

Was Jesus a Liar, Lunatic, or God?

by Servetus the Evangelical

None of the above. But that is what C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) asks in his little book, *Mere Christianity* (1943). It is one of the foremost apologetic works in the history of Christianity. In 2000, the premier American Christian magazine, *Christianity Today*, selected it as the #1 Christian book of the 20th century, that is, besides the Bible.

The UK's venerable C.S. Lewis was an authority on English literature, but not on the Bible. He was converted from atheism to Christianity and became widely acclaimed as a fiction author. His classic series for children, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, is among his many books, the whole of which has sold over 100 million copies.

Mere Christianity purports to define the Christian religion. In it, Lewis proclaims that the very essence of Christianity is that Jesus is God and that Jesus claimed to be God. Yet Lewis never supports this latter assertion scripturally even though he describes Jesus as “a man who goes about talking as if He was God.” Then Lewis pens the following popular piece that some scholars call “the trilemma argument:”

I am trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not 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.

We are faced, then, with a frightening alternative. This man we are talking about either was (and is) just what He said or else a lunatic, or something worse.... I have to accept the view that He was and is God.

To his credit, Lewis was opposing the liberal teaching of a moralistic Jesus whose life and death had no more significance than as a worthy moral example for us to follow. Yet, in this paragraph Lewis illogically leads us to choose between only three options regarding Jesus' identity: either he is (1) a lunatic, (2) the devil, or (3) God. Notice that Lewis herein follows the patristic practice of incorrectly equating the terms “God” and “the Son of God,” the latter as applied to Jesus. Lewis adds, “I have explained why I have to believe that Jesus was (and is) God.... I believe it on His authority.” Again, he provides no scriptural support and thus no statement by Jesus to affirm this assertion.

C.S. Lewis always disavowed being a theologian. He said modestly, “I am a very ordinary layman of the Church of England.” Indeed, his brilliant intellect, combined with such an unassuming nature, was the secret to so much admiration for him.

John A.T. Robinson, a Lewis contemporary, was one of the UK's preeminent Bible authorities, and he surely had Lewis' trilemma argument in mind when he protested:

We are often asked to accept Christ as divine because he claimed to be so—and the familiar argument is pressed: ‘A man who goes around claiming to be God must either be God—or else he is a madman or a charlatan’ ... And, of course, it is not easy to read the Gospel story and to dismiss Jesus as either mad or bad. Therefore, the conclusion runs, he must be God.

I am not happy about this argument. None of the disciples in the Gospels acknowledged Jesus because he claimed to be God, and the Apostles never went out saying, “This man claimed to be God, therefore you must believe in him.”

No one has worked Lewis’ trilemma argument more than American Evangelical Josh McDowell. This popular, public speaker and evangelist is one of the world’s leading voices declaring that Jesus is God. He has authored over 100 books, with over 42 million copies in print. But his lengthy, apologetic works consist mostly of quotations rather than structured arguments, and he fails to interact with leading Jesus researchers. Without discussion, McDowell presupposes that the New Testament (NT) identification of Jesus as the Son of God means that He is God. And in identifying Jesus as God, Josh rarely cites modern writers with opposing views and treats the critical, biblical texts very sparingly.

Likewise, some traditionalist expositors fail to distinguish between the concepts of God *being in* Christ and Christ *being* God. British expositor John R.W. Stott seems to make this error. He is an esteemed worldwide church leader, pastor, educator, and author in the burgeoning evangelical community. Echoing Lewis, Stott authored the highly-acclaimed *Basic Christianity* (1958). In it, he asserts rather startlingly, “If Jesus was not God in human flesh, Christianity is exploded.” Then he expounds almost in the same breath, “The Christian claim is that we can find God in Jesus Christ.” Indeed we can, but God *in* Christ is not the same as Christ *being* God, as Stott seems to imply. Nels Ferre explains, “There is a decisive difference between the affirmation that Jesus Christ is God and Saviour and that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.”

I address this question of whether Jesus is a liar or God in two portions of my very comprehensive, well-researched, and biblically in-depth book, *The Restitution of Jesus Christ* (2008). In it I assert that the Bible never identifies Jesus as God and does not teach a trinity of co-equal, co-eternal Persons in a Godhead, as the church has taught. I allege that church fathers so concluded because they were somewhat anti-Semitic and unduly influenced by Greek philosophy and its metaphysics. Yet I claim that the Bible affirms every other major church teaching about Jesus, such as his virgin birth, sinlessness, miracles, substitutionary death, resurrection, ascension, and future coming.