


6-3-2010

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Robert Moore-Jumonville
Spring Arbor University

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Recommended Citation

Moore-Jumonville, Robert (2010) "The End for Which We Are Formed: Spiritual Formation Through C.S. Lewis," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 7, Article 14.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol7/iss1/14

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VII

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Seventh
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS
Taylor University 2010
Upland, Indiana

The End for Which We Are Formed *Spiritual Formation through C. S. Lewis*

Robert Moore-Jumonville

For years readers have practiced spiritual formation through C. S. Lewis, without using that term. This paper first will lay out Lewis's definition of spiritual formation. We have no choice whether or not we are being formed spiritually. The soul of each of us is shaped through the sum of our creaturely choosing: choices which are transforming us moment by moment into either a more heavenly or more hellish being. Always pastoral in his concern, Lewis offers a compelling spiritual theology of human nature. As spiritual mentor, he wins us over by willingly siding with us in our trenches of battle. Examples from *The Screwtape Letters* will be offered to illustrate Hell's mission of throwing our choosing off track.

Moore-Jumonville, Robert "The End for Which We Are Formed: Spiritual Formation through C.S. Lewis." [Inklings Forever](http://www.taylor.edu/cslewis) 7 (2010) www.taylor.edu/cslewis

The End for which we are Formed:
Spiritual Formation Through C. S. Lewis

Robert Moore-Jumonville, Professor of Spiritual Formation, Spring Arbor University

C. S. Lewis offers readers a profound picture of spiritual formation, grounded in his own keen awareness of human nature. He grasps the complexity of the human animal as a blend of rational, psychological, physical, and spiritual components, but essentially sees us as choosing creatures. Lewis perceptively recognizes human longing for joy and transcendence as we reach out for that “end for which we are formed” (a line from his last sermon, *A Slip of the Tongue*). While he clearly comprehends our experience of trials, temptations, failures, and incompleteness—both within ourselves and within the world, Lewis nevertheless knows what it takes to be transformed into the image of Christ. In the end, he affirms that spiritual formation is not an option for human beings (though it is a choice). We will be formed one way or another—either into a more heavenly creature or a more hellish one. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis lays out a concise but perceptive definition of spiritual formation.

Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other”¹

Lewis's genius in understanding spiritual formation, therefore (though he did not use the term), centers on his insightful interpretation of human nature—elucidating our insatiable longing (the end for which we are formed) and our free will (which animals do not enjoy). Without either of these (longing or free will), spiritual formation becomes a rather ridiculous enterprise. If you have no goal toward which to be formed, no destination or telos at which you are aiming to arrive, why speak of *formation* at all? And if you are not free to walk (or not walk) toward your destination, it seems strange to call the enterprise *spiritual*. Groundhogs are not spiritual creatures; they do not make choices about their own life destinies (with the exception perhaps of Punxsutawney Phil). On the other hand, Lewis cries, “You have never met a mere mortal;”² there are no ordinary people—only those on their way to becoming either devils or glorified creatures like the angels. And yet we are embodied souls, as well—part animal—subject to emotions, internal chemical reactions, fatigue, and desire. It is this human duality of the feely choosing creature—a concept Augustine and Pascal understood so well—that forms the center of Lewis's spiritual theology.

Many of us have been relying on C. S. Lewis for years as a chief guide in our spiritual formation without perhaps fully recognizing the depth of his influence. Yet every time we turn to one of his books for a second or third reading, every time we quote him on key spiritual topics, every time we refer to one of his analogies or images, our head and heart betray a deep longing to be led by Lewis further into Christ-likeness.

