

# **Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Christology, Session 19, Systematics: Subordination? Impeccability?**

## **Unipersonality**

### **Resources from NotebookLM**

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

## **1. Abstract of Peterson, Christology, Session 19, Systematics: Subordination? Impeccability? Unipersonality, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL**

**Dr. Robert Peterson's Christology Session 19** explores key aspects of Jesus Christ's person and work. **The session examines subordinationism**, distinguishing between an essential subordination, deemed heretical, and an economic or functional subordination accepted as part of God's redemptive plan. **The discussion then addresses the debate over Christ's peccability versus impeccability**, acknowledging the disagreement among theologians while affirming Christ's sinless life and present inability to sin. Finally, **the lecture introduces the concept of the unipersonality of Christ** as a personal union of divine and human natures, leading into an explanation of the **communication of attributes**, where qualities of both natures are ascribed to the single person of Christ, illustrated with scriptural examples.

## **2. 20 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Peterson, Christology, Session 19 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Theology → Theology, Peterson → Christology).**



**Peterson\_Christology\_Session19.mp3**

### 3. Briefing Document: Peterson, Salvation, Session 19, Systematics: Subordination? Impeccability? Unipersonality

#### Briefing Document: Key Themes and Ideas from Peterson's Christology, Session 19

**Overview:** This session of Dr. Peterson's Christology course delves into crucial aspects of the person of Christ, focusing on the implications of his humanity. The session addresses subordinationism within the Trinity, the debate surrounding Christ's peccability or impeccability, the unipersonality of Christ (the hypostatic union), and the communication of attributes between his divine and human natures.

#### Key Themes and Important Ideas:

##### 1. Subordinationism:

- **Biblical Basis:** Peterson acknowledges the scriptural teaching that the Son is subordinate to the Father, citing John 14:28 where Jesus says, *"for the father is greater than I."* He also references John 5:26, where the Father grants the Son life in himself, a relationship that is not reversible.
- **Distinction between Essential and Economic Subordination:** Peterson emphasizes the critical distinction between two types of subordinationism:
- **Essential Subordinationism:** This view posits an inherent inferiority of the Son to the Father in their very being or essence. Peterson strongly rejects this as incompatible with Christ's deity, identifying it as an error of theological liberalism and cults. He argues that if Christ is not essentially God, our trust in him for salvation is undermined: *"If Christ is not God incarnate, then how can we trust him for salvation?"*
- **Economic (or Functional) Subordinationism:** This view affirms that the Son willingly submits to the Father in terms of his role and work, particularly in the plan of redemption and the incarnation. Peterson argues that this subordination is compatible with the affirmation of Christ's deity. *"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."*

- **Importance of Economic Subordination:** Peterson states that Christians "rejoice in the economic subordination of the Son to the Father because that is what saves us." This subordination enabled the Son to become human, live a perfect life, and die in our place.

## 2. Peccability vs. Impeccability:

- **The Debate:** This section addresses the long-standing debate about whether the incarnate Son of God was able to sin (peccability) or unable to sin (impeccability).
- **Key Positions and Proponents:****Impeccability:** Held by theologians like Louis Berkhof and Donald MacLeod, this view asserts that Christ was unable to sin.
- **Peccability:** Held by theologians like Charles Hodge, this view asserts that Christ was able to sin.
- **Points of Agreement:** Peterson highlights crucial areas of agreement between both sides:
  - Jesus did not sin. *"What is clear is that Jesus did not sin. Everybody agrees. All right?"*
  - Jesus cannot sin now in his state of exaltation. *"Everybody says that not only did Jesus not sin, but he cannot sin now. Universal agreement on that."*
  - Jesus was genuinely tempted. *"Another point of agreement, although one side claims to score points at the other's expense on this, was that he was really tempted."*
- **The Central Point of Disagreement:** The core issue lies in the interpretation of Christ's temptations. Peccability proponents argue that genuine temptation implies the possibility of yielding to it. Impeccability proponents emphasize Christ's divine nature and the absence of a sinful principle within him.
- **Peterson's Perspective:** While acknowledging the validity of both sides and emphasizing that this should not be a divisive issue, Peterson leans towards peccability, agreeing 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." He suspects impeccability might overemphasize Christ's deity at the expense of his humanity. He also cites his former professor, Robert J. Dunzweiler, who suggested that Jesus was able to sin as the God-man, yet in God's plan, he was unable to sin.

- **Emphasis on Unity:** Peterson stresses the importance of emphasizing the clear truths (no sin, genuine temptation, no future sin) and not allowing this debate to divide believers. *"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..."*

### 3. Unipersonality (Hypostatic Union):

- **Definition:** Peterson affirms that Christ is one person with two natures, divine and human, joined in a personal or hypostatic union. *"He is one person. The first thing to be said is it is indeed a personal union of the two natures."*
- **Personal Union:** Christ's human nature did not exist prior to its conception in Mary's womb and was personal from the moment of conception because it was joined to the divine nature of the Son (the Logos, the second person of the Trinity). *"His humanity was personal exactly because it was joined to the Word, to the light, to the Son, and to the second person of the Trinity."*
- **Continuity of Personhood:** The continuity of Christ's personhood lies in his divine sonship, which pre-existed the incarnation, not in his humanity, which had a beginning. *"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."*
- **Rejection of Impersonal Humanity:** Peterson clarifies that Christ's humanity was never impersonal in the sense of God indwelling an already existing human being. *"So, there's never an impersonal humanity in the sense that God came and indwelt a man named Jesus. No, no."* He refers to the biblical accounts of the Holy Spirit's role in Mary's conception, emphasizing that what was conceived was from the Holy Spirit and would be the Son of God.

### 4. Communication of Attributes (Communicatio Idiomatum):

- **Biblical Basis:** This doctrine is based on scriptural passages where a title or attribute belonging to one of Christ's natures is ascribed to the person of Christ in a context that seems more fitting to his other nature. *"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."*
- **Reformed vs. Lutheran Views:** Peterson highlights the differing interpretations of this doctrine between Reformed and Lutheran theologians:

- **Reformed View:** Sees this as primarily a manner of speaking or a literary device (hermeneutical) to emphasize the unity of Christ, without necessarily implying an ontological transfer of attributes.
- **Lutheran View:** Believes in a real, ontological communication of divine attributes to Christ's human nature in the resurrection, allowing his humanity to share in attributes like omnipresence. This view is closely tied to their understanding of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper. *"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?"*
- **Examples from Scripture:** Peterson provides biblical examples to illustrate the communication of attributes:
  - **Acts 3:15:** Peter says, *"you killed the author of life."* "Author of life" is a divine title, while "killed" is a human action, demonstrating the unity of the person who is both God and man. *"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."*
  - **Acts 20:28:** Paul speaks of the Ephesian elders being overseers "to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (or "church of the Lord...with his own blood"). Divine titles ("God," "Lord") are connected with the human act of shedding blood in death. *"Does God have blood? ... God in heaven doesn't have blood, but yes, God on earth has blood. God became a human being so he could die."*
- **Purpose of the Doctrine:** The communication of attributes underscores the unity of the person of Christ, showing how the same person can be referred to with divine titles and yet experience human limitations and actions. *"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."*

**Conclusion:**

Session 19 of Dr. Peterson's Christology provides a detailed exploration of key theological concepts related to the humanity and person of Christ. It carefully navigates complex issues like subordinationism and the peccability debate, emphasizing the importance of distinguishing between essential and economic subordination and focusing on the areas of agreement in the peccability/impeccability discussion. Furthermore, the session clarifies the unipersonality of Christ as a personal union of two natures and introduces the doctrine of the communication of attributes through scriptural examples, highlighting differing theological interpretations while underscoring the fundamental unity of the God-man.

## 4. Study Guide: Peterson, Salvation, Session 19, Systematics: Subordination? Impeccability? Unipersonality

Christology: Humanity, Subordination, Impeccability, Unipersonality, and Communication of Attributes

### Study Guide

#### I. Subordination of the Son to the Father:

- Understand the biblical basis for the concept of the Son's subordination to the Father (e.g., John 14:28, John 5:26).
- Clearly distinguish between **essential (ontological)** subordination and **economic (functional)** subordination.
- Define essential subordination and explain why it is considered a heretical denial of Christ's deity.
- Define economic subordination and explain how it relates to the Trinity and the work of redemption.
- Explain why economic subordination is compatible with the Son's deity and equality with the Father.
- Articulate the significance of the Son's economic subordination for salvation.

#### II. Peccability and Impeccability of Christ:

- Define **peccability** (the belief that Christ was able to sin in his earthly life) and **impeccability** (the belief that Christ was unable to sin).
- Identify key figures historically associated with each position (e.g., Berkhof - impeccability, Hodge - peccability).
- Recognize the points of agreement between both sides of the debate:
- Jesus did not sin during his earthly life.
- Jesus cannot sin in his state of exaltation.
- Jesus was genuinely tempted.
- Understand the primary argument for peccability (relates to the genuineness of Christ's temptations and his role as the second Adam).

- Understand the primary argument for impeccability (relates to Christ's divine nature as the God-man).
- Reflect on the professor's proposed understanding that Christ was able to sin as the God-man, yet in God's plan, unable to sin.
- Grasp the importance of not making this a divisive issue within the church, emphasizing the clear truths about Christ's sinlessness.

### III. Unipersonality of Christ:

- Define the **unipersonality** of Christ, emphasizing that he is one person with two natures (divine and human).
- Explain the concept of the **hypostatic union**, the personal union of Christ's divine and human natures.
- Clarify that Christ's human nature did not exist prior to the Incarnation and was never impersonal; it was united to the Word from the moment of conception.
- Understand that the continuity of Christ's personhood comes from his divine nature as the eternal Son (Logos).

### IV. Communication of Attributes (Communicatio Idiomatum):

- Define the **communication of attributes** as the biblical teaching that what can be said of one of Christ's natures can sometimes be attributed to his person as a whole, even with a title that corresponds to the other nature.
- Understand the different perspectives of the Reformed and Lutheran traditions on this doctrine:
- Reformed view: Primarily a manner of speaking (hermeneutical/literary device) to emphasize the unity of Christ's person, without an ontological transfer of attributes.
- Lutheran view: An ontological sharing of divine attributes to Christ's human nature in the resurrection, allowing his humanity to possess divine qualities like omnipresence.
- Recognize the Lutheran motivation related to the Lord's Supper.
- Analyze biblical examples used to support the communication of attributes (e.g., Acts 3:15 - "you killed the author of life," Acts 20:28 - "the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood").



- Explain how these examples highlight the unity of Christ's person by ascribing human actions/qualities to one referred to with a divine title, or vice versa.

### Quiz

1. Explain the difference between essential subordinationism and economic subordinationism. Why is essential subordinationism considered problematic for Christian theology?
2. Summarize the core argument for the peccability of Christ. What theological considerations often motivate this view?
3. Summarize the core argument for the impeccability of Christ. What theological considerations often motivate this view?
4. Despite their disagreement, what are two key points about Jesus' sinlessness that both proponents of peccability and impeccability affirm?
5. Define the hypostatic union. Why is this concept essential to understanding the unipersonality of Christ?
6. Explain why the scripture states that what was conceived in Mary was "the Son of God" from the very beginning.
7. Describe the Reformed understanding of the communication of attributes. What is the primary purpose of this "manner of speaking"?
8. Describe the Lutheran understanding of the communication of attributes. What is one of the key theological implications of this view?
9. Using the example of Acts 3:15 ("you killed the author of life"), explain how this verse illustrates the communication of attributes.
10. Using the example of Acts 20:28 ("the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood"), explain how this verse illustrates the communication of attributes.

### Answer Key

1. Essential subordinationism posits an inferiority of the Son's very being or essence to the Father, while economic subordinationism describes a voluntary submission of the Son in role and function for the purpose of redemption, consistent with his deity. Essential subordinationism undermines Christ's deity, suggesting he is not fully God, which has implications for salvation.

