

Jesus's Confession of Ignorance and Consubstantiality

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Abstract: This essay argues that Jesus's confession of ignorance about the day and hour of his return (Matt. 24:36; Mark 13:32) is logically inconsistent with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan doctrine of his "consubstantiality" (*homoousia*) with God the Father. The essay first defines "consubstantiality", then presents three formulations of the argument, and finally rebuts a number of possible responses: from the textual originality of the phrase "nor the Son"; from the reinterpretation of "knows" as "makes known"; from the ideas of partitive exegesis and *communicatio idiomatum*; and from the question of the Holy Spirit's knowledge of the things of God.

Keywords: Jesus, Incarnation, Nicene Christology, Chalcedonian Christology, Homoousios, Timothy Pawl

The thesis of this essay is that Jesus's confession of ignorance about the day and hour of his return (Matt. 24:36; Mark 13:32) logically excludes the Nicene-Constantinopolitan doctrine of his "consubstantiality" with God the Father. R. P. C. Hanson notes that the pro-Nicene theologians struggled mightily to make good sense of these passages (1988, 107, 454, 496). The case will be made here that the logical analysis of Jesus's words by itself excludes the opinion that Father and Son are "consubstantial." But before proceeding to the argument, it would be well to begin by defining the notion of "consubstantiality."

Consubstantiality Defined

One of the central questions of Christian theology zealously debated in the fourth century had to do with the proper understanding of the divinity of Jesus Christ. In what sense can Christ be said to be divine? Would affirming the full divinity of Christ undermine the truth that there is only "one God, the Father" (1 Cor. 8:6)? This

dispute, which would later come to consume the “catholic” tradition¹ spread through the Roman empire, began in a disagreement between the bishop Alexander of Alexandria and his deacon Athanasius, on the one hand, and the presbyter Arius, on the other (Anatolios 2011; Ayres 2004; Hanson 1988; Kelly 1968). The “winning” answer to the question—at least as far as later judgments regarding orthodoxy are concerned²—was eventually codified in the creeds emitted by the councils of Nicaea (325 CE) and Constantinople (381 CE). The orthodoxy of this Nicene-Constantinopolitan stream commends belief in

the one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father. (*homoousion tōi Patri; consubstantialem Patri*; Schaff 1877, 57)

The most important element of this statement is the idea that God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son are “consubstantial” (*homoousioi; consubstantiales*) or “of the same nature.” This point is worth explaining in greater detail.

To say that God the Father and Jesus his Son are “consubstantial” or “of the same nature” is minimally to say that the Father and the Son are perfectly equal with respect to divinity. The one is not more perfectly or completely divine than the other; the Son is not lesser than the Father as regards his being divine. As can be noted in the passage quoted above, the way the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed attempts to illustrate this point is by means of the distinction between “being made” and “being begotten.” Thomas Weinandy summarizes the significance of this distinction as follows:

Nicaea made, for the first time, a clear distinction. What is made is *of a different nature* from that of the maker. Ants make anthills; human beings make houses; God

¹ The term “catholic” as it is used here does not refer to Roman Catholicism *per se* but rather to that mainstream of Christian theology which first distinguished itself in the second century from various forms of Gnosticism as being genuinely apostolic by means of episcopal succession and later codified and officially enforced its dogmatic commitments through the assistance of the secular powers in the ecumenical councils of the fourth through eighth centuries. Contemporary Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and more traditional forms of Anglicanism and Protestantism are thus all descendants and common inheritors of this “catholic” tradition to various degrees. See Pelikan (1971).

² There is a good case to be made that the “losing” answer endorsed by Arius and his supporters was the more conservative and traditional opinion throughout the Roman empire when seen in comparison to what would later become Nicene-Constantinopolitan orthodoxy (Hart 2022, 112–119; cf. Williams 2001). This point has been recently argued at some length by Vladimir Latinovic (2017).

creates/makes the world. However, what is begotten is *of the same nature* as the one who begets. Ants beget ants; human beings beget human beings; God begets the Son and so the Son, as begotten, is of the same nature as the begetter, God the Father. This is precisely why the Council can now employ its non-biblical word— [*homoousion*], one in being/substance with the Father. (Weinandy 2015, 553–554; emphasis added)

To say that the Son is not “made” by the Father but rather “begotten” of him is therefore to imply that the Son is of the same nature as the Father, just as a human child is of the same nature as his or her human parent. In other words, they are “consubstantial” (*homoousioi*; *consubstantiales*). The post-Chalcedonian *Quicumque Vult* (or so-called “Athanasian Creed”³) will put the point by saying that Jesus Christ the Son of God is “equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead” (Schaff 1877, 69).

