

# Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016

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Volume 3 *A Collection of Essays Presented at  
the Third Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on  
C.S. Lewis & Friends*

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Article 5

11-2001

## The Gently Sloping, Chosen Path: C.S. Lewis's View of Hell in Screwtape and The Great Divorce

Richard Hill  
*Point Loma Nazarene University*

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### Recommended Citation

Hill, Richard (2001) "The Gently Sloping, Chosen Path: C.S. Lewis's View of Hell in Screwtape and The Great Divorce," *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016*: Vol. 3, Article 5.  
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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume III**

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

Taylor University 2001

Upland, Indiana

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## **The Gently Sloping, Chosen Path: C.S. Lewis's View of Hell in *Screwtape* and *The Great Divorce***

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Hill, Richard. "The Gently Sloping, Chosen Path: C.S. Lewis's View of Hell in *Screwtape* and *The Great Divorce*." Inklings Forever 3 (2001) [www.taylor.edu/cslewis](http://www.taylor.edu/cslewis)

## The Gently Sloping, Chosen Path: C.S. Lewis's View of Hell in *Screwtape* and *The Great Divorce*

Richard Hill

Writer William F. Buckley was once asked why he spelled Hell with a capital H. "Because," he said, "it's a real place, like Scarsdale [an affluent New York suburb]." C.S. Lewis also spelled Hell with a capital H and definitely thought it a real place. However, though Lewis was, by today's standards, a religious conservative like Buckley, he did not see Hell as necessarily a domain of fire and brimstone. Nonetheless, his visions of grim, rainy towns full of relentless malcontents and modern bureaucracies full of smiling cannibals are in many ways more horrifying than the traditional imagery of Hell, and his summation of the fate of the damned is at least as chilling.

Lewis saw the essence of Hell as separation from God, arrived at voluntarily by a process of self-deception and self-centeredness. Taking a cue from Milton's Satan, denizens of Hell believe, either by arrogance or ignorance or both, that it is better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven. But for everyone but Satan himself, this choice means to hold on to self-deceptions, growing ever more "shrunk up into oneself" at the cost of eternal joy. One cannot be sent or taken to Hell: "you can only get there on your own steam." The doors to Hell may or may not be locked from the outside, but they are certainly locked from the inside.

Lewis offered two extended visions of Hell in his writing: the grey town in *The Great Divorce* and the modern corporate office of *The Screwtape Letters*. In the former, Hell seems almost too easy—at first. Houses appear just by thinking of them, and no tormentors are in view. But the eternally quarrelsome must live with each other,

which they are of course unable to do, and so the grey town spreads out for millions of miles as the inhabitants try to escape one another's company. And of course the houses, being only imaginary, don't keep out the rain, or the relentless frustration and unpleasantness, or the fear of darkness coming.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, Hell is streamlined, well-lit, and meticulously managed. It is a nightmare of bureaucracy, of which the worst police state, or even the N.I.C.E. abomination of *That Hideous Strength*, is but a pale shadow. From "Our Father Below" on up, *Screwtape's* Hell is a hive of resentful and envious backstabbers, a Byzantine "lowerarchy" of treachery and deceit. It is a dog-eat-dog concern, both figuratively and literally, for devils who do not stay ahead of the game are absorbed—eaten—by the ravenous devils they plotted to absorb themselves. Human souls are the cattle upon which devils feed as they plot to devour one another.

In *Screwtape* the young man is killed on Earth, but saved from Hell when he repents at his death. In *The Great Divorce*, lost souls are given a chance to repent even after they have been in Hell. If they do decide to repent, Hell has then been Purgatory for them. The free choice of whether or not to repent must exist, however—there must be a Hell for those who absolutely want to be separate from Joy. Of the final disposition of those who "only want to be left alone" by God, Lewis says, "Alas, I am afraid that is what He does."

For a deeper look at Lewis's view of Hell, I'll begin with a bit of literary background for those interested in sources and

inspirations.

