

William Swan Plumer's Defense of the Impeccability of Jesus Christ

By Caleb Cangelosi

When I was in the fifth or sixth grade, my class took a field trip to the John C. Stennis Space Center in Hancock County, Mississippi. After visiting the exhibits, our teachers told us we were going to a gift store to buy souvenirs. I was near the front of the group of students, and as we left the exhibit building I saw the gift store and went inside. It was not a very big store, but I found a space shuttle toy and bought it. Soon I realized that most of my friends were not in the gift store with me. I wondered where they had gone, so I walked outside to locate them. To my dismay, I discovered that in my hubris and haste I had entered a smaller gift store that was a good distance before the main gift store. When I went into the latter, my heart sank. There before me was a far greater assortment of space toys, as well as space ice cream. All my friends were eating space ice cream, but I had spent all my money in the first gift store. I had been ignorant, and was poorer for it.

My experience in middle school is illustrative of what has happened in the past one hundred and thirty five years with regard to the historical-theological reflection upon the doctrine of Christ's impeccability. The sinlessness of Jesus Christ has rarely been questioned within the Church, but the question of whether our Lord and Savior was *able* to sin (peccability) or *not able* to sin (impeccability) has been frequently debated, particularly over the past two centuries. Unfortunately, later authors have completely overlooked a rich source of exegetical and theological reasoning in favor of Christ's impeccability, and have relied on briefer, sparser treatments either to be their sparring partners or to bolster their defense of the doctrine. These shorter treatments are certainly not unsound or poorly argued, but are inadequate when compared to the former source, which comes at the question from more angles and often with greater insight. The ignored work of which I speak is Dr. William Swan Plumer's 1876 book *The Person and*

Sinless Character of Our Lord Jesus Christ,¹ a small volume one observer of Plumer's life calls "his most original and vigorously logical production."²

Plumer's book was not unfamiliar to his immediate contemporaries. An anonymous article in the January 1877 edition of the *Southern Presbyterian Review* discussed the modern origin and the theological foundations of the doctrine of the peccability of Jesus Christ, and it recognized the merits of Plumer's work: "The Church is under lasting obligations to Dr. Plumer for so distinctly calling its attention to this doctrine and its far-reaching consequences, in his admirable little book on 'The Sinless Character of Christ.'"³ Southern Presbyterian leader Robert Lewis Dabney, in the second edition of his *Systematic Theology*, under the question, "Was Christ's human nature peccable?" lists only one pro-impeccability work: Plumer's volume.⁴ Yet eight

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1. William Swan Plumer, *The Person and Sinless Character of our Lord Jesus Christ* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee on Publication, 1876). Henceforth identified as *Sinless*.

2. Obituary from the *St. Louis Presbyterian*, October 29, 1880. The William Swan Plumer Manuscript Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

3. "The Impeccability of Christ," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 28, No. 1 (1877): 142. According to Wayne Sparkman, the article has been attributed to Clement Read Vaughn.

4. Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (1878; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 464. Dabney's arguments come directly from Plumer. F. W. Kremer, a Reformed Church pastor, in an article in the *Reformed Quarterly Review*, cites *The Person and Sinless Character of Our Lord Jesus Christ* as he advocates for the impeccability of Christ: "This little book defends, with much vigor, and yet in an irenic spirit, the impeccability of the Son of God." Kremer, "The Impeccability of Christ," *Reformed Quarterly Review* 26, No. 1 (1879): 273n⁷. Southern Methodists also were aware of Plumer's volume; see James L. Evans, "The Impeccability of Christ," *The Quarterly Review of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* 1, No. 4 (October, 1879): 613.

years after Plumer's death in 1880 his "admirable little book" was either unknown or unacknowledged by Union Theological Seminary (New York) theologian William G. T. Shedd.⁵

Shedd's ignorance, or possibly ignoring, of Plumer on this topic is ironic, since in the 20th and 21st centuries, Shedd is the primary source of a pro-impeccability view. In the first dissertation on the subject, Howard C. Zabriskie asserts, "After a careful examination of the important material bearing on the impeccability of Christ,

it is my conception that nothing of a detailed nature has ever been written on the subject, and very little of a worthwhile nature in recent years.... William G. T. Shedd is one of the few theologians whom the writer has found to give an able though brief defense of the subject."⁶ Puzzlingly, Zabriskie does know of Plumer, but he is unaware of *The Person and Sinless Character of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. Rather, he cites another of Plumer's books, *The Rock of Our Salvation*, to show that Plumer proved the truth of impeccability "in a commendable manner"—from the fact that Christ did not assume a human person but a human nature.⁷ Yet for Zabriskie it is Shedd "who has done more to develop this doctrine on a sound basis than probably any other writer," even though "he has written no books directly on the subject."⁸ Recently, Paul Enns also relies heavily on Shedd, asserting, "Perhaps the most capable and thorough discussion of this [impeccability] view is by William G. T. Shedd.... Shedd's precision and thoroughness are seen here as elsewhere."⁹ To the reader aware of Plumer's book, *The Person and Sinless Character of Our Lord Jesus Christ* is conspicuously absent from modern Christological reflection.¹⁰

5. He includes no reference to it either in "The Impeccability of Christ," *The Presbyterian Review* 9, No. 36 (1888), 555–568; or in his *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes, 3rd ed. (1888–1889; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2003), 659–671. I suggest below that Shedd knew of Plumer's book.

6. Howard C. Zabriskie, "The Impeccability of Christ" (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1938), 1.

7. Zabriskie, 21. William Swan Plumer, *The Rock of Our Salvation* (1867; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1995). It is also peculiar that the pages to which Zabriskie refers from *The Rock of Our Salvation*—pp. 76–79—say little about Christ's assumption of a human nature rather than a human person, or of the impeccability of Christ. Zabriskie, 21n26.

8. Zabriskie, 21–22. Cf. Kremer, 269n*.

9. Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology, Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 254n39.

10. Authors such as Arthur W. Pink and John Walvoord quote Shedd but not Plumer. A. W. Pink, "The Impeccability of Christ," *Studies in the Scriptures* (1932), <http://www.graceonlinelibrary.org/doctrine-theology/christology/the-impeccability-of-christ-by-arthur-w-pink/> [accessed 7/27/12]; John Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 145–152. Joseph Sahl cites Dabney and Shedd, but reference to Plumer's work is absent. Sahl, "The Impeccability of Christ," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140, No. 557 (1983): 10–20. Oliver Crisp has written recently on the impeccability of Christ both in a book and an article. On neither occasion does he recognize Plumer's contribution to the discussion, though he spends much time examining Shedd's arguments. Wayne Grudem mentions only Geerhardus Vos. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 538. Berkhof mentions only advocates of the peccability of Christ. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 318. Several authors detail long lists of theologians who have held to the impeccability of Christ, including Shedd, yet ignoring Plumer. Robert Lanning refers to thirteen defenders of the doctrine; Shedd is one of them, Plumer is not. Lanning, "The Impeccable Sinlessness of Jesus Christ" (M.Div. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1977), 30ff. Michael McGhee Canham notes twelve proponents of the impeccability of Christ, including Dabney and Shedd, but Plumer is missing from his list. Canham, "Potuit Non Peccare or Non Potuit Peccare: Evangelicals, Hermeneutics, and the Impeccability Debate," *The Master's Seminary Theological Journal* 11, No. 1 (2000): 95n7. John Elton McKinley surveys the entire history of the church in relation to this doctrine (including Shedd), yet again there is not one reference to Plumer (nor even is Dabney included in his bibliography). McKinley, "A Relational Model of Christ's Impeccability and Temptation" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005). Cf. also David Pauley, "Introduction" (2010), <http://doctrinesofgraceonline.blogspot.com/2010/10/could-jesus-christ-have-sinned-chapter.html> [accessed 7/27/12].

The purpose of this article is to challenge the contentions of Zabriskie and Enns, and to fill in the lacuna in the history of Christology, by demonstrating that the arguments put forth by Dr. William Swan Plumer construct a stronger and more thorough defense of the doctrine of Christ's impeccability than do Shedd's arguments, as they include the latter and even more. Such a claim is on the surface laughable; if Plumer's arguments were that good, one might ask, why were they lost so quickly to the dustbin of church history? Indeed, Plumer's book was essentially lost to history within a decade of its publication, save for the brief reference in Dabney's *Systematic Theology*, while Shedd's work has not been forgotten by scholars, and now through the fine work of Alan Gomes and Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company it is obtainable even by the student and layman. Part of the reason for the anonymity of Plumer's work is certainly the fact that it was a relatively small monograph, published by a Southern denominational publishing house in Richmond, Virginia (the Committee on Publication of the Presbyterian Church in the United States). By comparison, Shedd wrote an entire systematic theology, originally published by a major publisher in New York City (Charles Scribner's Sons). A more important reason for the anonymity of Plumer's book, however, is the anonymity of Plumer himself. Thus before we examine Plumer's case for the impeccability of Christ, we must briefly survey his life and work.

