

Aut Deus Aut Homo Malus

Either God or Bad Man: The Historical Argument for the Divinity of Christ



This is an old argument that goes back to the early Christian fathers and was popularized in the 20th century by C.S. Lewis. The argument uses historical data to rule out “middle” or “fence sitting” positions about Jesus’ identity. Such an example of a fence sitting position would be the claim “Well I’m ready to say Jesus was a good moral teacher, but I’m not willing to say he was God.” *This is precisely the type of option the argument*

says one cannot take. Either Jesus was who he claimed to be, God, or he was an outlandish liar or a crazed lunatic. This argument will not convince a determined atheist, for such a person would have no problem saying Jesus was really crazy or a liar. Yet the argument doesn’t really aim at those types of people, but rather it aims at the majority of people who are not Christian believers yet are not so adamantly opposed to Christianity that they are willing to say those things about the historical Christ.

The argument is interesting because it does not really show one conclusion to be true; rather it simply lays out the reasonable alternatives and leaves it up to the listener to make up his or her own mind. Briefly the argument runs:

Jesus claimed to be God
Either that claim was true or false
If true then Jesus is God and thus Christianity is true
If false then Jesus was a notorious liar or a raving lunatic

Really the only premise that needs to be shown is the first

That Christ claimed to be God

One can derive Jesus’ own self-understanding as God from several lines of evidence. Here are just some examples to show that Jesus *at least thought* himself to be divine:

- *Jesus prayed to God using the term “Abba”* (like a Jewish child saying “Papa”). A Jew would never pray to God using such familiar terminology.
- *“Son of Man” passages:* this is Jesus’ favorite title for himself, appear over 80 times in the Gospels. Many mistakenly believe “Son of Man” refers to Jesus’ humanity; however, it is actually a claim to divinity.¹
- *Jesus speaks of himself as Judge* over all peoples and will separate them at the end of time²

¹“I saw in the night visions, and, behold, [one] like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion [is] an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom [that] which shall not be destroyed.” (Dan 7:13-14)

² Mt: 25:31-45

- *Jesus claimed the authority to override the Law*, as manifest in all of the “You have heard...*But I say to you...*” passages in the Sermon on the Mount. In other words, Jesus claimed to reinterpret and “raise the bar” of the Ten Commandments based upon his own authority.³
- *Jesus claims omnipotence and to be mysteriously united with the Father*, i.e., “All things are delivered to me by my Father. And no one knows who the Son is, but the Father: and who the Father is, but the Son and to whom the Son will reveal him.”⁴ (This is a “Q” source” and hence also appears in Mt 11:27)
- *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants* –(Luke 20: 13-16) the prophets had been slain and so now God has sent his Son, above all the prophets, who would be slain as well. *The scribes listening knew exactly what Jesus meant and wanted to seize him there.*⁵ Even most skeptical scholars take this parable as authentically coming from Jesus. But Jesus here views God’s special Son as unique from the previous representatives sent to Israel, God’s special messenger, and rightful heir to Israel.
- *Jesus’ conviction before the Sanhedrin* demonstrates Jesus’ own self-understanding of being one in nature with the Father and the true Son of God: “And the high priest said to him: I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us if thou be the Christ the Son of God. Jesus saith to him: Thou hast said it. Nevertheless I say to you, hereafter you shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of the power of God and coming in the clouds of heaven. Then the high priest rent his garments, saying: He hath blasphemed: What further need have we of witnesses? Behold, now you have heard the blasphemy.”(Mat 26:63-65)⁶
- *Jesus claims prerogatives reserved only to God*: He was before Abraham⁷, all judgment has been given to the Son⁸, he is the “door” through which men enter life, the “true vine”⁹, the “Way, and the Truth, and the Life”¹⁰, etc.
- *Jesus acts as only God can*: i.e., He performs miracles and forgives sins from His own power¹¹
- *Both the Apostles and the Jews understood His claim to be divine*. His own students and His enemies were in agreement on this. The origin of the disciple’s belief is unexplainable if Jesus never claimed to be God. How are we to explain a full-blown high Christology from the very beginning if not from the understanding of Jesus himself?