The first mention of what was to become *The Great Divorce* dates from 1932, when Lewis's brother Warren wrote in his diary: "Jack has an idea for a religious work based on the opinion of some of the Fathers that while punishment for the damned is eternal, it is intermittent; he proposes to do a sort of infernal day excursion to paradise." The diary date leads scholars to believe that Lewis may have been inspired by a book of Jeremy Taylor's sermons that his friend Arthur Greeves had given him in 1931. In one of the sermons, Taylor takes issue with a hymn by the fourth century poet Purdencius Aurelius Clemens who imagines the holiday from Hell idea. A major inspiration for the first chapters of *Great Divorce* not cited often by Lewis scholars is an eighteenth-century German book called *Letters From Hell* that Lewis owned but didn't mention. In it are many of the ideas that Lewis developed, including the grey town, the notion that ghosts may wish for what they want but never enjoy it, the darkness of Hell, and the glimpses of Paradise. In the Lewis mentions a fourth, less "literary" influence. He credits a science fiction writer whose name he has forgotten for the idea that Heaven is infinitely more solid than Earth or Hell.

So to his reflections on the writings of a fourth century hymnist, and a seventeenth-century minister, and a 1930s pulp-fiction hack, Lewis added an irritation with modern theology and his complete disagreement with mystic poet William Blake's notion of evil evolving into good that Blake postulated in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell." Lewis saw good and evil as absolutely incompatible, hence the "Great Divorce."

One of the most interesting characters in the book is the apostate Anglican bishop who writes books on Christianity for

personal fame rather than edification of Christians. The great success of *The Screwtape Letters* and his BBC broadcasts during the war had made Lewis the most popular "lay theologian" of the day, so as a famous Christian apologist himself, he was aware that one who points fingers must be prepared for fingers pointed back. But examples of Lewis's Christian humility are numerous in the biography. We see a good one later in *Great Divorce*, when George MacDonald cautions the narrator (who certainly seems to be Lewis himself) against becoming too much of an expert in the apologist line when he says, "There have been men before now who got so interested in proving the existence of God that they came to care nothing for God Himself. . . ." When Lewis wonders aloud what people will think of him back on earth for suggesting that even mother-love can lead one to Hell, MacDonald replies that it might give him some needed humility if he were misunderstood and vilified.

But for all his self-effacement, Lewis is still viewed as a Christian authority, by those who disagree as well as agree with him. In a college course on the Inklings I team-taught a few years ago, a student began to interrogate one of my co-professors on Lewis's view of Bible inerrancy. The student followed up with a question on whether Lewis agreed with George MacDonald's Universalist view—that everyone will be saved eventually. Since I was teaching Lewis as my part of that course, the questions were referred to me. I answered as best I could. I said that for C.S. Lewis, debates on Bible inerrancy and universalism were secondary to more crucial considerations, such as the importance of avoiding irritability with one's family members.

The student thought I was being facetious, but I wasn't. Or not too facetious,

anyway. Both *The Great Divorce* and *Screwtape*, focus on the simple things that are of the utmost importance in the Christian life. True, *Screwtape* is an ambitious and complex portrait of evil, and *Great Divorce* takes up great philosophical questions. But for Lewis, the prime question was always how we are doing in THIS space and THIS time to give up the living Hell of our own self-centeredness and become our real selves in God.

*The Screwtape Letters* is perhaps a closer companion piece to *Great Divorce* than most Lewis scholars have noted, so I'll spend a little time connecting the two. As those who have read it know, the time and space setting for *Screwtape* is the Second World War, arguably the worst wholesale human slaughter in recorded history. Many Christians at the time thought that Armageddon had arrived and that Hitler was the anti-Christ. Lewis certainly knew the horror of war. He was wounded in combat in World War I, and one of his closest friends was killed. But in the book, *Screwtape* the senior devil spends much more time advising a junior tempter (named Wormwood) how to poison a relationship between mother and son than he does on exploiting the war for Hell's purposes. According to *Screwtape*, nothing, not even the joy of humans blowing themselves to bits, should distract the tempter from "the real business of undermining faith and preventing the formation of virtues." "Nothing matters at all," says *Screwtape*, "except the tendency of a given state of mind in given circumstances, to move a particular [person] at a particular moment nearer to [God] or nearer to us."

So rather than tempting their patients to huge sins and debaucheries, *Screwtape* advises his demons to use our little vanities and even our little virtues as weapons against us. "There is going to be some

benevolence, as well as some malice, in your patient's soul," admits *Screwtape*. "The great thing is to direct the malice to his immediate neighbors whom he meets every day and to thrust his benevolence out to the remote circumference, to people he does not know. The malice thus becomes wholly real and the benevolence largely imaginary . . . There is no good at all in inflaming his hatred of Germans, if, at the same time, a pernicious habit of charity is growing up between him and his mother, his employer, and the man he meets in the train." A modern example might be someone who votes for government largesse for the poor, but disdains to donate an hour to the local soup kitchen because the inhabitants smell bad.

