

Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016

Volume 2 *A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis & Friends*

Article 8

11-1999

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Recommended Citation

Leas, Danielle (1999) "Screwtape: Of Demons and Letters," *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016*: Vol. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol2/iss1/8

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Screwtape: Of Demons and Letters

Cover Page Footnote

Undergraduate Student Essay

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume II

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 1999

Upland, Indiana

Screwtape: Of Demons and Letters

Danielle Leas

Screwtape: Of Demons and Letters

by Danielle Leas

In his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis allows his readers to look into the secret world of the demons. Through their correspondence one meets Screwtape and Wormwood and learns about the task of possessing a human.

Foundational to the task of writing about demons is deciding where one actually stands on the issue. The author's writing depends, especially in the areas of the supernatural, almost entirely on his view of the subject. Therefore, it is important for the reader to understand Lewis's view on demons. In his preface, Lewis states,

The proper question is whether I believe in devils. I do. This is to say, I believe in angels, and I believe that some of these, by the abuse of their free will, have become enemies to God, and as a corollary, to us. These we may call devils (6).

Lewis sees the devil, not as the opposite of God, but as the opposite of angels. This also gives one a clue as to his view of God. God is not someone who can be successfully opposed. He is omnipotent. Because of this, the demons are annoyances, but not all powerful.

The fact that Lewis views demons as real, helps the reader understand his treatment of the subject. He goes to great lengths to make sure that he does not portray the absurd demons of some authors. Instead, he decides

to organize the demonic world much like a bureaucracy.

The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid "dens of crime" that Dickens loved to paint. It is not done even in concentration camps and labor camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered (move, seconded, carried, and minuted) in clean, carpeted, warmed, and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voice. Hence, naturally enough, my symbol for Hell is something like the bureaucracy of a police state or the offices of a thoroughly nasty business concern (7-8).

Lewis's chosen setting for hell also shows that he is not just concerned with the evil of demons. He also addresses the social evil of men in the book. While the book is about demon "possession," Lewis suggests in many places that men do much of the demons' work on their own.

In dealing with Lewis's treatment of the subject, it is important to note that he had another ideal in mind. Lewis would have liked to balance the view of the demons with the view of angels (10). However, recognizing the innate tendency towards evil that humans

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have, he felt unable to find words that would even resemble what angels would say. This inability to balance good and evil makes the book appear negative and depressing.¹

Lewis did not enjoy writing the story, in fact, it was one of his least favorite books to write. He said, "The strain produced ad sort of spiritual cramp. The world into which I had to project myself while I spoke through Screwtape was all dust, grist, thirst, and itch. Every trace of beauty, freshness and geniality had to be excluded. It almost smothered me before I was done."² Although the writing of the book came very easily to Lewis, writing a letter in a few hours each week, it was his least favorite book to write. George Sayer, in his book *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis*³, suggests that *Screwtape* may even be the reason that Lewis asked the Church of England for a spiritual director who would hear his confessions. It is clear that Lewis not only believes in the demonic, but actually feels their power in his own life.

After finding Lewis's starting point, the reader is then better able to understand his characters. The demon letter-writer is Screwtape. He is the uncle of Wormwood, the demon to whom he is writing, and is actually the only voice directly heard in the story. Screwtape is an executive in the bureaucracy of hell, "His Abysmal Sublimity Undersecretary Screwtape, T.E., B.S., etc." (84). Screwtape gives the insight into human nature and the earthly world for his struggling nephew. Wormwood appears to be a new demon, although one is not sure exactly what his standing is in the bureaucracy. He seems to be rather incompetent in the handling of his human, and, from all indications, meets a rather unhappy end. The only other important character is the "patient," the human being possessed. He appears to be representative of

the human race as a whole, and it is through his character that the reader sees himself/herself.

Lewis addresses many themes through the demons, and not all can be addressed without rewriting the book in its entirety. However, there are some important themes that need to be acknowledged. The first is Lewis's view of the church and church-going Christians. He suggests that Christians do not judge churches in their doctrine, but rather on their view of the people who attend them. "Your patient, thanks to Our Father Below, is a fool" (23). Without understanding what sinners they are, they judge others on a completely different basis. Lewis also addresses the problems within the church itself. He gives two different examples, one of watered-down doctrine and one of shocking and confusing the congregation, to show the imperfections in the church (65). However, it is important to note that Lewis does not undermine the necessity of the church. He is attempting to show the need to see the church as it really is, good and bad.

