



Only the Father Knows:

A Response to Harold F. Carl

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A Review of Carl's Position

Harold F. Carl addresses the issue of Jesus' ignorance, especially as expressed in Mark 13:32. Carl describes the controversy, reviews its treatment by various historical and modern theologians, and concludes with a presentation of several possible solutions. The solution favored by Carl is the "rule of predication." This solution emphasizes the two natures of Christ and suggests that statements in Scripture can be ascribed to the divine Son and yet "be understood as solely describing his human nature."¹ In other words, the human nature of Christ is ignorant but his divine nature knows all things, even when the ignorance is attributed to the Son using his divine title.

The article has a number of strengths. Carl gives a clear synopsis of the issue, defining it in both historical and modern terms. The historical overview is both efficient and helpful, describing the views of Athanasius, Hilary of Poitiers, Gregory of Nazianzus, Ambrose, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, and giving brief explanations of the reasoning used by each. The

¹ Harold F. Carl, "Only the Father Knows: Historical and Evangelical Responses to Jesus Eschatological Ignorance in Mark 13:32," *Journal of Biblical Studies* [<http://journalofbiblicalstudies.org>] 1, no. 3 (2001): 23.

views of several modern evangelicals are also recited, although the selection of theologians is certainly not comprehensive.

While acknowledging that some have questioned the authenticity of Mark 13:32, Carl rightly rejects such a view as groundless.² The verse fits the flow of the text, the theological context of the chapter, and the vocabulary of Mark. Incidentally, the verse is also on firm footing from a text-critical standpoint.³

However, there is a key weakness in the article: “Nature” is viewed as having substantive qualities. This is ultimately the downfall of the predicative view.

Carl never gives an explicit definition of “nature,” despite his extensive use of the term. However, it is plain from his usage of the term that he views a nature as being loosely equal to a mind, consciousness, or soul-- and therefore substantive. This use of the term compounds the original problem of the two natures of Christ, as we shall see.

How does Carl equate nature and mind? In describing Shedd’s solution, he seems to approve of the idea that “the human mind could not know any more than the divinity allowed and communicated to it.”⁴ In the same context, “while the Logos knew precisely when the day of judgment was, the human mind of Christ knew only what the Logos revealed, and He did not reveal this.”⁵ Along a similar vein, he seems to follow Warfield in thinking that “in Christ there dwells both an infinite and finite mind.”⁶ More directly, Carl follows Grudem in distinguishing

² Carl, “Only the Father,” 18-19. As Carl points out, the addition would have created more problems than it would have alleviated.

³ See especially the excellent work by Reuben Swanson, ed., *New Testament Greek Manuscripts: Mark* (Pasadena: William Cary International University Press, 1995), 219.

⁴ Carl, “Only the Father,” 14. See also his conclusion on 22 where he describes the two-natures defense by Shedd and Grudem in favorable terms.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Carl, “Only the Father,” 16.

“two centers of consciousness in Christ.”⁷ These statements indicate that “nature” and “mind” are interchangeable terms for Carl.

Again speaking of the nature as a substantive being, Carl states that “the divine nature existed before Christ, not the whole person [!?!] or the human nature.”⁸ Describing Christ’s death, he says that “the human body ceased living and functioning, not the divine nature,” as though the nature were the soul.⁹ Similarly, “we know that Mary is the mother of the human nature of Christ and not the divine nature which has existed from all eternity.”¹⁰ The nature is spoken of as if it were the very essence of being.

The rule of predication, Carl’s favored solution for this problem, relies on a substantive view of nature. “Sometimes Christ speaks, but what He says can only be attributed to one or the other nature.”¹¹ This statement is followed by a list of verses that make it evident that Carl would apply this statement not only to the knowledge of Christ (Luke 2:52), but also to his presence (Matt 28:20; John 16:28, 17:11). We are left to conclude that one nature went to the Father, but the other nature was present with the disciples. This clearly suggests a substantive understanding of nature.

It is obvious, then, that Carl fails to distinguish nature from mind or consciousness. It would appear that these terms have been used interchangeably so that for Carl nature has a substantive quality. Such thinking leads to insoluble problems when proponents also cling to the orthodox, single person-hood view of Christ.

⁷ Ibid. Grudem follows Hodge in identifying not only two natures, but also two centers of consciousness, two intelligences, and two wills. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 561.

⁸ Carl, “Only the Father,” 17.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 22.

