

On Jesus' Eschatological Ignorance

Edwin K. P. Chong

Version: July 25, 2003

1 Jesus' ignorance of His return

One of the most difficult passages in the New Testament is Mark 13. Epitomizing the difficulty of this chapter is verse 32, which explicitly teaches that Jesus does not know when He will return:¹

No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

An identical verse appears in Matthew 24:36. How is this compatible with the orthodox view that Jesus is God and hence is omniscient?

Over the centuries, groups like the Ebionites, Arians, and Nestorians² have used this verse to argue that Jesus was not fully divine.³ In response, the church fathers developed interpretive approaches to Mark 13:32, which today continue to form the basis for theological solutions to this problem.

In 451 A.D., the Council of Chalcedon, in Act V, defined the union of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ.⁴ According to this definition, Christ is "truly God and truly man." This Chalcedonian formula has since become a hallmark of orthodox Christology. How exactly does this orthodox view reckon with Mark 13:32?

In this essay, I outline the prevalent solutions to the controversy surrounding Mark 13:32, the major proponents of each solution, and its basis. I also provide some evaluation of these solutions, indicating which have garnered mainstream acceptance, and why.

¹Mark 13:32, New International Version.

²Over the centuries, a number of heresies on the divine and human nature of Christ have emerged. The Ebionites denied the deity of Christ, asserting instead that he was divinely empowered at his baptism. The Arians believed Christ to be a finite, and hence created, being. The Apollinarians held that Christ took on the human nature only partially. The Nestorians, in reaction to the Apollinarians, emphasized the human body of Christ. In contrast, the Eutychians held that Christ had only one nature, the divine nature.

³The same argument persists even in current anti-orthodox literature; see, e.g., Jason Hatherly, "Why the Christian god does not exist," 2001, <http://www.mwillett.org/atheism/oolon1.htm>.

⁴See, e.g., <http://www.mit.edu/tb/anglican/intro/chalcedon.html>.

2 Approaches to Jesus' ignorance

The dominant approaches to dealing with this problem fall into several categories, ranging from those that strongly preserve the Chalcedonian understanding to those that abandon this understanding in resolving the issue. These views continue to be discussed in the current theological literature—see, e.g., the recent paper by Harold F. Carl,⁵ and a response to this paper by Kris J. Udd.⁶

2.1 Hypostatic union

The Chalcedonian formula involves a view that Christ has two natures, God and man, subsisting in only one person. This union of two natures in one person has come to be called the *hypostatic union*.

The doctrine of the hypostatic union is based on a cumulative view of the scriptural witness to Christ. This witness testifies to several important attributes of Christ, outlined below.⁷

The preexistence of Christ. This means that Christ existed before his earthly birth. The scriptural evidence for this understanding of Christ includes proof from the Old Testament (Isaiah 9:6), New Testament (John 8:58), Christ's involvement in the creation (Colossians 1:16), the appearance of the angel of the Lord (Exodus 3:2,4; Genesis 22:11), and by Christ's various names: Logos, Son of God, and Jehovah.

The incarnation of Christ. Christ's incarnation is defined as the eternal second Person of the Trinity taking on Himself humanity or flesh. The central supporting passage for the incarnation is John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only,⁸ who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." The means of Christ's incarnation is the virgin birth (Matthew 1:23, Luke 1:35).⁹ Several purposes of the incarnation are recognized within orthodox Christology: to reveal God to us; to provide an example for our lives; to provide an effective sacrifice for sin; to be able to fulfill the Davidic covenant; to destroy the works of the devil; to be able to be a sympathetic high priest; and to be able to be a qualified judge.

⁵Harold F. Carl, "Only the Father Knows: Historical and Evangelical Responses to Jesus' Eschatological Ignorance in Mark 13:32," *Journal of Biblical Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3, July–September 2001. <http://journalofbiblicalstudies.org/issue3.html>.

⁶Kris J. Udd, "Only the Father Knows: A Response to Harold F. Carl," *Journal of Biblical Studies*, vol. 1, no. 4, October–December 2001. <http://journalofbiblicalstudies.org/issue4.html>.

