

Could Christ have sinned?

Ellen White disagrees with Ellet J. Waggoner

By Terry Hill

In the Signs of the Times of December 23rd 1889, a three-paragraph editorial note was published stating that Christ, when He was here on earth, could not have sinned. No author is cited for this note but at that time, the editors of the Signs were E. J. Waggoner, M. C. Wilcox and C. P. Bollman. This note was written in response to a question that had been asked in a Sabbath School class. The following is what was stated in the first two paragraphs.

“A MEMBER of a Sabbath-school writes us that the question recently arose in the class whether or not Christ, when on earth, could have sinned, and that the majority said he could, while one or two thought he could not. We are asked to state our opinion. This we can do in a few words. We have not the slightest hesitation in saying that he could not. Our whole hope of eternal life through Christ rests upon this; for if there had been any temptation that could have induced Christ to sin, that would show that there is temptation that is stronger than divine power, which, in turn, would show that he is not " able to save to the uttermost.”

The question is simply another form of asking, "Can God sin?" for "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself." "The word was God," just as truly when it was "made flesh and dwelt among us," as it was in the beginning, "before the world was." The object of that mysterious union of divinity with humanity was to demonstrate the power of God over sin.”
(Editorial note, Signs of the Times, December 23rd 1889, editors were E. J. Waggoner, M. C. Wilcox and C. P. Bollman)

There are a number of points here that I feel need to be addressed.

In the Sabbath School class, “the majority” had agreed that Christ could have sinned. The author(s) of the editorial note disagreed. It was said “We have not the slightest hesitation in saying that he could not”. Notice the reason given for coming to this conclusion was that “divine power” was stronger than any temptation. It was also said that asking if Christ could sin, was only the same as asking, "Can God sin?" – which, would of course, have invited a negative response. Notice too it said that the object of Christ becoming incarnate was to “demonstrate the power of God over sin”.

Speaking personally, I disagree with the above reasoning. I do not believe it was a question of divine power but a question of Christ’s personal choice.

Adam and Eve were created perfect. In them was no propensity to sin. They did

though have the freedom to choose. They could either heed the voice of God or disobey it. As we know, they chose the latter. In the incarnation, Christ was placed in the same sinless position as Adam and Eve when they were created (Christ was sinless), but His human nature, unlike Adam and Eve's nature before the fall, was fallen human nature. This made Christ's test far greater than Adam's.

Christ's mission on earth was not to show that God, as God, could overcome sin, but that fallen humanity, when united with divine nature, could do so. In other words, by *choosing* to rely upon divine power, fallen humanity could obey God. This is what Christ proved in the incarnation. By choosing to rely upon His heavenly Father, He did, in His fallen human nature, overcome sin. As the apostle Paul said, "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh" (Romans 8:3).

In the third and final paragraph, the writer(s) made this very interesting comment

"We might pile scripture upon scripture in further proof of this position, but it is not necessary. Those who have a proper conception of Christ cannot find room in their minds for such a question. We are sorry that there is any Sabbath-school whose members have so low a view of Christ that they can turn aside from the grand themes of the lesson to discuss a question that ought never to be asked." (*Ibid*)

Again I disagree with this reasoning. This is because it misses the entire point of Christ becoming incarnate. As said previously, Christ came not to show that God and divine power were more powerful than sin, but to show that fallen humanity, when choosing to rely upon God, could choose not to sin. This is what Christ achieved. By relying upon God His Father, He overcame sin in fallen humanity. This is why He is our perfect example. He proved that it could be done.

I cannot accept that those who take the view that Christ could have sinned have a "low" view of Him; Neither do I believe it is a question that should never be asked. By contemplating what Christ achieved, also risked, in becoming flesh, we uplift Him and His Father to the highest. To realise that Christ could have sinned, and thereby, if He had sinned, would have lost His eternal existence, reveals to us the height and depth of God's love for fallen humanity. If Christ had sinned, then, like us, He would have become a sinner, and God would have lost His Son for eternity. This is not having a wrong conception of Christ or God. It is having a correct conception of them. Wondrous love.

