Humanity of Christ, Subordination, Impeccability, Unipersonality, and Communication of Attributes**

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This is Dr. Robert Peterson in his teaching on Christology. This is session 19, Systematics, Humanity of Christ, Subordination, Impeccability, Unipersonality, and Communication of Attributes.

We continue our study of Christology and systematic Christology and the person of Christ in terms of his humanity.

We need to treat two issues before we move to the unity of the person of Christ. One of those issues is subordinationism, the other is the peccability, impeccability discussion. Subordinationism is the biblical warrant for the concept.

There's no doubt that scripture teaches, the son of God himself teaches, that he is subordinate to the father or, use the language of John 14 and verse 28, the father is greater than I. He tells his disciples they should rejoice that he's leaving them; that's a hard one for them to understand because he's going to the Father, and the Father is greater than Jesus is, literally. I'm going to the father, Jesus said, quote, for the father is greater than I. Of course, the meaning is the father is greater than I am great. There's no question there's a biblical subordination of the son to the father.

Likewise, in a verse we saw before, another verse we saw before, so this is not really new, although I want to really clarify and make distinctions between two different types of subordinationism. John 5:26, as the father has life in himself, he has also granted the son life in himself. That is not reversible.

You cannot say the son has granted the father to have life in himself. That is, the son submits himself to the father. The father willed the incarnation.

The son didn't will the father's incarnation. There is no incarnation of the Father or the Spirit. And so, we distinguish first, second, and third persons.

The Spirit is the servant of the Father and the Son. This distinction in terms of numbers doesn't mean that they're not co-equal. They are co-equal.

They're co-eternal. They're equal members of the trinity. Nevertheless, for the sake of the plan of God being actualized, for the sake of the biblical story, for the sake of redemption, the Father sent the Son into the world.

Galatians 4:4. And the Father and the Son sent the Spirit at Pentecost. But we're not talking about the spirit at this point. We're talking about the son from his own lips.

We learned the Son was subordinate to the Father. Hence, the study of this involves subordinationism. There are two types and they must be distinguished.

Essential subordinationism says there's an essential subordination of the Son to the Father. This is a subordination, as the adjective essential indicates, of essence or being. Ontologically, essential subordinationism affirms, ontologically or metaphysically, the Son is inferior, subordinate and inferior to the father in essence, being, makeup.

Thus, this essential subordination is incompatible with an affirmation of Christ's deity. This is the error of theological liberalism and the error of the cults. Yes, the scripture says Jesus said the Father is greater than I. But no, that does not mean in their essential being.

It is not a denial of the equality of the father and the son. Essential subordinationism is seriously wrong because it cuts people off from grace. If Christ is not God incarnate, then how can we trust him for salvation? But wait a minute, errors in conception and conceiving of Christ don't change who he is.

That is true. But errors in conceiving of Christ, that is, false teaching about Christ, cut a person off from grace because if I put all my trust in an angel to save me or a mere man, it doesn't work. The biblical Christ is the God-man.

And yes, for us sinners and our salvation, he subordinated himself; he subjected himself to the Father. But that is not an essential subordination. It is an economic subordination.

This is a subordination of function, of work, of role. The son submits himself to the father in order to do the work of redemption. The son submits himself to the father in his role as the incarnate Son who dies on behalf of his people and is raised again.

Economic or functional subordination is compatible with an affirmation of Christ's deity. So, we don't run from the scriptures ever. We don't always understand them, but the scripture does teach that the Son is lesser than the Father, if you will, that the Father is greater than the Son, and that the Father gave to the Son to have life in himself.

But all of this pertains to a humbling of the son, subjection of the son, a subordination of the Son to the Father that does not touch on the essence or essential being but rather touches on the Son's work of redemption, the Son's role as mediator, the Son's function. Thus, we acknowledge, as a matter of fact, that we rejoice in the economic subordination of the Son to the Father because that is what saves us. The Son becomes one of us, lives a perfect life, and dies in our place in fulfilling his role as the servant of the Father.

And yes, the master is greater than the servant in that way. The father is greater than the son, but the son is equal to the father. So, we thus acknowledge, with the church historical, a functional or economic is the historical word, an economic or functional subordination, and hence studying it, an economic or functional subordinationism.

Was Christ able to sin? This is the impeccability, peccability debate. And I've seen people almost come to blows over this one. Impeccability says, the Latin word for sin is peccatum.

Peccatum. Impeccability says, the incarnate son was unable to sin. Peccability says, the incarnate son was able to sin.

There are worthy proponents on both sides. Louis Berkhof, whose systematic theology was used to train a whole generation of students concerning what the Bible teaches. He taught impeccability, as do most. I don't have a complete survey here, but I'm sensitive to this because if you push me on it, I come out in the minority position, which I'll explain in a bit.