I. THE LIFE AND WORK OF A LEGEND IN HIS TIMES
A. Ancestors and Early Years

Dr. William Swan Plumer (1802–1880) was a remarkable man whose life spanned nearly the entire 19th century. He came from Presbyterian roots on both sides. His mother Catharine was the daughter of John McAllister,¹¹ of Scotch heritage, while his father William was descended from the Englishman Francis Plumer, who arrived in America in 1633 and settled in Newbury, Massachusetts, in the fall of 1634.¹² That same year the cousins Thomas Parker and James Noyes arrived in Newbury; these two men held to a Presbyterian polity in the midst of strident Congregationalism, and caused not a little unrest in the early days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.¹³ It is not readily apparent if Francis Plumer joined Parker and Noyes in their Presbyterian convictions, but Dr. Plumer's grandfather Jonathan Plumer was known to be a Presbyterian elder.¹⁴ Jonathan eventually moved down to the regions of Pennsylvania and Maryland, where Dr. Plumer's father (also named William) was born in 1760. On February 27, 1781¹⁵ (eight months before the Battle of Yorktown), the elder William met and married his wife Catherine in Long Run, Pennsylvania, and after several years they moved from Long Run to Greensburg¹⁶ (now Darlington), Pennsylvania, in Beaver County (northwest of Pittsburgh).¹⁷ There, on July 26,¹⁸ 1802, their youngest child¹⁹ William Swan Plumer was born, named after the Reverend William Swan, a pastor of the churches of Long Run and Sewickly, in the Presbytery of Redstone in Pennsylvania.²⁰

In Plumer's first two years of life his parents moved frequently, first to the Red Banks in the lower parts of Kentucky, then to Leading Creek, Ohio, and finally to Washington County, Ohio (outside Marietta, Ohio). Plumer's father was a river trader, poling his keel boat up and down the Ohio and Kanawha Rivers, and thus young Plumer's boyhood was spent in, on and around the waters of those rivers.²¹ Before he was fifteen, however, he had a strong desire to obtain a liberal education, and ultimately become a physician. His parents were

11. John McAllister was the eldest son of Archibald McAllister. Mary Catharine McAllister, *Descendants of Archibald McAllister, of West Pennsboro Township, Cumberland County, Pa. 1730–1898* (Harrisburg, PA: Scheffer's Printing, 1898), 9. Regarding her ancestor, McAllister writes, "Of Archibald McAllister, the emigrant and founder of this branch of the family, very little is known, except that about 1730 he owned a large tract of land in the Cumberland Valley, and was a strict Presbyterian. He was one of the organizers of the First Presbyterian Church, at Carlisle, Pa." *Ibid.*, 9. Catharine, born August 21, 1759, was named for her mother, Catharine McKnight. She was raised by her aunt. *Ibid.*, 21–22.

concerned about his health, and their inability to provide for his education financially,²² but they gave their blessing and by the age of sixteen he was teaching across the Ohio River in Wood County, Virginia (now West Virginia). After six months of hard labor he realized he wasn't making enough money, so he moved back home to await an offer to teach at Kanawha Salines in a town called Malden (near Charleston, West Virginia). In the

12. Walter L. Lingle, "William Swan Plumer." The William Swan Plumer Manuscript Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library. Moses Drury Hoge, in his address at Dr. Plumer's funeral service, asserts that Dr. Plumer was the seventh generation from Francis Plumer. "Funeral Services of Rev. Dr. Plumer," *Central Presbyterian* (Richmond, VA: October 27, 1880). The William Swan Plumer Manuscript Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

13. See Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 1:480–488; Charles A. Briggs, *American Presbyterianism: Its Origin and Early History* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1885), 94, Appendix III, xxiiiiff.; Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), 137; Williston Walker, *A History of the Congregational Churches in the United States* (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1894), 155.

14. "Death of Dr. Plumer," *Presbyterian Banner* (Pittsburgh, PA, October 27, 1880). The William Swan Plumer Manuscript Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

15. McAllister, 22.

16. Sources sometimes spell the name of this town as "Griersburg" or "Greensburg." Plumer, in his *Autobiographical Notes*, says he was born in Darlington. William Swan Plumer, *Unpublished Autobiographical Notes of William Swan Plumer*, No. II, 1. The William Swan Plumer Manuscript Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library. Henceforth, *Autobiographical Notes*.

17. They moved to Greensburg at the request of local Presbyterians who needed help boarding students in the town's Presbyterian school. "Death of Dr. Plumer."

18. Several sources give Plumer's birthdate as July 25, but Plumer himself says he was born on July 26. Plumer, *Autobiographical Notes*, No. II, 1.

19. The couple had three sons (Jonathan, John, and William Swan) and six daughters. McAllister, 22. Jonathan was nearly twenty years William's senior; he graduated from the College of New Jersey in 1809, and died soon after graduating. Plumer, *Autobiographical Notes*, No. IV, 2.

20. "Death of Dr. Plumer." The Reverend William Swan was originally from Cumberland County, PA, which became Franklin County in 1784. He was educated at Canonsburg Academy, licensed to preach on December 22, 1791, and ordained on October 16, 1793. He served his two congregations for twenty five years, resigned, and then was called back to Long Run in the spring of 1819. Due to ill health, he resigned again in 1822. He passed away November 27, 1827. "Swan, Rev. William," in *Encyclopedia of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America: Including the Northern and Southern Assemblies*, ed. Alfred Nevin (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Encyclopedia Publishing Co., 1884), 879.

21. Plumer, *Autobiographical Notes*, No. II, 1.

22. *Autobiographical Notes*, No. IV, 1–3.

fall of 1819, after a seven week wait, the offer came, and Plumer traveled on foot 127 miles in four days to reach his destination.²³

B. Plumer's Conversion and Early Ministry

The offer to teach in Malden was likely connected to the Colonel David Ruffner, a pioneer in the production of salt and a devout Presbyterian.²⁴ William Henry Ruffner, the grandson of Colonel Ruffner, states that the Colonel met the elder and younger William Plumers as they traded on the Kanawha River;²⁵ he was "so impressed with the youth, that he induced the father to give him up for the experiment of a different mode of life."²⁶ Providentially, it was a few months after Plumer arrived in Malden that he was converted, due in large part (according to an anecdote of William Henry Ruffner) to the influence of Colonel Ruffner's wife.²⁷ In his *Autobiographical Notes*, Plumer does not mention Mrs. Ruffner directly, but he does mention a prayer meeting that took place in the Ruffner home one Saturday evening sometime at the end of 1819 or the beginning

of 1820. The preacher at the Presbyterian Church in Charleston and the Salines while Plumer lived there was the Reverend Calvin Chadwick, a Congregationalist,²⁸ and when he began to exhort from God's word that evening, the Holy Spirit moved powerfully in Plumer's heart. As he tells the story,

[Mr. Chadwick] said many things, which I knew to be true, but I was familiar with them, & was unmoved by them. At length he spoke of the love & forbearance of Christ towards us all. My eyes had been fixed on him from the first. At length he said that the Lord Jesus was standing & had long been standing at the door of our hearts. He said he had stood there till his locks were wet with the dew of the night, & yet we would not let him in. At once I saw the base ingratitude of my course; I was pricked in the heart, I was brought down to the dust. I wept sorely. I was ashamed to let my feelings be known but I could not conceal them. The meeting closed. I went out into another room. I wept convulsively. In the room were two pious ladies,²⁹ who saw my state. One said she hoped my impressions would be lasting. This I understood. The other said she hoped it would not be long till to Mr. Plumer Christ would be all in all. What that meant I had no conception; but I felt convinced that the true Christian knew something of which I was wholly ignorant; & especially that I was sadly in the dark about the Savior....³⁰

Plumer had been taught the word of God from his earliest days by his mother and father. He had many early religious impressions, but he had never been truly and soundly converted.³¹ Now, for two weeks after the prayer meeting, "God's hand was heavy upon" him. In his *Autobiographical Notes*, he lays out five difficulties that beset him as he wrestled with God, including a self-righteous spirit and an idolatrous esteem of the profession of medicine.³² After further conversation with Mr. Chadwick, though, the Lord drove Plumer to despair of ever saving himself, and gave him saving faith and repentance unto life. In his own words,

I surrendered to God's will & ways. I saw a beauty & fitness in the plan of salvation. I saw it was right that God should rule everywhere, in particular in me & over me. I at once desired to honor him in every possible way, & in particular, if he would open the way, I desired to serve him in the ministry of the gospel. For my idol, medicine, I now cared nothing. I was not ashamed to let all the world know that I loved Christ.³³

23. *Autobiographical Notes*, No. II, 2; No. IV, 5–8. Waiting for the offer was a time of great trial for Plumer. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

24. Charles Hedrick, *History of the Ruffner Family of Kanawha* (1884), <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~wvkanawh/Early/ruffner2.html> [accessed 8/3/12]. Ruffner and his brother were the first to bore wells through the rocky mountains, and the first to use coal for boiling the water in the salt-making process.

25. Plumer's father would almost certainly have been a middleman for the salt that David Ruffner manufactured. See Hedrick's interesting explanation of the significance of salt manufacturing on the economy in the Kanawha region. *Ibid.*

26. William Henry Ruffner, "Continuation of the History of Washington College, Embracing the Regency of Rev. Henry Ruffner, D.D., 1829–30, with Sketches of Distinguished Alumni," *Washington and Lee Historical Papers*, No. 5 (Lexington, VA: 1895), 26. It is unclear at what point Plumer met Colonel Ruffner; Plumer does not mention Ruffner in the context of waiting seven weeks for the offer to come from Kanawha Salines.

27. Ruffner, *ibid.*

28. Plumer, *Autobiographical Notes*, No. IV, 28; No. V, 7–8. How ironic that the human instrument of Plumer's conversion was a Plan of Union minister, and that Plumer would in 1837 be one of the human instruments of expelling the Plan of Union presbyteries from the Presbyterian Church!

29. Was one of these ladies perhaps Colonel Ruffner's wife?

30. *Autobiographical Notes*, No. IV, 30–33.

31. *Autobiographical Notes*, No. IV, 15ff. For an instance of his early—yet not saving—religious sensibilities, see also William Swan Plumer, "William and His Mother; or What is True Repentance?" Tract No. 83 in *Presbyterian Tracts* (Philadelphia, Presbyterian Board of Publication: n.d.).

32. *Autobiographical Notes*, No. V, 1–4.

33. *Ibid.*, No. V, 4–5. Plumer states that the early part of his book *Vital Godliness* is essentially a narrative of his own experience.