There is nevertheless a further problem needing to be clarified. Suppose that Father and Son are “consubstantial” in the sense of being “of the same nature.” But what exactly does it mean to be “of the same nature”? It depends on what is meant by “nature.” Contemporary analytic theologians like Oliver Crisp (2007, 42–49; 2009, 105–107) and Timothy Pawl (2016, 34–39) distinguish between an “abstract” and a “concrete” sense of nature. Understood abstractly, a nature is a universal property or set of properties which can equally be instantiated or exemplified by numerically distinct individuals. To possess a nature in this sense is therefore to exemplify a certain kind of being. It is generally possible in English to refer to natures abstractly understood by means of nouns ending with -ity or -ness. One can therefore speak of “felinity” as an abstract nature that is equally exemplified by distinct feline individuals, such as this cat and that cat. Understood concretely, a nature is a particular concrete thing that instantiates a certain kind. To possess a nature in this sense is therefore to have concrete being as a certain kind of thing. It is generally possible in English to refer to natures concretely understood with demonstrative or possessive adjectives and nouns. One can therefore speak of “this felinity” or “Jesus’s humanity.” One can appreciate the distinction between abstract and concrete conceptions of nature as follows. Suppose one writes the letter *A* on a whiteboard three times. This situation allows one to distinguish between the abstract universal *A*-ness that has been instantiated three times over and the concrete particular *As* that instantiate the universal. The abstract is the universal that is multiply instantiated or exemplified while the concrete is what instantiates or exemplifies the universal. The abstract is one and common while the concrete can be

³ The *Quicumque Vult* is neither a creed, nor was it written by Athanasius, nor is it reflective of his theology. See the discussion in Kelly (1964; 2006).

multiple and particular. It therefore must be explained which of these conceptions of “nature” is at work in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan idea that Father and Son are “consubstantial” or “of the same nature.”

Weinandy notes that the phrase “consubstantial” (*homoousios*) could have been understood in two ways at the time of Nicaea-Constantinople (2015, 554). On the one hand, one could say that Father and Son share a common divine “substance” in the way that two copper coins are both made of copper. They would thus be “consubstantial” in the sense of being made out of the same kind of “stuff.” Here “substance” roughly means material cause. The problem with this way of understanding things is that it would seem to imply that Father and Son are two gods. This compromises the unity of Father and Son. They would no more be “one” as “consubstantial” in this sense than two coins are “one.” Such a result incidentally would also follow from an interpretation of the phrase “of the same nature” along purely abstract lines. If the nature that Father and Son share is an abstract nature, then they share it in the sense of being two particulars who stand in a relation of exemplification to one and the same universal. Father and Son would thus be two gods just as Peter and Paul are two human beings. The interpretation of “consubstantiality” along the lines of a purely abstract understanding of nature therefore compromises the oneness of God. On the other hand, one could say that Father and Son are “consubstantial” in the sense that “they are one and the same reality, one and the same being” (Weinandy 2015, 554). Here “substance” means the individual being. This would require a concrete interpretation of “nature.” To say that Father and Son are “consubstantial” thus means that one and the same concrete particular instance of divinity somehow or other belongs equally (even if asymmetrically)⁴ to the both of them. Whatever distinctions remain between Father and Son are to be understood as not being of such a sort as to turn them into distinct beings in the manner of Peter and Paul or two copper coins. The unity of Father and Son as a single God is in this way preserved by the concrete interpretation of “nature.”

⁴ The notion of “asymmetry” is mentioned here for the sake of preserving the traditional doctrine of processions. The persons of the Trinity share one and the same nature, but they are distinguished from one another from the point of view of the relations that obtain between them. The Father is uncaused and ungenerated, the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father (and from the Son). The one concrete divine nature is thus equally but asymmetrically the possession of each person. It is the Father as begetter and spirator that brings it about that Son and Holy Spirit share in his one concrete divine nature. See Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 25.15.

This interpretation of “nature” in concrete terms can be supported by appeal to important figures in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan tradition. Athanasius himself explains the significance of the term *homoousios* as follows:

[T]he Son [is] from the Father, and not merely like, but the same in likeness, and . . . the Son's likeness and unalterableness [is] different from such copy of the same as is ascribed to us, which we acquire from virtue on the ground of observance of the commandments. For bodies which are like each other may be separated and become at distances from each other, as are human sons relatively to their parents (as it is written concerning Adam and Seth, who was begotten of him that he was like him after his own pattern [Gen. 5:3]); but since the generation of the Son from the Father is not according to the nature of men, and not only like, but also inseparable from the essence of the Father, and He and the Father are one, as He has said Himself [John 10:30], and the Word is ever in the Father and the Father in the Word, as the radiance stands towards the light (for this the phrase itself indicates), therefore the Council, as understanding this, suitably wrote ‘one in essence’ [*homoousios*] that they might both defeat the perverseness of the heretics, and show that the Word was other than originated things. (*De Decretis* 5.20)

The similarity or likeness of nature or essence that obtains between Father and Son is thus distinguished from that which can obtain among distinct creatures. Human beings may attain to a likeness of God or a resemblance to him in some sense by means of the practice of virtue. Parents and their children can likewise be said to be like to or to resemble one another, even though each one has his or her own proper features. But the Son's being begotten of the Father is “inseparable from the essence of the Father.” It is constitutive of what the Father is simply by nature that he begets the Son. The creed emitted at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE expresses this point by saying that the Son is begotten “out of the being of the Father” (*ek tēs ousias tou Patros*; Schaff 1877, 60). The two persons consequently cannot be “separated and become at distances from each other” in the way possible for human parents and their children. It is not as though each had a body or concrete actuality of his own. The Father's begetting of the Son is “not according to the nature of men.” The Son is thus “not only like, but also inseparable from the essence of the Father.” This can thus be taken as meaning that there is between Father and Son a single and indivisible concrete reality, namely their divine nature concretely understood, which belongs to them equally.