And I'll do it in such a way that that's a secondary deal, that a couple of matters are clear and biblical, that we stand on them, and that where one comes down on this is not as important. But first of all, as somebody as conservative as Louis Berkhof taught impeccability, somebody as conservative as Charles Hodge, who also taught the preceding generation of students, or maybe two, taught peccability. Berkhof said Christ is unable to sin.

Hodge said he was able to sin. Now, other good people teach impeccability. The volume that I've been touting, as the author of the volume in the *Contours of Christian Theology*, the Scottish theologian Donald MacLeod, impeccably.

And I can name other names, which are not rolling off my tongue right now. But Berkhof, peccability. Hodge, peccability.

What is clear? What is clear is that Jesus did not sin. Everybody agrees. All right? He did not sin.

It is unfair of those who hold he could not sin, impeccability, to say of their peccability brothers and sisters, if he could have sinned then, he could sin now and bring the whole structure of salvation crashing down. Not fair. Unfair.

Everybody says that not only did Jesus not sin, but he cannot sin now. Universal agreement on that. Every Bible-believing theologian.

What's the difference? It's the difference between his two states. In a state of humiliation, he was limited. He was weak and vulnerable.

He never sinned, however. State of exaltation, he is not limited. He moves from the temporal earthly sphere to the transcendent heavenly sphere.

He'll never be tempted again. He'll never be beaten or suffer or die. Oh no.

He's the glorious Christ who comes back and, at his word, destroys his enemies. He's the glorious Christ who is Lord of heaven and hell. I don't mean to leave out the Father or the Holy Spirit, but I'm emphasizing the fact that not only did Jesus never sin, absolute universal agreement, but he never will sin.

Universal agreement. In a state of exaltation, it's impossible. He is impeccable.

Nevertheless, good people disagree. Another point of agreement, although one side claims to score points at the other's expense on this, was that he was really tempted. And that is the nub of the matter for Charles Hodge.

He says if Jesus was really tempted, then it was possible for him to sin. Oh, no way. He's got no sinful principle within, no propensity, no sinful nature, reaching out to sin like everyone else.

Not like everyone else. Adam, before the fall, didn't have that, and he was truly tempted, and he was not only able to sin, he did sin. I'll say it again: whether Jesus was peccable or impeccable, he did not sin.

Hodge says, I cannot understand how the temptations of Jesus could be genuine. It was absolutely impossible for him to sin. On the other hand, the good people, and they are good people, my goodness, Berkhof, McLeod, and many others say he couldn't; it is true, he did not sin.

It is true, and he cannot sin now. In fairness, we agree with our peccability, brothers and sisters, on those truths. It is also true that he was tempted, although he never, and he could not sin.

Because, they say, he is the God-man. They appeal to his divinity as to why he could not sin. I would prefer not to take a position on this, but my students always made me do it.

So, I did it like this. These matters are clear. Jesus did not sin, although he was truly tempted, and now he cannot sin.

We agree. Having said all that, I would favor, humbly, I would never make it a matter of something you have to believe to join the church. With great respect for the other side, I would agree with Hodge that it makes more sense of the temptations that Jesus was the second Adam and to say that he could have sinned, but he never did.

The temptations don't pertain chiefly to his being God. They rather pertain to his being one of us, and I suspect impeccability is another attempt to exalt his deity, which I believe in, at the expense of his humanity. But Peter is not going to start any campaign on this or write books that squash the other side, disfellowship them, or put them down.

It's just not fair to do that. I will mention my professor of theology back in seminary, Robert J. Dunzweiler, who said two things. Perhaps this is the best way to do it.

Number one, I once wrote a paper for him arguing for impeccability, and to show how fair the man is, on my paper, he wrote, A, good work, he said. Agreement is not always the basis for the evaluation of work. He disagreed with me, and obviously, I've changed my mind since then, although I'm not a rip-snorting advocate of impeccability, as you already can see.

But he said, number one, along with the truths I've been emphasizing over and over again, Jesus didn't sin; he was truly tempted, and he can't sin now. He said he was able to sin as the God-man, and yet, in God's plan, he was unable to sin. Maybe that's the way to do it.

So, do I claim to have all the answers? No. But please, emphasize what is clear, de-emphasize what is not clear, and don't shoot your brothers and sisters who disagree with you on minor issues, wherein it is perfectly proper for brothers and sisters to disagree in love. We move to our last major topic studying the person of Christ.

We've studied his pre-existence. The Son of God did not begin to exist at Bethlehem. Our Lord's humanity began then.