Whoever wrote this response was so intent upon uplifting the power of God, also the fact that God was actually in Christ, that the entire point of Christ taking upon Himself the liabilities and limitations of fallen humanity was missed (see Hebrews 2:16-18, 4:14-16). As Ellen White explained to her niece Mary Watson

“The Son of God lived a perfect life of obedience in this world. We need always to keep in view the truthfulness of the humanity of Christ Jesus. When Christ became our substitute and surety, it was as a human being. He came as a man, and rendered the obedience of human nature to the only true God. He came not to show us what God could do, but what God did do, and what man, a partaker of the divine nature can do. It was the human nature of Christ that endured the temptations in the wilderness, not His divine nature. In His human nature He endured the contradiction of sinners against Himself. He lived a perfect human life. Jesus is everything to us, and He says to us, “Without me ye can do nothing.” (Ellen G. White, Letter 128 1896, To Mary Watson, July 9th 1896)

A response to an objection to the reasoning that Christ could not sin

In the Signs of the Times of June 9th 1890, there was a further response to the question of whether or not Christ could have sinned. It came from Ellet J. Waggoner. He was then the paper’s editor. His response was in the form of an article called *The Sinless One*. After referring to the editorial note of December 23rd 1889 (see page 1), also after quoting portions of it that said Christ could not have sinned, Waggoner explained

“We have received several letters in regard to this note, one brother claiming that it is in direct conflict with the following statement made by Mrs. E. G. White: “If it were not possible for him [Christ] to yield to temptation, he could not be our helper.” We are sure that it does not conflict with that statement. The misunderstanding is an instance of the impossibility of giving all sides of a subject in one item. Perhaps we can relieve the minds of our questioners if we say that while holding to the statement previously made, we just as firmly believe the following:— (E. J. Waggoner, Signs of the Times, June 9th 1890, ‘The Sinless One)

Waggoner believed that saying that Christ could not have sinned was in perfect harmony with where Ellen White had written, “If it were not possible for him [Christ] to yield to temptation, he could not be our helper.” The latter had been published in the Review and Herald of February 18th 1890. This was just 2 months after the original editorial note had appeared in the Signs of the Times (which claimed that Christ could not have sinned). Did Ellen White write her remarks in response to the editorial note? One is left to wonder.

Regardless of whether or not it was a direct response from Ellen White, I would say that what she wrote does serve to refute the idea that Christ could not have sinned. This though was not the opinion of Waggoner. He claimed that what she wrote was in harmony with the belief that Christ could not have sinned. After a lengthy explanation saying that Christ, in the incarnation, had been made like us, also that the temptations He endured were very real, he explained

“We do not think this side of the case can be stated any more strongly; and yet we see no reason to recall the statement before made. If Joseph could say, in the face of strong temptation, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9); if the beloved disciple could write by inspiration of the Spirit, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God " (1 John 3: 9); surely it May be said of the only-begotten Son of God, in whom dwelt " all the fullness of the Godhead.bodily," that he could not sin.

Take another point of view. Temptation comes through the working of Satan upon the frailty of human flesh, of which Christ himself was a partaker. We know that Satan in person put forth all his power on Jesus, not only in the wilderness, but through his whole earthly ministry, knowing that the fate of all men depended on him. If it had been possible for Satan to induce Christ to sin, he would have done it. The fact that Christ "did no sin"—that he "knew no sin," although subjected to the severest assaults of Satan, is sufficient to show that he could not be induced to sin.

This is the idea intended to be conveyed in the note referred to. In one sense, it was possible for Christ to sin, provided he had wished to, for the nature which he took was a nature subject to sin. Yet it was impossible for him to sin, because "God was in Christ," and that in perfect fullness. Not simply did he have the power of God with him, but he was God; for even when he lay a babe in the manger at Bethlehem, the decree went forth, "Let all the angels of God worship him." Heb. 1: 6. He never ceased to be God, and therefore he did not sin. He demonstrated in his own person the power of divinity to prevail against the power of Satan working through human weakness." (*Ibid*)

Waggoner said that it was “impossible” for Christ to have sinned. This is even though he agreed that Christ was free to do so (if He had so wished). This can only be considered a contradiction. If it was impossible for Christ to sin, then He never had the freedom to do so. This is even if He had wished to sin. Notice Waggoner said, “He never ceased to be God, and therefore he did not sin”, also that “If it had been possible for Satan to induce Christ to sin, he would have done it”.

Waggoner’s reasoning for it being impossible for Christ to sin, was the same as given in the previous editorial note of December 23rd 1889 (which quite possibly had also been written by Waggoner). He said it was impossible for Christ to sin because “God was in Christ”. After saying that we cannot explain how Christ could be human and have retained His divinity, or explain how He could be God and human at the same time, Waggoner went on to say

"We advise our friends not to try to explain these things. The fact that we cannot understand how a thing can be, argues nothing against it. Finite minds cannot comprehend the workings of Infinity. We can only accept as true the statements which that same divine power makes concerning itself. But we can take comfort in every revelation of divinity. We take the highest comfort in thinking that Christ voluntarily subjected himself to every condition and every weakness that it is possible for men to be subject to; and our comfort in this arises not less from the fact that there is thus a bond of sympathy established between us, than from the knowledge that "his divine power," which was such that Satan could not by any possibility overthrow it, is that by which are "given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness." 2 Peter 1:3. " (*Ibid*)

Again there is an appeal not to attempt to explain these things. Again it is said that Satan could not "by any possibility" overcome the "divine power" that was in Christ. Waggoner took the view that it was because of divine power (the power of God) that Christ did not sin. I would disagree. I believe it was all a question of choice. Christ chose, above all things, also in all things, to obey the word of His Father.