Consider for a moment how influential Lewis has been in the development of your own Christian faith as you eavesdrop on the experience of others. Martha Atkins Emmert, retired missionary: “C. S. Lewis served as my pastor and counselorI clung to his words as to a lifeboat As I read, life came back into perspective Lewis steadied and sustained me

through our thirty-five year career in Congo and comforts me still today.”³ Catholic teacher and scholar Thomas Howard: “I can say that C. S. Lewis has been a very special instrument of grace to me There is no question about it—Lewis has been a spiritual mentor. . . .”⁴ Scholar and author Michael Ward: “My debt to Lewis is incalculable and inexpressible. There is not world enough and time to tell all I have gained from [him].”⁵ Nicholas Seward, Chaplain of Magdalen College “Every time I [red]read anything he wrote, I felt impelled to pursue holiness.”⁶ Mary Coverdale: “As Lewis so vividly showed me [through the *Great Divorce*], I would have to cast aside my earthly sins for the sake of heaven. I learned about how and why. . . . from Lewis, and I continue today to try to live my life in light of heaven.”⁷ Pastor Richard James: “And thus, through both his life and his words, C. S. Lewis has left his footprints deeply upon my heart, and life has never been the same.”⁸ Teacher and scholar Jerry Root: “Lewis gave me a vocabulary for my soul”.⁹

We trust Lewis as spiritual mentor and guide, don’t we? Why is that? Let me offer two explanations. First, we trust Lewis as spiritual guide because he tells us the truth about ourselves. His analysis rings true. As Lewis clearly delineates for us the enigma of human nature—both the misery and mystery of the human condition—we experience his fascinating facility for understanding the human heart. People often claim the same sort of thing about Henri Nouwen’s books: “It’s like he understands me; like he can read my thoughts.” Both writers had incredible insight into human nature—not just in the abstract sense of human fallibility or potential goodness, but in the daily particulars. Time and again we find ourselves asking, as we read some passage from Lewis: “How did he so completely perceive my irritation at my colleague?” or “How did he intuit the way my family operated around the dinner table as

we grew up?” It is as if he looks right through the walls at times—into our homes and into our hearts. We trust Lewis because we know he knows us.

Second, we trust Lewis as spiritual director because he convinces us he is on our side; he is one of us. Wallace A. C. Williams wrote an interesting essay on Lewis and spiritual formation entitled: *C. S. Lewis: Spiritual Disciplines for Mere Christians*.¹⁰ “Mere Christianity” originally appeared as a term in the writing of the sixteenth century divine Richard Baxter, signifying basic orthodoxy, as in “foundations of the faith,” or “basic beliefs.” Lewis’s own (personal) spiritual formation was nourished on a meat and potatoes diet of the “mere” Christian basics—prayer, Scripture, commitment to Church, frequent participation in Eucharist, etc—with obedience and reasoned-discipline as the sauces that tied the meal together.¹¹ Lewis knew how to lead “mere” Christians—the average pew-sitter—because he really understood himself as one. He does not ask anything of his readers that he has not first asked of himself.

While Lewis excelled as a student of human nature and behavior (in general terms), much of his wisdom came from the careful examination of his own life. We feel safe with Lewis as a spiritual guide, therefore, because he never leads from the position of saint “above us,” but always as fellow soldier “alongside us” in the trenches. Lewis, as you may have noticed, was humble. He did not make excuses for himself. He recognized sin in others because he knew it so well in himself. When he asks us, then, to consider the heavenly or hellish choices we make moment by moment, he knows (from experience) defensiveness may easily surface within us. Often (again like Henri Nouwen) Lewis points to his own struggle to choose well. Instead of singling us out, he shines the lamp on his own life. Let me cite a memorable example.

Lewis delivered his last sermon, *A Slip of the Tongue*, at Magdalene College, Cambridge chapel in January, 1956.¹² In the sermon, Lewis relates how he was praying the *Book of*

Common Prayer Collect in his private devotions (Proper 12 in today's version) where it says "let us so pass through things temporal that we lose not the things eternal," but Lewis found himself garbling it as "let us so pass through things *eternal* that we lose not the things *temporal*." He says, okay, just a silly mistake, right?—but, in fact, he admits this is rather how we tend to live, hanging on to things temporal (and my point is that Lewis includes himself in this mental mess with us). We really know we cannot escape God, but we want to give him just enough for us to get along with him, while still thoroughly running our own lives. Instead, God insists: 'No, I want all of you.'