His sense of call to the ministry was concomitant with his conversion. The Reverend Henry Ruffner, the son of Colonel Ruffner and eventual President of Washington College in Virginia, had returned to his native county soon after Plumer's rebirth, and the news of Plumer's vocational desires were communicated to him. Plumer writes, "He was interested in my plans. I told him all I felt. He took me to his confidence, gave me some good advice, offered to be my friend, & helped me mightily."³⁴ Ruffner counseled Plumer to journey across the mountains (again on foot³⁵) to gain a classical education under Dr. John McElhenny in Lewisburg (in Greenbrier County, Virginia).³⁶ Plumer immediately set off, arriving in Lewisburg in October of 1820 as one of the oldest of McElhenny's students.³⁷ In the spring of 1822, nearly twenty years old, he concluded his studies with McElhenny and entered Washington College (now Washington and Lee University) in Lexington, Virginia. There he studied under George Baxter and Henry Ruffner, and graduated in three years. The summer after graduating, he traveled (by boat this time³⁸) to Princeton Seminary. Because he had studied church government and church history in college, he only spent a year and three months in the seminary, leaving in September 1826. He had been licensed by the New Brunswick Presbytery on June 14, 1826, and on May 19, 1827, he was ordained by the Presbytery of Orange as an evangelist/church planter.³⁹

As a Presbytery evangelist from September 1826, to June 1829, Plumer kept a hurried pace, "preaching in destitute places organizing churches, aiding pastors & feeble churches."⁴⁰ He organized the Presbyterian churches in Danville, Virginia, and Warrenton, North Carolina, spending about eleven months in each town. He also labored in Raleigh, Washington, and Newburn, all in North Carolina. During one particularly trying season in Danville, Plumer received a letter from Dr. Archibald Alexander, who encouraged him with these words: "Believe assuredly that if your life is spared, God will accomplish wonders, even by your feeble instrumentality." God's wonders were indeed just beginning for this jar of clay.⁴¹

On June 11, 1829, Plumer married Mrs. Eliza Garden Hasell, of Hillsboro, North Carolina.⁴² His marriage was the occasion for him to settle down, and from June 1829, till September 1830, he was the stated supply of Briery Church in Prince Edward County, Virginia. In October 1830, he moved to the Tabb Street Presbyterian Church in Petersburg, Virginia, where he was for the first time regularly installed as a pastor. He remained here until September 19, 1834. From October 19, 1834, until November 19,

1846, he was the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Virginia.⁴³ It was in Richmond that Plumer had not only his longest pastorate, but arguably his most significant time of service as a presbyter.⁴⁴

34. *Autobiographical Notes*, No. V, 9. Plumer remarked of Ruffner, "No man ever had a better friend than I had in him." It was only when Ruffner appeared in town some eight or nine months after Plumer's conversion that Plumer was able to become a communing member of a local church. Plumer supposed that Mr. Chadwick the Congregationalist "did not feel quite at ease in receiving members into the Presbyterian Church & administering the sacraments among people of another branch of the church." *Ibid.*, No. V, 7-9.

35. *Autobiographical Notes*, No. V, 9-13.

36. McElhenny, who lived to be over ninety years old, was a native of the Waxhaws settlement in South Carolina. Walter L. Lingle, "More About Dr. Plumer," *Christian Observer*, March 18, 1936. The William Swan Plumer Manuscript Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library. The granddaughter of McElhenny tells the story of his life, and includes several nice anecdotes regarding Plumer. Rose Fry, *Recollections of the Rev. John McElhenny*, D. D. (Richmond, VA: Whittet and Shepperson, 1893).

37. Thus he earned the moniker of "Daddy." Fry, *Recollections*, 130;

38. Plumer, *Autobiographical Notes*, No. II, 3.

39. *Autobiographical Notes*, No. II, 3-6.

40. *Autobiographical Notes*, No. II, 6.

41. *Autobiographical Notes*, No. VI, 41-42. Plumer noted of Alexander's letter, "Hardly anything ever affected me more.... Never before had it occurred to me that the Lord would probably do anything considerable by one so feeble & so undeserving; yet here was this good man calling on me to believe assuredly that wonders were to be done even through me." Richard McIlwaine tells of an earlier instance in which Alexander looked ahead to Plumer's usefulness in the church: after a particularly discouraging session of sermon review by professors and fellow students, Alexander laid his hand on Plumer's shoulder and said tenderly, "My young brother, you must not be discouraged. If I am not mistaken, the Lord has a great work for you to do in the ministry." Richard McIlwaine, *Memories of Three Score Years and Ten* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1908), 112.

42. She was a widow of French Huguenot descent and a native of Charleston, South Carolina. Fourteen years his senior, she passed away on October 30, 1878, at the age of 90. Lingle, "William Swan Plumer." The couple would have two daughters, Eliza Douglas (b. April 2, 1830, d. April 14, 1882) and Kate (b. September 29, 1831, d. February 16, 1898). McAllister, 25. McAllister lists Eliza's maiden name as "Gardner;" she also lists a William Swan Plumer, born to William and Eliza on November 3, 1858, but I have found no corroborating record of this son elsewhere. Kate was the mother of William Swan Plumer Bryan (1856-1925), also a pastor in the Presbyterian Church in the United States.

43. "Plumer, William Swan," in *Encyclopedia of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, 622.

44. In addition to the work mentioned below, Plumer also served his community by advocating for the founding of the Institution for the Blind and Deaf and Dumb in 1838. It was located in Staunton, Virginia, and Plumer was on the first board. He also would be instrumental in bringing Moses Drury Hoge to Richmond as his assistant, with a vision to plant the Second Presbyterian Church. Peyton Harrison Hoge, *Moses Drury Hoge: Life and Letters* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee on Publication, 1899), 73-74.

He was only thirty-two years old when he arrived in Richmond, but he soon became a force in the life of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. The dissension between the Old School and the New School was brewing, and Plumer was in the middle of it. Though he was not a signatory of the Act and Testimony of 1834,⁴⁵ he was present at the 1837 Philadelphia Convention that was held in May one week before the upcoming General Assembly.⁴⁶ At that Assembly,

45. See <http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/act&testimony.pdf> for the document and its signatories [accessed 8/6/12].

46. *Minutes of the Philadelphia Convention of Ministers and Ruling Elders in the Presbyterian Church in the United States. Called by the Minority of the General Assembly of 1836* (Philadelphia, PA: Published for the Convention, 1837), 4. Plumer represented East Hanover Presbytery.

47. Plumer was the mover of the resolutions to exclude the Plan of Union Presbyteries. Benjamin Gildersleeve, "General Assembly," *The Charleston Observer*, June 17, 1837. For the full text of both resolutions, see *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: 1837), 419–421, 425.

48. Quoted in Henry Alexander White, *Southern Presbyterian Leaders* (1911; repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 288–289.

49. Henry Smith Stroupe, *The Religious Press in the South Atlantic States, 1802–1865* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1956), 15–17. Upon losing the majority of his Southern readership upon his announcement, Converse moved his paper to Philadelphia and bought out the *Philadelphia Observer*, combining the two papers under the new name, *Religious Telegraph and Observer*. When Gildersleeve bought the *Watchman of the South*, he combined it with his own paper and moved to Richmond to publish the new *Watchman and Observer*.

50. William Plumer's age certainly would qualify him for one of the youngest, if not the youngest, Moderators to serve a Presbyterian denomination.

51. McIlwaine, 145.

52. Cf. Plumer, *Autobiographical Notes*, No. II, 8.

53. William Swan Plumer, *Short Sermons to Little Children* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1848); William Swan Plumer, *The Ribbon Room and Other Stories: With Thoughts for Boys and Girls* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1849); and William Swan Plumer, *Plain Thoughts About Great and Good Things for Little Boys and Girls* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1849). The first and the third of these books were published together under the title, *Plain and Simple Thoughts for Children and Parents* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 2006).

54. William Swan Plumer, *The Grace of Christ* (1853; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1997).

55. At first, Plumer declined the call. But the professors of the Seminary visited him and appealed for him to come. Dr. David Elliott, who had been the Moderator of the 1837 General Assembly, gave up the chair of Didactic Theology, and Plumer was persuaded to come. Plumer, *Autobiographical Notes*, No. II, 10. For the authorization of the Board of Western Seminary to perform this department shuffling, cf. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1854), 36. Plumer's handwritten theological lectures are in his papers at Princeton Theological Seminary.

meeting in the Central Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Plumer was one of the primary spokesmen both for abrogating the Plan of Union and for preventing the Plan of Union presbyteries from being seated at the next General Assembly until their case be decided.⁴⁷ In regard to the first question, William Henry Foote states that Plumer's speech "changed the fate of the question," swaying those on the fence to vote to end the Plan of Union.⁴⁸

When Plumer returned home to Richmond, he read that Amasa Converse, the editor of the Richmond-based *Southern Religious Telegraph*, was throwing his support behind the New School. In response, Plumer started an Old School newspaper, the *Watchman of the South*, which he edited until July 10, 1845, when he sold it to Benjamin Gildersleeve, the famous editor of the *Charleston Observer*.⁴⁹ Plumer's fine churchmanship and his sound influence through the press led to his being elected Moderator of the 1838 General Assembly, at the age of thirty-five.⁵⁰

C. A Maturing Ministry

Richard McIlwaine's assessment of Plumer's life is accurate: "[He led a] narrow and restricted life in his youth, but [he burst] forth later on into the noontide effulgence of high usefulness and honored service."⁵¹ On April 28, 1847, Plumer began his ministry to the Franklin Street Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Maryland.⁵² It was during these years that Plumer began to serve the whole church with his pen, writing for the *Biblical Repository and Princeton Review*, publishing various books of sermons (with a special emphasis upon bringing God's truth to children⁵³), tracts, and his first substantive theological book, *The Grace of Christ*.⁵⁴ His writing was of a practical bent, meant to cultivate faith in the lost and piety in the people of God. In 1854 his special theological and pedagogical gifts were recognized by the General Assembly, when they called him at the age of fifty-two to be the Professor of Didactic and Pastoral Theology at Western Theological Seminary in Allegheny, Pennsylvania.⁵⁵ His inaugural address is typical of all his writings. Entitled *Christ our Theme and Glory*, Plumer sets forth clearly the beauty of our Savior and of a Christ-centered piety:

The great central truth of the religion of sinners relates to the person, character, work, sufferings and offices of Jesus Christ. As a man is sound or corrupt here, so is he elsewhere.... If men would be safe, or wise, or holy, or happy, or useful, or victorious—let them look to

