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Did Christ Have a Conscience?

Revisiting the Debates on Christ's (un)Fallen Humanity

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Abstract: This paper draws on the Dutch neo-Calvinist dogmatician Herman Bavinck's notion of conscience to explore the question of whether Christ's assumed humanity is fallen or unfallen. It will demonstrate that, for Bavinck, Christ's conscience was silent and did not accuse or exonerate him according to the moral law (the word of God) as occurs in the postlapsarian conscience. Such a unique conscience reflects the unfallenness of Christ's humanity and his impeccability. Moreover, Christ's impeccability is concomitant with Christ's permanent response to God's word in faith. This suggests that in the eschaton, the human conscience will become silent in a faithful trust in the word of God.

Keywords

Christian's faith, Christ's fallen humanity, Christ's impeccability, Christ's sinlessness, Christ's unfallen humanity, conscience, consciousness, Herman Bavinck, Jesus's temptation

The question of whether Christ's humanity was fallen or unfallen traditionally is not treated within Roman Catholic theology, at least not specifically in these terms. Catholic theologians

rarely inquire directly into whether Christ assumed a postlapsarian human nature, in part due to the received Thomistic interpretation of human nature that stresses the enduring goodness and integrity of human nature, even given the reality of the fall. As Thomas Aquinas asserts, “There are the principles of which nature is constituted, and the properties that flow from them, such as the powers of the soul,...[are] neither destroyed nor diminished by sin.”¹ It is in this sense of human nature that Christ’s humanity shares in the postlapsarian human condition. That is, Christ shared our bodily infirmities, but the “fomes of sin” or any sinful inclinations were excluded.² Hence, in discussing Jesus’s temptations in the desert, Hans Urs von Balthasar states, “In himself, Jesus did not need to be tempted; but we and our temptations are in his flesh (In Ps. 60, 3). *He is not fallen* and so does not need to fear death; but he freely undergoes the fear of death, which is not his but ours (In Ps. 93, 19).”³ He also argues elsewhere that “‘Adam,’ as the head of fallen humanity, is a deficient antitype to Christ as the head of redeemed humanity.”⁴ Balthasar makes it clear that Christ’s humanity

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920–1922), 1-2, q. 85, a. 1, resp. (hereafter cited as *ST*).

² Aquinas, *ST*, 3, q. 15, a. 2.

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 4, *The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), 251 (emphasis added).

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 7, *Theology: The New Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 467–68.

differs somehow from Adam's fallen humanity, suggesting that Jesus's humanity is unfallen. It is Christ's assumption of unfallen nature that I want to bring into explicit focus.

Many Reformed scholars contend that as Christ *assumes* a fallen nature he also, at the same time, restores it. For example, appealing to Gregory of Nazianzus's principle of "the unassumed is the unhealed," the Scottish Presbyterian theologian Thomas F. Torrance argues that Christ assumed the *fallen* human nature "while at the same time sanctifying and recreating it."⁵ Torrance perceives a potential risk that the fallenness of Christ's humanity would undermine the sinlessness of Christ and consequently threaten God's salvation to be effected through the Incarnation. As such, he underscores Christ's humanity is at once assumed *and* sanctified and recreated.

Thus there is a fundamental tension between a shared Christian commitment to Christ's full humanity and the recognition of humanity's fallen condition. If Christ's human nature is not fallen, can we still say that Christ is "just as we are" (Heb 4:15 NRSV, used throughout)? Is Jesus Christ peccable? More concretely, is Jesus's temptation in the desert the same as temptations that other humans would face?

Confronting this challenge becomes all the more important in light of the turn to the historical Jesus in contemporary Christology.⁶ It encourages us to investigate more deeply

⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 155.

⁶ For example, John P. Galvin, "From the Humanity of Christ to the Jesus of History: A Paradigm Shift in Catholic Christology," *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 252–73,

Christianity's commitment to the belief that Jesus truly became human *like us*: an embodied, particular person, dwelling within a particular historical moment.⁷ This investigation requires us to address another question: in what sense is the historical Jesus's (un)fallen human nature the same as the nature of other historical human persons yet unique in terms of his hypostatic union?

I will explore this Christological question from the perspective of Christ's conscience. Though the question of Christ's conscience is of significance for Christology (given the relationship of conscience to sin and morality), little work has been done on it. By "conscience," I generally refer to the human moral faculty that makes moral verdicts on human action, distinguishing right from wrong.⁸ Two points should be noted here. First, conscience is intrinsic to humanity. Second, the idea of conscience presupposes the possibility of immoral action. As such, we can distinguish between the prelapsarian and postlapsarian conscience, leading to the questions: Did Jesus have a conscience? Was his

<https://doi.org/10.1177/004056399405500204>; William Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ to the Historical Jesus," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 314–31,

<https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390006100205>.

⁷ For example, Karl Rahner, *The Content of Faith: The Best of Karl Rahner's Theological Writings*, trans. Harvey D. Egan, ed. Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 291–92.

⁸ This general definition of conscience can serve as the metanarrative of the human conscience. That is, notwithstanding the variations of the definitions of conscience and its historicity, this general definition sketches the contours and basic function of conscience.

conscience prelapsarian or postlapsarian? These inquiries disclose the conceptual linking between the (un)fallenness of Christ's humanity and his conscience.

This paper shall draw on the Dutch neo-Calvinist dogmatician Herman Bavinck (1854–1921). In the past two decades, Bavinck studies have developed rapidly in the Anglophone world. With the publication of his four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics* and the first volume of *Reformed Ethics*,⁹ Bavinck's theological system has garnered a high level of international interest.¹⁰ As far as this paper is concerned, Bavinck offers a fascinating account that attempts to explore fallen humanity and its conscience with an eye on Christ's and the prelapsarian Adam's conscience.¹¹ Though Bavinck argues from his own theological presuppositions as a neo-Calvinist theologian, the retrieval of his theology of conscience can benefit contemporary Christology by attending to the question of Christ's (un)fallen humanity.

⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003–2008); Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, *Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt, Jessica Joustra, Nelson D. Kloosterman, Antoine Theron, and Dirk Van Keulen, rev. trans. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019).

¹⁰ For example, Bavinck's Christology has been examined in Bruce Pass, *The Heart of Dogmatics: Christology and Christocentrism in Herman Bavinck* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020).

¹¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics* 1:204.

