

Dear fellow pilgrims,

What a wonderful chapter we had the privilege to explore last week! Book 2, Chapter 3, entitled "The Shocking Alternative," is vintage Lewis--erudite, limpid, insightful, and highly quotable! The shock Lewis refers to in the title is a man appearing on this earth, claiming to have the power to forgive sins and claiming to be God in the flesh: "what this man said was the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips."

In keeping with the topic of forgiving sins and in preparation for Ash Wednesday next week, we listened to an excerpt of Allegri's *Miserere*, that most marvelous choral work that sets Psalm 51 to music and was reserved for worship at the Vatican until the 14 year old Mozart heard the piece while worshipping in Rome and went home and transcribed it. I highly commend listening to it all the way through, with the text in Latin and English in front of you (link below).

Here is a summary of what we covered last week:

Chapter 3: The Shocking Alternative

A. The Dark Power and God's Will

Christians, then, believe that an evil power has made himself for the present the Prince of this World. And, of course, that raises problems. Is this state of affairs in accordance with God's will or not? If it is, He is a strange God, you will say: and if it is not, how can anything happen contrary to the will of a being with absolute power?

B. The Nature of Authority

But anyone who has been in authority knows how a thing can be in accordance with your will in one way and not in another. It may be quite sensible for a mother to say to the children, "I'm not going to go and make you tidy the schoolroom every night. You've got to learn to keep it tidy on your own." She would prefer the children to be tidy. But on the other hand, it is her will which has left the children free to be untidy. That is not what you willed, but your will has made it possible.

C. God and Free Will

God created things which had free will. If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight... and for that they must be free.

D. The Risk God Took

Of course God knew what would happen if they used their freedom the wrong way: apparently He thought it worth the risk...If God thinks this state of war in the universe a price worth paying for free will—that is, for making a live world in which creatures can do real good or harm and something of real importance can happen, instead of a toy world which only moves when He pulls the strings—then we may take it it is worth paying. The better stuff a creature is made of—the cleverer and stronger and freer it is—then the better it will be if it goes right, but also the worse it will be if it goes wrong.

E. How did the Dark Power go wrong?

The moment you have a self at all, there is a possibility of putting Yourself first—wanting to be the centre—wanting to be God, in fact. That was the sin of Satan: and that was the sin he taught the human race...What Satan put into the heads of our remote ancestors was the idea that they could "be like gods"—could set up on their own as if they had created themselves—be their own masters—invent some sort of happiness for themselves outside God, apart from God—the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.

F. The Quest for Happiness Outside of God

God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on gasoline...Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.

G. The Wrong Fuel

--Some fatal flaw always brings the selfish and cruel people to the top and it all slides back into misery and ruin. And what did God do? He left us conscience, the sense of right and wrong. Secondly, He sent the human race what I call good dreams: I mean those queer stories scattered all through the heathen religions about a god who dies and comes to life again and, by his death, has somehow given new life to men. Thirdly, He selected one particular people and spent several centuries hammering into their heads the sort of God He was. Then comes the real shock. Among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who claims to forgive sins. He says He has always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time.

H. The Shocking Alternative

When you have grasped that [Jesus meant He was the Being outside the world Who had made it], you will see that what this man said was the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips.

I. The Forgiveness of Sins

Jesus told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the party chiefly concerned, the person chiefly offended in all offences. This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin.

J. Liar, Lunatic, or Lord: Lewis's Trilemma

I am trying here 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 patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

The Trilemma in Narnia

Lewis places this same argument into an important scene in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. After Lucy and Edmund return from Narnia, Edmund betrays Lucy by saying they were just pretending and it was not real. Peter and Susan are worried about Lucy, who seems to be acting irrationally, and don't know what to do. Eventually, they decide with some trepidation to consult Professor Kirke, at whose house they have been billeted. After some discussion, the Professor explains as follows:

"Logic!" said the Professor half to himself. "Why don't they teach logic at these schools? There are only three possibilities. Either your sister is telling lies, or she is mad, or she is telling the truth. You know she doesn't tell lies and it is obvious she is not mad. For the moment then, and unless any further evidence turns up, we must assume she is telling the truth."

The White Witch as a foil to Aslan and exemplar of the argument

Influence of Lewis's Trilemma

Lewis's trilemma has continued to be used with great impact in Christian apologetics since the publication of *Mere Christianity*, notably by writers such as:

--apologist Josh McDowell

--theologian Peter Kreeft describes the trilemma as "the most important argument in Christian apologetics"

--apologist and Anglican priest Nicky Gumbel, where it forms a major part of the first talk in the Alpha Course and his book *Questions of Life*

--Ronald Reagan also used this argument in 1978, in a written reply to a liberal Methodist minister who said that he did not believe Jesus was the son of God

--Bono of the rock group U2 has quoted a variant of the trilemma in talking about his Christian faith

has also been quoted by Bono

--Chuck Colson cites the Lewis version as the basis of his conversion to Christianity

--Noted New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger argued that "It has often been pointed out that Jesus'[s] claim to be the only Son of God is either true or false. If it is false, he either knew the claim was false or he did not know that it was false. In the former case (2) he was a liar; in the latter case (3) he was a lunatic. No other conclusion beside these three is possible."

--Popular Catholic apologist Bishop Robert Barron also cites the trilemma argument from Lewis in his work. (adapted from Wikipedia)

I have included a link below for snorkelers and scuba divers to an excellent article by renowned Catholic scholar and philosopher Peter Kreeft on the trilemma.

Note in answer to last week's question about early origins of the trilemma: scholars view the trilemma as having been posed in John's Gospel in several passages, then picked up in the patristics period by Gaius Marius Victorinus and St. Augustine in the 4th century. Classically, the argument is often referred to in its Latin form *Aut Deus Aut Malus Homo*.

Here is the link for class tomorrow, Wednesday, February 10, at 7:15 p.m. ET--please feel free to share the link with any friends who may be interested:

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://zoom.us/j/99307536525>

I look forward to "seeing" you tomorrow in class on Zoom!

Further up and further in,
Brian+

Music link from last week to Allegri's *Miserere*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TorsaoZw4sQ>

Video link to last week's class:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxOQ8TaEmwI>

Podcast link:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/episode-12-book-2-chapter-3-the-shocking-alternative/id1537579476?i=1000507736790>

Audio on church website link:

<https://www.stphilipchurchsc.org/mere-christianity-/episode/2021-02-03/episode-12-book-2-chapter-3:-the-shocking-alternative>

<https://www.peterkreeft.com/topics/christ-divinity.htm>