Ellet J. Waggoner's previous thoughts

Waggoner's conclusion to the question of whether or not Christ could have sinned was not new to him. In two previous articles he had written

"God was in Christ," and hence He could not sin. His humanity only veiled His Divine nature, which was more than able to successfully resist the sinful passions of the flesh. There was in His whole life a struggle. The flesh, moved upon by the enemy of all righteousness, would tend to sin, yet His Divine nature never for a moment harboured an evil desire, nor did His Divine power for a moment waver. Having suffered in the flesh all that all men can possibly suffer, He returned to the throne of the Father, as spotless as when He left the courts of glory. When He lay in the tomb, under the power of death, "it was impossible that He should be holden of it," because it had been impossible for the Divine nature which dwelt in Him to sin.

"Well," some will say, "I don't see any comfort in this for me; it wasn't possible that the Son of God should sin, but I haven't any such power." Why not? You can have it if you want it. The same power which enabled Him to resist every temptation presented through the flesh, while He was "compassed with infirmity," can enable us to do the same. Christ could not sin, because He was the manifestation of God." (*E. J. Waggoner, Signs of the Times January 21st 1889, 'God manifest in the flesh'. and October 21st 1889, 'The nature of Christ'*)

He also published the above in *The Present Truth* of July 2nd 1891. This was 18 months after the editorial note had been published saying that Christ could not have sinned (see page 1 above).

It was also much the same as he had written in his book *Christ and His Righteousness* (1890). On page 28 we find him saying

“One more point, and then we can learn the entire lesson that we should learn from the fact that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." How was it that Christ could be thus "compassed with infirmity" (Heb. 5:2), and still know no sin? Some may have thought, while reading thus far, that we were depreciating the character of Jesus, by bringing Him down to the level of sinful man. On the contrary, we are simply exalting the "Divine power" of our blessed Saviour, who Himself voluntarily descended to the level of sinful man, in order that He might exalt man to His own spotless purity, which He retained under the most adverse circumstances. His humanity only veiled His Divine nature, by which He was inseparably connected with the invisible God, and which was more than able successfully to resist the weaknesses of the flesh.” (E. J. Waggoner, ‘*Christ and His Righteousness*’, page 28)

Waggoner later reasoned (as he done so in the previously quoted articles)

“But someone will say, "I don't see any comfort in this for me. To be sure, I have an example, but I can't follow it, for I haven't the power that Christ had. He was God even while here on earth; I am but a man." Yes, but you may have the same power that He had if you want it. He was "compassed with infirmity," yet He "did no sin," because of the Divine power constantly dwelling within Him.” (Ibid page 29)

Not only did Waggoner believe it was impossible for Christ to have sinned, but also that He was “inseparably connected with the invisible God”. If Waggoner’s views had been correct, it would have been impossible for a risk to Christ’s existence to exist. The only way that Christ could have lost His eternal existence was by sinning. Notice again that Waggoner said that Christ did not sin because of the divine power dwelling within Him. If this were true, then it had nothing to do with Christ choosing to obey His Father.

Ellen White’s comments on whether Christ could sin

Here now are statements from Ellen White that clearly say that Christ, when He was here upon earth, could have sinned. The first one is the one quoted by Waggoner (see page 3)

“Letters have been coming in to me, affirming that Christ could not have had the same nature as man, for if he had, he would have fallen under similar temptations. If he did not have man's nature, he could not be our

example. If he was not a partaker of our nature, he could not have been tempted as man has been. If it were not possible for him to yield to temptation, he could not be our helper.” (Ellen G. White, *Review & Herald* 18th February 1890, ‘How to meet a controverted point of doctrine’)

It is possible that some of these “letters” were written in response to the Signs of the Times editorial note of December 23rd 1889 which had said that Christ could not have sinned, also the other articles Waggoner had written that said exactly the same. This article by Ellen White was published less than two months after the editorial note.

The same year (1890) Ellen White wrote the following (again confirming that Christ could have sinned)

““Our Lord’s trial and test and proving shows that He could yield to these temptations, else the battle was all a farce. But He did not yield to the solicitude of the enemy, thus evidencing that the human nature of man, united with the divine nature by faith, may be strong and withstand Satan’s temptations.

