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REPLY TO ADAM BARKMAN

Donald S. Williams

It is a privilege to share in this conversation on the Trilemma with Adam Barkman, whose response to my defense of the argument insightfully and helpfully focuses our attention right on the crux of the matter: the question of whether Jesus did or did not claim to be God. Let me then begin by highlighting our significant areas of agreement before proceeding to make some comments that I hope will help our readers in the task of deciding between us on the disputed point that remains.

1. Areas of Agreement

First, we agree that the “truth of the matter” is more important than our ability to score apologetic points. What I found curious in my initial statement was that so many profess to find the argument fallacious when (unlike Barkman) they are clearly analyzing an inferior argument to the one Lewis actually made—and when one would think they would have no motive for doing so. Second, we agree that the argument “is fairly compelling if we grant Lewis’s assumption that Jesus claimed to be God.” It is clear that the Trilemma becomes pointless in the absence of that claim. Third, we agree that what matters is “its soundness as an argument directed at informed believers and nonbelievers today.” (I would however distinguish soundness from effectiveness. The former is not dependent on the audience, while the latter is.) And, perhaps surprisingly, I even agree with Barkman that Lewis’s argument as presented in *Mere Christianity* “assumes without argument” something for which argument is now needed: “that Jesus claims to be God.” As I said in my original defense:

Anyone using the Trilemma today should be prepared to make the case that Jesus actually made the claims whenever it is needed. The wise apologist will not simply repeat Lewis’s paragraph from *Mere Christianity*, but rather adapt it to his own audience. This will involve notations such as “Here be prepared to insert ‘Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,’ along with further updated arguments.”
2. At Issue: The Claims of Christ

What then remains? Our main point of disagreement appears to be over how strong the case for Jesus’ claims to deity actually is—and perhaps over how strong it needs to be. Barkman thinks that all that is needed to undermine the Trilemma is to “show that reasonable doubt can be cast upon the claim that Jesus thought himself God.” One could ask how much doubt is reasonable doubt? Do we need a slam-dunk case for the traditional view of Jesus’ claims, or is it sufficient simply to make a strong case that the traditional reading is the most reasonable interpretation of the texts? I would say that even if (which I am not admitting) the latter were all we could manage, that would be enough to preserve the relevance and usefulness of Lewis’s argument. It would be a “proof” only to the extent that we were certain about the claims. But even if we only thought them fairly likely, the Trilemma would still be a pointed exposition of the implications of those claims—and a compelling one, for all the reasons I gave in my original defense. But it is time to turn to the claims themselves.

In his effort to show that Jesus’ claims to deity can reasonably be doubted, Barkman expends a great deal of labor establishing a point that no informed defender of the traditional reading of the Gospels contests: that titles such as Messiah, Son of Man, or even Son of God do not in and of themselves necessarily constitute claims to deity in a full Trinitarian sense. He is right. Each of them in isolation can be read either as claiming nothing out of the ordinary or as compatible with the claim to be, say, some kind of Arian god or angelic being or Platonic demiurge as opposed to being God Himself. Even the claim to forgive sin could be read as a claim only that God had authorized Jesus to pronounce forgiveness on His behalf. All this being correct, it might seem at first glance that Barkman has succeeded, not in overturning the traditional understanding of Jesus’ claims (which he does not claim to have done), but in showing that it can reasonably be doubted. Before we draw that conclusion, though, perhaps we should see what can be said on the other side.

3. The Case for the Traditional Reading

The case for the traditional reading is that, while some of the claims can be read otherwise in isolation, the claims of Christ taken as a totality, and read in the light of his contemporaries’ response to them, do indeed amount to a claim to be God. That totality is not limited to the possibly ambiguous titles mentioned above, but includes language such as “Before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:58). Not, note, “Before Abraham was, I was,” a claim that would have been audacious enough. Jesus here, in no uncertain terms, identifies his own ego, his “I,” with that of Jahweh. In a first-century Jewish