⁷For a fairly exhaustive summary of common Christological views, in particular views on the deity and humanity of Christ, see <http://theopenword.org/topics/humanity/hummain.htm>, <http://www.biblicalstudies.com/bstudy/christology/jesus1.htm>, and <http://www.discernment.org/Christ.htm>.

⁸Or "the Only Begotten."

⁹Both Matthew and Luke provide genealogies of Jesus.

The deity of Christ. The Scriptures provide ample evidence that Christ is God. For example, the Scriptures testify to Christ possessing attributes that only God has: eternity (Isaiah 9:6; Micah 5:2; John 1:1; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:8-10; Revelation 1:8), omnipresence (Matthew 18:20, 28:20; John 3:13), omniscience (John 16:30, 21:17), omnipotence (Psalm 45:3; Philippians 3:21; Revelation 1:8), immutability (Hebrews 13:8), self-existence (John 1:1-3, 5:21-26; Hebrews 7:16), and holiness (Luke 1:35; Acts 3:14; 1 Peter 1:19). Furthermore, Christ performed acts that only God can perform: forgiveness (Mark 2:10; Luke 7:47), judgment (John 5:22; 2 Timothy 4:1; Acts 17:31), creating (Hebrews 1:10; Colossians 1:15), sustaining (Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3), and miracles (John 10:37). Also, Christ was given names and titles of deity: Son of God (Matthew 8:29, 16:16; Mark 1), and Lord and God (John 1:1,18; Hebrews 1:8; Titus 2:13; Matthew 22:43-45). Finally, Christ claimed to be God and He received worship (John 10:30; Matthew 4:10; John 5:23; Revelation 22:8-9; Philippians 2:10).

The humanity of Christ. That Christ was human is clear from Scriptures. He was born and had a human body, as described in the Gospels (see also Galatians 4:4), He had a human soul and spirit, He exhibited the characteristics of a human being, like growing up (Luke 2:52), and He was called by human names.

The unity of the person of Christ. In addition to the Biblical evidence for Christ's deity and humanity, the unity of these natures in the person of Christ is also evident (John 1:14; Galatians 4:4; 1 Timothy 3:16; Ephesians 2:16-18; 1 John 2:1-2, 4:2, 4:15, 5:5).

The hypostatic-union view of Christ plays a key role in dealing with Mark 13:32. Prominent theologians who espouse this solution include W. G. T. Shedd, B. B. Warfield, Wayne Grudem, Charles Lee Feinberg, Norman Geisler, and John F. Walvoord (who, incidentally, passed away in December 2002 at age 92). W. G. T. Shedd, in particular, provides a unique solution along these lines by positing that the divine nature of Christ, not His human nature, is the basis for His personhood—the Word took on flesh, not the other way around (John 1:14). Hence, as Shedd puts it, “As the prophet Isaiah could know no more of the secret things of God than it pleased the Holy Spirit to disclose to him, so the human mind of Christ could know no more of these same divine secrets than the illumination of the Logos made known.”¹⁰ In other words, the Word (Logos) in His omniscience knew the day of the return, but the human mind of Christ did not, because the Logos did not reveal this.

One key issue in dealing with Mark 13:32 is that the title “the Son” is used specifically in this context. If the Son refers to the second person of the Trinity, then it would appear that it is the deity of Christ who does not “know about that day or hour.” The orthodox solution to this issue is that the divine title of “Son” is often in Scripture connected with a human attribute. Another example

¹⁰W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, Second Edition, 3 vols. Thomas Nelson, 1980. As quoted in Carl, “Only the Father Knows,” cited before.

is the statement, “they crucified the Lord of Glory” (1 Corinthians 2:8). This interpretive principle was developed by Martin Luther, and has since become known as the *rule of predication*. The rule of predication was present even in the work of early theologians, notably Athanasius (295–373). This principle is also applied in the work of John Calvin, B. B. Warfield, and Wayne Grudem.