Jesus, let them look to none else, let them walk in him, abide in him, glory in him, and count as loss all things beside.... None but Christ, none but Christ, none but Christ, has been the cry of the faithful witnesses of all ages, when truth has triumphed, when oracles were struck dumb, when sinners were converted, when saints rejoiced, when the word of God mightily grew and prevailed. True piety begins, continues and is perfected by our union with Christ.... In proportion as men are truly pious, they make him the foundation and top-stone, the sum and substance and centre of all their hopes and rejoicings....⁵⁶

With a heart for Christ and eloquence like this, it is not surprising that the student population at Western rose from 52 in 1855, to 79 in 1856, to 81 in 1857, to 95 in 1858, to 125 in 1859, to 140 in 1860, to 165 in 1862.⁵⁷

In 1862, Plumer's time at Western came to an end, due to an unpleasant situation in which he found himself because of his stance on the Civil War. Along with his duties at the seminary, Plumer had pastored the Central Presbyterian Church in Allegheny since 1855, but when the War began he was suspected of disloyalty to the Union. The suspicions arose because he would not ask "God's blessing upon the Government of our country in its efforts to suppress rebellion," nor would he "give thanks to God for the victories which God has granted our armies" during corporate worship.⁵⁸ After much back and forth between his congregation and his Presbytery, on September 19, 1862, he resigned from his pulpit and his chair at the seminary.⁵⁹

Plumer moved to Philadelphia, where he continued to preach every Lord's Day as Stated Supply of the Arch Street congregation. His primary focus during this period, though, was upon preparing books for the press.⁶⁰ On November 19, 1865, he was installed as the pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Pottsville, Pennsylvania. He only stayed a little over a year, however, as the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (the Southern Presbyterian Church) elected him in November 1866 to fill Dr. James Henley Thornwell's vacated chair of Didactic and Polemic

Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary. In January 1867, he moved south of the Mason-Dixon Line once again.⁶¹

D. Laboring Unto Death

The last thirteen years of Dr. Plumer's life were just as

as 158 students. Plumer states there were 168 students in 1862. Plumer, *Autobiographical Notes*, No. II, 10. The just-cited anonymous obituary records that the enrollment at Western dropped when Plumer left, from 134 students in 1864, to 114 in 1865, to 84 in 1866, to 73 in 1867.

58. Cited from *Presbyter*, June 26, 1862, in Vander Velde, 296.

59. See William Swan Plumer, *Farewell Letter to the Central Presbyterian Church, Allegheny, PA. Read September 28, 1862* (Pittsburgh, 1862). Vander Velde claims that Plumer's attitude toward the war "was the nearest approach to pacifist sentiments reached by an Old School minister," quoting the *Presbyterian Banner* from July 31, 1862: "He affirms that he is a Union man.... He cannot pray for the success of our arms, nor give thanks for our victories, because arms and victories produce alienations rather than fraternal feelings; men cannot be coerced to love; swords and bayonets can never piece together these states in a happy and enduring Union." Vander Velde, 296–297. The situation appears to be more complicated than simple pacifism, however. An additional interpretation of Plumer's actions, found in Richmond's *The Christian Observer*, was that they were based upon a belief in the spirituality of the church: "There is another class of ministers who have contended earnestly, that in the sacred office it was highly improper for them to intermeddle with political subjects, and that the judicatories of the Church have no right to decide, or attempt to decide, any question of this kind." Dr. Plumer took this ground in self-defence before his congregation and the Presbytery, and maintained, by a reference to the Scriptures and church-standards, that the whole question of the war was a political question with which God's ministers had nothing to do as such." "What Have Ministers to Do With the Current War?" *The Christian Observer*, August 14, 1862. Yet in a "Card" written by Plumer in the heat of the controversy, he declares, "I have long ago written, and I still maintain that there is no provision in our form of government for Secession, and that Secession is revolution." *The Christian Observer* sarcastically comments, "Here surely is a political question—on which he has long been a teacher!" Ibid. (For the "Card" itself, as well as a summary of the ecclesiastical proceedings, see "Difficulty in Dr. Plumer's Church," *The Christian Observer*, August 17, 1862). Richard McIlwaine gives yet another interpretation of Plumer's actions, asserting that it was understood that Plumer sympathized with the South. McIlwaine, 284. His embrace by the Southern Presbyterian Church in 1867 would seem to indicate this assessment is accurate, but investigating the true nature of the controversy and Plumer's position, is an article for another day!

60. Plumer, *Autobiographical Notes*, No. II, 11. The following books were published between 1864 and 1867: William Swan Plumer, *The Law of God as Contained in the Ten Commandments, Explained and Enforced* (1864; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1996); William Swan Plumer, *Vital Godliness: A Treatise on Experimental and Practical Piety* (1864; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1993); William Swan Plumer, *Jehovah-Jireh: a Treatise on Providence* (1865; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1997); William Swan Plumer, *Studies in the Book of Psalms* (1866; repr., Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975); Plumer, *The Rock of Our Salvation*.

61. *Autobiographical Notes*, No. II, 11–12.

56. *Addresses Delivered at the Inauguration of Rev. Wm. S. Plumer, D. D. as Professor of Didactic and Pastoral Theology in the Western Theological Seminary* (Pittsburgh, PA: 1854), 21, 24.

57. Obituary, n.p., n.d. The William Swan Plumer Manuscript Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library. By comparison, the enrollment at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1862 was 170. Lewis G. Vander Velde, *The Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union, 1861–1869* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 295n62. Vander Velde, citing statistics from an editorial in *Presbyterian*, August 16, 1862, gives the enrollment of Western in 1862

active as the first sixty-five. Not only was he teaching at the seminary, but he was laboring diligently for its very existence.⁶² He continued his involvement in presbyterial, synodical, and denominational affairs, and in 1871 he had the honor of being elected a second time to the office of Moderator, now of the (Southern) Presbyterian Church in the United States.⁶³ He continued to publish newspaper articles, tracts, and books, including commentaries on Romans and Hebrews⁶⁴ and his 1874 work

62. McIlwain states, "When I knew Dr. Plumer—1872 to 1880—he was an old man but in the fullness of intellectual and spiritual strength and service. Indeed he was the chief factor in the resuscitation and maintenance of Columbia Theological Seminary, was unwearied in efforts to secure students, in providing for their comfort and advancement, and in preparing them for the duties of life." McIlwaine, 284.

63. From a quick glance at the Wikipedia entry of Moderators of the Presbyterian Church, it appears that only one Harold R. Martin shares this honor with Plumer. <http://bit.ly/NbO6Oo> [accessed 8/7/12].

64. William Swan Plumer, *Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (1870; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993); William Swan Plumer, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul, the Apostle, to the Hebrews* (1872; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1980).

65. William Swan Plumer, *Hints and Helps in Pastoral Theology* (1874; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 2003).

66. Plumer mentions "Columbia, Yorksville, Hopewell (in Marin.) & First Pres Church in Charleston S.C. 1st Ch. Wilmington & 2nd Church Charlotte N.C." in this regard. He says that he averaged at least 100 sermons a year, in addition to addresses. Plumer, *Autobiographical Notes*, No. II, 12–13.

67. See Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865–1898* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 137–140. Moody's interviews with Plumer were later published. Dwight L. Moody and William S. Plumer, *Great Questions Answered: Two Colloquies Between Dwight L. Moody and William S. Plumer* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Co., 1876), and Dwight L. Moody and William S. Plumer, *Three Colloquies On Vital Matters in Religion Between D. L. Moody and Dr. Wm. S. Plumer* (New York: American Tract Society, 1876).

68. See "The General Assembly at St. Louis," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 26, No. 4 (October 1875), 645. Dr. John L. Girardeau was elected to Plumer's former chair. Plumer's request for transfer saved the Assembly from much contention (see "The General Assembly of 1880," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 31, No. 3 (July 1880), 527). For more information on the chapel controversy, see Nick Willborn, "John L. Girardeau (1825–98): Pastor to Slaves and Theologian of Causes" (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2003), 213ff.; and John M. Mulder, *Woodrow Wilson: The Years of Preparation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 15ff.

69. E. T. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1973), 2:369.

70. Thompson, 2:370. The Panic of 1873, coupled with the chapel controversy, hit Columbia Seminary hard, and by 1880 it essentially had to shut its doors, especially since Dr. Girardeau had resigned that spring. The move to make Dr. Plumer a professor emeritus was a part of the Board's attempts to make ends meet, though in the minds of some, it was also an attempt to get rid of Dr. Plumer. See "The General Assembly of 1880," 519ff. Cf. also Louis C. LaMotte, *Colored*

Hints and Helps in Pastoral Theology.⁶⁵ Throughout his years in Columbia, he preached nearly every Sabbath day, at times serving the same church for several months in a row,⁶⁶ and at times traveling throughout South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia. He notes that in his first eleven years of residence in South Carolina, he traveled more than 108,000 miles. In 1875 and 1876, his travels took him to Philadelphia, New York City, and Augusta, GA, as he joined Dwight L. Moody to be interviewed by the evangelist at his revival meetings.⁶⁷ Plumer covered 15,000 miles in 1877 alone; this was the year that he traveled to Edinburgh, Scotland, with Stuart Robinson and Moses Drury Hoge to represent the Southern Presbyterian Church at the Council of all the Presbyterian Churches of the World.

His service to Columbia Theological Seminary ended on a somewhat sour note, however. In 1875 he had requested to be transferred to the Chair of Historic, Casuistic and Pastoral Theology, a move that was the postscript to an ugly period in the life of Plumer and Columbia Seminary, the chapel controversy.⁶⁸ E. T. Thompson writes that by this point in the seventy-three year old's life and career, many of Columbia Seminary's supporters regarded him as unsuited for the Chair of Dogmatic and Polemic Theology, and believed "that his continuance there was injuring the seminary."⁶⁹ Over the next few years, complaints were brought against Plumer's effectiveness as a teacher, and at the 1880 General Assembly he was made Professor Emeritus, against his wishes, and in his mind against the constitution of the church.⁷⁰

On October 22, 1880, in Baltimore, following complications from kidney stone surgery, Dr. Plumer passed into glory.⁷¹ His life had been full to the brim, and God had used him mightily till the very end of his days. He had been a church planter, a pastor-teacher, a presbyter, a seminary professor, a theologian, a commentator, a pamphleteer, and an author for the people. Like J. C. Ryle, his writings were primarily devotional, designed for the common man.⁷² As a theologian his specialties were Christology and sanctification, two topics not often associated with nineteenth century Southern Presbyterians.⁷³ Moses Drury Hoge sums up well the influence of his mentor:

Light (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1937), 146–149.