This same conception of things would also be taken up by later figures in this same Nicene-Constantinopolitan tradition. The *Quicumque Vult* asserts that there is between Father and Son (and Holy Spirit) one and the same godhead, glory, majesty,

uncreatedness, incomprehensibility, eternity, almightiness (Schaff 1877, 66–68). The Father does not have his own godhead or majesty or eternity distinct from that of the Son or Spirit. There is only one concrete divinity which equally belongs to each person. This is what makes it possible to say that there are not three Gods. John of Damascus likewise asserts that the catholic doctrine of God maintains that between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit there is “one substance, one godhead, one virtue, one will, one operation, one principality, one power, one domination, one kingdom” (*Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 1.8). Insofar as substance, godhead, virtue, will, operation, and the like would appear to refer to the concrete instantiation of the nature of divinity, it follows that the Damascene understands the consubstantiality of Father and Son in terms of their sharing the same divine nature concretely understood. To say that there are between Father and Son two godheads or wills or operations would seem to turn them into two gods, just as there are between the two men Peter and Paul two manhoods, two wills, and two operations. This is further support in defense of understanding “consubstantial” in terms of a concrete conception of nature.

The interpretation of the notion of “consubstantiality” becomes somewhat more complicated when it is a question of the meaning of the term in later Christian history. The “symbol” emitted by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE asserted that “one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ” is “consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood” (*homoousion tōi Patri kata tēn theotēta, kai homoousion auton hēmin kata tēn anthrōpotēta*; Schaff 1877, 62). These lines are presented as further expositing the idea that Jesus Christ is “perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man.” This is another way of saying that he exemplifies both divinity and humanity in such a way as completely and perfectly to count both as divine and as human. Aloys Grillmeier thus writes that for Chalcedon “Christ is truly and perfectly God and man!” (Grillmeier 1965, 484). But it would be difficult to say that Christ and all other human beings are “consubstantial” in the sense of sharing one and the same concrete humanity. This would entail the (plainly false?) proposition that there is only one human being (*anthrōpos*) just as there is only God (*theos*).⁵ This therefore

⁵ This idea can be found in Gregory of Nyssa’s *To Ablabius: On “Not Three Gods.”* He argues that the term “human being” (*anthrōpos*) only refers to human nature considered as a universal shared by many particulars. It is for this reason a “customary abuse of language” to speak of “many human beings” (*polloi anthrōpoi*) insofar as this would imply that there are “many human natures” (*pollai physeis anthrōpinai*). But William Hasker (2013, 28) rightly rejects this line of reasoning as confused. And Johannes Zachhuber (2020, 63) writes that “[Gregory’s] claim that plural use of a term like ‘man’ is catachrestic . . . has, overall, not been met with much sympathy among modern scholars and even

means that the term “consubstantial” is being used somewhat differently in the Chalcedonian symbol than in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Earlier “consubstantiality” meant that the Father and the Son equally share a single divine nature concretely understood. Now it means that the Son exemplifies the abstract universal divinity just as the Father does in addition to exemplifying the abstract universal humanity just as ordinary human beings do. He counts as an instance of deity and as an instance of humanity. Philip Schaff proposes to explain this situation by suggesting that the word “consubstantial” (*homoousion*)

is used in both clauses, though with a shade of difference. Christ's *homoousia* with the Father implies numerical unity, or identity of essence (God being one in being, or *monoousios*); Christ's *homoousia* with men means only generic unity, or equality of nature. (Schaff 1877, 64)

But it seems implausible that one and the same word could be used in such radically different senses in close succession. It makes better sense to interpret “consubstantial” in Chalcedon as meaning “of the same nature” where “nature” is understood abstractly. The concrete particular natures are rather referred to by means of the nouns “Godhead” (*theotēs*) and “Manhood” (*anthrōpotēs*). A nature concretely understood is precisely a concrete individual that instantiates a certain kind, i.e. stands in a relation of exemplification to a certain nature abstractly understood. It is consequently in virtue of his equal possession of both kinds of concrete particular natures that the one person of the Son is “consubstantial” with the Father according to his Godhead and with human beings according to his Manhood, i.e. he exemplifies both divinity and humanity abstractly considered.