I will demonstrate that Bavinck characterizes Christ's conscience as silent: Christ's conscience did not accuse or exonerate him according to the moral law (the word of God) as occurs in the postlapsarian conscience. Such a unique conscience reflects the unfallenness of Christ's humanity. Christ's words and actions did not arise as a response to the promptings of his conscience, but arose in obedience to the word of God in *faith*, owing to the union of his humanity and divinity in the person of the Word of God made incarnate. To put it in Bavinck's words, Christ's conscience was silent, and Christ's faith spoke instead. As such, Christ's impeccability is concomitant with Christ's permanent response to the divine word in faith. This suggests that in the eschaton, the human conscience will be consummated, which means that the conscience becomes silent in a faithful trust in the word of God.

In what follows, I first will examine recent scholarly discussions on the (un)fallenness of Christ's humanity, which will show that little work has been done in addressing the issue of Christ's conscience. Then, I will develop Bavinck's idea of Christ's *weak yet unfallen* human nature as a foundation for discussing Christ's uncorrupted conscience and its relationship to his humanity. Finally, I will demonstrate that, viewed from the perspective of conscience, the idea of Christ's unfallen humanity dovetails with the view of Christ's impeccability.

Original Sin and Christ's Humanity

The endeavor to understand Christ's humanity raises the question of whether and how Christ assumed a fallen human nature.¹² That Christ's humanity is fallen is widely accepted and developed by theologians who follow Karl Barth.¹³ According to them, the investigation of the (un)fallenness of Christ's humanity cannot dispense with the doctrine of sin, which features in the recent relevant literature.¹⁴

Oliver Crisp appeals to Reformed scholasticism and the doctrine of original sin in order to argue against the idea of Christ's assumption of a fallen human nature.¹⁵

Refashioning the traditional doctrine of original sin, he distinguishes between the component ideas of original corruption and guilt, arguing that Christ's fallen human nature only has

¹² For the latest comprehensive study on the (un)fallenness of Christ's humanity in the history of Christianity, see E. Jerome Van Kuiken, *Christ's Humanity in Current and Ancient Controversy* (London: T&T Clark of Bloomsbury, 2017).

¹³ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2.1, *The Doctrine of God*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 397–98.

¹⁴ See Kelly M. Kapic, "The Son's Assumption of a Human Nature: A Call for Clarity," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3 (2001): 154–66.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1463-1652.00057>

¹⁵ Oliver Crisp, "Did Christ Have a *Fallen* Human Nature?," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6 (2004): 270–88; also see Oliver Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 90–117.

original corruption, and not the original guilt associated with it. He then asserts that Christ remains sinless owing to the intervention of divine grace.¹⁶ Yet Crisp argues that, even if his refashioned doctrine of original sin is accepted, logical flaws remain that make Christ's assumption of fallen humanity untenable.¹⁷

Crisp builds his case against attributing "fallenness," as the term is used to describe postlapsarian human existence, to Christ's human nature by pointing out three logical flaws. Firstly, "Christ would be sinful" and cannot "act as a redeemer." Secondly, even without original guilt, we can still affirm that Christ's humanity is corrupted, and, thus, he is, like all humans, "loathsome in the sight of God." Thirdly, "Christ cannot commit actual sin" with the aid of divine grace, which means that it is impossible for Christ to be tempted to sin.¹⁸ In the

¹⁶ Crisp, "Did Christ have a *Fallen* Human Nature?," 280–84.

¹⁷ Crisp, 271. In this light, Ho-Jin Ahn does injustice to Crisp's argument. Ahn argues that "Crisp seems to recognise that his dogmatic speculation regarding original sin contradicts the narrative of the Gospels in which Christ had a true human body and mind like us.

Consequently, Crisp goes against the testimony of the Bible which shows that Christ, even assuming fallen nature, lived a holy life without guilt." However, Crisp's motive is to defend Christ's unfallen humanity, rather than assuming fallen nature. Ho-Jin Ahn, "The Humanity of Christ: John Calvin's Understanding of Christ's Vicarious Humanity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65 (2012): 145–58 at 149. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930612000026>

¹⁸ Crisp, 284–85.

end, Crisp can conclude that Christ assumed an unfallen human nature yet also took on “the infirmities of fallen human nature.”¹⁹

Michael Allen remarks that Crisp “goes well beyond acclaiming the sin of Adam as the fount of all later sin.”²⁰ However, Allen believes that this so-called “traditional doctrine of original sin” is unfamiliar to John Calvin. He observes that Calvin refers to the depravity and corruption of human nature as original sin.²¹ That is to say, Calvin’s view of the sinful corruption of human nature makes the distinction between fallen nature and guilt, a distinction that can be used to support the view that Christ’s humanity is fallen.²² Like Crisp, Allen perceives the necessity of confirming Christ’s sinlessness. He maintains that the work of the Holy Spirit protects Christ from acting in accordance with his sinful humanity. Thus, Christ is never guilty of actual sin.²³

¹⁹ Crisp, 288.

²⁰ Michael Allen, “Calvin’s Christ: A Dogmatic Matrix for Discussion of Christ’s Human Nature,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9 (2007): 383–397 at 387.

²¹ Allen, 387; John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 2, trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1846), on Psalm 51:5.

²² Allen concedes that Calvin did not endorse the fallenness position. However, he maintains that “Calvin’s quite precise doctrine of ‘inherited corruption’ along with its carefully-nuanced expression in certain subsequent sin which contextually permeates one’s moral identity right from the start—allows for discussion of fallenness apart from that of guilt” (396).

²³ Allen, 390–91.

Similar to Allen's appeal to Calvin, yet differing from Allen's focus on the doctrine of original sin, Ho-Jin Ahn appropriates Calvin's view of Christ's vicarious humanity in order to qualify the fallenness view, maintaining that "we can only consider the person of Christ as the incarnated Son of God in our humanity with significant qualification."²⁴ Ahn contends that, although Calvin does not explicitly endorse the fallenness of Christ's human nature, "he seems in fact to be inclined to accept the view of Christ's fallen nature at the level of interpretation, because Calvin has no hesitation in saying that Christ assumed a mortal body like us."²⁵ Ahn support this view since for him salvation does not rest in that Christ shares our fallen nature. Rather, the essence of salvation is human "personal participation in the death of Christ by faith" owing to "Christ's vicarious sacrifice."²⁶

Ahn's approach to the fallenness of Christ's humanity depends on Calvin's description of Christ's vicarious humanity in terms of the notions of humans' "mortal body," "corrupted state," and "miserable state."²⁷ In this sense, Ahn tends to define the fallenness of Christ's humanity in a materialistic and experiential sense. However, I argue that fallenness must carry the connotation of falling before *God*. This means that there must be something that is metaphysical and intrinsic to the fallen humanity—that is, "fallenness" should reflect the unique connection between humans and God.