The next point that Lewis makes is the effect that relationships have on our Christian life. Screwtape suggests that Wormwood emphasize the differences between the patient and his mother to keep him stumbling in his walk (25). He encourages the patient's keeping two lives, one sophisticated and cynical, one religious, to make sure that he cannot grow (47). He is against the patient's finding love with a "vile, sneaking, simpering, demure, monosyllabic, mouselike, watery, insignificant, virginal, bread-and-butter miss!" (82). The reason the demons are concerned about all of these relationships is that they have a great impact on the patient. Biblically, the importance of others to the Christian is stated in no uncertain terms (Acts 2:42; 1 John 1:3). Screwtape and Wormwood seek to

pervert these relationships, moving them away from God's intended use into something that pulls the patient away from God.

Besides human relationships, the demons also try to attack the patient's relationship with God, specifically in the area of prayer. The first area of prayer that the demons attack is prayer for another. Instead of the patient's praying for the person's needs the demons want his attention directed to her sins (26). This inattention to the real needs allows the patient to pray for an image, a false image separate from the real person. Screwtape states that, "since his ideas about her soul will be very crude and often erroneous, he will, in some degree, be praying for an imaginary person, and it will be your task to make that imaginary person daily less and less like the real mother" (26). Not only is the patient praying about an imaginary person, but he is praying for an imaginary God. "But whatever the nature of the composite object, you must keep him praying to *it*—to the thing that he has made, not to the Person who has made him" (30). The second area of attack is the human realm of emotion. Screwtape suggests Wormwood should keep the patient trying to create the feeling and mood of prayer by himself (28-29). This accomplishes two things: a faith that is based on emotion and not intelligence and the attempt to create faith without God. In attacking prayer, Screwtape and Wormwood effectively cut off the patient's communication with God.

In addition to communication with God, the demons actually attack the Christian life itself. The demons use the sense of what modern Christians call "the valley" to make the patient question his faith (23). They manipulate the fact that the human experience is always changing to tempt the patient when he is at his weakest. "Their nearest approach

to constancy, therefore, is undulation—the repeated return to a level from which they repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks" (40). When they have drawn him away, they use the fact that humans do not like admitting error to keep him running away from God. "He will *want* his prayers to be unreal, for he will dread nothing so much as effective contact with the Enemy. His aim will be to let sleeping worms lie" (53). The demons manipulate the natural biological need to look to the future to keep the patient from following God's call to live in the present (62). They take all of the pleasures that God has created in His world and pervert them into something else, something evil (83). The demons attempt to pervert faith itself. "If they must be Christians, let them be at least Christians with a difference. Substitute for the faith itself some Fashion with a Christian colouring" (91). They even pervert the Christian's discomfort in the present world into hoping to make this world heaven (102). Lewis is making it very clear that things God created as good can be perverted into evil if the person is not looking to him.⁴

Screwtape's goal is to attack the Christian from all angles. In *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*, a later addition to the book, Lewis makes it clear that the demons appear to be successful. Screwtape uses his toast as a stunning criticism of the lack of the extraordinary in Christian faith, which is as true now as when Lewis wrote it. "What I want to fix your attention on is the vast, overall movement towards the discrediting, and finally the elimination, of every kind of human excellence—moral, cultural, social, or intellectual" (124). Lewis calls to attention the lack of effort, especially in the school system, at trying to move above average in any area.

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Now that one has met the characters and seen some of the issues Lewis addresses, it is possible to evaluate the story. In every letter, Lewis addresses different issues that are part of the human experience. As stated previously, he addresses the problems of hypocrisy, judging, relationships, prayer, and the Christian life itself. Lewis uses the fictional nature of the story to get around the reader's defenses and bring the important issues home. He makes the reader accept that everyone has shortcomings that need to be dealt with, but they are not something of which to be ashamed.

The more obvious theme of the story is the ability of demons to manipulate humans. As the above paragraphs have shown, Lewis believes that demons can and do affect the Christian. The next question to ask is whether or not this is biblical. In Job chapters one and two, God gives the devil permission, essentially, to torture Job in an attempt to make him deny God. In Matthew 8:28-34, Jesus drives evil spirits out of two men. It is important to note that the evil spirits made men violent. Lewis obviously has a Biblical foundation on which to place his belief of demons effecting humans.

