

“A Third Option”
Mark 3:19b-30 (NRSV)

As I’ve said before **there are many opinions about Jesus**. The answer to the question that will affect our faith in him, is which ones are accurate?

The first opinion: Jesus is a madman (Mk. 3:20-21).

There’s no doubt about it: there came a time in Jesus Christ’s ministry **“when his family [having heard how he was attracting the crowds] went out to restrain him”** (3:21a). We are told Jesus’ brothers and sisters came down to Capernaum with the sole intention of “arresting” him – for that is the force of the word “restrain” (Vincent Taylor, 1981, p. 236), forcibly taking him under control, and hauling him back to Nazareth! Mark is clear as to why this was so, for he writes, **“[Some] people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind’”** (3:21b). **That is, they thought he was “crazy”!** Sadly, for some reason, his own family -- for whom Jesus had likely been providing as the eldest son, ever since Joseph had died -- believed these anonymous rumours, and they had come to do something about it. Perhaps, to put the best slant on it, they were thinking if only he’d agree to go back home with them, he could indulge his delusions in the relative safety of those he knew and loved.

How was it that his own flesh and blood would resort to such extreme measures and such a humiliating course of action? **First, and to their everlasting credit, they loved him**. He was kith and kin. It would’ve been so much easier to just let him go his own way. Keeping him under “wraps” wouldn’t be easy, but they were prepared to risk trouble to protect him from himself. They did what they thought was best.

Second, they were afraid his religious fervour would ruin his health.

This is clear from the way in which Mark structured his explanation. After Jesus had returned “home” to the house he was staying at in Capernaum, the crowd around him was so large that **the people inside the house, much less Jesus himself, “couldn’t even eat”** (3:20). In a culture where meals were rituals and food was scarce, allowing so many people inside the house to prevent regular meals from being taken was considered to be insane! The same thing had likely happened whenever Jesus was mobbed in the streets or along the seashore. No healthy man would give up his meals.

Third, his religious zeal was too radical. No man would give up his business, like Jesus had give up Joseph's carpentry shop in Nazareth, which met his own and his family's needs, take up an itinerant teaching ministry, gather a motley crew around him, and set himself up against the powers that be as Jesus had done. His family was afraid his crazy life would kill him (and then what would they do?) It was okay to be devout, but the extremes to which he went weren't those of a balanced man. They'd also heard reports of him staying up all night to pray under the stars (Lk. 6:12). Moreover, it was clear to them that he was mistaken about who he was and what his mission was. John's Gospel tells us "even his [own] brothers [didn't] believe in him" (Jn. 7:5). Their starry-eyed brother was caught in a self-destructive megalomania and his family had to save him!

This has also become **a model for the more charitable opinion** of those who do not believe in Jesus Christ. They say Christ was a good man, perhaps even the greatest of men, but he was mistaken about his own person and his mission. They say he was a man to be admired for his teaching and dedication, but **he was "out of his mind."** This is something of the position to which **Albert Schweitzer** came in his famous book, The Quest for the Historical Jesus (1959), where he has Jesus, in his Messianic delusion, attempting to turn the wheel of history, only to have it turn some more and crush him (p. 370-371). The purest, noblest, most utterly self-oblivious and devoted life that ever lived upon earth was (and still is) disposed of in this way: **"He is beside himself; he is crazy."**

This is also how those who have followed in his steps have been judged by history. When the apostle Paul preached before Festus, the Roman governor, Festus cried out in response, "You are out of your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!" (Acts 26:24). Similar verdicts have been rendered over **Martin Luther, John Bunyan, and John Wesley.** But let us note (and note well!) that given the truth of Christ and his gospel, such people are utterly sane! If Christ is who he says he is, then the sanest thing in the world is to follow him and commit our lives to him. If the Apostles' Creed is sensible and true, then those who believe it have aligned themselves with sanity. Christianity needs more of this sanity.

The first opinion of an unbelieving world is that Christ was **a madman.** The second and far less charitable, opinion is that he was **a tool of Satan.**

2. The second opinion: Jesus is a demoniac (3:22-30).

Those who rendered this verdict were “scribes” – highly trained legal specialists -- sent out from Jerusalem to assay Jesus’ miracles, and to see if Capernaum was a “seduced” city (William L. Lane, 1975, p. 141). They apparently came with their minds already made up, as there is no evidence of their having held interviews with Jesus or his disciples.