²⁴ Ahn, "The Humanity of Christ," 146.

²⁵ Ahn, 146.

²⁶ Ahn, 150.

²⁷ Ahn, 146, 152, 154, 158.

All aforementioned scholars have contributed to the ecumenical debates on the sort of humanity that Christ assumed. Nonetheless, the conceptual linkage between conscience and the fallenness of humanity is under-explored. The corruption of conscience is the immediate consequence of the fall of the human being (Ti 1:15). In this light, the question of Christ's (un)fallen humanity should be considered in tandem with the question of his conscience. As will be seen, Bavinck's idea of conscience helps to address this Christological question.

Christ's Humanity as Weak rather than Fallen

Before we unpack Bavinck's idea of conscience and its relationship to Christ's humanity, we turn to his view of Christ's human nature. For Bavinck, "fallen" is never predicative of Christ's humanity since Christ "is the Son of God, the Logos, who was in the beginning with God and himself God," and thus must be sinless.²⁸ Bavinck ascribes Christ's sinlessness to his divine nature, and in so doing appropriates the received Reformed notion of *communicatio charismatum* or *communicatio gratiarum*.²⁹ That is, because of Christ's hypostatic union, the second person of the Trinity imparts charisms to the assumed humanity by the work of the Holy Spirit, which makes Christ sinless and impeccable.³⁰

²⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:314.

²⁹ Bavinck, 3:309.

³⁰ Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson, ed. Ernst Bizer (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 434.

Bavinck's account of Christ's humanity preserves this commitment to *communicatio charismatum*:

[Christ] was not placed in a paradise but came into a world that lies in the evil one; he was vulnerable to temptation on every side. He bore a nature that was susceptible to suffering and death. *His was not the human nature of Adam before the fall; rather, God sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, that is, in flesh that was the same in form and appearance as sinful flesh* (Rom 8:3).³¹

At first glance, one may suspect that Bavinck identifies Christ's humanity as postlapsarian. If this were a case, the idea of *communicatio gratiarum* could be aptly used to affirm the fallenness position. This is in tune with Darren Sumner's stance. Stressing the Christological doctrine of *anhypostasis*, Sumner takes the cue from Karl Barth that the doctrine of *communicatio gratiarum* undergirds both Christ's fallen humanity and his impeccability. Christ's fallen human nature is "determined wholly and utterly, from the very outset and in every part, by the electing grace of God."³² Despite the assumed fallen humanity, Christ's *unio hypostatica* safeguards his impeccability insofar as *communicatio gratiarum* leads to Christ's continuing obedience to the Father.³³ Although both Bavinck and Sumner stress

³¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:309–10 (emphasis added).

³² Darren O. Sumner, "Fallenness and *Anhypostasis*: A Way Forward in the Debate over Christ's Humanity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67 (2014): 195–212 at 205; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4.2, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 88. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930614000064>.

³³ Sumner, 210.

communicatio gratiarum, they differ in that Bavinck’s account of Christ’s humanity here attends to Christ’s humiliation. Bavinck argues,

The incarnation as such, without any further qualification, always was and remains an act of condescending goodness but not, strictly speaking, a step in the state of humiliation. It became this as a result of the fact that it was an incarnation, the assumption of *a weak human nature*. There was no disagreement, after all, over the fact that *Christ assumed a weak human nature, a nature that was subject to suffering and death, and that for the Son of God this was an act of humiliation.*³⁴

Accordingly, it could be argued that Bavinck deliberately dissociates the theology of *communicatio gratiarum* from the view of the (un)fallenness of Christ’s humanity by describing the incarnation as “the assumption of a *weak human nature*.” This weakness is merely relevant to physical sufferings. The *communicatio gratiarum* reveals the distinctiveness of Christ’s humanity—that is, Christ has the free choice of “suffering and dying.” This means that “suffering and death for him were a natural given of the human nature he assumed.”³⁵ By combining the ideas of *communicatio gratiarum* with Christ’s weak humanity, Bavinck clings to the Chalcedonian Christology—stressing, on the one hand, the ecumenical consensus on Christ’s humanity as consubstantial with ours and underlining, on the other hand, the particularity of Christ’s human nature.

The above analysis shows that Bavinck neither speaks of Christ’s humanity as fallen nor leans towards an unfallenness position. But the following sections will elucidate how

³⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:310 (emphasis added).

³⁵ Bavinck, 3:311.

Bavinck's view of conscience in *Reformed Ethics* discloses his potential sympathy with the view that Christ's human nature is unfallen.

Christ's Conscience

Bavinck's conception of conscience stems from his analysis of the Greek *syneidēsis* in the New Testament. He sums up the threefold meaning of this word:

The word *syneidēsis* is first in the general sense of consciousness or knowledge. ...

Beyond this it acquires the significance of a testimony present to my consciousness concerning my circumstances and relationships, self-judgment (*zelfbeoordeling*). ...

In the third place, conscience has the meaning of moral obligation, being bound in our act and conduct by a conformity to God's law and will.³⁶

Bavinck's construal of conscience here offers two principles that govern his discourse on the human conscience: the epistemological, and the moral and religious.

First, Bavinck maintains that the human conscience involves knowing one's internal world and external circumstances. His construal of this epistemological character builds on his etymological study of the Dutch *geweten* (conscience). According to him, this Dutch term consists of three epistemological factors: (1) *scientia*, or knowledge; (2) knowing with others (that is, the idea of a shared consciousness); and (3) consciousness of good and evil.³⁷ In this

³⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, ed. Dirk van Keulen (Utrecht:

KokBoekencentrum, 2019) 132; Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:173–74 (revised translation).