The orthodox opinion maintains that Father and Son are “consubstantial” (*homoousioi*; *consubstantiales*) or “of the same nature.” But there would thus appear to be two ways in which the word “consubstantial” can be used in Christian theology. This phrase is ambiguous. Its meaning depends on whether “nature” is interpreted abstractly or concretely. It is one thing to be “of the same nature” in the sense of sharing one and the same concrete nature, and it is another to be “of the same nature” in the sense of exemplifying one and the same abstract nature. One could say that Nicaea-Constantinople proposes a “concrete” understanding of “consubstantial” while Chalcedon proposes an “abstract” understanding. The use of this term in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed means to communicate that one and the same concrete particular instance of divinity belongs equally (even if

later Patristic authors were ambivalent about it.” Jesus himself tells a parable about “two men” (*anthrōpoi duo*) who went to the Temple to pray (Luke 18:10).

asymmetrically) to them Father and Son alike. It thus implies a concrete understanding of nature. The use of the term in the Chalcedonian symbol means to communicate that Father and Son both equally (even if asymmetrically) exemplify the abstract universal divinity. It thus implies an abstract understanding of nature. Yet the Chalcedonian symbol also specifies that the Son is “consubstantial” with the Father specifically according to his “Godhead,” i.e. his concrete divine nature (*kata tēn theotēta*). This Chalcedonian use of the term “consubstantiality” is thus in principle consistent with even if different from the use of the same term in Nicaea-Constantinople.

As was mentioned at the start, the thesis of this essay is that Jesus’s confession of ignorance of the day and hour of the judgment (Matt. 24:36; Mark 13:32) logically excludes the Nicene-Constantinopolitan doctrine of his consubstantiality with God the Father. This thesis can now be further specified. It has been argued that Nicaea-Constantinople makes use of a “concrete” notion of consubstantiality. The argument will be made below that Jesus’s confession of ignorance implies that he does not share one and the same concrete instance of divinity together with God the Father. And to the extent that Chalcedon asserts the “consubstantiality” of Father and Son, abstractly conceived, on the basis of their possessing one and the same concrete divine nature or Godhead (*theotēs*), it will therefore undermine the Chalcedonian notion of their consubstantiality just as well. But it should also be noted that the argument here is *not* that Jesus’s ignorance of something proves that he cannot be “of the same nature” as the Father in a purely abstract sense, i.e. that he fails to exemplify divinity. That is another matter altogether.⁶

Jesus’s Confession of Ignorance

Toward the end of what is commonly called the Olivet Discourse, by way of exhorting his disciples to wakefulness and vigilance, Jesus makes the following assertion:

⁶ The possibility that Jesus might still perfectly exemplify divinity even while being ignorant of something is an interesting one to consider but strictly beyond the scope of the present essay. The reason is that this possibility presupposes that Jesus would not share one and the same concrete divine nature with the Father, who does know that of which Jesus is ignorant (cf. Matt. 24:36; Mark 13:32). For the divine Jesus not to know something that the divine Father does is for the concrete divinity of the one to lack a knowledge which the concrete divinity of the other possesses and thus for the two persons not to share one and the same concrete divine nature. This is simply a denial of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan conception of “consubstantiality,” with which the present essay is principally concerned.

But about that day and hour no one knows (*oudeis oiden*), neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, *but only the Father* (*ei mē ho patēr monos*). For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so, too, will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left. Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming (Matt. 24:36–42; emphasis added).

But about that day or hour no one knows (*oudeis oiden*), neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, *but only the Father* (*ei mē ho patēr*). Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight or at cockcrow or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake (Mark 13:32–37; emphasis added).

Jesus thus says that there is something only the Father knows which no one else does, not even the Son, i.e. himself. The difficulty of this passage for the Nicene-Constantinopolitan conception of the consubstantiality of Father and Son can be appreciated as follows.

For the Father and the Son to share one and the same concrete divine nature is for everything proper to that nature to be equally predicable to both persons. One can appeal here to the examples of the *Quicumque Vult*. Because almightiness, eternality, uncreatedness, etc. are proper to the divine nature concretely considered, all these qualities can be predicated to the Father and to the Son alike insofar as they both equally possess that nature. That is why both the Father and the Son are rightly said to be almighty, eternal, uncreated, and the like. But because there is only a single divine nature concretely understood which is equally (even if asymmetrically) the possession of the persons of the Father and the Son, it follows that there is only one almighty, one eternal, one uncreated, etc., and not three (Schaff 1877, 66–67). Now Jesus further maintains that the Father knows the day and the hour of his return. This knowledge must then be proper to his concrete divine nature. There is obviously nothing else in which this knowledge could subsist insofar as the person of the Father does not possess two natures but only the one. Yet Jesus also says that this knowledge is possessed *only* by the Father. No one else shares in it, neither the angels in heaven, nor even the Son himself. This entails therefore that the concrete divine nature of the Father is not equally the possession of the Son insofar as the

knowledge proper to that nature is not predicable of him. If he were to possess that nature equally with the Father, then such knowledge would be predicable of him and it would not be true to say that *only* the Father knows. But to say that the Son does not share equally in the one concrete divine nature of the Father is to deny that he is “consubstantial with the Father” (*homoousios tōi Patri*) as intended by Nicaea-Constantinople. The argument is therefore clear.

