



# C. S. Lewis

## The Trilemma: the Deity of Christ

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**The Argument in Plain Language:** There is no way Jesus can merely be a good man.

**The 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 a level with a 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 man 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.”

—C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

**Background of the Argument:** This argument is commonly referred to as “The Trilemma.” This title is somewhat deceptive, since it implies that the argument is in the form of a dilemma, but with three horns rather than the standard two (see Chapter 13 on dilemmas). However, the argument is not in the form of a dilemma, but a disjunctive hypothetical syllogism—the only difference being that its major premise contains three disjuncts rather than two (as in the ones we have studied). It is proposed as a proof of the deity of Christ. The argument, indeed, has the most force with the person it is directed at: the person who wants to say that Jesus was a great moral teacher and no more. When Lewis uttered this argument (in a radio talk on the B. B. C. during World War II), this was a very common opinion—and still is. However, with the person who believes that Jesus could be a liar or a lunatic (an opinion that would be quite hard to justify, but still believed by some atheists), the argument has much less force. There is a form of this argument (a quite embryonic form of it) in G. K. Chesterton’s *Everlasting Man*, (written in 1927), a book that Lewis cited as a major influence on his thought.

**Assignment:**

1. Put the argument in the form of a disjunctive syllogism. The only difference will be that there will be three disjuncts in the major premise and the minor premise will involve the denial of two of the disjuncts rather than just one.
2. Write a short 1-2 page essay explaining why you think the argument is sound or unsound.
3. Write a short 2-3 page biographical essay on C. S. Lewis.