A secondary theme that is not clearly expressed, but strongly implied, is that there is an omnipotent God that makes demons tremble. Screwtape freely admits that they are perverting God's intended plan (83). At the same time, the demons are obviously working against a stronger power. they admit that God actually loves humans and has a plan for them (41). Screwtape also states that they cannot make pleasure, but only pervert the pleasures that God has made (44). At one point, they are completely thwarted by the presence of God (55). These facts all indicate that they are nowhere near as powerful as God. Lewis even

suggests that they cannot stand in front of heavenly bodies.

As he saw you, he also saw Them. I know how it was. You reeled back dizzy and blinded, more hurt by them than he had ever been by bombs. The degradation of it!—that this thing of earth and slims could stand upright and converse with spirits with whom you, a spirit, could only cower (110).

This is firmly built on Biblical principles. As it reads in Job, the devil has no power without God giving him permission first. In James 2:19 it says, "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." It is obvious that there is a god who rules over the demons.

In evaluating the themes it is important to understand that Lewis is working on the assumption that the Bible is true. His story is based on a Christian faith that will seem unbelievable, and even ludicrous, to an unbeliever. It is also important to know that he is working on assumptions about the spirit world. Lewis addresses this, saying, "It seems to me to explain a good many facts. It agrees with the plain sense of Scripture, the tradition of Christendom, and the beliefs of most men at most times" (6). However, he firmly states that if his beliefs are proven untrue, it will not destroy his faith.

Lewis, as shown above, had to work out many things for himself in writing this story. There are no specific Biblical references that talk about how demons possess humans. However, he uses Scripture and tradition as a starting point and moves from there. It is also important to note that this is not, by any means, supposed to be a factual account of

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demon possession. The belief in God and demons is a part of the Christian faith. Because we do not have specific information about it, or do not completely understand it, in no way makes it less real.

In noting the strengths and weaknesses of *Letters*, it is interesting to see that the same things work for and against it. For example, while the lack of information may make some doubt the plausibility of the story, it is that lack of information that allows it to be accepted without much debate on incidental issues. The fact that the story is fictional also has its positives and negatives. Since the story is fictional, it can be easily shaken off as unimportant. However, the genre allows Lewis to address many topics that would otherwise necessitate entire books to themselves. This is related to the last strength and weakness. The story raises many questions for the Christian, but they are not fully addressed.

Because of the fictional nature of the story, it is suitable for middle-school-aged children as well as mature audiences. Although younger audiences will not understand some of the questions Lewis raises, *Letters* will allow them to grasp the supernatural in a way that will keep them interested. For mature audiences, the challenge will be looking into their own lives and seeing into how many of the traps proposed by Lewis they fall. The mature reader should feel challenged to look into some of the topics he has raised.⁵

Letters is an interesting read for many reasons. First, it grabs attention by addressing topics relevant to the human experience, for example love and family relations. It is more interesting for a Christian because it touches many areas of the Christian life that can seem untouchable, like leading dual lives, or unthinkable, like fluctuating levels of faith. Lewis uses easily understandable language

when dealing with the topics addressed. Although he has a good grasp of theology, he does not slip into theological terms. Instead, he makes sure to take the reader with him through the story. The use of letters as the medium enhances the story because it allows Lewis to address many themes instead of having only one to deal with throughout the story.

Endnotes

1. This view of human nature carries over to another of his works. In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis takes his reader, through a narrator, on a bus ride from hell to heaven. In heaven the narrator hears conversations between heavenly bodies and people who have come from hell. The heavenly souls are trying to convince the other to stay, but in most cases they are unable to see that they are stuck in hell. It is not obvious that Lewis feels the gap that exists between humanity and God, but he understands that there is a bridge in Christ.
2. from *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*. By Green & Hooper, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974.
3. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1988.
4. "Screwtape Proposes a Toast" was written after *Letters* was published. In it Screwtape suggests that the demons are winning more people than ever. He also states that the quality of people won is declining. He feels that people are becoming more bland and unable to define or stand up for what they believe.
5. Lewis addresses many of the topics raised in *Mere Christianity*. He also addresses the topic of love exclusively in his book *The Four Loves*.