This argument can also be put as follows. Pawl (2016, 154–159) proposes a certain helpful rule for understanding the truth conditions of at least some theological statements regarding Christ. Richard Cross (cf. 2019, 12) summarizes the proposal roughly as follows: to say that Christ is *F* is to say that Christ possesses a nature that is *F*. Certain predicates are thus more properly applied to natures and only derivatively or indirectly to the persons associated with these natures. Pawl pairs this rule with a preference for the concrete interpretation of “nature” over the abstract (2016, 34–39). Suppose one grants Pawl’s proposal. The application to the present context is then very clear. Jesus asserts that no one knows the day and the hour of the judgment except the Father alone. Interpreted in keeping with Pawl’s rule, Jesus would then be asserting that no one possesses a nature that knows the day and the hour of the judgment except the Father alone. But this further implies that Jesus himself does not possess that nature insofar as he is a distinct person from the Father. And to say that Jesus does not possess the same concrete divine nature as the Father is to deny that Father and Son are “consubstantial” in the sense intended by Nicaea-Constantinople. The argument is therefore clear.

The argument can also be put as follows. The logical form of Jesus’s words is the following: (1) No one is *F* but *x*. Sentences with this form can be rephrased as follows: (2) *x* is *F* and no one else. But such a sentence implies the truth of one like this: (3) The *F*-making conditions in virtue of which *x* is *F* obtain in no other case. After all, if these *F*-making conditions obtained in the case of some other individual than *x*, then it would no longer be true to say that no one is *F* but *x*. These equivalences can be appreciated as follows. To say that no one is the president of the United States except Joseph Biden is equivalent to saying that Joseph Biden is the president of the United States and no one else. But to say that Joseph Biden is the president of the United States and no one else is equivalent to saying that the president-making conditions in virtue of which Joseph Biden is president of the United States do not obtain in the case of anyone else. After all, if the same conditions did obtain in the case of someone else, then Joseph Biden would not be the only president of the United States. This other person would be as well. These conditions presumably have to do with the fulfillment of the stipulations for the election of the president according to the law of the United States of America. No one else has fulfilled these

stipulations than Joseph Biden himself. This same line of reasoning can therefore be applied to the remarks of Jesus at Matt. 24:36/Mark 13:32. To say that no one knows except the Father alone is the same as saying that the Father knows and no one else. But to say that the Father knows and no one else is equivalent to saying that the knowledge-conferring conditions in virtue of which the Father knows do not obtain in the case of anyone else. After all, if the same conditions did obtain in the case of someone else, then the Father would not be the only one who knows. These conditions presumably have to do with the possession of the one concrete divine nature to which omniscience or all-knowledge is proper. No one else possesses that nature than the Father himself. This therefore implies that Jesus does not equally possess that same nature and so is not “consubstantial” with the Father as Nicaea-Constantinople demands.

In all these ways, the logical form of Jesus’s words at Matt. 24:36 and Mark 13:32 implies that he is not “consubstantial” with the Father in the sense intended by Nicaea-Constantinople. In other words, he does not equally possess one and the same concrete divine nature.

Possible Responses

There are various possible responses one might think to give to this argument. It would be well to consider them in order.

To begin, one might think to avoid the argument altogether by calling into question the originality of the words which Matthew and Mark report. It may be that Jesus never actually said “nor the Son” insofar as this phrase is missing from some manuscripts of the Gospels of Matthew and of Mark. There are two things to say to this by way of rejoinder: that this point is implausible and that it is irrelevant.

First, this proposal is implausible. R. Alan Culpepper (2021, 480) writes that copyists responsible for some manuscripts likely excluded the phrase precisely for the theological trouble it causes. The Gospel of Luke does not even include them at all, probably for the same reason of the embarrassment they cause. This can be taken as an indication of the phrase’s probable origins in Jesus himself. Joel Marcus (2021, 914) argues that “the denial of omniscience [on Jesus’s part] seems to some to point toward genuineness; would the church have made up a saying in which Jesus disclaimed eschatological insight?” Herbert Bassler and Marsha Cohen (2015, 636) accept the passage in Matthew as uncontroversial: “Jesus himself does not know the precise day or hour.” And Craig Keener argues that the saying is “surely authentic” as follows:

[B]ecause Scripture already attested that the Lord knows the time (Zech 14:7), the early church would hardly have created a saying limiting divine omniscience to the Father; no circle of first-century Christianity securely known to us could have afforded such a concession. Further, had early Christians simply needed a saying to address the delay of the parousia, they would more naturally have created a claim that Jesus denied the imminence of the parousia, not that he was ignorant of its timing. (Keener 2009, 590)⁷

On the basis of these considerations, it therefore seems improbable that the phrase “nor the Son” should not be original to the gospel texts or that it should not trace back to Jesus himself. It is precisely the theological trouble it causes for later Christian orthodoxy that makes it unlikely that it should have been invented.