³⁷ Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, 141; cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:192.

regard, Bavinck does not separate the conscience from theoretical reason or intellect. He stresses instead that “conscience belongs to the knowing dimension of human life, to the sphere of the *intellect*.”³⁸ Then, he distinguishes the speculative or theoretical intellect from the practical intellect. The former is directed at the knowledge of truth and has knowing as its goal, whereas the latter aims for good actions and effects and has acting as its goal. At the same time, he affirms that the intellect or knowing is both theoretical and practical and grounds the connection between speculative and practical intellect in the external authority, that is, the law of God.³⁹ The law of God is inscribed in both the practical and speculative intellect, which in turn governs both human intellectual endeavors and the moral life. As such, the human conscience operates with both speculative and practical intellect such that it knows God’s law and renders a judgment corresponding to this law.⁴⁰

Second, the other principle that underlies Bavinck’s view is that conscience has not only a moral but a religious character. For Bavinck, the conscience must guide the human action to conform to the *law* given by *God*, which reflects the indissoluble relationship between religion and morality. To his mind, the two tables of the Decalogue refer to religion (human service to God) and morality (human service to neighbors); though both are given by God, it is significant that the second table follows the first, rather than otherwise.⁴¹ “The two

³⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:193.

³⁹ Bavinck, 1:193–94.

⁴⁰ Hence, Bavinck calls the conscience “an act, a deed, an activity” (1:195). This echoes Thomas Aquinas’s view that “conscience is not a power, but an act.” *ST*, 1, q. 79, a. 13, resp.

⁴¹ Bavinck, 1: 66.

tables therefore form a most intimate unity. ...The two tables are therefore never confused but are ever kept distinct in such a way that the first has the second as consequence.”⁴² Accordingly, morality is rooted in religion. For Bavinck, the conscience is primarily a religious faculty that shapes our moral judgments and acts.

These two dimensions—the epistemological, and the religious and moral—compose the conscience, but for a healthy conscience the religious character is dominant. As will be seen, this religious character of conscience is important for understanding Christ’s unfallen humanity.

Bavinck summarizes the operation of the conscience: “A conscience is a judgment about someone’s being and acting in accord with a law and assumes therefore that the individual is subject to the law.”⁴³ It is at this juncture that Bavinck takes a further step to explore the question of whether or not Jesus Christ had a conscience. As will be seen, Bavinck maintains that Jesus Christ had a conscience by virtue of his true human nature; however, Christ’s conscience was silent. Bavinck’s stance on the silence of Christ’s conscience can help us elaborate on Christ’s unfallen human nature and his impeccability. Yet, Bavinck does not go on to explain how Christ’s silent conscience is related to the (un)fallenness of his humanity. In order to develop Bavinck’s argument to elucidate the connection between Christ’s conscience and the state of Christ’s humanity, I will first analyze two possible scenarios: Christ had a conscience, and Christ had no conscience.

⁴² Bavinck, 1: 67–68.

⁴³ Bavinck, 1: 204.

If we were to assume that Christ had a conscience, it would mean that Jesus Christ is subject to the moral law. This creates a problem since it would mean that the second person of the Triune God—who inscribes the moral law in the human conscience—becomes subject to the law he authored. Paul’s saying that Christ was born “under the law” (Gal 4:4) may be cited in support. However, biblical scholars have pointed out that the phrase “under the law” connotes, on one hand, the Jewish identity and true humanity of Jesus Christ and, on the other hand, Jesus’s bearing of the curse of the law.⁴⁴ In this sense, the phrase “under the law” does not imply that Christ is subject to the law.

Alternatively, if we were to maintain that Christ did not have a conscience, it would suggest that Christ’s humanity differs from ours, casting doubt on his consubstantiality with us. More importantly, according to Bavinck’s analysis of *syneidēsis* above, the function of conscience involves a testimony present to one’s consciousness concerning external circumstances. That is, Jesus’s conscience should receive a testimony that is made by his consciousness about what happened and what he was conscious of in the desert during the moments of temptation. Hence, if Jesus did not have a conscience, then his temptation in the desert was not genuine on the grounds that he could not be conscious of the temptations in the same way as we are. Then, it is contrary to Hebrews 4:15 that Jesus Christ “in every respect has been tested *as we are*.”

Despite Bavinck’s silence on this issue, his view of *syntērēsis* hints at both the actuality of Christ’s conscience and his real and yet unfallen humanity. Bavinck draws a

⁴⁴ Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 171; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 196.

distinction between syntērēsis and conscience. He defines syntērēsis as “a natural habit of concrete activity that contains the principles of practice or practical reason.”⁴⁵ This “natural habit,” however, must be interpreted in light of Bavinck’s view that the religious function of conscience (conforming to *God’s* law) is antecedent to morality—that is, moral principles depend on religion (that is, human service to God). Then, Bavinck avers that “this syntērēsis does not belong to the conscience, but precedes it, is its necessary presupposition, without which the conscience cannot judge.”⁴⁶ As such, “the conscience has no content,” and the law, according to which the conscience operates, is from syntērēsis.⁴⁷ The law of conscience means the law is contained in the syntērēsis, which rests in religion.

What is the law contained in the syntērēsis? Here Bavinck distinguishes between two instances. The first is that of the natural conscience rendering judgment according to *natural* moral principles. Bavinck suggests that there are “natural principles of morality and justice and of natural religion, given to us at creation and left to us after the fall.”⁴⁸ Bavinck’s view here is not based on a theology of general revelation—a key aspect of Bavinck’s dogmatics and broader neo-Calvinism. Rather, the doctrinal rationale here is Bavinck’s theology of the covenant.

God...*made such a covenant with the first human beings.* ... After creating men and women after his own image, God showed them their destiny and the only way in

⁴⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:195.

⁴⁶ Bavinck, 1:196.

⁴⁷ Bavinck, 1:196.

⁴⁸ Bavinck, 1:197–98.

which they could reach it. Human beings could know *the moral law* without special revelation since it was written in their hearts.⁴⁹

Accordingly, it can be argued that the Sinaitic covenant and the Decalogue are paired together in a way that parallels that of the Edenic covenant and the moral law. Specifically, the moral law given to the first humans is rooted in God's covenant with them in Eden. Similarly, the covenant between God and humanity on Mt. Sinai is the foundation for the two tables of the Decalogue, which shows the connection between religion and morality. The law and covenant are indivisible, and thus the conscience must be tied up with divine-human covenants insofar as the conscience operates according to the law.

The second case arises when the conscience is enlightened and purified in divine grace. For those who believe in the Gospel, Bavinck argues, their consciences are “bound to” the word of God, and “the conscience in turn binds and obligates the person.”⁵⁰ In the context of the covenant of grace, Bavinck substitutes the “word of God” for law insofar as “the word of God, both as law and gospel, is the revelation of the will of God, the promulgation of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.”⁵¹ For the conscience enlightened in grace, the word of God sheds light on the natural principles of morality.⁵²

⁴⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:571 (emphasis added).