Their opinion had two parts. First: **“He has Beelzebul, ...”** (3:22a), that is, **“He is possessed by Beelzebul,”** Beelzebul being the lord of evil spirits. Do you remember **William Golding’s** famous book, The Lord of the Flies (1954)? It’s the story of a group of perfectly nice British prep school boys who descend into mayhem and murder when they are marooned on a deserted island. Even a bunch of proper English boys can be captured by Beelzebul. The scribes accused Jesus of being demonized and claimed that the demon that was controlling him was Satan himself.

The second accusation was that **“by the ruler of the demons he cast out demons”** (3:22b). As far as the scribes were concerned Jesus was a son of Satan. They may have been hinting that Jesus used the name of Beelzebul, under his breath, to perform his exorcisms. Their charge virtually reduced Jesus to a demonized sorcerer who majored in the black arts. Perhaps the scribes said this because Jesus did perform bona fide exorcisms. They couldn’t deny this. In fact, the parallel rendering of this account in Matthew’s Gospel indicates that Jesus had just exorcised certain debilitating spirits from a man (12:22-24), and this enraged the scribes. While they couldn’t deny Jesus’ power, they wouldn’t accept it as being from God. It had to come from Satan. As far as they were concerned Jesus was supremely evil, an archfiend, a horribly corrupted tool of Satan.

Jesus had a powerful answer for them. **“How can Satan cast out Satan?”** (3:23), he asked. Building on this question, he gave a couple of for instances: “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand” (3:24). **Abraham Lincoln** poignantly quoted this text when speaking of the agonies of the American Civil War. I suppose nations have been divided – witness the Sudan breaking up into north and south -- and many marriages have also broken up in divorce, but there are always hurts and shreds left hanging. Further, it’s one thing for nations or for families to be divided against themselves, but it’s another thing for a person to be divided against himself or herself.

Jesus went on to ask, **“What would happen if Satan were to be divided against himself?”** The conclusion is inevitable; such a personality is unstable in all his ways; he will have a complete mental breakdown. **“And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but an end has come”** (3:26). Jesus thereby proved the scribes’ charge didn’t hold water. **Satan cannot cast out satanic demons** and still maintain his integrity.

Then Jesus told his audience what really happened when he cast out demons: “But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered” (3:27). The “strong man” is Satan – our Adversary. His “house” is the realm that he occupies here on earth. His “possessions” are the helpless victims whom he holds in bondage by means of the work of his demonic servants (Taylor, p. 241). **Only one who is stronger than Satan can free the victims, and this is what Jesus has done** – entering Satan’s abode, binding him, and loosing the hapless captive souls. Jesus used the literary logic of these illustrations to deflate the scribes’ accusations, and he left them virtually speechless.

Then Jesus gives them **a chilling warning:**

Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” – for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.” (3:28-29)

Here we have **the so-called “Doctrine of the Unforgivable Sin.”** There are few Scriptures so **misunderstood** as this one, and so **misapplied**. Nearly everyone has heard of the unforgivable sin. I’ve even had Christians tell me they’re afraid they’ve committed it. Let me hasten to say that **if you’re worried that you may have committed the unforgivable sin**, rest assured, **you haven’t**. It’s all about having a hard or a tender heart. The former are problem people, the latter are God’s people. It’s not about occasionally saying bad things about God, or Jesus, or the Holy Spirit; it’s not about occasional swearing – although it isn’t a good thing to do. It’s not about adultery or sexual perversion, vile as they are. It isn’t even about murder, multiple murders, or genocide – horrific as they are. It’s about **the ongoing, continual rejection of the witness of the Holy Spirit in one’s heart**. It’s about the perversion of the heart that chooses to call light darkness and

darkness light. It's about the continual rejection of the witness of God's Holy Spirit, whether that witness be a quiet witness in one's conscience, or the witness of the Word in the Bible, or the witness of the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ.

I think as far as Jesus was concerned, **the scribes were on the brink of committing that sin** because they were saying that Jesus' exorcisms and miracles were really the work of Satan. Moreover, they were persisting in their blasphemy because **they kept saying it repeatedly** (at least that is the force of the verb "said" in verse 3:22). If their attitude became permanent, they would have crossed the line.

Have their been people who have committed the unforgivable sin?

Frankly, only God knows, but I'd venture to say, "Yes." I believe there have been men and women who have rejected the Spirit's testimony so strongly, so consistently, and so continually, and the work of Jesus Christ as well, that their hearts have gradually become completely unable to believe. Such people range, no doubt, from the gross sinner to the urbane "good" person. Yet Scripture emphasizes the final judgment is God's (Rom. 14:10, 12-13).