Second, this proposal is irrelevant. It should be noted that the logical force of the argument being presented here does not come principally from the words “nor the Son” but rather from the words “only the Father.” It does not matter whether Jesus originally said the words “nor the Son.” There is no text-critical question about the originality of the words “only the Father.” Even the Greek word *monos* is not strictly necessary. The meaning is exactly the same whether it is a matter of Matthew’s formula (*oudeis oiden . . . ei mē ho patēr monos* = no one knows . . . except the Father alone) or Mark’s (*oudeis oiden . . . ei mē ho patēr* = no one knows . . . except the Father). And given that the Son and the Father are distinct persons, the truth of the sentence that only the Father knows logically implies the truth of the sentence that the Son does not know. The phrase “only the Father” or “no one . . . except the Father” by itself implies “and not (= nor) the Son.” The inference is therefore simple. If only the Father knows, then only the Father possesses a concrete nature in virtue of which such knowledge is predicable of him. And if only the Father possesses that nature, then the Son who is other than the Father does not equally share in that nature as the orthodoxy of Nicaea-Constantinople demands. One can thus conclude that this question about the originality of the words “nor the Son” is something of a red herring.

Alternatively, one might propose a different interpretation of the passages in question. It may be that when Jesus mentions that the Son does not “know” the day and the hour, he means to say that he is not going to make the day and the hour

⁷ Keener in that same place also (predictably) tries to find some evidence suggestive of Jesus’s divinity in this passage. But it would be irrelevant for the purposes of the present essay’s argument to pursue that line of thought here. The case is being made that Jesus’s remarks are logically inconsistent *specifically* with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan doctrine of the “consubstantiality” of Father and Son. It may well be that Jesus is “divine” in some way or other without being consubstantial with the Father in the specifically Nicene-Constantinopolitan sense.

known. This privilege belongs only to the Father. “Knowing” thus means “making known.” Pawl himself (2014, 172) opts for this reading of the passage in question. It is given by Thomas Aquinas: “But one must understand here that the Son, set as a man among men, considered Himself as ignoring something [i.e., not knowing it] so long as He did not reveal it to His disciples. . . [T]he Son is said not to know that which he does not make us know” (*Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.8.8). Marcus (2021, 913–914) notes that this is a very common notion among the patristic interpreters of this passage, who generally insisted that the Son did indeed know in the ordinary sense of the word. But this is an implausible suggestion. On the one hand, the verb “know” (*oiden*) at Matt. 24:36 and Mark 13:32 cannot mean “make known” in this context insofar as that is plainly not what Christ has in mind in his later exhortations: “Therefore, keep awake, for you do not know (*ouk oidate*)” (Matt. 24:42/Mark 13:35). On the other hand, interpreting the verb “know” as “make known” undermines the force of Jesus’s words.

Jesus says that no one knows the day and the hour except the Father. Suppose this means that no one makes the day and hour known except the Father. This assertion would nevertheless be logically consistent with the Son’s knowing, the angels’ knowing, and even the disciples’ knowing in the sense of possessing awareness of the day and the hour. It is just that none of these persons make the day and the hour known. But there would be no basis for Jesus to exhort his disciples to vigilance and watchfulness in the first place if all he meant to say is that no one except the Father will make the day and the hour known. Nothing about the fact that the Father alone makes the day and the hour known would motivate a call to vigilance—unless of course it were paired with the idea that the Father alone knows in the ordinary sense of the word. This interpretation therefore has little plausibility. It is sooner an example of what one must say if one has a prior commitment to Nicene-Constantinopolitan orthodoxy. Consider how the ante-Nicene Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* 2.28.6 believes the interpretation of the verse is plain:

[E]ven the Lord, the very Son of God, allowed that the Father alone knows the very day and hour of judgment, when He plainly declares, But of that day and that hour knows no man, neither the Son, but the Father only. If, then, the Son was not ashamed to ascribe the knowledge of that day to the Father only, but declared what was true regarding the matter, neither let us be ashamed to reserve for God those greater questions which may occur to us. For no man is superior to his master.

The bishop of Lyons was not committed to a Nicene-Constantinopolitan conception of “consubstantiality” and thus was able to appreciate the plain meaning of the

words. Where there is not an *a priori* commitment to a notion of the “consubstantiality” of Father and Son, the text seems to speak simply enough.

Alternatively, one might think to limit the truthfulness of the ascription of ignorance to Jesus’s concrete human nature in some way. One could say that he is certainly ignorant of the day and the hour in or according to his human nature, but he is not ignorant in or according to his divine nature. This response would thus involve an appeal to the correlated principles of partitive exegesis and *communicatio idiomatum*.