Christ’s perfect humanity is the same that man may have through connection with Christ. As God, Christ could not be tempted any more than He was not tempted from His allegiance in heaven. But as Christ humbled Himself to the nature of man, He could be tempted. He had not taken on Him even the nature of the angels, but humanity, perfectly identical with our own nature, except without the taint of sin. A human body, a human mind, with all the peculiar properties, He was bone, brain, and muscle. A man of our flesh, He was compassed with the weakness of humanity. The circumstances of His life were of that character that He was exposed to all the inconveniences that belong to men, not in wealth, not in ease, but in poverty and want and humiliation. He breathed the very air man must breathe. He trod our earth as man. He had reason, conscience, memory, will, and affections of the human soul which was united with His divine nature.

Our Lord was tempted as man is tempted. He was capable of yielding to temptations, as are human beings. His finite nature was pure and spotless, but the divine nature that led Him to say to Philip, “He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father” also [John 14:9], was not humanized; neither was humanity deified by the blending or union of the two natures; each retained its essential character and properties.

But here we must not become in our ideas common and earthly, and in our perverted ideas we must not think that the liability of Christ to yield to Satan’s temptations degraded His humanity and He possessed the same sinful, corrupt propensities as man.

The divine nature, combined with the human, made Him capable of yielding to Satan's temptations. Here the test to Christ was far greater than that of Adam and Eve, for Christ took our nature, fallen but not corrupted, and would not be corrupted unless He received the words of Satan in the place of the words of God. To suppose He was not capable of yielding to temptation places Him where He cannot be a perfect example for man, and the force and the power of this part of Christ's humiliation, which is the most eventful, is no instruction or help to human beings.

But the facts of this history are not fable, but a living, acting, experience. [To deny this] would rob Jesus of His greatest glory—allegiance to God—which enshrouded Him as a garment in this world on the field of battle with the relentless foe, and He is not reckoned with the transgressor. He descended in His humiliation to be tempted as man would be tempted, and His nature was that of man, capable of yielding to temptation." (Ellen G. White, MS 57, Diary 1890, 'The Humiliation of Christ')

Two years later in 1892, Ellen White made these comments

"Those who claim that it was not possible for Christ to sin, cannot believe that He took upon Him human nature. Christ was actually tempted, not only in the wilderness, but all through his life. In all points He was tempted as we are, and because He successfully resisted temptation in every form, He gave us a perfect example." (Ellen G. White, Bible Echo, 1st November 1892, 'Tempted in all points like as we are', see also Signs of the Times, 10th October 1892, 'Draw from the source of strength')

Three years later in a General Conference Bulletin we find these words

"Jesus did not consent to sin. Not even by a thought could he be brought to the power of Satan's temptations. Yet it is written of Christ that he was tempted in all points like as we are. Many hold that from the nature of Christ it was impossible for Satan's temptations to weaken or overthrow him. Then Christ could not have been placed in Adam's position, to go over the ground where Adam stumbled and fell; he could not have gained the victory that Adam failed to gain. Unless he was placed in a position as trying as that in which Adam stood, he could not redeem Adam's failure. If man has in any sense a more trying conflict to endure than had Christ, then Christ is not able to succor him when tempted. Christ took humanity with all its liabilities. He took the nature of man with the possibility of yielding to temptation, and he relied upon divine power to keep him." (Ellen G. White, General Conference Bulletin, 25th February 1895, 'Extracts from Life of Christ')

The next year (1896), Ellen White wrote the following

“Christ took human nature upon him, and became a debtor to do the whole law in behalf of those whom he represented. Had he failed in one jot or tittle, he would have been a transgressor of the law, and we would have had in him a sinful, unavailing offering.” (*Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times, 16th January 1896, ‘Sin condemned in the flesh’*)

In a letter to Bro and Sister Baker, Ellen White very plainly wrote

“He could have sinned; He could have fallen, but not for one moment was there in Him an evil propensity. He was assailed with temptations in the wilderness, as Adam was assailed with temptations in Eden.” (*Ellen G. White, Letter 8, 1895. written to Brother and Sister W. L .H. Baker, North American workers in Australia, February 9th 1896*)

Three years later, Ellen White’s mind again returned to the same subject.

“He [Christ] could not have been tempted in all points like as man is tempted had there been no possibility of his failing. He was a free agent, placed on probation, as was Adam and as is man.