In short, the infernal strategy is to turn the Christian into a complacent, self-righteous fault-finder, full of self-justification for his own shortcomings and completely ignorant that he is walling himself off from God's grace. The safest road to Hell—that is, the road most likely to lead humans to damnation, is, says *Screwtape*, "the gradual one, the gentle slope, soft underfoot without sudden turnings, without mileposts, without signposts." Which leads us to the main theme of *The Great Divorce*: the real horror of Hell is that the vast majority of its inhabitants have no idea how they got there, but would rather stay there than go to Heaven.

The question naturally arises: why would anyone choose Hell after realizing there was a choice? Lewis provides some answers. The Big Man in chapter four sees his refusal as a matter of pride; he has been a hard working, self-sufficient fellow and resents any suggestion that he should ask for "bleeding charity." The apostate bishop in chapter five sees the opportunity to actually meet God face to face as a poor substitute for endless speculation about the nature

of God. Other ghosts see being reborn as a heavenly creature as some sort of loss of self, and some of Hell's inhabitants are frankly more comfortable in their misery.

As Lewis explains in the preface to *Screwtape*, "We must picture Hell as a state where . . . everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives the deadly serious passions of envy, self-importance, and resentment." Passions, positive or negative, are difficult to relinquish, and we are given the free will to keep the destructive ones if we choose. By one rationalization or another, most of the ghosts in *Great Divorce* prove unwilling to let go of the deadly sins of pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, sloth, and envy—even when they know that God's will is an alternative. MacDonald puts their dilemma in a nutshell in chapter nine. "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, chose it. Without that self-choice, there could be no Hell."

The second major theme of *The Great Divorce* is also a main theme of *Screwtape*. That is, the so-called "small" sins, like pouting or secret sulking when things don't go our way—the everyday acts of excluding God's grace and direction—THOSE are the sins we really need to worry about, especially if we are patting ourselves on the back for being free of the "big" sins. Even the famous sinners who are mentioned in the book are trapped in their so-called small sins. Napoleon is in self-exile in the outer space of Hell not for causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands in Europe, but for his unwillingness to admit that anything was his fault. All the damned either see their sins as virtues, or see themselves as innocent victims of others, including God.

Lewis says in the Preface to *Screw-*

*tape*: "Even in human life we have seen the passion to dominate, almost to digest [another person]; to make his whole intellectual and emotional life merely an extension of one's own . . . On earth this desire is often called 'love.'" The dwarf who would continue the emotional blackmail of his wife even after death, the strong wife in chapter ten who says, "I forgive him as a Christian, but there are some things one can never forget," and the loving mother in chapter eleven says she believes "in a God of love"—all are entirely consumed by their own possessiveness. All would take the objects of their "love" with them to Hell rather than give up their selfish sense of control. But as Lewis illustrates, selfish love is not really love at all—it is merely selfishness.

Hell would seem to be FULL of "minor" sinners—grumblers, whiners, self-pity artists, emotional blackmailers. All the characters have a grievance, all feel that they are getting less than they deserve. Their cases are airtight. They have "rights"; they deserve better treatment, and they can prove it. They don't need Heaven on Heaven's terms. So with a perverted pride—the sort of thing that *Screwtape* encourages—they stomp back to Hell in pathetic triumph. Thus too on earth: with layers of self-justification for all our selfishness of mind, body, and spirit, we slowly, inexorably, and voluntarily shut ourselves off from God. Orual, the protagonist in Lewis's last novel, *Till We Have Faces*, finds the meaning of that title when she discovers that she has been a selfish, self-pitying manipulator of others. Her epiphany is that God is unable to communicate with us "face to face" until we are able to become honest enough with ourselves to see our own real "face."