R. B. Jamieson (2020, 188) defines “partitive exegesis” as “a reading strategy that recognizes that [the apostolic authors speak] of Christ in two distinct, complementary registers, the divine and the human, and that distinguishes between what [they ascribe] to Christ insofar as he is divine, and insofar as he has become human” (cf. Jamieson 2021, 31–36). This is a traditional rule which played an important role in the biblical interpretation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan tradition (Behr 2004). Gregory of Nazianzus summarizes it as follows:

In sum: you must predicate the more sublime expressions of the Godhead, of the nature which transcends bodily experiences, and the lowlier ones of the compound, of him who because of you was emptied, became incarnate and (to use equally valid language) was “made man.” (*Orations* 29.18)

And Thomas Aquinas:

[W]e confess that in Christ the Son of God, after the mystery of the Incarnation, there were two natures, namely, the human and the divine. Hence both those things that are proper to God are said of him by reason of his divine nature (*ratione divinae naturae*), and those things that would seem to savor of imperfection are said of him by reason of his human nature (*ratione humanae naturae*; SCG 4.4).

This passage from Thomas illustrates the way in which the method of partitive exegesis is founded upon the idea of the two natures of Christ and the *communicatio idiomatum*. Ian McFarland (2019, 79) defines this latter idea as follows: “[B]ecause in Jesus both divine and human natures are united in one hypostasis, any of the properties (*idiomata* in Greek) of either nature are rightly predicated of the single hypostatic ‘someone’ that Jesus is.” And Thomas Joseph White (2015, 21): “The subject who acts is one, but he acts always both as God and as man, simultaneously able to do what only God can do, and able to suffer what only a human being can suffer.” One could thus say that the *communicatio idiomatum* is the theological-metaphysical corollary and ground of the methodological principle of partitive

exegesis. And it is in virtue of the union of two natures in a single person in Jesus Christ's case that one can say of him truthfully both that "[Christ] is all-knowing" as well as that he is "ignorant of the time of his second coming," as Crisp (2007, 7) writes.

This line of response does not convince. The greatest problem with it is that it seems to miss the point entirely. It is worth mentioning once more that the challenge being raised here is not that one must find a way of accounting for the truth of the sentence that the Son does not know. It is rather that of appreciating the logical implication of Jesus's saying that *only* the Father knows. The appeal to partitive exegesis and the *communicatio idiomatum* might very well explain how it could be possible in the abstract truthfully to say both that the Son does not know and that the Son does know. One simply distinguishes between the two natures. The Son does not know in or according to the one nature but does know in or according to the other. Yet this is all irrelevant to the problem at hand. In this essay the problem is rather that Jesus's statement excludes the possibility of saying truthfully that the Son does know in the first place. If the Son does know as far as his divine nature is concerned, then he knows. And if the Son knows, then it is not true to say that *only* the Father knows—so long as one grants that the Son and the Father are distinct persons. To say that *only* the Father knows excludes the possibility of saying that the Son knows altogether. But if *only* the Father knows, then the Son cannot equally possess that concrete divine nature in virtue of which that knowledge is predicable to the Father. This is to say that Father and Son are not "consubstantial" according to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan doctrine.

This brief discussion also makes it possible to see how Andrew Loke's (2016) "kryptic" model of the Incarnation offers no real solution to the problem at hand. Loke notes that the Greek word *oiden* which is used at Matt. 24:36 and Mark 13:32 can be understood as communicating "awareness" of a fact (Loke 2016, 118). Jesus thus is denying being aware of the day and hour. Only the Father is aware of it. But this is still consistent with his possessing knowledge of the day and hour at a preconscious level. Loke proposes that Jesus voluntarily kept the knowledge which was proper to him in virtue of his divine omniscience at the level of his preconscious during the time of his earthly ministry. The preconscious is defined as "mental contents that are not currently in consciousness but are accessible to consciousness by directing attention to them" (Loke 2016, 66). Jesus's voluntarily limiting the knowledge proper to him in virtue of his divine omniscience to the preconscious level thus makes it possible for him truthfully to claim not to be aware of the day and the hour of his return even despite the fact that is omniscient by nature as divine (Loke 2016, 119–120). Yet this is a further red herring, as can be seen.

The reason why this proposal does not offer a genuine solution to the problem at hand is that *it is itself inconsistent with the doctrine of Nicaea-Constantinople*. One can grant Loke's suggestion that the verb *oiden* at Matt. 24:36 and Mark 13:32 refers to awareness rather than simply knowledge. For the Son to lose awareness of the day and hour of his return while the Father retains it is for the Son to possess a numerically different concrete divine nature than the Father. If they possessed one and the same concrete divine nature, then the loss of awareness for one would be the loss of awareness for the other as well. That is because there would only be one act of awareness or unawareness which would be equally shared by both, just as the *Quicumque Vult* emphasizes that there is between Father and Son one almightiness, one eternality, one uncreatedness, and so on. In the words of John of Damascus, there is between the Father and Son "one operation" and "one will" (*Exact Exposition* 1.8). But Loke's proposal implies that the divine persons of Father and Son do not share one and the same concrete divine nature as Nicaea-Constantinopolitan tradition demands. Only thus could the Son voluntarily lose awareness of something he knows while the Father retains awareness of it. There would be two "operations" or acts between the two of them. This means that one cannot appeal to Loke's Christology in order to show how Jesus's words at Matt. 24:36 and Mark 13:32 are consistent with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan view.