2. The core argument for peccability is that if Jesus was truly tempted, then there must have been a genuine possibility of him sinning; otherwise, the temptations would be meaningless. This view often emphasizes Christ's humanity and his role as the second Adam who faced real choices.
3. The core argument for impeccability is rooted in the belief that as the God-man, the divine nature of Christ made it impossible for him to sin. This view emphasizes the perfect holiness of God and the sinlessness required for Christ's atoning sacrifice.
4. Both sides agree that Jesus did not sin during his earthly life and that he cannot sin in his glorified, exalted state. They both affirm his actual sinlessness and his present inability to sin.
5. The hypostatic union is the personal union of Christ's two natures, divine and human, in one person without confusion, change, division, or separation. It is crucial for unipersonality because it explains how Jesus can be fully God and fully human simultaneously in a single, unified person.
6. From the moment of conception, the humanity of Jesus was united to the pre-existent Word (the Son, the second person of the Trinity). Therefore, that which was conceived was not merely a human being later indwelt by God, but the Son of God taking on human flesh.
7. The Reformed view of the communication of attributes sees it primarily as a figure of speech or a way the Bible talks about the unified person of Christ. It emphasizes the unity by attributing qualities of one nature to the person referred to by a title of the other nature, without implying an ontological transfer or sharing of those attributes between the natures themselves.
8. The Lutheran view of the communication of attributes holds that in the resurrection, divine attributes were truly and really communicated to Christ's human nature. This ontological sharing means Christ's humanity now participates in divine attributes like omnipresence, which is significant for their understanding of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper.
9. In Acts 3:15, Peter states, "you killed the author of life." "Author of life" is a divine title, referring to God's creative power. However, the act of "killing" is a human action pertaining to Christ's humanity and his mortal body. This juxtaposition of a divine title with a human action demonstrates the unity of the person who is both the divine Author of Life and the human being who was crucified.

10. In Acts 20:28, Paul exhorts the elders to care for "the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." "God" is a divine title. However, the act of obtaining the church "with his own blood" refers to Jesus' human sacrifice and death. This verse communicates that the divine God (in the person of Christ) acquired the church through his human act of shedding blood, illustrating the unity of his divine and human existence.

## Essay Format Questions

1. Discuss the theological significance of distinguishing between essential and economic subordination within the Trinity, particularly in relation to the person and work of Jesus Christ.
2. Analyze the arguments for both peccability and impeccability, considering their implications for our understanding of Christ's temptations and the nature of sin. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each position?
3. Explain the doctrine of the unipersonality of Christ and its importance for Christian faith and practice. How does the concept of the hypostatic union support this doctrine?
4. Compare and contrast the Reformed and Lutheran understandings of the communication of attributes. What are the key differences in their theological frameworks and what motivates these distinctions?
5. Examine how biblical passages like Acts 3:15 and Acts 20:28 contribute to the doctrine of the communication of attributes and deepen our understanding of the person of Jesus Christ as both fully God and fully human.

## Glossary of Key Terms

- **Subordinationism:** The teaching that the Son and/or the Holy Spirit are subordinate in being or nature to the Father. This can take various forms, some considered heretical (essential/ontological subordination) and others orthodox (economic/functional subordination).
- **Essential (Ontological) Subordination:** The belief that the Son is inferior to the Father in his very being or essence. This view denies the full deity of the Son.
- **Economic (Functional) Subordination:** The belief that the Son voluntarily submits to the Father in his roles and functions within the Trinity and in the work of redemption. This view is compatible with the Son's full deity and equality with the Father.
- **Peccability:** The doctrine that Christ, in his earthly life, was able to sin.
- **Impeccability:** The doctrine that Christ, in his earthly life, was not able to sin.
- **Unipersonality:** The doctrine that Jesus Christ is one person, despite having two natures (divine and human).
- **Hypostatic Union:** The personal union of Christ's divine and human natures in one person without confusion, change, division, or separation.
- **Communication of Attributes (Communicatio Idiomatum):** A theological concept that describes how the attributes of Christ's divine nature and his human nature can be ascribed to his single person.
- **Ontological:** Relating to being or existence. In this context, it refers to the fundamental nature or essence of God.
- **Hermeneutics:** The branch of knowledge that deals with interpretation, especially of biblical texts.