71. See E. Douglas Plumer and Kate Plumer Bryan, *In Memorium* (n.p.: 1880). Union Theological Seminary Archives, Richmond, Va.

72. Cf. Joel Beeke, "Foreword" to William Swan Plumer, *The Christian* (1878; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: 1997), vii.

73. He also wrote on the providence of God, the Bible, and pastoral theology.

Probably no man in our time was more widely known in these United States than Dr. Plumer. His reputation as a preacher secured for him great audiences wherever he went. Those who did not care for the ordinances of God's house, and who rarely attended any place of worship, would flock to any church where it was known that he would officiate. He touched society at so many points and had so many ways of impressing himself on the public that his reputation extended far and wide. As an editor; as a contributor to the periodical press; writing for reviews, for magazines, for the publication boards of all denominations; as the author of commentaries on the Scriptures, and many religious books, some of which were republished in Europe, and others translated into German, French and Modern Greek; as a professor in two theological seminaries, which have sent forth hundreds of ministers, with his impress upon them, to labor in every part of the world; as a lecturer before literary institutions and benevolent associations; as a correspondent, writing innumerable letters, especially to those whom he knew to be afflicted and bereaved, letters full of sympathy and consolation; in all these and many other ways, he gained the eye, the ear and heart of the great public, by availing himself of every channel of communication and every avenue of usefulness.⁷⁴

Reflecting on their visit to Edinburgh in 1877, Hoge recalled, "There he commanded the most marked attention, and left an impression upon the thousands who saw and heard him, which will not be forgotten in this generation."⁷⁵ Unfortunately, future generations have forgotten Dr. William Swan Plumer, in part because no "Life and Letters" was ever written of him. Some of his writings have continued to be reprinted in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but the majority of his contributions to theological knowledge and religious piety have been forgotten. Such is the case with *The Person and Sinless Character of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, to which we now turn our attention.

III. THE IMPECCABILITY OF CHRIST, AS DEFENDED BY WILLIAM SWAN PLUMER

A. *The Historical Context of Plumer's Defense*

In the nineteenth century, the impeccability of Jesus Christ became a topic of controversy in the church worldwide.⁷⁶ There had always been some in the history of the church who affirmed that Jesus was able to sin,⁷⁷ but such a teaching became mainstream in Plumer's day with the ministry of Edward Irving in Scotland, Carl Ullmann in Germany, and Charles Hodge in

America.⁷⁸ Each of these ministers (and several others) denied the impeccability of Christ in their published works.⁷⁹ Plumer was greatly troubled by this denial, and felt compelled to write in defense of the impeccability

74. Moses Drury Hoge, *Portraits of Four Pastors* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1892), 11–12.

75. Moses Drury Hoge, "Memorial of Wm. S. Plumer, D. D., LL. D.," *Memorial Volume of the Semi-Centennial of the Theological Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1884), 215.

76. The nineteenth century was a time of great Christological unrest. Plumer observes, "During the present century the press has teemed with essays, articles, and volumes on the person and character of the Son of Mary, who was also the Son of God. In this century many a man has sent forth a 'Life of Jesus,' or a 'Life of Christ,' or made some contribution to this branch of literature. Some of these writings have been of sterling worth, and have made glad the hearts of God's people. Some of them have been feeble, fanciful, and unsafe. Others have been not only somewhat rationalistic, but grossly infidel." Plumer, *Sinless*, 17–18. Either Charles Augustus Briggs or Clarence Augustine Beckwith explains the situation: "The orthodox Christology emphasized the divinity of Christ, and left his humanity more or less out of sight and, in the last stage of Lutheran development, arrived at the brink of Gnostic Docetism. Rationalism arose, toward the close of the eighteenth century, as a reaction against symbolical and scholastic orthodoxy, and ran into the opposite extreme; it ignored the divine nature, and fell back upon a purely human, or Ebionitic, Christ. Its worth, as well as its weakness, consists in the examination of the human element in Christ and in the Bible." C.A.B., "Christology," in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel M. Jackson (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1909), 3:58ff. Lanning attributes the increase in disbelief in Christ's impeccability to "the advent of miracle debunking rationalism and German theology's emphasis upon the theory of Jesus' ethical development." Lanning, 29.

77. The fourth and fifth century bishop Theodore of Mopsuestia claimed that Jesus became impeccable after His resurrection; his teachings were condemned at the Fifth General Council of Constantinople in 553. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Company, 1957), 169. Cf. Zabriskie, 12ff. Plumer, in his historical survey of the proponents of peccability before his own century, mentions the second century author Basilides, Duns Scotus, Socinus, Limborch of the Remonstrants, Doederline, and Knapp. He also gives a long excerpt from a sermon by the 18th century American Henry Patillo of North Carolina, whose belief in the impeccability of Christ was deplored by Archibald Alexander. Plumer, *Sinless*, 67–80. See also the historical survey in McKinley, chapters 1–3.

78. Wolfhart Pannenburg states that Ullmann denied the impeccability of Jesus in later editions of his book under the influence of Julius Muller. Pannenburg, *Jesus-God and Man* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1975), 359–360. Cf. Ullmann, 34n1. Hodge was influenced by Ullmann. James J. Cassidy, "Unpublished paper" (editor note: on the subject of "No Absolute Impeccability: Charles Hodge and Christology at Old Princeton"), www.calvary-amwell.org/files/37364995.doc, 8–9 [accessed 8/9/12]. For a comparison of the views of Hodge and Irving, see Michael Paget, "Christology and Original Sin: Charles Hodge and Edward Irving Compared," *Churchman* 121, No. 3 (Autumn 2007), http://www.churchsociety.org/churchman/documents/Cman_121_3_Paget.pdf [accessed 8/9/12].

79. See Edward Irving, *The Collected Works of Edward Irving in Five*

of Christ out of a love for the church: “The design of the following pages is not to engender controversy, but rather to quiet an uneasiness felt by not a few plain and serious Christians.” He sought not to tear down those who held the peccability of Christ, but to challenge their views and to elicit explanations from them that “would quite relieve the minds of pious men.”⁸⁰

After briefly summarizing the basic teaching regarding the person of Christ,⁸¹ Plumer lists five views theologians take on the topic of His sinlessness.⁸² First, he notes many who are satisfied with the bare factual statement that Christ was sinless. Second, there are those who “regard it as unwise, perhaps unlawful, to go further, and inquire into the cause and reason of the sinlessness of Christ Jesus.”⁸³ Third, men like Ullmann and Hodge affirm Christ’s sinlessness but deny His impeccability.⁸⁴ Hodge writes:

Volumes, Vol. 5, ed. G. Carlyle, (London: Alexander Strachan, 1865); Carl Ullmann, *The Sinlessness of Jesus Christ*, 7th ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870), 33–34; Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1871–1873; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 457. In addition to these three, Plumer interacts with Frederic William Farrar, *The Life of Christ* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1891); Philip Schaff, *The Person of Christ* (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1866); and Joseph Parker, *Ecce Deus* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1867). He also cites Isaak August Dorner, but it is unclear to what work he refers.

80. Plumer, *Sinless*, 5.

81. Plumer cites Shedd regarding the four things necessary for a complete understanding of Christ’s person: 1. He was fully God; 2. He was fully man; 3. He was fully God and fully man in one person; 4. His deity and humanity remain distinct in the one person. *Ibid.*, 8; quoting from William G. T. Shedd, *A History of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1865), 1:392.

82. Plumer, *Sinless*, 18–36.

83. *Sinless*, 21ff.

84. *Sinless*, 26ff.

85. Hodge, 457. This statement alone should lead one to hesitate before repeating the oft-quoted “A new idea never originated in this Seminary.” A.A. Hodge, *The Life of Charles Hodge* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1880), 521. Certainly Dr. Dabney had Hodge in mind when he wrote, “In recent days, some of whom better things should have been expected, deny the [impeccability of our Redeemer].” Dabney, 470. Shedd was astounded at Hodge’s view: “It is remarkable that a theologian of such soundness and accuracy as the elder Hodge should deny the impeccability of the God-man.” Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 660n4.

86. Plumer, *Sinless*, 31ff.

87. *Sinless*, 34ff. See note 10 above for a list of those theologians who have held the impeccability of Christ. For the views of the church fathers, see Pannenburg, 355ff.; McKinley, chapter 2; Plumer, *Sinless*, 81–82. Plumer’s own understanding was influenced by the writings of Marcus Dods, *On The Incarnation of the Eternal Word* (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1831); and Hugh Martin, *Christ’s Presence in the Gospel History* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1860). Dods wrote against Irving, and Martin wrote against Ullmann. Plumer includes an excerpt from Martin’s work as an appendix to his book.

88. *Sinless*, 22–23.