⁵⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:198.

⁵¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:448.

⁵² This accords with the neo-Calvinist axiom of “grace restoring and renewing nature”; see Jon Stanley, “Restoration and Renewal: The Nature of Grace in the Theology of Herman

Bavinck's analysis of these two cases comes down to the belief that "God and God alone is the one who in and through the syntērēsis binds the conscience, commands it, stands above it, possesses power and authority over it."⁵³ Again, Bavinck insists that religion has precedence over morality in the matter of the operation of conscience. It is this precedence given to religion, together with the syntērēsis conveying the word of God, that helps to understand how Christ's humanity is unfallen and yet shares in the operation of humanity's conscience.

We can make the argument that Bavinck's view of Christ's conscience supports the view that Christ's humanity is unfallen in six steps. To this end, I will adopt a *reductio ad absurdum* with the premise of Christ's humanity as fallen.

First, we assume that Christ's humanity is fallen and thus corrupted. This corruption impairs the human conscience, as noted above. Following this commitment, second, the fallen humanity assumed by Christ also shares in a corrupted conscience (Ti 1:15). In other words, the consubstantiality of Christ's humanity with that of other *fallen* humans means that he also shares in the corruption of the conscience. Third, inasmuch as the assumed fallen humanity is sanctified by the grace of God, Christ's conscience must become uncorrupted and purified in his hypostatic union.

Fourth, in keeping with Hebrews 4:15, Christ's uncorrupted conscience should function *in the same way as* the enlightened conscience. The enlightened conscience is the

Bavinck," in *Revelation and Common Grace*, ed. John Bowlin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 81–104.

⁵³ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:198.

one that is bound to the word of God and thus has been purified in Christ. It is not perfect (Heb 9:14) but weak and erring (1 Cor 8:7, 10; 1 Tm 4:2; Ti 1:15; see Rom 15:1). As such, Christ's conscience would be the same as the conscience of other fallen humans: imperfect, weak, and erring.

Fifth, because Christ's conscience and the enlightened conscience are qualitatively the same, Christ and those who have the enlightened conscience acquire the same knowledge of and give rise to the same response to the law of God. Given that the notion of conscience stresses the precedence of religion over morality, Christ's relationship with God would be qualitatively the same as our relationship with God.

Sixth, in consequence, since the moral law to which the operation of conscience is subject has been determined by the divine-human covenant, Christ would be ineligible to be *the* mediator of the covenant of grace precisely because his response to the law of God would be the same as ours. This is because in Bavinck's construal, the notion of conscience is intertwined with the doctrine of covenant. If the operation of Christ's conscience shows that his relationship with God is the same as ours, then every human person *can* become the mediator of covenant; the conscience of every human person may respond to the moral law in the same way and to the same extent as Christ's conscience. As such, Christ's mediatorship is undermined.

An objection to this corollary—Christ's mediatorship is undermined due to his fallen humanity—can be anticipated: The pre-temporal intra-Trinitarian *pactum salutis*—the covenant of redemption made between the Father and the Son in eternity—undergirds Christ's mediatorship due to Christ's hypostatic union, even though Christ's conscience was

restored from corruption by divine grace.⁵⁴ However, this approach is apt to fall into Docetism insofar as it seems to ascribe the mediatorship to Christ's divinity alone rather than to the *incarnate* second Person of the Triune God. In short, the fact that Christ's conscience is qualitatively different from ours must be seen as the *sine qua non* for his mediatorship of the divine-human covenant; in turn, Christ's mediatorship is the sufficient condition for the unfallenness of his humanity.

To sum up, based on Bavinck's idea of conscience and its concomitant theology of covenant, Christ's assumption of fallen humanity necessarily implies that Christ's conscience is corrupted yet purified, and this would, *ipso facto*, undermine Christ's mediatorship.⁵⁵ If, however, we instead assume that Christ's humanity was unfallen, two thorny questions arise: What would it mean for Christ's unfallen humanity to have a conscience, and to what extent is Christ's response to the *syntērēsis* different from ours?

⁵⁴ For Bavinck's view of the relationship of Christ and the *pactum salutis*, see Mark Jones, "Covenant Christology: Herman Bavinck and the Pactum Salutis," in *Five Studies in the Thought of Herman Bavinck, A Creator of Modern Dutch Theology*, ed. John Bolt (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), 129–50.

⁵⁵ John Bolt provides an in-depth analysis of Christ and moral law and gives some hints on Christ's mediatorship in this regard. However, he does not weave the idea of conscience into the theology of Christ's mediatorship. "Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 45–73.

Christ's Unfallen Humanity and Uncorrupted Conscience

Christ's consubstantiality with other humans means that he must have a conscience.

However, Christ's capacity to act as *the* mediator requires that his human nature, and thus his conscience, cannot be "fallen" as is the case for the rest of humanity; it must be unique in some sense without undermining the genuineness of Christ's humanity. To understand how this can be so, we can turn to Bavinck's idea of conscience again—his discourse on how the conscience renders judgment.

Bavinck contends that the conscience makes judgment according to the moral law contained in the *syntērēsis*. It is not God who directly judges in the workings of human conscience. Rather, it is the conscience through which humans judge themselves.⁵⁶ But does Christ, with his unfallen humanity, render judgment in the same way as we do? Bavinck's lengthy discussion on the essence of the conscience's judgment addresses this question:

In our conscience, we justify God contrary to our own will and desire; we are compelled to acknowledge God as God. It is as this judging subject that the conscience is called Judge: The conscience summons the guilty, listens to its witnesses, opens the lawbook (the *syntērēsis*), and judges and specifies the punishment accordingly.... The conscience is bound to that law, judges in accord with that law, and judges in God's place, in God's name, and before God's face. The *syntērēsis* is therefore entirely specified by God and is appropriately said to be "religious." However, [the conscience] judges about the moral quality of a person's

⁵⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:200.

being and acting, and is therefore a moral consciousness. ...The conscience is therefore religiously oriented and, for that reason, precisely moral.⁵⁷

This passage evidences, once again, Bavinck's view that in the operation of conscience, religion takes precedence over morality. This means that the operation of the conscience is sound provided that it recognizes its subservient position before God. In this light, the operation of the conscience reflects one's *being* before God. That is, the conscience operates first in the ontological sense and then in the moral sense, and the essence of the conscience's function hinges upon one's relationship with God. Additionally, according to Bavinck, the judgment of the conscience exerts a bearing on human *existence* on the grounds that the function of the conscience has close ties to human daily life and action. Thus understood, the operation of the conscience discloses the priority of the ontological significance over the existential one, that is, the priority of humanity's *being* over humanity's *existence*.