³ Mt 5: 21-22; cf. vv. 28, 32, 34, 39, 44.

⁴ Luke 10:22

⁵ Luke 20: 13-16

⁶ Mat 26:63-65

⁷ Jn 8:57-58

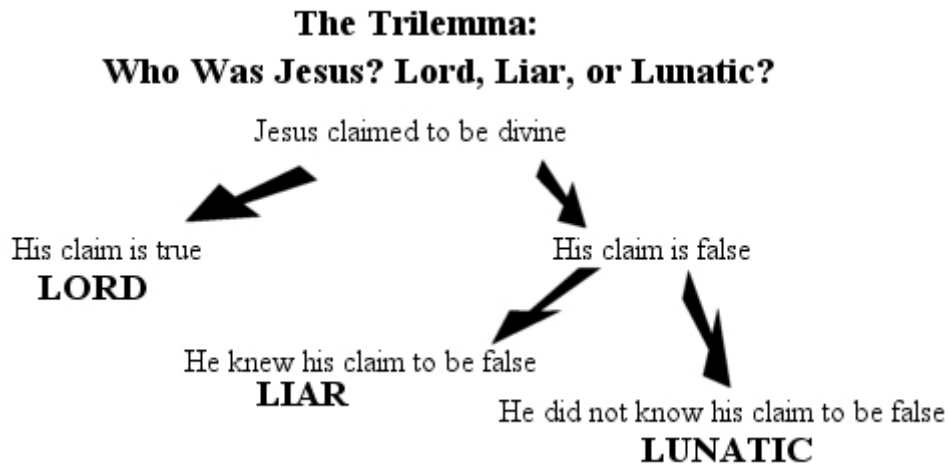
⁸ Jn 5:22-23

⁹ Jn 15:1

¹⁰ Jn 14:6

¹¹ “And when Jesus had seen their faith, he saith to the sick of the palsy: Son, thy sins are forgiven thee. And there were some of the scribes sitting there and thinking in their hearts: Why doth this man speak thus? He blasphemeth. Who can forgive sins, but God only? Which Jesus presently knowing in his spirit that they so thought within themselves, saith to them: Why think you these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the sick of the palsy: Thy sins are forgiven thee; or to say: Arise, take up thy bed and walk? But that you may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins (he saith to the sick of the palsy): I say to thee: Arise. Take up thy bed and go into thy house. And immediately he arose and, taking up his bed, went his way in the sight of all: so that all wondered and glorified God, saying: We never saw the like.” (Mark 2:5-12)

The “Either God or Bad Man trilemma” is a simple argument from these divine claims of Jesus



If Jesus was not God, then he was either stark raving mad or the greatest liar in the history of the world. Insanity and intentional falsehood come in degrees. *The greater the distance between the claim and reality, the greater the insanity or lying.* Claiming to be God when one is not must be the greatest degree of insanity or lying possible. In a famous passage, C.S. Lewis writes:

“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 a 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.”¹²

So what are we to make of this data about Christ? Again, C.S. Lewis answers with his usual clarity and poetic persuasiveness:

What are we to make of Christ?" There is no question of what we can make of Him, it is entirely a question of what He intends to make of us. You must accept or reject the story.

The things He says are very different from what any other teacher has said. Others say, "this is the truth about the Universe. This is the way you ought to go," but He says, "I am the Truth, and the Way, and the Life." He

¹² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Macmillan Publishing. 1978.) pg. 56 emphasis added

says, "No man can reach absolute reality, except through Me. Try to retain your own life and you will be inevitably ruined. Give yourself away and you will be saved." He says, "If you are ashamed of Me, if, when you hear this call, you turn the other way, I also will look the other way when I come again as God without disguise. If anything whatever is keeping you from God and from Me, whatever it is, throw it away. If it is your eye, pull it out. If it is your hand, cut it off. If you put yourself first you will be last. Come to Me everyone who is carrying a heavy load, I will set that right. Your sins, all of them, are wiped out, I can do that. I am Re-birth, I am Life. Eat Me, drink Me, I am your Food. And finally, do not be afraid, I have overcome the whole Universe." That is the issue.¹³

¹³ C.S. Lewis, "What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?" *God in the Dock*, p. 160