This sinlessness of our Lord does not amount to absolute impeccability. It was not a *non potest peccare*. If He was a true man, He must have been capable of sinning. That He did not sin under the greatest provocation; that when He was reviled, He blessed; when He suffered, He threatened not; that He was dumb as a sheep before her shearers, is held up to us as an example. Temptation implies the possibility of sin. If from the constitution of His person it was impossible for Christ to sin, then His temptation was unreal, and without effect, and He cannot sympathize with His people.⁸⁵

This statement is short and simple (even simplistic and facile), but it reveals why this third view was coming in vogue in the nineteenth century: to deny the peccability of Christ was ostensibly to deny His true humanity and His ability to sympathize with us in temptation. A fourth view also has adherents, namely, that Christ Jesus was not impeccable at first, but eventually became so.⁸⁶ Finally, there is the view that Christ was incapable of sinning, “the old doctrine” which was the majority report among the church, from the time of the fathers to Jonathan Edwards, and including Dabney, Shedd, and Plumer himself.⁸⁷

Plumer held (in contradistinction from the second view he mentions) that it was proper to have an opinion on this question. To those who taught that it was not necessary to know whether Christ could have sinned while on earth, or that it was beyond our minds to know, or that debating issues like this only led to strife, Plumer responded:

But there is no solid ground for such assertions. We cannot be too reverential, too modest, too careful not to assert anything respecting our Saviour beyond what God has made known to us. But by every good rule of conduct we are bound to receive all the light God gives us. We must be reverent; we must adore; but we must inquire. Ignorance is the mother of nothing good. We may not be wise above what is written, but we must labor to be wise up to what is written. If the Lord has spoken, let us give good heed to it all. If God’s word, rightly interpreted, gives us fuller and clearer views on the subject than these men suppose, let us not be afraid to learn them. It is as contrary to piety wilfully to shut our eyes to truths sufficiently revealed, as it is to search into things not made known....⁸⁸

Such a rejoinder is well suited against opposition to the discussion of any point of theology, but particularly for a question of Christology: “We might be the

more inclined not to stop short of Divine teachings on this subject, because of the transcendent excellence and inestimable value of the truth touching our Lord's character.... All truth respecting Him is precious.... Our Saviour either was or He was not capable of sinning. If the truth on this matter can be learned, like all other truth, it is valuable."⁸⁹ Thus Plumer wrote not only out of a concern for the church, but for His Saviour, and for the truth.

Following the introduction to the doctrine of the person of Christ and delineation of the five views on Christ's impeccability, Plumer deals with several matters related to the question, including the term "absolute" and the nature of temptation. He answers several objections to the teaching that Christ is unable to sin, and then spends time examining the history of both sides of the issue. Finally, he lays out a nine point defense of impeccability, examines several passages of Scripture, and finishes up with concluding observations.⁹⁰ Edwards had argued from the presence of the Spirit and the promises of God,⁹¹ while Shedd would argue from the immutability of Christ and the constitution of His person, in addition to answering objections relating to the temptability of Christ.⁹² Plumer's book contains all these arguments and answers, and more. For that reason it deserves to be better known than it is—or, perhaps more appropriately stated, it deserves to be known.

B. The Arguments for Christ's Impeccability⁹³

The first step in Plumer's defense is that "the great body of orthodox writers, and the great mass of God's people in every age, have so believed."⁹⁴ Even Plumer himself acknowledges that counting noses is not the most convincing argument. "But," he avers, "it is worth more than some suppose." One of Plumer's great concerns in writing, as mentioned above, is that the faith of God's people not be shaken: "What right has any one to unsettle, or to try to unsettle, the faith of the great body of believers by maintaining that it was possible for our Saviour to sin, and so to fail in His work?"⁹⁵ He wrote for the people, and argued from the people. This ecclesiological argument, one that is not found in Edwards or Shedd, is based upon the truth of the perspicuity of Scripture; if the Bible is a plain book, it ought to give us cause to pause if the great majority of God's people and their teachers through the ages have held that our Lord was incapable of sinning.⁹⁶

Second, Plumer argues from the virgin conception. Jesus was a descendent of Mary, David, Abraham, and Adam, but not by ordinary generation. Thus He was

not represented by Adam; He was born without original sin, without guilt, and without corruption. Indeed, "[t]he only necessity for a miracle in the birth of Christ (besides meeting the demands of prophecy) was that He might have a human nature both entire and sinless."⁹⁷

Plumer's third argument is related to the second, namely, that the human nature of Jesus has never existed separately from the divine nature, but always in hypostatic union with the second person of the Trinity. That union was "immediate, inseparable, and indissoluble."⁹⁸ Quoting from a variety of sources, Plumer's argument is that Christ did not take to Himself a human person, but a human nature, and thus the God-man is not peccable, but impeccable. The impersonality [anhypostasis] of Christ's humanity, in Plumer's mind, means that it is improper to speak even of the human nature as peccable:

If any ask, Of whom do orthodox writers speak when they say He was peccable? Are they speaking of the Logos, the second Person of the Trinity? All say, No. The Son was as impeccable as the Father. Do they assert that the God-man, the Mediator, was peccable? Some perhaps say, No. Others hesitate. Will they agree that

89. *Sinless*, 23, 6.

90. On the whole, the book is poorly arranged and repetitive, and the writing is stream of consciousness at times (these could be other reasons it did not remain in print for long). With all due respect, perhaps the sharpness of the seventy-four year old's logical arranging abilities was slipping just a little bit, and/or he had no editor.

91. Jonathan Edwards, *On The Freedom of the Will*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 1:42–44. Cf. James J. Cassidy, 6; Philip J. Fisk, "Jonathan Edwards's *Freedom of the Will* and his defence of the impeccability of Jesus Christ," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, No. 3 (August 2007): 309–325.

92. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 659–671. Cf. Cassidy, 6–7; Crispien, "William Shedd."

93. We will examine Plumer's arguments for impeccability, and then consider his answers to the arguments for peccability.

94. Plumer, *Sinless*, 85.

95. *Sinless*, 108. Cf. also 35, 77.

96. *Sinless*, 85–86.

97. *Sinless*, 88. Thus Plumer rejects the teaching of Irving that Christ took a fallen human nature. In his commentary on Romans 8:3, Plumer writes, "The likeness of sinful flesh is not sinful flesh, but 'the likeness of that flesh which was sinful' ... He was in all things made like unto his brethren, having a true body and a reasonable soul, Heb. 2:16–18. But he was not born in sin, nor did he ever offend against God, but was holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners. His Father, his friends, his judge, his betrayer all pronounced him faultless." Plumer, *Commentary on Romans*, 371. Cf. Dods, "That the 'Word was made flesh,' and that he was not made sinful flesh, are propositions which lie at the very foundations of Christianity." Dods, vii.

98. *Sinless*, 90.

in no proper sense was the Mediator either peccable or fallible? Will they admit that the person of the Redeemer could neither sin nor err? Then if we ask, Precisely what was it that was peccable? The reply is, The human nature of Christ was peccable. But the human nature of Christ was impersonal. It never had a personal subsistence. From the first it was in indissoluble and personal union with the Logos. Christ's two natures are and for ever must be distinct, though they are ineffably and inseparably united. If the position maintained was that the human nature of Christ was truly and properly humanity, and that, if it had existed by itself without union with the Logos, it might have sinned; the answer is, That is not the matter under discussion. The human nature of our Lord did never so exist, and will never so exist, and a discussion of what might have been, or would have been in a fictitious case, is idle.⁹⁹

Again, Plumer writes, "What the human nature, which is in indissoluble union with the Logos, might have been or might have done, had no such union existed, it is worse than idle to inquire. None will deny that mere human nature, without support, is very weak. But human nature upheld by infinite and omnipotent holiness is a very different thing—is impeccable."¹⁰⁰

This argument is a most significant one, particularly

99. *Sinless*, 110–111.

100. *Sinless*, 116.

101. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 660–661.

102. Shedd, *ibid.* Regarding Shedd's formulation, Crisp wonders, "But, it might be asked, How does the divine nature of Christ act in such a way that it prevents the human nature from sinning? This is mysterious, and Shedd does not attempt to explain it. One possible answer has to do with the perichoresis or coinherence involved in the hypostatic union. It might be that that the perichoretic relation the Word has to his human nature is such that it prevents the human nature from sinning." Crisp, "William Shedd," 169. Without using the exact terminology, that is precisely the explanation Plumer gives in his book. The way Shedd speaks of the human nature seems to shade toward Nestorianism; but he is in no way a Nestorian. Cf. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, part 5, chapters 1–4; Crisp, "William Shedd on Christ's Impeccability," 170n19.

103. Plumer, *Sinless*, 114–115.

104. *Sinless*, 38.

105. *Sinless*, 94.

106. *Sinless*, *ibid.* Crisp writes that he does not understand theological reasoning like this. Crisp, "William Shedd," 170n20. Shedd, as he makes the same point Plumer does on page 661 of his *Dogmatic Theology*, uses some of the exact same words as Plumer ("degradation," "consent"). This fact, coupled with Shedd's use on page 662 of the same illustration with which Plumer closes his book (an invincible army being attacked, see below), leads me to think that Shedd had read Plumer's work but for some reason chose not to cite it.

107. *Sinless*, 95.

108. Cf. Crisp, "William Shedd," 169n14.

as we compare Plumer's defense to Shedd's. Though both men agree that the God-man could not succumb to temptation, and that by the constitution of His person, Shedd is willing to say that the human nature is peccable: "Impeccability characterizes the God-man as a totality, while peccability is a property of his humanity."¹⁰¹ The divine nature is stronger than the human, and keeps the human nature from sinning. Shedd's omission of the language of anhypostasia, or impersonality, in his discussion of impeccability, leaves him open to questions that Plumer answers.¹⁰²

Those who deny impeccability may claim that their position ensures the true humanity of Christ (cf. Hodge's "If He was a true man, He must have been capable of sinning," above). Plumer has a response to this assumption, related to his third argument, that Shedd does not make: "[T]he answer is, that His humanity is complete now in heaven, and yet no one will say that He is now peccable. He is very God and very man precisely as He was on earth, no more so and no less so than when He dwelt on earth."¹⁰³ Plumer brings out clearly the point that sinfulness, or the possibility of sinning, is not of the essence of being human. Like our Savior and Enoch and Elijah now, all the saints after the resurrection will have a full human nature and be *non posse peccare*.¹⁰⁴

The fourth step in Plumer's argument is Colossians 1:19 and 2:9; from the time our Lord took to Himself fullness of humanity, all the fullness of the Godhead has dwelt in Him in bodily form. "How was it possible," Plumer asks, "for the second Person of the Trinity, though incarnate, to err from the truth?"¹⁰⁵ At this point Plumer answers another interlocutor, in the same way as Shedd: "Should any ask, If our Lord's divinity did not save Him from suffering, how could it infallibly preserve Him from sinning? The answer is easy: It is condescension to suffer as He did. It is always degradation to sin. Divinity could agree that His humanity should suffer. But it could not consent to His committing moral wrong."¹⁰⁶

In the next three arguments, Plumer brings in arguments that Shedd does not use, but that sound very much like Jonathan Edwards, though he does not quote Edwards. The fifth argument for Christ's impeccability is "the amazing indwelling of the Holy Ghost in the man Christ Jesus," prophesied in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New.¹⁰⁷ The Holy Spirit kept the man Christ Jesus from sinning.¹⁰⁸ The sixth argument is the promises made to Christ, and through Him to the Church, which, if Christ were able to sin or fail, those promises would come to naught. Plumer cites Isaiah

42:1–4 (as does Edwards); “If He ‘shall not fail nor be discouraged,’ He must be infallible and impeccable.”¹⁰⁹ The seventh argument is like the sixth, though broader in scope: “It was not possible for Christ to sin, because it was not possible to subvert God’s system of mediation; because God could neither make nor permit a breach of the covenant of redemption; because the eternal purpose of God, which He purposed in Christ Jesus, cannot be foiled; and because a general failure of the prophecies of Scripture is impossible.”¹¹⁰

Eighth, Plumer argues that we never read of Christ feeling remorse, confessing sin, or regretting anything He did. Plumer admits that this eighth argument is an argument from silence, “but,” he writes, “it is fair, and, rightly carried out, has no flaw in it.”¹¹¹ If Jesus had been peccable, we would assume we might find Him praying for grace to keep Him from sinning. But we do not.