This priority is of import to Bavinck's account of Jesus's conscience. Given that the function of the conscience indicates the kind of relationship that one has with God, the quality of this relationship is, for Bavinck, manifest in the extent to which one's consciousness accesses the syntērēsis. Regarding the consciences of Christ and the prelapsarian Adam, he states,

A syntērēsis was certainly present in Adam and in Jesus, and this was entirely pure; the foundational practical principles (= the law of nature) lay completely pure and clear within them. Similarly, their *consciousness* of their own being and doing was completely clear and transparent; their entire (ethical) being was reflected faithfully

⁵⁷ Bavinck, 1:201.

and completely in their ethical consciousness. With us there is a gap between being and consciousness; the latter is smaller than the former because sin darkens our consciousness. Nevertheless, upright persons know (God and therefore) themselves clearly and transparently. Third, they had a consciousness, the firm, clear consciousness (not merely an opinion, a conviction, or even a confidence) of having acted morally.⁵⁸

Bavinck makes it clear that the distinction between Christ's and the prelapsarian Adam's consciousness and the fallen human being's consciousness lies in the difference between the operations of their consciences. Inasmuch as Christ and the prelapsarian Adam are fully *conscious* of the syntērēsis, they are *conscious* of their moral action.⁵⁹ On the contrary, fallen human beings cannot be conscious of the syntērēsis as clearly and comprehensively as Christ and the prelapsarian Adam, and their conscience operates by *judging* their own being and action accordingly. According to Bavinck, the conscience renders judgment in the manner of a syllogism. "The syntērēsis (i.e., the law or Word of God) provides the major premise, and consciousness supplies the minor premise. The conscience draws the conclusion and renders judgment. This judgment either accuses or exonerates (Rom. 2:15)."⁶⁰

The difference between the function of Christ's and the prelapsarian Adam's conscience and that of the fallen person's conscience discloses that the conscience renders a

⁵⁸ Bavinck, 1:205.

⁵⁹ For Bavinck, Christ's human nature (therefore including consciousness and conscience) is "more highly developed" than that of the prelapsarian Adam. *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:311.

⁶⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:203.

negative judgment, that is, judging one's being and action as immoral. In other words, the operation of conscience presupposes *injustice*. To put it in Schleiermacher's words, "conscience is posited only along with the state of needing redemption."⁶¹ Hence, Bavinck asserts, "Our answer to the question 'May [Christ's] consciousness of having acted morally be called "conscience"?' must be 'No.'"⁶² This does not mean that Bavinck denies the reality of Christ's conscience. By appealing to the aforementioned notion of the two-dimensional operation of conscience—the ontological (the kind of one's relationship with God) and the existential (the moral quality of one's action)—Bavinck offers a third option besides the all-or-nothing thinking: Christ had a true conscience, but the operation of Christ's conscience only reflects his communion with God.

Bavinck denies Christ's conscience only as it relates to the judgment of "having acted morally." Then, he describes Christ's and prelapsarian Adam's consciences as follows:

This is so, in the first place, because it is in the conscience that we take note of the bond that ties us to God. ...Second, we can say this because the conscience remains the continuing testimony of God within us. This testimony did not come after the fall but is a surviving remnant of the original testimony in Adam that was his communion with God.⁶³

⁶¹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith, Volumes One and Two: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, trans. Terrence N. Tice, Catherine L. Kelsey and Edwina G. Lawler, ed. Catherine L. Kelsey and Terrence N. Tice (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2016), 517.

⁶² Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:205.

⁶³ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*,. 1:206.

Two noteworthy observations can be made according to the above passage. First, that Christ had a conscience strictly means that Christ's conscience operates in the sphere of religion rather than morality—that is, in Christ's communion with God is found the true, core meaning of conscience. This showcases Bavinck's Christological definition of conscience: conscience is not defined by moral actions but rather by the prototype of Christ's conscience, that is, by the communion with God that is perfectly embodied in Christ's union with the Father.⁶⁴ Second, the rupture between the prelapsarian and postlapsarian consciences is not complete. The original testimony to the law of God and the communion with God partly survives in the human being after the fall.⁶⁵ Hence, Bavinck is able to affirm Christ's conscience and thus the Chalcedonian doctrine of the consubstantiality of Christ's humanity with ours.

The question that remains is how such a conscience operates in the case of Jesus's temptation to sin. Can Bavinck's approach help us affirm both the authenticity of Jesus's temptation and his impeccability?

⁶⁴ Although Christ and the prelapsarian Adam are fully conscious of the syntērēsis, Christ's union with the Father makes Christ's prelapsarian conscience unique vis-à-vis the prelapsarian Adam's conscience.

⁶⁵ Bavinck's contention here corresponds to his theology of general revelation. *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:284–87.

Christ's Silent Conscience and His Impeccability

According to Bavinck's notion of conscience, Christ's impeccability and sinlessness are tied to his conscience, which operates to exonerate Christ's actions in face of temptation. But, as I have argued, if this were the case, Christ's conscience would be postlapsarian, and thus his mediatorship is undermined. Hence, something different must be operative in Christ.

In addressing this challenge, we can appeal to a statement by Bavinck: "The conscience is a judge, but this assumes injustice. In the state of integrity, *conscience was silent, faith spoke.*"⁶⁶ So, in Christ's assumption of an unfallen human nature, his conscience was silent, but his faith spoke during his life on earth. That is, his faith substitutes for his conscience in responding to the word of God (i.e., the moral law). Bavinck partly agrees with Schleiermacher here. Because conscience is part of human nature, and thus of Christ's human nature, Schleiermacher contends that Christ "always bore a completely satisfied conscience...; his conscience was always in a state of silence."⁶⁷ Though both Bavinck and Schleiermacher point to the peculiar state of Christ's conscience as silent, they, nonetheless, differ in that Schleiermacher does not connect conscience and faith, whereas for Bavinck Christ did have a conscience, but it was overshadowed by Christ's faith. Bavinck's connection between conscience and faith serves to construe Christ's impeccability in two respects.

⁶⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:205–6 (emphasis added).

⁶⁷ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 519.

