

expressed, when I fail to convey the heights and the depths of God's truth, then I cast myself on God's mercy to forgive—on God's Omnipotence to use—on God's wisdom to convert—so that, after all, and in spite of all, hearts may be impressed and won by the living touch of even my poor fragmentary sermon. *My best is bad, but linked with God's best it must prevail.*"



The Temptation of Christ.

BY THE REV. H. M. SANDERS, M.A.,

Vicar of St. John's, Highbury, N.

"ABLE not to sin" (*Posse non peccare*), or "Not able to sin" (*Non posse peccare*). Which of these is correct? What do we mean when we say Christ *could not* sin? The question is no new one. It has been debated from Augustinian, and even from pre-Augustinian, days. It was a classical subject for discussion in the days of the Schoolmen, providing them with a metaphysical and psychological problem after their own heart. Nor was this to be wondered at when we remember that the exegesis of the Temptation then current was that, *e.g.*, of St. Chrysostom (see *THE CHURCHMAN*, March, 1909, p. 202). The problem of making the Temptation *real* to a sinless Christ was, and is, a difficult one if that Temptation is viewed as in any shape, however remote, addressed to His own personal, moral, or religious sense. What we mean will be the better understood if we consider for a moment the case of a Christian man well advanced on the road of holiness (*cf.* 1 John v. 18). Of such a man it is possible to say that "in Christ" he cannot be tempted with sin. So long as he is "in Christ," in *living, conscious union* with the Lord, he cannot, strictly speaking, be induced to evil at all. All his shortcomings are due to the victory, for the time being, of the old Adam over the new,

because he has relaxed his love and faith and obedience. And actually—though, alas! the best so often fall or “revert”¹ in this fashion—it is true to say that the life of union with Christ renders *impossible* such gross sins as blasphemy, filthy speech, and filthy action. The true saint has no taste for such. They do not attract; they only repel. He is conscious, however, that even against these he still has a warfare to wage. They lie, for the present, right beyond the farthest outwork of his security, and he believes that Christ can and will keep them there, but only so long as he allows evil in *no* shape to make a truce with him. He must hate it even in its “mild” forms. He must remember that spiritual declension can come so gradually as to be almost unnoticed at first, but that, like the “hole in the dyke,” the little unrepented failure may lead to the ultimate bursting of all his defences. But the fact remains that “in Christ” there are certain evils into which he cannot fall, and ideally he is immune from all. From this it is lawful to conclude that the life of Christ, which, as imparted to the believer by the Holy Spirit, is the Source of this immunity, is itself, and if *is*, then also *was* similarly immune; in short, that He had no “taste for” sin. With the believer this immunity is not a negative but a positive excellence. “He doth not commit sin,” not because he cannot, but because he will not. What rejoices God in him is that he does not, in the face of the possibility that he could. Is it a negative thing with Christ? If we answer “Yes,” then we seem to make the believer’s derivative excellence greater than that of its Source. If we answer “No,” then we seem to admit a possibility of sinning in the case of Christ. Either supposition is impossible. There must be some *via media*. We cannot be left on the horns of this dilemma. The origin of the dilemma arises from confusion of thought between a moral and a physical necessity. If we

¹ Cf. Bishop Moule, “Romans,” p. 195. “He fails,” he “reverts,” when being a sinner by nature still and in the body still, he meets the law and meets temptation in any strength short of the definitely sought power of the Holy Ghost, making Christ all to him for peace and victory.” Cf. Bishop Gore, “Romans,” i., p. 267.

say "God cannot lie," we mean God *will* not—wills not to lie. Anselm's famous answer will bear quoting in full :¹

"All power depends on will. When I say, for instance, that I can speak or walk, it is implied, if I will. But if freedom of will be not implied, it is not power, but necessity. For when I say that I can be betrayed or conquered against my will, this is no capacity of mine, but my necessity and power on the part of another. For that I can be betrayed or conquered is nothing else but that another can betray or conquer me. Thus we may say of Christ that He could lie, if we imply 'if He willed it,' and since He could not lie against His will, nor could will to lie, no less exact is it to say that he could not lie."

Or, later on, in the same chapter:

"That is improperly called *necessity*, which is neither compulsion or prohibition."

The first Adam and the Second Adam each met the tempter in a state of innocence. The will of each was free. They both possessed the *liberum arbitrium*.² The former fell because he had not, in addition, the *beata necessitas boni* (Augustine). The Second Adam overcame the tempter because His free will was inflexibly fixed upon righteousness.

But this question "could never have been so much as started," as Archbishop Trench says,³ "except in a Nestorian severance of the Lord into two persons, and thus in the contemplation of a human person in Him, as at some moment existent apart from the Divine. When we acknowledge in Him two natures, but these at no time other than united in the one person of the Son of God, the whole question at once falls to the ground. And such is the Church's faith. Christ was perfect man in the sense of having everything belonging to the completeness of the human nature; but there is not, and there never at any moment has been, any other *person* but the Son of God. His human body and soul, at the very moment of their union with one another, were also united with the Eternal Word.

¹ "Cur Deus Homo," ii., x.

² Cf. "Greg. Nyssa Contra Eunom., Migne," ii."545. ἡ δὲ ψυχὴ (= the natural life of man) ἀμαρτία οὐκ ἐστὶν ἀλλὰ δεκτικὴ ἀμαρτίας ἐξ ἀβουλίας ἐγένετο.

³ "Studies in the Gospels," p. 28.

so that there is not, nor ever has been, any human person to contemplate, or in regard to whom to put this question."¹

In short, of the two questions asked at the head of this paper, it is the second, Not able to sin (*Non posse peccare*), which fits the case. Nor is there in this answer anything which subtracts from the victory of Christ its moral virtue and positive excellence.

How strongly does the view of the Temptation which makes it addressed to the sense of Messiahship in Jesus support this contention! How really does it take out of our path some of the difficulties which a false exegesis had placed there! The tempter recognizes that his opponent has the *beata necessitas*, of which we spoke above. It is hopeless to attack Him with moral or religious evil. He will see if his subtlety is equal to the task of subverting that very "necessity," of using it to his own ends. He made the attempt. He failed. He departed to return again after a season (*ἄχρι καιροῦ*, Luke iv. 13), only, however, under the same *free* necessity, to be foiled again!

¹ Cf. "Athanasius Contra Arios," iii. 35. "It was necessary, then, first of all to examine these points, that whenever we find our Lord either doing or saying anything by the action of His body, which at the same time proves His Divine power, we should ascribe all such actions and words to Him as God; and that, when the manner of His acting or speaking is represented as human, and when any infirmity seems to encompass Him, we should understand that He bore our flesh and became man, and that, as such, He did and said and suffered these things. We cannot fail to have a right notion and belief concerning the person of Christ if we distinguish, as we should, between the two natures; and if, at the same time, that we attribute to each nature its proper faculties and functions, *we look upon both as the powers and acts of one person.*"