Let me add this: **the unforgivable sin is a sin that requires knowledge.**

C. E. B. Cranfield, an eminent New Testament theologian, notes the "scribes" whom Jesus warned were **the accredited theological teachers of God's people**. He further notes their daily business was the Scriptures, and that they were, therefore, subject to the constant witness of the Holy Spirit speaking in and through them. He concludes, "If we have been following the right clue, then it means those who particularly should heed the warning of this verse today are **the theological teachers and the official leaders of the churches**" (The Gospel According to Mark, 1983, p. 143).

Cranfield is correct. **It isn't the ignorant blasphemer on the street** who is in danger of committing the unforgivable sin, **but the man or woman in the Church who knows the Scriptures**, who has heard the Word held forth with accuracy and power, who has seen something of the miraculous power of God in changed lives, and yet who rejects it all, even identifying what he/she has seen with the power of Satan. **The warning is particularly to those of us who have grown up in the Church**, and who may even have had some theological education, **but who have willfully rejected it**, and in their heart of hearts attribute supposed Christian reality to evil incarnate.

Again, let me emphatically say, to those who are afraid they have committed the sin, we can say with absolute confidence that their being so troubled is infallible testimony they have not committed it (Cranfield, p. 142). And please note, as well, that Jesus didn't actually say that the scribes had committed this sin, but he only warned them against committing it. Those who continue to blaspheme the Holy Spirit care not a whit about what they have done. If someone cares at all, though his/her sins be the worst, there is hope and the possibility of God's amazing grace.

Mark has showcased for us two unacceptable opinions regarding Jesus Christ: The first, and most charitable was that **he was "out of his mind."** This was the opinion of those who appreciated him, who even loved him, who knew of his impeccable life, but who **did not believe that he had a right to do what he did, who did not believe that he was God incarnate.** This is the opinion of thousands today who believe **Jesus was a good man, a religious genius,** but who are deceived as to who he really was.

The second opinion and least charitable was that **he was possessed by demons, perhaps even Satan himself.** This was (and is) the view of those who are lost, those who find themselves standing at the edge of the eternal Abyss from which there is no return.

3. A third opinion: Jesus is God incarnate.

This presents us with **the Great Trilemma:** either **Jesus was a lunatic,** or he was **a demonic liar,** or **he was God incarnate.** I suppose we could also add a fourth possibility: **he was a legend** concocted by his misguided followers. That, of course, would mean that the apostles were somehow twisted the truth; yet, would they have risked as much as they did if that were true?

Regarding **Jesus being a liar,** **Philip Schaff,** a historian wrote:

The hypothesis of imposture is so revolting to moral as well as common sense, that its mere statement is its condemnation. How in the name of logic, common sense, and experience, could an imposter – that is, a deceitful, selfish and depraved man – have invented, and consistently maintained from the beginning to end, the purest and noblest character known in history with the most perfect air of truth and reality? How could he have conceived and successfully carried

out a plan of unparalleled beneficence, moral magnitude and sublimity, and sacrificed his own life for it, in the face of the strongest prejudices of his people and ages?

(Josh McDowell, Evidence That Demands a Verdict, 1972, p. 110, quoting Schaff's, The Person of Christ, 1913, p 94-95)

As to **Jesus' sanity**, we must realize that the historical difficulty of explaining his life, if he was a madman, has never been overcome. The incongruity of the immense sanity of his moral teaching and the massive megalomania that was his if he wasn't God incarnate has never been satisfactorily reconciled. There is only one acceptable opinion, the opinion of the early and the ancient church, is that **Jesus Christ was God incarnate**.

In **C. S. Lewis'** oft quoted words:

I'm trying to prevent anyone from saying the really silly 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's the one thing we mustn't say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher. He'd either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he's a poached egg – or else he'd 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 don't let us come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great ... teacher. He hasn't left that open to us. He didn't intend to.

(The Case for Christianity, 1944, .p. 455)

According to a number of passages in the New Testament, "**Jesus Christ is Lord.**" Perhaps we do not yet see this but, **one day, "every knee will bow and proclaim" it** (Phil. 2:11). One day trumpets and voices in heaven will proclaim, "**The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever**" (Rev. 12:15).

In the meantime, I tell you, **it is an exercise in sanity to trust Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord**. As the eternal Incarnation of God **he is the supremely sane man!** All sanity resides in him. Make a commitment to his sanity. Make a commitment to him.

Amen

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