2.2 Non-use

Closely related to the hypostatic-union solution is what is best described as the “non-use” solution. The idea here is that although Christ did not lose His divine attributes at the incarnation, He gave up independent use of them. For this reason, he was ignorant of his return. Both Luther and Calvin sometimes explained Christ’s ignorance this way.¹¹ Other prominent theologians who take this view include Charles M. Horne, R. C. H. Lenski, and Thomas Oden.

The hypostatic-union and non-use solutions are so closely tied that, as suggested above, many seem to hold both views.¹²

2.3 Official ignorance

A third solution to Mark 13:32 is to say that although Christ knew, He was not commissioned to reveal the day or the hour of the final judgment. In other words, Christ’s ignorance is only an apparent ignorance. This view was W. G. T. Shedd’s first solution in volume one of *Dogmatic Theology*, where he dubs it the “official ignorance” of Christ:¹³

To “know” means to “make known,” ... A particular Trinitarian person is officially the one to reveal another, and in this reference the others do not officially reveal, and so are officially “ignorant.” ... When it is said that the “Father only” knows the time of the day of judgment, this must be harmonized with the truth that the Holy Spirit is omniscient, and “searcheth the deep things of God,” 1 Cor. 2:10. The Holy Spirit is not ignorant of the time of the day of Judgment, but like the incarnate Son he is not commissioned to reveal the time ... Again, it is not supposable that Christ now seated on the mediatorial throne is ignorant, even in respect to his human nature, of the time of the day of judgment, though he is not authorized to officially make it known to his church.

The official-ignorance view was held as far back as by Hilary of Poitiers (315–367); it was also the view espoused by Augustine (354–430). Today, this view is a minority view. As Carl points out, “The only other modern author found [other than Shedd], and he not so modern, to espouse

¹¹Carl, “Only the Father Knows,” cited before.

¹²Even some contemporary literature seems to hold both these views simultaneously; e.g., <http://www.daviscru.com/ccci/resources-is-jesus-god.asp> and http://www.carm.org/diff/Mark13_32.htm.

¹³W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, Second Edition, Volume One. Thomas Nelson, 1980, pp. 319–320. (As quoted in Carl, “Only the Father Knows,” cited before.)

the official ignorance view is Lewis Sperry Chafer.”¹⁴ This view remains appealing to those who cannot accept that Christ could be ignorant in any real sense.¹⁵

2.4 Kenoticism

Another solution to Mark 13:32 is based on the scriptural notion of *kenosis* found in Philippians 2:5–7:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

Kenosis, often translated “to empty” or “to make into nothing,” is how Christ’s incarnation is described here. Thus, in explaining Mark 13:32, kenosis theologians (kenoticists) would say that Christ was ignorant because He willingly emptied Himself of His divinity when He became incarnate. Kenoticism developed with the work of Gottfried Thomasius (1802–75), a German Lutheran. The view continued to develop in Germany in the period 1860–80, and in England in 1890–1910.¹⁶ Over the years, several views of the kenosis have developed, some more liberal than others in reconciling this view with the rest of Scriptures:¹⁷

1. He gave up the use of the attributes.
2. He acted as if he did not possess divine attributes.
3. He gave up the independent exercise of the divine attributes.
4. He limited himself to the voluntary non-use of the attributes.
5. He abandoned some substantial measure of independence in the use of his divine prerogatives.
6. He had a human soul, to which the Logos imparted his divinity, little-by-little until he became completely divine.
7. He laid aside his deity which was then restored at the ascension.
8. He abandoned certain prerogatives of the divine mode of existence in order to assume the human.
9. He lived a double life from two, non-communicating life centers. As God, he continued his trinitarian and providential existence, and as man he was united with a human nature. He did not know consciously anything of his divine, trinitarian existence.

¹⁴Carl, “Only the Father Knows,” cited before.

¹⁵Recent literature espousing this view includes <http://www.bible.org/docs/qa/qa.asp?StudyID=435>.