Finally, one might think to raise the question of the Holy Spirit here.⁸ Christ says that only the Father knows. Does this mean that the Holy Spirit does not know? Paul writes that the Spirit of God makes the things of God knowable: "God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human (*tis*) knows what is truly human (*ta tou anthrōpou*) except the human spirit that is within (*to pneuma tou anthrōpou to en autōi*)? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:10–11). If the Spirit comprehends what is truly God's, then it would seem that Jesus's remark that "only" the Father knows cannot be taken so woodenly. But this line of argument does not convince. It is impossible to address this objection in sufficient detail within the constraints of the present context, but two simple points may be raised against it.

First, this argument assumes that the "Spirit" is being conceived of as a distinct person from God the Father. Yet this can be called into question. Presumably Paul does not mean to suggest that the "human spirit that is within" is a distinct person from the "human" or "person" (*tis*) that knows what is truly human. The "human spirit that is within a person" (*to pneuma tou anthrōpou to en autōi*) is not a distinct person from that person him- or herself. It is rather a personifying reference to a

⁸ I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

particular dimension of that person's being, viz. his or her interiority and self-awareness. Something similar can therefore be said of the Spirit of God as well. Wilhelm Herrmann (1927, 148) summarizes an alternative possible interpretation as follows: "The Holy Spirit is simply the living God present and working in us." It is thus open to one to accept this conception of things. Paul simply means to be saying that Christians come to know the things of God because God himself causes them to share in his own self-knowledge by acting upon them in their interior dimension. In that case, there is no contradiction in saying that only the Father knows and that the Spirit knows all the things of God. The "Spirit" would not be a distinct person but simply a certain way of referring to God the Father himself.

Second, this objection takes for granted that the theological vision of Paul in 1 Corinthians must be consistent with that of the synoptic gospels. Yet one need not accept this. This purported consistency is not something that the texts themselves demand insofar as they make no reference to each other. It is at best a requirement of a certain theological perspective that assumes that these texts are all equally inspired by God in every detail and thus must present a logically consistent vision of things. This may well be true, but it arguably should not be taken for granted from the start. Dale Martin (2012, 108) writes of the habit of many scholars of speaking of "early Christianities" in the plural. Diversity both of opinion and of practice was the order of the day (cf. Dunn 2006). If there is in fact such a coherent single vision to be found in the New Testament, it would be most convincing to show that it follows from an independent, fair, and neutral reading of the texts themselves which does not take their doctrinal unanimity for granted from the start. The essential agreement of the texts can be demonstrated *a posteriori* if they truly do agree; it does not need to be assumed *a priori*. But it may well be that the texts do not present such a unified vision. In that case, it does not matter whether Jesus's remarks as presented in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark imply a conception of the Holy Spirit different from that of Paul in his epistles. To insist on agreement where there is none is to fail to interpret the texts honestly.

It would be worth concluding this discussion here by noting that worries about theological coherence are out of place in the present context. Such concerns are not constitutive of the background from which the present argument is being offered. The thesis being argued for here is that Jesus's confession of ignorance of the day and hour at Matt. 24:36 and Mark 13:32 is logically inconsistent with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan doctrine of the "consubstantiality" of Father and Son. If it is true, then there will certainly also follow various other inconsistencies for the greater scheme of Nicene-Constantinopolitan orthodoxy as a whole. But that is a problem for that theological tradition and not for the present essay — assuming that the thesis

of logical inconsistency has been argued successfully. This tradition would then be shown to be itself essentially out of tune with the presentation of Jesus in at least some parts of the New Testament. And it is the opinion of the present author that theologians are under no absolute or unconditional obligation to be committed to this Nicene-Constantinopolitan tradition in the first place.

Concluding Remarks

The thesis of this essay has been that Jesus's confession of ignorance of the day and hour (Matt. 24:36; Mark 13:32) is logically inconsistent with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan doctrine that the Father and Son are "consubstantial." Jesus says that only the Father knows. This implies that he himself does not equally share that concrete divine nature in virtue of which such knowledge is predicable of the Father. If he did equally share in that same concrete divine nature, then such knowledge would be predicable to him as well, so that it would not be true to say that only the Father knows. The denial of the originality of the words "nor the Son" in those passages is a red herring, the attempt to interpret "knows" as "makes known" is contextually implausible, and the appeal to partitive exegesis and the *communicatio idiomatum* apparently misses the point. One may try to make sense of this text by appealing to "kryptic" Christology *à la* Loke. Jesus may have then lacked an awareness of the day and hour of his return as a matter of his voluntarily limiting his divine omniscience to the level of his preconscious during the time of his earthly ministry. Various "kenotic" Christologies are possible from this point of view. But this option implies rejecting the Nicene-Constantinopolitan idea that one and the same concrete divine nature belongs equally to Father and to Son. The Son's self-limiting of his own divinity cannot have affected the Father's divinity, which means that they cannot share one and the same concrete divine nature. All these arguments therefore support the conclusion that Jesus's confession of ignorance at Matt. 24:36 and Mark 13:32 is logically inconsistent with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan doctrine of the consubstantiality of Father and Son.

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