Plumer’s final argument is John 14:30, Jesus’ declaration that “The prince of this world has nothing in Me.” Plumer interprets this passage thusly, “Satan had in Christ no right by which he could control Him. There was in Him no guilt by which to oppress His conscience; no corruption to incline Him to side with temptation. Satan had no part in Him; no element on which he could work to inflame his nature.”¹¹² Thus as He prepares to face His greatest temptations in the Garden of Gethsemane, He has the confidence that He cannot sin. Plumer quotes from one of his contemporaries, “Satan’s temptations fall into a wicked heart like mine as a spark of fire falls into a keg of gunpowder; but when Satan came to our Lord, there was no powder to ignite.”¹¹³ In addition to John 14:30, Plumer appeals to several more passages, including II Corinthians 5:21, John 8:46, I Peter 2:22, Hebrews 1:10–12 and 13:8.¹¹⁴

Plumer’s “admirable little book” has already proven itself to be fuller than both Edwards and Shedd in terms of the amount and variety of arguments he marshals in defense of Christ’s impeccability.¹¹⁵ To be sure, Edwards and Shedd are more philosophical than Plumer, and they

do not rely as heavily upon other authors in the course of their writing. One common criticism of Plumer is that he is just a collator/collector of the thoughts of others. He does quote many authors in this book, yet as his obituary writer noted, there is an originality about it—both in terms of content and composition. We see that reality even more clearly (particularly vis a vis Shedd) as we consider the ways he answers the advocates of peccability.

C. Objections Answered

Even more striking than the fullness of Plumer’s arguments for impeccability is the diversity of his arguments against peccability. One of the most powerful and unique is a variation on the theme of immutability: if Christ was once peccable and fallible, when did He become impeccable?

That question goes on the presumption that no man doubts that now and henceforth Jesus cannot sin, cannot err. If any has doubts on this point, this book is not addressed to him. But admitting that Christ is now and for ever immutably pure and holy, when did He become

109. Plumer, *Sinless*, 97; cf. Edwards, 42, argument 1.

110. *Sinless*, 97–98; in another section, he writes, “To Pilate, Jesus said: ‘To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth.’” John 18:37. Was it possible for that *end* to be defeated and that *cause* to fail? Surely not. Yet if Jesus had sinned, all would have been lost. O how can any say of Him whom the Father hath sanctified and sent into the world, that it was possible for Him to err, fail, or sin? John 10:36. Was He not a Lamb without blemish and without spot? O yes! But if in anything He had failed, redemption would have failed, and Jehovah would have been defeated.” *Ibid.*, 108–109. Cf. Edwards, 43–44, especially arguments 4, 7, 8, 9, and 10.

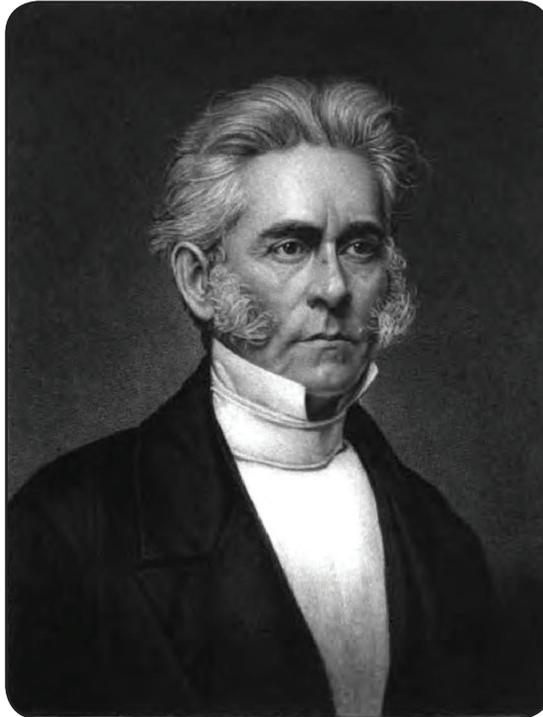
111. *Sinless*, 101–102.

112. *Sinless*, 102–103.

113. *Sinless*, 104.

114. *Sinless*, 105–109. Regarding Hebrews 13:8, Shedd puts greater weight on the immutability of Christ than Plumer does, though see below for Plumer’s insightful question in this vein to those who argue for Jesus’ impeccability.

115. Each of Dabney’s arguments for the impeccability of Christ, as well as his answers to objections, follow Plumer. Dabney, 471ff.



so? at His baptism? at His death? at His resurrection? at His ascension? If any shall be bold enough to take ground on this subject, it is probable some one will be found bold enough to show the utter insufficiency of his reasonings.¹¹⁶

The Bible certainly nowhere teaches that Christ progressed from peccability to impeccability during His life, as Schaff and Dorner aver, nor does it teach that He became peccable by taking our nature.¹¹⁷

Another unique response to those in favor of the peccability of Jesus is that peccability and fallibility hang together. Those who argue for Christ's peccability would likely also argue for His infallibility; yet Plumer would challenge their desire to have their cake and eat it too: "He who can sin may surely err. Sin is the worst form of evincing fallibility. If impeccability did not always belong to our Lord Jesus Christ, neither did infallibility; and if He was not an infallible teacher, our faith is vain."¹¹⁸ In actuality, Jesus was neither fallible nor peccable, for "His whole work depended on His personal character. Jesus Christ was not a truth-seeker, nor a truth-finder. He was the Truth itself, the very truth which makes men free. He did not go through life in quest of light or finding light."¹¹⁹ If Jesus could have sinned while on earth, we would have no reason to trust Him as He taught in His own name and by His own authority.

116. Plumer, *Sinless*, 108.

117. *Sinless*, 34–35.

118. *Sinless*, 63–64.

119. *Sinless*, 62.

120. *Sinless*, 64. He seems to quote Hodge purposefully regarding this point, as if to say, "Brother, remember what you have written!"

121. *Sinless*, 66. Edwards argues the other direction, stating the importance of Christ's impeccability for a Calvinistic view of freedom: "I have been the longer in the proof of this matter, it being a thing denied by some of the greatest *Arminians*, by *Episcopius* in particular; and because I look upon it as a point clearly and absolutely determining the controversy between *Calvinists* and *Arminians*, concerning the necessity of such a freedom of the Will as is insisted on by the latter, in order to moral agency, virtue, command or prohibition, promise or threatening, reward or punishment, praise or dispraise, merit or demerit." Edwards, 44. Dabney is wonderful on this point: "They argue that unless Jesus were free in his rejection of temptation, He would have wrought no moral victory. This is true. But they wish us to infer therefrom, that because His will was free, it must have been mutable. This deduction would be consistent only in a Pelagian. Every Calvinist knows that a holy will may be perfectly free, and yet determined with absolute certainty, to the right." Dabney, 473.

122. *Sinless*, 41, 115.

123. *Sinless*, 109–110.

124. Shedd and Dabney are actually more helpful and direct than Plumer on this point. See Shedd, 662–668; Dabney, 471–472.

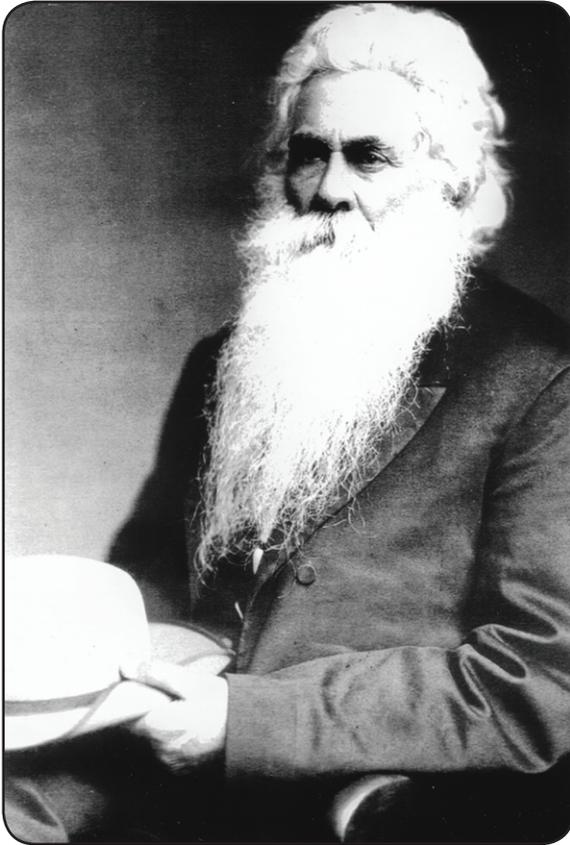
125. *Sinless*, 59–60.