¹⁶Rodney J. Decker, “Philippians 2:5–11, The Kenosis,” http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/rd_ken.htm.

¹⁷Ibid.

10. He disguised his deity and attributes, not by giving them up, but by limiting them to a time-form appropriate to a human mode of existence.

It is evident that some of the previously described solutions to Mark 13:32 are instances of kenosis. Indeed, Charles M. Horne characterizes his non-use solution as the “true kenosis.”¹⁸ Today, kenoticism is commonly understood to mean the view that Christ abandoned His divinity at the incarnation, and hence had no divine attributes during His earthly ministry.¹⁹ In our analysis, we will assume this commonly held meaning of kenoticism.

2.5 Subordination

John Dahms, a supposed opponent of kenoticism, introduced a contemporary variant of the doctrine in his controversial 1944 essay, “The Subordination of the Son.”²⁰ In this essay, Dahms concludes, “It is probable that the eternal subordination of the Son is reflected in Mark 13:32.”²¹ Dahms’ argument is that the title “Son” in Mark 13:32 implies that the deity of Christ is in view here. Therefore, because there is something that the Son does not know that the Father knows, the Son is subordinate to the Father. This view is not common in orthodox circles.²²

2.6 Open theism

We end our list of solutions to Mark 13:32 with a recent entrant to the theological arena, *open theism*.²³ This view holds that even though God is omniscient, He does not know all of what will take place in the future, because the future is *not exhaustively definite*.²⁴ (Exactly why the future is not exhaustively definite is itself subject to at least two views.²⁵)

The open-theism position therefore overcomes the apparent incompatibility of Mark 13:32 with Christ’s omniscience by limiting what is possibly foreknowable even to an omniscient God. For example, Boyd interprets Mark 13:32 in light of 2 Peter 3:10–12, where Peter speaks of “speeding the day” of the Lord’s coming by living holy and godly lives:

¹⁸Charles M. Horne, “Let this Mind be in You: An Exposition of Philippians 2:5–11,” *Grace Journal*, vol. 1, Spring 1960, p. 28. As quoted in Carl, “Only the Father knows,” cited before.

¹⁹See also <http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/books/mangod/manch4.htm>.

²⁰John V. Dahms, “The Subordination of the Son,” *JETS*, 37, September 1994, pp. 356–357.

²¹As quoted in Carl, “Only the Father Knows,” cited before.

²²But see “When it comes to Mark 13:32//Matthew 24:36...what about the Holy Spirit?” <http://www.tektonics.org/mk1332.html>.

²³See, e.g., Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, Baker Book House, 2000. Also, John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*, InterVarsity Press, 1998.

²⁴John Sanders, “On Heffalumps and Heresies: Responses to Accusations Against Open Theism,” *Journal of Biblical Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, January–March 2002, <http://journalofbiblicalstudies.org/issue5.html>.

²⁵Some, like Gregory Boyd and William Hasker, believe that part of the future is simply unknowable. Others, like Dallas Willard, argue that God has dispositional omnipotence and omniscience.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.

As Robert L. Thomas describes, based on this reading, “Boyd reasons that the Father could not know precisely the day or hour because that date has not yet been set.”²⁶ Boyd’s rationale is that, as Roger Nicole explains, “the Father himself really could not determine this in advance because of the smog of human liberty.”²⁷

3 Analysis

Because of the difficulties in confronting Mark 13:32, some have asserted that this passage is “a late addition by the early church to justify the delay of the anticipated parousia.”²⁸ Their main justification is that Mark does not use the absolute form “the Son” anywhere else. But Carl dismisses this charge because it is problematic on two counts. First, Mark does in fact use the form “the Son” without the modifier “of God” or “of Man” when there is already an implied association with the Father. Second, as Carl points out, “it seems illogical that the church would attempt to justify the delayed parousia with a verse that attributes ignorance to the Son and consequently creates more difficulty than it alleviates.”²⁹ Proceeding with the view that Mark 13:32 needs to be confronted as an authoritative text, which of the views presented above are reasonable and which are not?