First, given that the conscience *in se* primarily shows a bond between humans and God, the person's perfect faith in God consummates the conscience: that is, it leads the conscience into the state of silence. As has been illustrated earlier, the religious dimension of conscience takes shape as one's conscience is subservient to God through the word of God (the law and the Gospel). We can develop this connection between conscience and the word of God in a Christological direction. That is, that Christ's faith spoke means that his faith is the unique exemplar that shows the religious dimension of conscience and his unique, faithful response to divine word. Given that Christ's humanity is united with his divinity in the second Person of the Triune God—namely, the Word of God—Christ's conscience, which reflects Christ's perfect relationship with God, rests not only in the response of Christ's humanity to the word of God but also, more significantly, in his humanity's obedience to the Word of God. "By nature," Bavinck asserts, "faith for...Christ was nothing other than the act of clinging to the word and promises of God, a holding on to the Invisible One."⁶⁸ By adding the theology of the hypostatic union and the Word of God, it can be argued that Christ's conscience is overshadowed by Christ's faith in the word of God and ultimately the Word of God. In addition, Christ's faith in the word of God, which reflects his relationship with God, is ultimately determined by the intra-Trinitarian communion between the Father and the Son (the Word of God). Hence, the silence of Christ's conscience and the speaking of his faith manifests the perfect union between divinity and humanity.

Second, and therefore, that Christ's conscience was silent and his faith spoke means that Christ's impeccability depends upon the Word of God, in which Christ's humanity is

⁶⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:312.

subsisting. Were Christ to sin, it would mean either God's peccability or the break of the union of Christ's two natures.⁶⁹ It is not the faith response of Christ's humanity that determines his impeccability. Rather, it is the object of his faith, namely the word of God and ultimately the Word of God. While Christ's conscience was silent, his faith spoke and conformed to the word of God. In light of Christ's faith, Bavinck's syllogism of how the conscience renders judgment could be reformulated as follows: "The syntērēsis (i.e., the law or [w]ord of God) provides the major premise, and [Christ's] consciousness supplies the minor premise. [Christ's faith] draws the conclusion."⁷⁰ Christ's faith does not render moral judgment on his existence (accusing or exonerating), as does the conscience operating in postlapsarian humanity. Instead, Christ is fully conscious of the word of God in his relationship with God and is thus impeccable.

Theologians normally attribute Christ's impeccability to his divinity, describing his humanity as peccable.⁷¹ However, such a practice may leave the impression that Christ's divinity and humanity are somehow separated or divided. Such a stance is hardly in accord with the theology of *communicatio idiomatum*, be it Reformed, Lutheran, or Christian more

⁶⁹ Bavinck, 3:314. It is worth noting that for Bavinck the reliance of Christ's impeccability upon the hypostatic union is recognized by many theologians throughout the centuries. In addition to several other theologians, he highlights Peter Lombard's *Sentences* as well as Thomas Aquinas's and Bonaventure's commentaries on this work.

⁷⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:203.

⁷¹ For example, Oliver Crisp, *An American Augustinian: Sin and Salvation in the Dogmatic Theology of William G. T. Shedd* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock 2007), 75.

broadly. It is impossible to anatomize the one person by ascribing impeccability to his divinity and peccability to his humanity; the oneness of the person of Christ prevents this.

An objection can be anticipated at this point: Christ's human nature cannot be impeccable insofar as it would make humanity on a par with divinity. Augustine's account of humanity's impeccability in the eschaton can help us here: "the first freedom of the will was in being able not to sin; the final freedom will be much greater—in not being able to sin."⁷² For Augustine, the primordial freedom accorded the will was in being able not to sin; but in the eschaton, the postlapsarian humanity will be thoroughly transformed and share in a greater gift: that of not being able to sin. He looks with eschatological hope to the transformation of human volition through the grace of God. In *Enchiridion de fide, spe et caritate*, Augustine sees in Christ's impeccable humanity the prelude to this hope: humans, Augustine argues, "may know that they are justified from their sins by the same grace which enabled *the man Christ* to be free from the possibility of sin."⁷³

⁷² Augustine, "Admonition and Grace," in *Christian Instruction; Admonition and Grace; The Christian Combat; Faith, Hope and Charity*, trans. John Courtney Murray, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1950), 12.33.

⁷³ Augustine, "Faith, Hope and Charity," in *Christian Instruction; Admonition and Grace; The Christian Combat; Faith, Hope and Charity Augustine of Hippo*, trans. Bernard M. Peebles, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1950), 11.36 (emphasis added).

This eschatological hope of humanity that we will be, like Christ, not only sinless but free from the possibility of sin strengthens Bavinck’s view—Christ’s faith speaks as his conscience is silent—in two ways. First, Christ’s impeccability indicates that the human conscience will be silent in the state of glory, where humans will be in full communion with God through the Word of God, the mediator of the divine-human covenant. As noted earlier, the postlapsarian conscience renders judgment by condemning or acquitting, and thus operates in a context that presumes injustice. Christ’s impeccable humanity brings into focus the hope that the human conscience will be liberated from the circumstance of injustice in the eschaton.

Second, seen from the eschatological perspective, the impeccability of Christ’s humanity does not contradict the fact that he was truly tempted. Christ’s impeccability means that Christ’s faith spoke of the word of God during the moments of temptation.⁷⁴ Bavinck contrasts the speaking of Christ’s faith with the silence of Christ’s conscience, which paves the way for our understanding of Christ’s impeccable humanity in the cases when he was tempted. We need to recognize that impeccability and temptation are not exclusive. Following Oliver Crisp, we can distinguish between “succumbing to a particular temptation” and “the capacity to succumb to temptation.”⁷⁵ The latter is the *sine qua non* for the former,

⁷⁴ It is noteworthy to point out that this observation coincides with the rejection of Monothelism at the Third Council of Constantinople in 681 A.D. That Christ’s faith spoke of the Word of God vividly delineates the two operations of Christ’s two wills.

⁷⁵ Oliver Crisp, *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 122–36.

whereas the former is the nonessential condition for the latter.⁷⁶ Given that only God is incapable of being tempted (Jas 1:13–14), the humanity assumed by Christ must have the *capacity* to succumb to temptation, reflecting the qualitative distinction between humans and God.⁷⁷ However, the fallen human being cannot but exercise the capacity to succumb to temptation and then succumb to temptations at least on one occasion. How then does Christ’s humanity truly share in the capacity to succumb to temptation but not in its realization?