We studied the miracle of the Incarnation. The eternal, almighty God became a human being with the miraculous conception of his humanity in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit, so that ever after, he is the God-man with two natures in one person.

We've studied his resultant deity, and we found the continuity of personhood in his being the Son.

He was the pre-incarnate Son who became the incarnate Son. Continuity of personhood is not provided by his humanity because that had a beginning, unlike his sonship. Then we studied his humanity and, finally, his uni-personality.

He is one person. The first thing to be said is it is indeed a personal union of the two natures. The divine and human natures of Christ are joined in a personal, or to use the patristic word, hypostatic union.

It's a personal union. That is, his human nature had no existence prior to its creation by God in Mary's womb. God did not come and super indwell an existing human being.

There was no existing human being in that way, although I don't like the terminology. His humanity was impersonal. Why don't you like it? Because his humanity was never impersonal, although it didn't exist as a separate human being from the very moment of his conception in Mary's womb. It was personal exactly because it was joined to the Word, to the light, to the Son, and to the second person of the Trinity.

Once again, continuity of personhood is not by being a man but by being God. He's the pre-incarnate Logos, and he becomes the incarnate Logos. And as soon as our Lord's humanity is conceived, the Spirit joins it to the deity of our Lord so that he is God and man already in Mary's womb.

Mysterious? Very much so. But so, there's never an impersonal humanity in the sense that God came and indwelt a man named Jesus. No, no.

Even before Jesus was conceived, the Lord told Mary through the angel Gabriel, that which is conceived, the Holy Spirit will come upon you, God will overshadow you, so that that which is born from you will be holy, the Son of God. And twice in Matthew 1, God tells Matthew in a more summary fashion, that which will be conceived in your Mary, whom you should not hesitate to marry, is from the Holy Spirit. So, the first thing to be said concerning the unity of Christ's person is, it's a personal union.

The second thing to be said is, the communication of attributes, Latin, *communicatio idiomatum*, the communication of attributes, is a biblical teaching. Oh, the Reformed and the Lutherans really disagree with each other on this one. As a matter of fact, they agree with some aspects of it, but one important aspect they do not agree with.

Here's the facts. Sometimes, scripture refers to Christ, the person, with a title that corresponds to his deity, while attributing to him in the same sentence a quality that

pertains to his humanity. This is the basis for the patristic doctrine; the Fathers found this in the Bible, of the communication and the sharing of qualities.

Let us look at some of these. Let's do some induction in order to understand. I'll just preface the conclusion and the evaluation by saying that the Reformed say this is a manner of speaking in the Bible.

It does not pertain to ontology. It pertains to hermeneutics. It's a way of speaking.

It's a literary device to emphasize the unity of Christ. The Lutherans say, nope, it's much more than that. Don't you make the Reformed make this into a mere figure of speech because they teach, godly Bible-believing Lutherans teach, in the resurrection of the Son of God, really, divine attributes were truly and really communicated from his divine nature to his human nature?

There's an ontological sharing, so that his humanity now is, shares the divine attribute of omnipresence or ubiquity. It's not hard to see. The motivation is Eucharistic.

It enables Luther himself, although he didn't develop it as much as his descendants theologically did, it enables them to say that Christ is in, with, and under the elements in the Lord's Supper. Not in a Roman Catholic sense of transubstantiation, of an inner miracle where the outer elements appear the same. Thomas distinguished the accidents and the essence using Aristotelian logic.

Accidents are those things that appeal to the eyes. So, pulpits could have different colors and different shapes. Okay, those are accidents. But pulpits, the essence of a pulpit, has some kind of structure, and it's up at a certain height where a preacher or a teacher can put the Bible on it, right? That's the substance or the essence of pulpitism, if I can make up a word, right? That's the essence of what pulpits are.

Color: red, black, blue, green, that's an accident. The exact shape, that's an accident. The exact height, and material that's made from, those are all accidents.

But the essential of being a pulpit, and that's better that way, is a certain height, a certain platform where you can put your Bible, right? Of course, I'm making this up as I go along. For Thomas Aquinas, who was a genius, the bread and the wine and their outward appearance are accidents. The essence is the body and blood of Christ.

And God, at the tinkling of the bell in the mass, as the ordained minister of the Roman church is called a priest, he is ordained and receives the power in ordination, so Roman Catholic theology says, to offer Christ in the non-bloody sacrifice of the mass. At the tinkling of the bell, the accidents remain the same, but the essence, the

very nature of the elements, is changed. There's a trans-change substantiation, a change of essence, not outward appearance.

It still looks like bread and wine, but inwardly, there is a miracle. Luther rejected that out of hand. He was angry at that.