## 5. FAQs on Peterson, Salvation, Session 19, Systematics: Subordination? Impeccability? Unipersonality, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### Frequently Asked Questions on Christology

**1. What is "subordinationism" in the context of Christology, and what are its different forms?** Subordinationism concerns the hierarchical relationship between the Father and the Son within the Trinity. Scripture indicates the Son's subordination to the Father (e.g., John 14:28, John 5:26). There are two main types: **essential subordinationism** and **economic (or functional) subordinationism**. Essential subordinationism posits an inherent inferiority of the Son's being or essence compared to the Father, which is considered a heretical denial of Christ's full deity. Economic subordinationism, on the other hand, describes the Son willingly submitting to the Father in his role and work, particularly in the plan of redemption, without implying any ontological inequality.

**2. How does the concept of "economic subordination" relate to the Trinity and the work of salvation?** Economic subordination highlights the distinct roles undertaken by each member of the Trinity in enacting God's plan. The Father sent the Son into the world (Galatians 4:4), and the Father and the Son sent the Spirit at Pentecost. The Son, in his incarnate state, submitted himself to the Father to accomplish the work of redemption, living a perfect life and dying as a sacrifice for humanity. This functional submission is crucial for our salvation and is fully compatible with the Son's essential equality and co-eternity with the Father and the Spirit within the Trinity.

**3. What is the debate surrounding the "peccability" and "impeccability" of Christ?** This debate centers on whether the incarnate Son of God was able to sin (peccability) or unable to sin (impeccability). Both sides agree that Jesus did not sin and that the exalted Christ cannot sin now. Proponents of peccability, like Charles Hodge, argue that for Jesus' temptations to be genuine, it must have been possible for him to sin, emphasizing his humanity as the "second Adam." Advocates of impeccability, such as Louis Berkhof and Donald MacLeod, contend that due to Christ's divine nature, it was impossible for him to sin, even during his earthly life. While the lecturer personally leans towards peccability, he stresses that this is a secondary issue and encourages respect for differing views.

**4. How did the early church understand the unity of Christ's person, and what term is used to describe it?** The early church affirmed the unity of Christ's person as a union of his divine and human natures. This union is described as a **personal** or **hypostatic union**. This means that the divine and human natures are joined in one person, without confusion, change, division, or separation. Christ's human nature did not exist independently before the Incarnation but was united to the Word (the Son, the second person of the Trinity) from the moment of conception in Mary's womb.

**5. What is the "communication of attributes" (communicatio idiomatum), and what is its biblical basis?** The communication of attributes is a theological doctrine that explains how Scripture can ascribe qualities of Christ's divine nature to his person when referred to with terms related to his humanity, and vice versa. This is based on the personal union of his two natures. Examples from Scripture, such as Acts 3:15 ("you killed the author of life") and Acts 20:28 ("the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood"), illustrate this by attributing divine actions or titles to the person who experienced human limitations like death.

**6. What are the Reformed and Lutheran perspectives on the "communication of attributes," and why do they differ?** Both Reformed and Lutheran theologians acknowledge the biblical basis for the communication of attributes but differ in its ontological implications. The Reformed view generally understands these scriptural expressions as a manner of speaking or a literary device (hermeneutics) that emphasizes the unity of Christ's person without necessarily implying a real transfer of divine attributes to his human nature. The Lutheran perspective, however, teaches that in the resurrection, divine attributes were truly and really communicated (ontologically shared) to Christ's human nature, allowing it to share in attributes like omnipresence. This difference is significantly motivated by their contrasting views on Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper.

**7. How does the "communication of attributes" relate to the understanding of Jesus as the "God-man"?** The communication of attributes is a key concept in understanding Jesus as the "God-man." It highlights how the one person of Christ is both fully God and fully human. Because of the personal union of his divine and human natures, what is true of one nature can be attributed to the person as a whole. This allows Scripture to speak of God dying (Acts 20:28) or the human Jesus being the author of life (Acts 3:15), underscoring the unique reality of the incarnate Son of God.

**8. What is emphasized as most important when discussing these complex theological topics within Christology?** When discussing these complex theological topics, it is crucial to prioritize what is clearly taught in Scripture and to exercise humility and charity towards those who hold differing views on less clear or secondary issues. While understanding the nuances of doctrines like subordinationism, impeccability/peccability, unipersonality, and the communication of attributes is valuable, the fundamental truths about Christ—his pre-existence, incarnation, deity, humanity, sinless life, atoning death, and resurrection—should be the primary focus, fostering unity and avoiding unnecessary division among believers.