As has been noted earlier, the postlapsarian conscience must judge one’s response to temptations, condemning it if one chooses to act immorally and exonerating it if one resists temptations and acts, according to the *syntērēsis*. However, “Jesus, who himself always performed his Father’s will, who himself never experienced the condemning and accusing *voice of conscience* in his innermost being, did not assign to conscience that place that is assigned to it by many today in the domain of the moral life.”⁷⁸ Again, Christ’s silent conscience did not operate, but his faith spoke. Specifically, the capacity to succumb to temptation is not exercised in Christ’s impeccable humanity precisely because Christ’s speaking of the word of God in faith is *the* response to temptation.

⁷⁶ Crisp, 127.

⁷⁷ This is reminiscent of Thomas Aquinas’s saying: “An angel or any other rational creature considered in his own nature, can sin; and to whatever creature it belongs not to sin, such creature has it as a gift of grace, and not from the condition of nature.” Aquinas, *ST*, 1, q. 63, a. 1, resp.

⁷⁸ Herman Bavinck, “Conscience,” trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *The Bavinck Review* 6 (2015): 113–26 at 117 (emphasis added).

Christ's hypostatic union and ultimately the intra-Trinitarian communion ground his capacity to speak the word of God in faith.⁷⁹ Here we begin to see the relevance of this examination of Christ's conscience for the contemporary interest in the historical Jesus: the proposed theological understanding of Christ's conscience allows us to affirm another dimension of the historical particularity of Christ without threatening his divinity. Everything about the divine nature of the second Person is manifest in the historical Jesus. As Karl Rahner puts it:

Jesus is truly a man and, because he is truly a *historical* man, everything he does or suffers must reveal and make concrete all that flows from *his union with the eternal Word of God* in his human nature....there are times in the life of Jesus when this hidden *union with God* is realized in what might be called an express and deliberately willed prayer. Therefore Jesus goes into the desert, therefore he fasts.⁸⁰

According to Matthew 4:1–11, Christ's fasting was followed by temptations, which were overcome by Christ's speaking of the word of God. Hence, "this hidden union" is not merely realized in the "willed prayer" but, more significantly, in Christ's speaking of the word of

⁷⁹ This does not mean that Jesus Christ had the perfect knowledge of the word of God from the beginning. Bavinck contends for Christ's pilgrimage on earth, which reflects the development of Christ's wisdom, knowledge, morality and power. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:311–16.

⁸⁰ Karl Rahner, "He Came on the Side of the Weak," in *The Great Church Year: The Best of Karl Rahner's Homilies, Sermons, and Meditations*, trans. Harvey D. Egan, ed. Albert Raffelt (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 128-30 at 129 (emphasis added).

God in his faith. In this light, we might paraphrase Rahner's statement on the historical Jesus as follows: *By speaking of the word of God in faith*, everything historical Jesus does or suffers must reveal and make concrete all that flows from his union with the eternal Word of God in his human nature. Christ's triple temptation manifests Christ's unfallen and impeccable humanity.

In light of Jesus Christ's impeccable humanity, his temptations show how the faith in the word of God operates to overcome those unavoidable temptations. Bavinck puts it well:

Christ had to manifest his innate holiness through temptation and struggle; this struggle is not made redundant or vain by virtue of the inability to sin (*non posse peccare*). For although real temptation could not come to Jesus from within but only from without, he nevertheless possessed a human nature, which dreaded suffering and death.... And in those temptations he was bound, fighting as he went, to remain faithful; the inability to sin (*non posse peccare*) was not a matter of coercion but ethical in nature and therefore had to be manifested in an ethical manner.⁸¹

Christ's pilgrimage on earth is the pilgrimage of the faith of the impeccable humanity, that is, speaking of the Word of God in faith, which was particularly revealed during the moments of his temptations. Christ's faith indicates that Christ's human knowledge of the divine word does not become superhuman due to his hypostatic union. Instead, the Word of God acted through Christ's human nature, and Christ's human knowledge possesses the character proper to humanity. As such, he, who assumed the unfallen and impeccable humanity, is ever "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Heb 12:12). To put it in Balthasar's terms, Christ's faith

⁸¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:315.

is archetypal (*urbildlich*), and our faith is imitative; thus, Christ's faith is *the* parameter for ours.⁸² Christ purifies the human conscience (Heb 9:14; 10:2, 22) and makes it capable of responding to the word of God unto the eschaton. Hence, the earthly pilgrimage of Christ's impeccable humanity points us to the eschatological consummation of our conscience—that is, the conscience will become silent in a faithful trust in the word of God.

Conclusion

Was the humanity assumed by Christ fallen or unfallen? This paper has explored this question from the perspective of conscience. Whether or not Christ assumed a fallen human nature comes down to the question of whether or not Christ had a conscience.

Bavinck's notion of conscience affords a dialectical answer in this regard. On the one hand, his denial of Christ's conscience aims to stress that Christ's conscience did not affect Christ's existence insofar as Christ as the mediator cannot subordinate his conscience to the *syntēresis* in the same way as the postlapsarian conscience does. Thus, the humanity assumed by Christ was unfallen. On the other hand, Bavinck's affirmation of Christ's conscience shows not only that Christ assumed the true humanity but that Christ's conscience is the

⁸² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 300–301. On von Balthasar's archetypal faith, see Christopher M. Hadley, "The Archetypal Faith of Christ," *Theological Studies* 81 (2020): 671–92 at 671–86, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563920958147>.

perfect exemplar that commits to the word of God and, ultimately, to the Word of God, by virtue of his hypostatic union.

Bavinck's dialectical answer can advance the investigation of Christ's impeccability. The silence of Christ's conscience points to the fact that it was Christ's faith that spoke during his earthly pilgrimage, particularly during the moments of temptation. In faith, Christ's capacity to succumb to temptation never turns out to be succumbing to a particular temptation, though he was truly tempted. In keeping with this approach, the particular form that Christ's impeccability takes reveals the possibility that lies ahead for all humanity, its eschatological hope: the human conscience will become silent in the faithful trust in the word of God.

Bavinck's theology of conscience opens up a vista for future explorations of Christ's (un)fallen humanity. This paper has demonstrated how Bavinck's idea of Christ's silent conscience is in tune with the view of Christ's unfallen humanity and impeccability and also with the traditional commitment that Christ is "like us." That being so, the debates on the historical Jesus should be supplemented with explorations of the sort of humanity that was assumed by Christ in history, and, as far as this paper has explicated, with the view of Jesus Christ whose humanity is unfallen and whose conscience was silent.⁸³

Author Biography

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