Another interesting facet of the book is its theology—but the theology is hard to pigeonhole. Fine points of doctrine are

brushed aside by the Heavenly Beings—the bright spirit says to the apostate priest in chapter five, “We know nothing of religion here.” MacDonald tells the narrator that Catholics and Protestants are “both right, maybe.” On the other hand, what is called “liberal theology” comes in for scathing sarcasm. The Episcopal apostate ghost in chapter two may be modeled on E.W. Barnes, the bishop of Birmingham at the time *Divorce* was written. His book, *Rise of Christianity*, which was selling well then, attempts to rationalize the supernatural passages in the Bible. The apostate bishop personifies Lewis’s ongoing quarrel with those who remain in the Church while denying its basic doctrines. In “Christian Apologetics,” a paper he read to Anglican priests and youth leaders of the church in 1945 (soon after he finished *Great Divorce*), Lewis admonishes those who do not believe in basic Christian dogma to do the right thing and leave the church. The angel in chapter five states flatly that God, the resurrection, and the master-subject relationship between God and man are facts, not theories.

On the other hand again, Lewis’s scenario of the grey town and the opportunity to leave it would seem to be a concession to people like Bishop Barnes who want to take the “burning” out of Hell in order to appease humane skeptics. In the January 2000 issue of *U.S. News and World Report*, the cover story titled “Hell Hath No Fury,” begins, in the typical sardonic modern news magazine style with the following blurb: “With fire and brimstone out of fashion, modern thinking says the netherworld isn’t so hot after all.” Lewis and *The Great Divorce* are mentioned in the article as part of the modern movement to soft-pedal Hell and make it less fearsome.

Certainly Lewis’s notion that Hell is a choice and that it is possible for sinners to repent even from perdition is not the funda-

mentalist view of Hell. However, chapter two of *Divorce* intimates that a more classically biblical Hell may indeed loom ahead for the damned who finally chose to reject God. The ghosts are whispering on the bus, fearful of “the darkness” and a mysterious THEY. “Who are ‘They’ and what are you afraid they’ll do to you?” Lewis asks. The other passengers don’t dare discuss the matter, but clearly they know that something terrible is coming—Hell will not always be so mundane. For an inkling to what Lewis may have had in mind, the reader might look to Screwtape’s portrayal of Hell and the way the senior devil speaks throughout the book of human souls in terms of food. When Screwtape writes, “I could show you a pretty cageful down here,” one thinks uncomfortably of animals waiting for the slaughter.

Yet another important theme in *Great Divorce* is the firm denial that Hell can hold Heaven hostage. Many a modern atheist echoes famous “freethinkers” like Robert Ingersoll and Bertrand Russell in saying, “I disdain to believe in a God that would create Hell, or even allow it to exist” or as Lewis expresses it in chapter thirteen, “Some people say on Earth that the final loss of one soul gives lie to all the joy of those who are saved.” But MacDonald counters that for the highest good in the universe, joy must prevail. If misery is given the power to infect joy, if the selfish are allowed to demand happiness on their own terms, then evil will triumph. As the Lady asks the Dwarf in chapter twelve, “Do you think joy was created to live always under that threat? Always defenseless against those who would rather be miserable than have their self-will crossed?” It may seem like a harsh doctrine, but for all the emphasis humanists have put on “free thinking,” a universe which allows souls to have Hell if they want it is granting those souls more

freedom than humanist philosophers seem willing to grant them.

As I tell my students, the relatively short *Divorce* has enough material to last a whole semester, but the last theme I'll mention is "The last shall be first and the first shall be last", another biblical passage presented vividly in *Divorce*. As the Spirit tells the Ghost Artist in chapter ten, no one is "distinguished" in Heaven. The learned Bishop, the famous artist, the professors and lecturers, the intelligent businessman, the "decent chap" the "loving mother"—all decide to deny God in the end and all are lost in the tiny crack of Heaven wherein Hell lies. But the murderer who repents is in Heaven, the man hag-ridden by lust becomes a being of light, and the nondescript housewife who practiced God's love on earth is exalted by angels. The "Hard-Bitten" ghost says the splendor of Heaven is a scheme by an amorphous "them." To the postmodern mind, this explanation of a meaningless universe bent on fooling us and stealing our selfhood is all too plausible.

But as the man ridden by the lizard discovers, if we become willing to surrender our lusts and selfish desires, to surrender our "best thinking," and even to surrender our selves, if we trust God and renounce the "marriage of Heaven and Hell," we will realize our real selves and the real pleasures of the real Heaven.