How can we dare put a name on this miracle? That's why I don't think he'd be a big fan of calling this thing consubstantiation, con from the Latin, with. In, with, and under the elements, Christ is present. But Luther taught that Christ was as present in the Lord's Supper as any Roman Catholic ever taught, including Thomas Aquinas.

How is he present? Miraculously. How do you explain it? You don't. Well, here is the explanation, as much as there is one, that is, in the resurrection of Christ, divine attributes were transferred from Jesus' deity to his humanity, so now his humanity can be everywhere present at the same time, and thus it can be present in, with, and under the elements in the Holy Supper.

It's probably no surprise to you now that I follow the Reformed view on this, but again, I have great respect for my fellow Reformational Christians who are Lutherans. Let's look at some passages that affirm the communication of attributes. Acts 3.15. Peter is preaching.

Peter did not take Norman Vincent Peale's course on how to be kind to your hearers, how to win friends, and how to influence people. Peter is a tough one, man, and he just blasts his hearers many times. He basically says over and over again, you, especially the Jewish leaders, but the Jewish people, crucified the Son of God, and here's what the Father did.

He showed his estimation of his Son by raising him from the dead, and you are in serious trouble. Oh, my word. He gives credit to the healing of the lame man to verse 13 of Acts 3. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied, ouch, in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him.

But you denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. Here's the expression: you killed the author of life.

Author of life is a divine title, all right? It can't be used to have an apostle or an angel, right? You and I are not the author of life. God alone is the author of life, and the Son of God in his deity could be called the author of life. We saw it John 1. We saw it in Hebrews 1. We saw it in Colossians 1. The Son is the Father's agent in creation.



Oh, the pre-incarnate Son, but there's continuity of personhood. The pre-incarnate Son became the incarnate Son. But look what it says to him.

I find this the best way to teach this is to, first of all, correct the verse. Yes, I'm speaking with tongue in cheek. And make the verb fit the noun.

Uh, you adored the author of life. You worshipped the author of life. That goes together.

Or if you want to do it the other way, you killed the man Jesus. You killed the carpenter's son. Do you get it? Divine title, divine verb.

Human title, human verb. But there's a crossing over here. There's a sharing of attributes.

It doesn't say you killed the man Jesus or you worshipped the author of life. It says you killed the author of life. Divine title and human verb, which indicates a human attribute.

In other words, the title of God, and even God's being the author of life, goes with death and mortality. How could it be? It could be because the one person is God and man at the same time. He was the author of life.

He was the author of life, and he still is. He created. And he was killed because the author of life became a human being and died on the cross for our sins.

That is, it's a strange way the Fathers acknowledged affirming the unity of the person. The same person could be called God, and what could be said of him is true of human beings and not God in the same sentence. In other words, he's the God-man.

This is the communication of attributes. A divine title, author of life, a human quality, mortality, being capable, being mortal, being able to die. Not only was he able to die, he died.

Acts 20, 28. There's a textual problem here, but either way, either text is right; it's a divine title. Whether it's the church of God or the church of the Lord, it's the same deal in the end.

They're both divine titles. Acts 20:28. Paul speaks to the Ephesian elders.

It's like a proto-presbytery. The elders from Ephesus, from the Ephesian church, have come, and they meet Paul in Miletus, and they meet with him before he goes on and says he will see them no longer. He has some solemn words for them.

Verse 28. Be careful, excuse me, pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. Some manuscripts say the church of God.

Some manuscripts say the church of the Lord. It's a toss-up, as a matter of fact, okay? In terms of the rules of the term of so-called higher criticism, trying to figure that out, you could say church of God or church of the Lord. For my present purposes, our present purposes, it's not important because God and the Lord in this context are divine titles, right? What does the divine title say about this one, denominated as God or Lord? Here's what it says.

This one obtained the church with his own blood. Does God have blood? As a matter of fact, it is good to see how Greeks would respond to this. That is crass.

That is gross. No, remember, it was Greek philosophy, that of Plato and Aristotle, that led to these notions of trying to protect the Son of God from humanity in contact with humanity, and now you're going to say God has blood? No, God in heaven doesn't have blood, but yes, God on earth has blood. God became a human being so he could die.

Of course, blood here, as in Old Testament sacrificial contexts, here when it speaks of Jesus' sacrifice, it means his violent death. The church of God or the Lord, which he bought, purchased, redeemed with his own violent death, his own blood: divine title, God or Lord.

Human quality, once again, he's capable of dying; he's mortal. Notice, combined in the same sentence but so close together, it's arresting on purpose because it underscores what? The unity of the person of Christ. The same person could be called God or Lord, and of that person, it could be said he shed his blood.

As we'll see in our next lecture, we will continue with our inductive study of the communication of attributes.

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