Plumer displays a third distinctive response to the proponents of peccability—a reminder of the relationship between freedom and determination of will. To those who would imagine that Christ's resisting of sin is somehow less virtuous or less voluntary because it is absolutely guaranteed, Plumer writes, "It can never be proven that uncertainty of action is necessary to free-agency."¹²⁰ He proffers God the Father, the angels, and the saints in glory as exhibits of this truth, and asks, "Why should contingency (or liability to do wrong) be thought necessary to the glorious actions of our sinless Lord Jesus Christ?"¹²¹ In a similar vein, he affirms,

No actual inclination to evil, great or small, is necessary to a virtuous and praiseworthy rejection of seductive appliances. The less one is disposed to yield to occasions of sinning, the more virtuous he is.... If any say that the value of Christ's obedience was increased by the possibility of His sinning; the answer is, that the praiseworthiness of good actions or a good life does indeed depend upon their voluntariness, but in no degree on a bias towards evil, or even a capability of sinning.¹²²

Jesus Christ freely obeyed, freely resisted temptation, and at the same time it was impossible for Him to do otherwise.

A last answer that Plumer gives is one that Shedd also gives—an answer to Hodge's objection above regarding temptation and peccability ("Temptation implies the possibility of sin. If from the constitution of His person it was impossible for Christ to sin, then His temptation was unreal, and without effect, and He cannot sympathize with His people."). This is surely one of the most common and natural objections to the doctrine of Christ's impeccability. Plumer notes that in some cases, the difference between the two sides in this debate may be merely semantic.¹²³ But in the case of Hodge and others, it certainly was not. For that reason both Plumer and Shedd spend a good deal of time discussing both the nature of temptation, the nature of Christ's temptation, and the relationship between Christ's temptation and His sympathy with us in our own temptations.¹²⁴ Plumer contends, "[T]he reality of a temptation does not in the least depend on the actual power it has over one to lead him astray. In other words, moral evil and an invitation to commit moral evil are not identical.... In common language, temptations are enticements to commit sin. Their reality depends on their presentation, and not in their actual controlling power over one."¹²⁵ Thus Peter tempted Jesus not to die, and Satan



tempted Jesus to tempt God. But there was no lust or concupiscence in Christ that would entice Him to sin from within. Indeed, it was Jesus' righteousness that made His temptations all the more strident:

An army may be invincible, but it does not follow that it cannot be impetuously attacked. So the unconquerable resistance to evil solicitation exerted by Christ seems to have induced the great adversary to assault the Redeemer with a vehemence and intensity, to which none else was ever exposed. Christ's impeccability was evinced by His omnipotent and victorious resistance of evil; and this, instead of being a reason why He could not be tempted at all, or but slightly, was the very reason why He was assailed with the severest of all temptations.¹²⁶

Some may object that if Christ wasn't able to give in to the temptation, then He is not able to truly sympathize with fallen man; and thus a doctrine of Christ's peccability secures a greater degree of sympathy. But Plumer disagrees:

In no way does it aid one in pitying, or relieving the

vile to be like them vile. It is not necessary ever to have had the least liability to sin, in order to compassionate the sinner ... neither fellowship in crime, nor a bias to wrong, nor a possibility of sinning, is necessary to secure the tenderest compassion. If this were not so, we could not be secure of the tender mercies, the kind compassion of the Father, or of the Holy Ghost.¹²⁷

Thus the opponents of Christ's impeccability are heard and answered thoroughly and resoundingly.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this article we have sought to make clear that the loss of the knowledge of William Swan Plumer, and of his book *The Person and Sinless Character of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, has been a great loss indeed. We have been deprived of a great father in the faith, as well as substantive arguments for Christ's impeccability, and convincing rebuttals of those who argue for His peccability. We have not had exposure to Plumer's sound theological and exegetical acumen, nor to the sound teachers from whom he was learning. Plumer wrote that "true piety cannot fail to be interested in suitable teachings respecting the person and character of our Saviour."¹²⁸ Unfortunately, our generation has not generally been known for true piety. Even at our best, we have tended toward imprecision in our Christology, and we have overemphasized the humanity of Christ at the expense of His deity. For this reason we have typically been open to arguments for His peccability. Rediscovering Plumer's arguments and answers would guard us from error, and help us to grow in piety as we learn about the impeccable piety of Jesus. Our Savior was, is, and forever will be "holy, harmless, and undefiled" (Heb. 7:26), and my hope is that He will use this man, this book, and this article to deepen the church's knowledge of Him and love for Him. ■

126. *Sinless*, 117.

127. *Sinless*, 99, 115; cf. 53ff. Regarding Hebrews 4:15, Plumer writes, "In His temptations the Lord Jesus entered into great conflicts, had a clear perception of the pit into which the enemy desired Him to fall, and felt His principles subjected to the severest possible test, yet without sin. Christ's humanity was not absorbed by His divinity. His human nature was sustained by His divine nature, but it did not cease to be human nature, capable of suffering and of temptation, though He was not capable of being seduced into sin. Thus our Lord had His rectitude put to a trial, a severe trial." *Sinless*, 57.

128. *Sinless*, 5.

In Brief: Death of Dr. Plumer

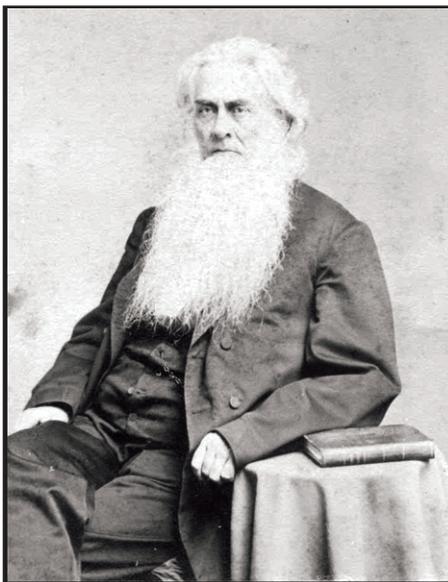
The venerable Dr. Wm. S. Plumer died in Baltimore last Friday morning, in the seventy-ninth year of his age. He had been suffering for some time from disease that was wearing out his life, and that gave no hope of relief save by the surgeon's knife. Yet at his advanced age he did not recover from the operation, and survived it only a few days.

Dr. Plumer's life was a conspicuous one; he was ever prominent in the Church. He was born in Beaver county, Pennsylvania, July 25, 1802. He was a graduate of Washington College at Lexington, Virginia, and of Princeton Theological Seminary. Between the years 1826 and 1834 he preached in Danville, Virginia, in Warrenton, Raleigh, Washington, and New Bern, North Carolina. When, in 1834, Dr. William J. Armstrong resigned the pastorate of the First church of Richmond, VA, to accept a place as Secretary in the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Mr. Plumer was suggested as his successor. It was the privilege of the late Senior Editor of this paper [Rev. Amasa Converse], then living in Richmond, to moderate the meeting at which the call was made and (although differing with Mr. Plumer on ecclesiastical questions) to aid in removing opposition and securing unanimity in the congregation in calling him.

In 1837 Mr. Plumer offered the resolution in the General Assembly, "That by the operation of the abrogation of the plan of union of 1801, the Synod of the Western Reserve is and is hereby declared to be no longer a part of the Presbyterian Church in the United States." The adoption of this resolution was the turning point of the division in the Church. About the same time he established in Richmond, Virginia, a newspaper known as *The Watchman of the South*, which he conducted for eight years in advocacy of the course pursued in 1837.

In 1847 he was called to a church in Baltimore. In 1854 he became professor of didactic and pastoral theology at Allegheny Theological Seminary, near Pittsburgh, Pa. Here he continued till 1862, serving meanwhile one of the Pittsburgh churches. But his political views gave great offence to many in that neighborhood during the war; he was compelled to leave the place, and for a time he remained in Philadelphia avoiding publicity. He became pastor of the church in Pottsville, Pennsylvania, in 1865, and a year later was elected professor in Columbia Theological Seminary. He occupied in this Seminary first the chair of didactic theology and afterward the chair of pastoral theology until the seminary was closed a year ago.

He was exceedingly averse to the closing of the Seminary, and his consequent retirement from active service. The earnestness with which he pleaded for prolonged opportunities of work for the Lord, at the last Assembly, becomes the more significant, and the sadness with which he learned of the decision to suspend his labors becomes the more touching as we learn (what was not publicly known before) that at that time he must have been suffering from the incipency of this fatal disease. His was a resolute spirit, to plead for work at a time when other men might have pleaded for rest.



He wrote many books and distributed them to students of theology with a lavish hand. He never failed in the pulpit to command close attention from his audience. Even in these last months of suffering he preached often and effectively as opportunity offered.

On Thursday last, the Synod of Virginia, hearing of his illness, sent him a telegram expressive of the sympathy and affection of Synod (he was unconscious when it reached him), and called on Dr. John Leyburn, of Baltimore, to lead in prayer to God for him. Before offering prayer, Dr. Leyburn spoke of the venerable minister in terms such as these—words which all hearts will echo. He said that before he left Baltimore yesterday,

he had visited Dr. Plumer daily during his illness, and could tell the brethren that the spirit of the gospel which he preached was beautifully manifested in his sufferings. Before the operation to which he had lately submitted, he had told his family that it was a question of life and death, eternity was before him; but that he had never been more calm; and in the anticipation of the crisis, had experienced the happiest hour of his life. Under the operation he had realized what he supposed were the sufferings of the martyrs, but never more clearly the presence of the Saviour. Visiting him one day, Dr. Leyburn feared he was dying, and finding him very sad, was constrained to ask him concerning his hope of the future. Dr. Plumer replied, "You see a great sinner;" but about his pardon and acceptance in Christ he had no difficulty—his peace was as a river. His countenance was illuminated with joy as he said this. Dr. Leyburn mentioned Dr. Plumer's language in regard to this synod as a most noble band of Christian brothers in the Lord. Excerpted from *The Christian Observer*, 59.43 (27 October 1880): 4, columns 1–2. Image of Dr. William Swan Plumer, original carte de visite photograph preserved at the PCA Historical Center, St. Louis, Missouri. All rights reserved. Used by permission. ■