Thirteen

PRO: A DEFENSE OF C. S. LEWIS’S “TRILEMMA”

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No apologetical argument that C. S. Lewis ever made is better known—or more controversial—than his famous “Trilemma” (not his word), or “Lord/Liar/Lunatic” (not his phrase) argument for the deity of Christ. N. T. Wright observes accurately that “[t]his argument has worn well in some circles and extremely badly in others” (Wright, 2007, p. 32). Some of the sharpest critiques, in fact, have come from within the believing community.

It is curious that an argument that has become a staple of popular Christian apologetics should be rejected as fallacious by many who presumably accept its conclusion. With not only the validity of a much used argument but also the competence of the greatest apologist of the twentieth century at stake, it is time to take a fresh look at Lewis’s argument and its critics. Can we still use the Trilemma? If so, how should we approach it? At the end of the day, how does Lewis come off as an apologist and an example to other apologists?

First, let us remind ourselves of the argument itself as it is presented in Mere Christianity. (See Brazier, 2002, pp. 91-102 for a survey of other works in which Lewis gives a version of the argument.) Lewis is addressing a person who says, “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I do not accept his claim to be God.” We note first of all that the Trilemma is presented not so much as an argument for the deity of Christ per se, but as a refutation, a heading off at the pass, of one popular way of evading the claims of Christ. This, Lewis argues, is the one thing we cannot say:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to (Lewis, 1943, p. 56).
Many critics treat Lewis’s Trilemma as original. But it is actually a refinement of a much older argument, the *aut Deus aut malus homo* (“either God or a bad man”) which goes back at least to the Patristic period. (See Brazier, 2012, pp. 103-126 for a survey of its use before and after Lewis.) Lewis makes the dilemma a trilemma by subdividing the *malus homo* option into two types of badness—mendacity and insanity—which are potentially relevant to the case of the claims of Christ to be God. Later thinkers have expanded it again to a Quadrilemma: Lord, Liar, Lunatic, Legend, or alternatively, Lord, Liar, Lunatic, Innocently Mistaken. In this chapter I will use the familiar term Trilemma to refer to the *aut Deus aut malus homo* (or “Mad, Bad, or God”) argument in whatever iteration we find it, because it was Lewis’s tripartite form that gave it classic expression for most of us.

Lewis’s version of the argument involves the following steps:

1. Jesus claimed to be God. (This is assumed in *Mere Christianity*.)
2. There are three logical possibilities in the case of such a claim:
   a. He was telling the truth.
   b. He was lying.
   c. He was mistaken (and hence insane, given the nature of the claim).
3. A liar or a megalomaniac (the relevant form of insanity) could not be a great moral teacher.
4. Therefore, we must either accept Jesus’ claim or reject him as immoral or insane. The merely mortal great moral teacher option is logically eliminated.

Note that one could go on to argue that (5) Jesus was not a liar, (6) Jesus was not insane, therefore (7) Jesus was God. One could; many have; I might; in the next chapter Lewis does—but in the original passage from *Mere Christianity* Lewis leaves it at (4). He is explicit about his purpose: “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say” (Lewis, 1943, p. 55). Lewis does not claim to have proved the deity of Christ beyond a shadow of doubt, but only to have clarified our choices. Jesus was (a) telling the truth, and is the Son of God; he was (b) lying; or he was (c) mistaken—and one cannot be mistaken about the particular claim being made (deity) and be fully sane. The only choice Lewis claims to have eliminated absolutely is that Jesus was simply a great, but merely human, moral teacher—for a person who is a liar or a megalomaniac hardly qualifies as a great moral teacher.

Now, the argument is surely presented as support for the deity of Christ in that Lewis thinks that the other two choices will be hard choices for most people to make, as well as choices that give inferior explanations for the full data of the phenomenon of Christ. But people could still make them. “You can shut him up for a fool. . . .” The easy choice—that Jesus was a great moral