In the sermon, Lewis returns to a metaphor for Christian spiritual formation that first appeared in the last section of *Mere Christianity* (1945).¹³ He describes how we often mistakenly think Christ merely demands from us a greater percentage of our lives—"like honest but reluctant taxpayers." We may grudgingly agree that taxes are necessary, but we surely don't want them to increase, and we most definitely insist "that after we have paid [them] there will still be enough to live on."¹⁴ It is as if our life were viewed as a pie chart with different slices representing separate compartments: our social life, our financial life, our sex life, our vocational life, our family life, etc.—with God constantly asking us to expand our spiritual life slice (or compartment). In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis uses the voice of God to explain that God wants the whole pie, not merely a bigger slice: "No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours."¹⁵

We might understand this as a call to “Christian conversion.” As Lewis insists in *A Slip of the Tongue*, our first choice is crucial. If we do not start on the right road, we will have “missed the end for which we are formed.” He asks if it really matters “to a man dying in the desert by which choice of route he missed the only well?”¹⁶ But the sort of choosing Lewis addresses relates not only to starting on the right road, but continuing to choose to stay on that path. He means to point us to the process of ongoing spiritual formation commonly called sanctification (something Lewis consistently taught and practiced). To affirm that Christian growth implies progression is either redundant or tautological. Our growing up “into the full measure of Christ” continues even after our life on this earth ends, according to Lewis; so, we might as might well roll up our sleeves and get started on the journey.

In this last sermon, however (seven years before his death), Lewis returns to a metaphor he adopted eleven years earlier to admit that he himself continued to struggle with the reality of daily surrender to God (of paying his spiritual taxes). For all his practiced Christian devotion and obedience—laid out for us in Lyle Dorsette’s book *Seeking the Secret Place*—Lewis struggled throughout his life to give up “things temporal,” to practice what spiritual formation calls “detachment.” In *A Slip of the Tongue*, Lewis confesses that letting go of our “ordinary life,” what he terms “the natural self” in *Mere Christianity*, can loom for us as “too intolerably inconvenient.” For instance, he suggests, “It would be very tiresome to commit myself to a programme of temperance which would cut off my after-breakfast cigarette (or at least make it cruelly alternative to a cigarette later in the morning).”¹⁷ It is confessions like these, where Lewis comes alongside us as spiritual mentor—as one who understands human weakness because he knows it so well in himself. Rather than send information to us impersonally, as a walkie-talkie

Lieutenant, Lewis leads us out into spiritual battle as a foxhole Sergeant. He convinces us he has walked in our spiritual boots.

So Lewis leads fellow Christians, as Nouwen does, not from so far above (as Holy Priest) that we despair of ever matching up (he knows our weakness from within) and not from so far below (as a Spiritual Cripple) so that we shrug off the call to obedience, but rather as a fellow traveler and guide who has gone up around the bend just far enough to know the path personally. He can lead Mere Christians into the practice of *Mere Christianity* because he knew that he himself needed the basic tools, always returning to the foundations and fundamentals of the faith.

While Lewis's definition of spiritual formation centers on the human being as a choosing creature, with humans choosing moment by moment to become either more heavenly or more hellish, the concept of spiritual longing also pervades all of Lewis's work. Consider for a moment how traditional discipleship in the past has proceeded along one of two lines: either transformation of mind (intellect), or transformation of behavior (will). We call out to ourselves and to others either "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind," or "Come out from among them and be holy; be holy as the Lord your God is holy." The first, which is more intellectually oriented, focuses on Scripture and good theology (among both Protestant Para-Church groups and Catholic Thomistic traditions). The second, associated more closely with the Holiness Movement, emphasizes "methods" to encourage holy living (what we would lovingly call today the spiritual disciplines). Spiritual Formation in our current climate, however, while not ignoring transformation of mind or will, concentrates instead on transformation of heart or soul. By heart, I do not mean subjective feelings. Rather, I mean the same thing John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards meant by the term "religious affections"; what John Eldredge labels "desire"; or what

Ronald Rolheiser calls “holy longings;” what we might also call “spiritual passions or yearnings.”¹⁸