The hypostatic-union solution, probably the most widely held view in orthodox circles, preserves the Chalcedonian formula, harmonizing the two parallel descriptions of Christ in the New Testament. By viewing the human knowledge of Christ as dependent on the divine nature, this view holds both human and divine natures together in the person of Christ, but at the same time allows for a straightforward exegesis of Mark 13:32.

The non-use approach also preserves the full deity and humanity of Jesus. Like the hypostatic-union view, the non-use view provides a way to understand Christ as simultaneously omniscient and ignorant. As Carl puts it, “It subordinates Jesus to the Father or to the Spirit in economic ways that historic Christianity would not find objectionable.”³⁰ Therefore, like the hypostatic-union

²⁶Robert L. Thomas, “The Hermeneutics of ‘Open Theism,’” *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2, Fall 2001, <http://www.ondocline.com/2tho0001.htm>.

²⁷Roger Nicole, “God of the Possible?” *Reformation & Revival*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Winter 2001, http://www.the-highway.com/possible_Nicole.html.

²⁸Carl, “Only the Father Knows,” cited before.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

solution, it views Christ's human knowledge as dependent upon the divine.

The official-ignorance solution, though appealing and arguably less complicated than the first two solutions, is problematic because it involves deception on the part of Christ. In this view, Christ commits an *equivocation* on the word "know."

The kenosis view is widely rejected in orthodox scholarship because it strips Christ of His divine nature, contradicting much of the New Testament's witness to the person of Christ. Kenoticism involves destroying the integrity of the atonement, the traditional view of the incarnation, the immutability of God, and the monotheistic distinctive of the Christian faith.³¹ Some have even gone as far as questioning if kenoticists are Christians.³²

The subordination solution of Dahms, like the kenoticist view it seems so close to, is "fraught with several serious theological difficulties."³³ For one, Dahms' view destroys the divine nature altogether, making it virtually impossible to reconcile this view with passages like Colossians 2:3,9; John 16:14–15, 17:30; Matthew 11:27; and Hebrews 1:3.

Finally, the open-theism view, the newcomer to the arena, is one that has spurred considerable debate among evangelicals.³⁴ Open theism, also called *freewill* theism and *neotheism*, has come under significant scrutiny and criticism because of its radical departure from traditional views of God's omniscience.³⁵ It is not clear how open-theism resolves the issue that Mark 13:32 suggests that the Father *does* know, even if the Son does not. How does the indefiniteness of the future absolve Christ of His ignorance but at the same time not conflict with the clear implication that the Father is *not* ignorant? Open theism suffers not only from theological problems but also serious philosophical defects.³⁶ Indeed, Roger Nicole declares, "The movement of the 'openness of God' must be defeated."³⁷

4 Conclusion

Mark 13 remains a difficult passage of the New Testament, and no doubt future Biblical scholarship will continue to deal with it. For now, satisfactory views of Mark 13:32 exist that preserve the Christology of Chalcedon. The hypostatic-union and non-use views provide sound exegetical solutions to the difficulty of Mark 13:32. The other views vary in degrees of seriousness in the theological and philosophical problems they raise.

³¹See Dan Musick, "Kenosis: Christ 'emptied Himself' (Philippians 2:7)," <http://kenosis.info/>.

³²Ibid. But Musick also dismisses the non-use and non-exercise views as "senseless" and "heretical."

³³Carl, "Only the Father Knows," cited before.

³⁴See *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, J. K. Beilby and P. R. Eddy, Eds. InterVarsity Press, 2001.

³⁵See, e.g., James Patrick Holding, "Wide Open Theism: A Broadside Critique of Open Theism/Neotheism," *Tektonitron, Encyclopedia Apologetica*, <http://www.tektonics.org/opentheism01.html>, and Craig W. Thompson, "The Jesus Who Never Knew: Free-Will Theism and the Incarnation," <http://www.bible.org/docs/soapbox/scholars/freewilltheism.htm>.

³⁶See *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, cited before.

³⁷Nicole, "God of the Possible?" cited before.