In critiquing Gerald O'Collins, who also holds a two-consciousnesses view, Hanson declares, "I confess I do not understand how consciousness can be said to be on the side of 'nature' and not of 'person.'"¹² When it is suggested that Jesus had two minds or consciousnesses, it becomes exceedingly difficult to accept the plea that we are not dealing with Nestorianism.¹³

This form of two-nature theology has insurmountable logical difficulties. How can two minds or consciousnesses exist together without requiring the presence of two persons? How can a single person be both omnipresent and move from one place to another? How can one person be omniscient and yet grow in wisdom and be ignorant of some facts?

Proponents of this kind of theological construction, commonly called an antinomy, do not deny that it is incomprehensible. Carl, struggling to explain the conundrum, concludes that "failing to understand how this is possible does not prove it impossible; it simply proves that our understanding is limited."¹⁴ Hodge likewise describes the concept as "mysterious and inscrutable."¹⁵ Grudem declares: "To say that we cannot understand this is appropriate humility. But to say that it is not possible seems more like intellectual arrogance."¹⁶ Yet there is another way of interpreting the biblical evidence that does not result in an antinomy-- an alternative that Carl has overlooked.

¹² A.T. Hanson, "Two Consciousnesses: The Modern Version of Chalcedon," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 37, no. 4 (1984): 471.

¹³ Carl realizes that his position may have "sounded like Nestorianism" to those who participated in the Chalcedonian debate. Carl, "Only the Father," 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, abridged, ed. Edward N. Gross (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 358.

An Alternative

Charles Smith has noted that “intrinsic to most traditional discussions [of the two natures] is the semantic confusion of nature with soul or person,” a confusion already noted in Carl’s work.¹⁷ Buswell provides us with two helpful definitions:

A person is a non-material substantive entity, and is not to be confused with a nature. A nature is not a *part* of a person in the substantive sense. A nature is a complex of attributes, and is not to be confused with a substantive entity.¹⁸

This understanding of what constitutes a nature has two practical affects. First, it avoids the problem of confusing nature with consciousness or mind, thereby avoiding the tendency toward Nestorianism. A nature is simply a collection of attributes or characteristics. It is not a thing that can independently know or be ignorant, move about or remain still, die, experience hunger, or grieve. Those things are properly assigned to persons, not natures.

Secondly, it lays the groundwork for an understandable solution to the human/divine union. A person can indeed have a variety of attributes (natures) while remaining a single substantive entity. In Smith’s words, Jesus “possesses that set of characteristics which is essential for Him to be truly human and . . . he also possesses that set of characteristics which is essential for Him to be truly God.”¹⁹ One need not resort to the incomprehensible idea of multiple centers of consciousness, minds, and wills. Buswell maintains that “it is incorrect to speak as though it were one of His natures which is acting in a specific case. Whatever He did, He did as the God-man.”²⁰

¹⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 559-60.

¹⁷ Charles Smith, “Two Natures – or One?” *Voice*, 62 (July-August 1983): 20.

¹⁸ James O. Buswell, Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, *Part III – Soteriology, Part IV - Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 52; emphasis in the original.

¹⁹ Smith, “Two Natures” 20-21.

²⁰ Buswell, *Systematic Theology* 56.

But a problem remains. If God has the attribute of being omniscient and man is by nature ignorant, how can Jesus incorporate both into a single person without destroying either the omniscience or the ignorance?

The problem is that this question assumes that omniscience is *essential* to divinity, and that ignorance is *essential* to humanity. But are they? The more basic question is whether the nature is essential to the person. Can natures be changed, added, or deleted without destroying the person?

All attributes are essential.

Geisler implies that nature is essential. In describing the kenosis theory, which he rejects, he notes that its advocates teach that “Jesus ‘emptied himself’ of his omniscience at his incarnation.” He then equates this with teaching that “Jesus emptied himself of deity when he became human . . .”²¹ By equating knowledge with deity, he implies that omniscience is essential to deity or, put another way, a person without omniscience cannot be divine.

Lewis and Demarest take a similar position, stating that “all of the divine ‘attributes’ are essential qualities, not accidents. By definition, attributes constitute the essence of anything.”²²

Hodge stated his belief in the essentialness of attributes by saying, “The perfections of God, therefore, are attributes without which He would cease to be God.”²³

But are all attributes, characteristics, or components of a nature essential? Scripture and reason suggest otherwise.

²¹ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 425.

²² Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 2, *Our Primary Need, Christ’s Atoning Provisions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 283.

²³ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 135.

Some attributes are not essential.