Lewis understood how significant our spiritual longings were. We could compare Augustine’s famous statement in the *Confessions* that our hearts are restless (governed by longings) and find no rest until they rest in God. Therefore, our longings (our loves) need to be ordered, disciplined, managed, re-ordered, and given shape. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis includes a substantial reflection on how the work of Wagner produced within him this kind of wistful longing. A near palpable pleasure and hunger surfaced for Lewis and other Inklings as they experienced these beautiful strains of music, or as they tasted a similar joy in Norse saga and poetry—capturing a sense that life was beautiful, brief, and passing away. ‘Baldir the beautiful is dead, is dead,’ mourns the Icelandic myth. So Lewis refers to Wagner: “I had tasted the lost joy with unusual fullness.”¹⁹ Like leaving college and realizing you will never again experience those golden days of freedom and friends; like the last child moving out of the house with parents wondering how they can ever go into her room again without tears. *Sensucht* is the German word for this sort of anguished longing. But through his conversion, Lewis learns that this longing is a sign pointing to a greater fulfillment, to an eternal destiny, to seeds planted in the human soul meant to grow in an eternal garden.

How then do we learn to deal with our desires on this earthly journey? How do we learn to link our daily longing toward choosing heaven, toward choosing that which leads us to the end for which we were formed? That is much of what Lewis is trying to teach us in his writing. Recall the passage from *Perelandra* where the Green Lady counsels us to appreciate the fruit we have before us instead of pining after the fruit we had wanted but failed to locate.²⁰ In a parallel passage of the book, addressing human appetite (the fire of desire), Lewis has the main character

Ransom stumble upon a sort of water-balloon-like globe of pleasure: “For one draught of this on earth wars would be fought and nations betrayed.” After the intoxication of the drink, Ransom considers consuming more. But his reason steps in—or is it his integrity—warning him that such gluttony would be “like asking to hear the same symphony twice in a day.”²¹ It is not that Lewis is a prude. He simply knows too well that earthly pleasures promise what they cannot deliver. Self-denial, self-discipline, *askesis*, asceticism, the spiritual disciplines—these are not somehow ends in themselves, somehow intended to save us from having too much fun or pleasure. Rather, Lewis insists, we operate with a lower view of our pleasure than God himself. Consider the memorable analogy from *The Weight of Glory*: “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”²² There is a lovely *Book of Common Prayer* Collect that expresses the same idea: “Lord, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding; pour into our hearts such love toward you that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises which exceed all that we can desire, through Jesus Christ our Lord....” We are far too easily pleased, reminds Lewis. God calls us farther up and farther into formation in the image of Christ, deeper into his presence, lavished with the gifts of his infinite love.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. New York: Macmillan, 1960: 86-87.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. New York: Touchstone 1980: 39.

³ Mary Anne Phemister and Adrew Lazo, *Mere Christians: Inspiring Stories of Encounters with C. S. Lewis*. Grand Rapids: Baker 2009: 109-110

⁴ Ibid. 143

⁵ Ibid. 205

⁶ Ibid. 195

⁷ Ibid. 90

⁸ Ibid. 148

⁹ Ibid. 187

¹⁰ Wallace A. C. Williams, *C. S. Lewis: Spiritual Disciplines for Mere Christians* in *For All the Saints*, eds. Timothy George and Alister McGrath London: John Knox 2003: 177-194. See also William Griffin, *C. S. Lewis: Spirituality for Mere Christians*. New York: Crossroad 1998.

¹¹ See Lyle Dorsett, *Seeking the Secret Place: The Spiritual Formation of C. S. Lewis*. Grand Rapids: Brazos 2004.

¹² C. S. Lewis, *A Slip of the Tongue* in *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays*. New York: Touchstone 1980: 137-143.

¹³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. New York: Macmillan 1952.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 140

¹⁵ *Mere Christianity* 167.

¹⁶ *A Slip* 142.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 138.

¹⁸ John Eldredge, *The Journey of Desire*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson 2000; