

Is Jesus God If He Did Not Know the Time of His Return?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth was God. And they generally believe that God is omniscient, thus knowing everything, including all about the future. However, Jesus told his apostles that he would be killed, rise from the dead, ascend to heaven and someday return to earth, and he added that he did not know the day of his return. If Jesus was God, how could he not have known when he would return, since the Father knew it?

As a former Trinitarian, I used to believe that Jesus was and is God. But I began to question it when I read in the Bible that he said he didn't know the time of his return. It caused me to undertake a serious quest for Jesus' identity that led to my present belief, which is that Jesus was no more than a virgin-born, sinless man. What is this saying?

Shortly before Jesus' death and resurrection, he taught his apostles about the future, including the end of the world/age. He said of his return at that time, "But of that day and/or hour no one knows, not even the angels of/in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone" (Matthew 24.36; Mark 13.32). This saying has stirred much scholarly debate.

Church fathers were divided about these words of Jesus. Irenaeus, the most respected theologian of the 2nd century, opposed Greek religio-philosophy more than most church fathers did. It stressed the perfection of deity by asserting that absolute knowledge, which includes complete knowledge of the future, was the supreme perfection. But Irenaeus, like all apologist church fathers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, believed that Jesus was God with certain qualifications. He said of God the Father, "God holds the supremacy over all things," including over Jesus, and that he does "excel" him in knowledge. Irenaeus therefore believed that Jesus was God, but to a lesser extent than the Father was.

Athanasius, church father in the 4th century, disagreed, as did nearly all succeeding church fathers. He argued for the maximalist view of Jesus' foreknowledge, that by being "very God" in every sense he must have known the day of his return. Athanasius treated Jesus' saying by applying the two-nature method of exegesis to it. That is, Jesus did not know in his human nature, but he did know in his "Godhead," that is, his divine nature.

There have been other opinions. Thomas Aquinas and many other church theologians proposed that Jesus said these words while pretending ignorance. And Augustine posited that it was not the Father's will for Jesus to know at that time. But this view does not solve the problem of the impugning of Jesus' supposedly full deity.

In recent centuries, scholars proposed what are called "kenosis theories" to solve this and other problems. They are that at the moment of Jesus' incarnation, he laid aside or decided not to use some of his divine attributes, such as foreknowledge. But in the latter 20th century, these views fell out of favor with scholars due to the criticism that if Jesus laid aside or did not use part of his deity, he must have been less than fully God.

Both the two-nature exegesis and these kenosis theories are neither biblically based nor theologically and anthropologically sound. They make it seem as though Jesus was dishonest, or perhaps schizophrenic—saying he didn't know something when he really did—and therefore discredit his character.

So, Roman Catholic Church theologians held strongly to the maximalist view of Jesus' foreknowledge until the mid-20th century. Then, its prestigious document, *Bible et*

christologie, acknowledges and approves that Catholic scholars “have recently examined anew, e.g., the ‘knowledge’ of Christ and the development of his personality.”

One such scholar was R.E. Brown. *Time* magazine named him the world’s greatest Catholic Bible scholar. He believed that Jesus was God and wrote extensively on the subject of Jesus’ knowledge. He insists that the earthly Jesus had limited knowledge of the future and other things as well. Brown acknowledges that those who conclude as he does, that Jesus was not omniscient, open themselves up to the charge of “denying the divinity of Jesus,” which he rejects. He observes of his church, “We know of no Church statement that forbids the interpretation of the literal sense of Mk 13.32,” that is, that Jesus entire Person did not know the time of His second coming. Brown later adds, “It is important to emphasize that there is no dogma of the church on the extent of Jesus’ knowledge.... the church ... has not entered authoritatively in historical questions such as the one we are asking: How much did Jesus know in his lifetime?” In 1994, Brown observed, “the theological climate has changed, and very prominent Roman Catholic theologians now allow for limitations in Jesus’ knowledge.”

Ben Witherington explains about it, “this relationship between Father and son does not entail that the son knows all the things the Father knows.... Jesus’ special and unique ‘communion’ with God did not include a knowledge of every truth or secret God might have unveiled to him.”

A.N.S. Lane alleges that Jesus “taught with a supreme authority and manifested supernatural knowledge. But neither of these can be equated with omniscience. The affirmation of the omniscience of the historical Jesus has no biblical basis and indeed runs counter to the teaching of the Gospels.... it undermines his true humanity as taught in Scripture. It is hard to see how an omniscient man could be genuinely tempted to do something that he *knew* that he would not do.... But the New Testament nowhere bases the authority and reliability of Jesus’ teaching on his omniscience. Indeed the contrary is affirmed in that Jesus’ teaching is not his own but his Father’s.”

It should be concluded that Jesus had supernatural knowledge whenever the Father revealed it to him, and when he did not have it, the Father had not revealed it to him.

In sum, Jesus’ knowledge was limited, the Father has a greater knowledge than the Son does, and the Father is essentially superior to the Son, so that Jesus is not God.