Scripture clearly teaches that the Son took on himself the characteristics or nature of humanity, a nature he did not previously have. He *became* flesh and *took on* the form of a servant, *being made* in the likeness of man (John 1:14, Phil 2:7). In the words of Thomas Morris, the Son exemplifies this human nature contingently:

This follows from the conviction that there was a time before the Son began to exemplify the human nature, a time at which he was not a man and yet existed. Thus, humanity, though exemplified by him, *is not exemplified by him essentially*. For this reason, and possibly for others as well, the Christian who wants to preserve an orthodox theology with a consistent set of metaphysical commitments will reject the view that every nature is an essential property of every individual who exists in that nature.²⁴

In fact, it may be easier to explain what components of a nature are *not* essential than what components *are* essential. Even on the level of humanity this is true. Hodge wrongly asserts that intelligence is an essential attribute of humanity, such that “the loss of intelligence involves the loss of humanity.” Hodge seems not to have thought through the implications of this kind of reasoning for the unborn, infants, the comatose, or people with severe mental impairments. Certainly evangelicals agree that such beings retain the quality of being human. While intelligence may be a normal attribute of humans (just as having two arms or a bent toward sin are normal attributes of humans), it is not essential to being human.

How then may we discern which divine attributes are essential and which are not? Who decides which attributes fit into which category, and what parameters may be used in deciding? It is necessary to allow Scripture to speak for itself on this matter.

Were it not for Jesus, we would perhaps be justified in believing that omniscience is one of God’s essential attributes. That is certainly a descriptor of him that is used often in the

²⁴ Thomas V. Morris, “The Natures of God Incarnate,” *Christian Scholars Review* 14, no. 1 (1984): 41; emphasis added.

Old Testament. However, the New Testament reveals God in ways that had not previously been seen. Because Jesus clearly states that he is ignorant of an event, and because the New Testament clearly teaches that he was divine, we ought to follow the text in concluding that *omniscience is not essential to divinity*. Omniscience, according to the New Testament, is a contingent attribute of divinity. It is an attribute that is normal for God to have, but not necessary to his existence as God.

Delitzsch recognized the importance of this perspective. Concerning the biblical evidence, he notes that Jesus is depicted as lacking the following attributes:

The incarnate Logos is not in possession of the eternal *doxa*, for He looks back longingly after it (John xvii.5). He is not omniscient, for He knows not, as He himself says, the day and the hour of the end (Mark xiii.32). He is not almighty, for the power over all things is given to Him, as He says after His resurrection (Matt: xxviii. 18). He is not omnipresent, for He ascended up, that He might fill all things (Eph. iv. 10). If these three statements be merely referred to Him as man, the unity of the person is rent by inward contradiction, and the reality of the human nature is changed into an appearance.²⁵

In response to those who assume an equation between the retention of all attributes and the divinity of the Son, Delitzsch gives this reply:

These all proceed upon the supposition, that the Logos, if He surrender His omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence, ceases to be God. But this assumption contradicts the declarations of the God-man Himself, who in the Gospels disclaims for Himself these attributes, and still does not thereby disclaim the divine nature. The historical Christ is of more importance to me than the unhistorical defenders of His divinity, and the bugbears of their bungling conclusions.²⁶

The fact that Jesus did evidence supernatural power and knowledge on various occasions indicated that he came from the Father, but those actions in and of themselves were not necessarily indicators of divinity. If we take such supernatural actions as necessarily indicating Jesus' divinity, we would logically need to extend divinity to all persons who have done those

²⁵ Franz Delitzsch, *A System of Biblical Psychology*, trans. Robert Wallis (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), 386.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 385.

things, including the twelve disciples (Luke 9:1-6), Peter (Acts 3:6-7; 5:15-16; 9:32; 9:37-40), and Paul (Acts 14:9-10; 20:9-10; 28:3-5). It hardly seems coincidental that Jesus performed no miracles until after the Holy Spirit came upon him at his baptism, and that the disciples performed those same deeds through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

By retaining a non-substantive definition of “nature” and by recognizing the biblical evidence that not all divine attributes are essential, we may rightly conclude that Jesus was divine and ignorant of some facts at the same time. He had all the attributes (nature) necessary for complete humanity, and he had all the attributes (nature) necessary for full divinity. Omniscience, according to this view, is not a necessary attribute for divinity. According to the Mark 13:32, it is acceptable for God to choose to not know something.

This view preserves both the divinity and humanity of Christ in a balanced way. As one person who has all of the attributes necessary to humanity and divinity, he is truly the God-man. Mark 13:32 can be taken at face value without negating Jesus’ divinity or resorting to antinomy or other incomprehensible positions.