Unless there is a possibility of yielding, temptation is no temptation.” (*Ellen G. White, Manuscript 29, 1899, ‘Sacrificed for Us’, typed March 17, 1899*)

Ellen White, shortly afterwards, wrote in another manuscript

“The temptations to which Christ was subjected were a terrible reality. As a free agent He was placed on probation, with liberty to pass under Satan’s jurisdiction, to work at cross-purposes with God. If this were not so, if there was no possibility of His falling, He could not be tempted in all points as the human family is tempted. If it were impossible for Him to yield to temptation, it was no temptation to Him.” (*Ellen G. White, Ms 93 1899, July 13th 1899, ‘Words of Instruction from the Apostle Paul’*)”

The same year, the above thoughts were repeated to the youth of her day

“Unless there is a possibility of yielding, temptation is no temptation. Temptation is resisted when man is powerfully influenced to do a wrong action; and, knowing that he can do it, resists, by faith, with a firm hold upon divine power. This was the ordeal through which Christ passed. He could not have been tempted in all points as man is tempted, had there been no possibility of his failing. He was a free agent, placed on probation, as was Adam, and as is every man. (*Ellen G. White, Youth’s Instructor, July 20th 1899, ‘Sacrificed for us’*)

Later the same year (1899), Ellen White again counselled the Seventh-day Adventist youth

“The temptations to which Christ was subjected were a terrible reality. As a free agent He was placed on probation, with liberty to yield to Satan's temptations and work at cross-purposes with God. If this were not so, if it had not been possible for Him to fall, He could not have been tempted in all points as the human family is tempted.” (Ellen G. White, *Youth's Instructor*, 26th October 1899, 'Against principalities and powers')

The risk

The question is asked: What if Christ had sinned? Ellen White also had much to say on that subject – that is, if it had happened – which we are all very grateful that it didn't. Here are her comments.

“To the honor and glory of God, His beloved Son -- the Surety, the Substitute -- was delivered up and descended into the prisonhouse of the grave. The new tomb enclosed Him in its rocky chambers. If one single sin had tainted His character the stone would never have been rolled away from the door of His rocky chamber, and the world with its burden of guilt would have perished.” (Ellen G. White, Ms. 81, 1893, p. 11, *Diary entry for Sunday, July 2, 1893, Wellington, New Zealand*)

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“Christ has found his pearl of great price in lost, perishing souls. He sold all that he had to come into possession, even engaged to do the work, and run the risk of losing his own life in the conflict.” (Ellen G. White, *Letter 119 1895, to Edson and Emma White, February 18th 1895*)

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“Remember that Christ risked all; "tempted like as we are," he staked even his own eternal existence upon the issue of the conflict.” (Ellen G. White, *General Conference Bulletin 1st December 1895 'Seeking the Lost'*)

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“Had there been the least taint of sin in Christ, Satan would have bruised His head. As it was, he could only touch His heel. Had the head of Christ been touched, the hope of the human race would have perished. Divine wrath would have come upon Christ as it came upon Adam. Christ and the church would have been without hope.” (Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times, June 9th 1898, 'Tempted in all points like as we are'*)

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“Yet into the world where Satan claimed dominion God permitted His Son to come, a helpless babe, subject to the weakness of humanity. He permitted

Him to meet life's peril **in common with every human soul**, to fight the battle as every child of humanity must fight it, **at the risk of failure and eternal loss.**" (Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*. Page 49 'Unto you a Saviour')

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"Never can the cost of our redemption be realized until the redeemed shall stand with the Redeemer before the throne of God. Then as the glories of the eternal home burst upon our enraptured senses we shall remember that Jesus left all this for us, that He not only became an exile from the heavenly courts, **but for us took the risk of failure and eternal loss.**" (*Ibid*, page 131, 'The victory')

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"Though Christ humbled Himself to become man, the Godhead was still His own. **His Deity could not be lost while He stood faithful and true to His loyalty.**" (Ellen G. White, *The Signs of the Times*, 10th May 1899, 'Christ glorified')

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"He became subject to temptation, endangering as it were, His divine attributes. Satan sought, by the constant and curious devices of his cunning, to make Christ yield to temptation." (Ellen G. White, *Letter 5*, 1900, to W. A. Colcord, January 4th 1900)

Conclusion

The possibility of Christ sinning was very important to Ellen White. She regarded it as essential to understanding what Christ had achieved, and had also risked, in consenting to becoming incarnate. She also regarded it as integral to believing that it is possible for us, as erring mortals encumbered with fallen human nature, to overcome sin. This was because Christ, encumbered with fallen human nature, had achieved it. On this topic therefore, her views were directly contrary to those of Ellet J. Waggoner.

First published 12th October 2020

Website: <https://theprophetstillspeaks.co.uk>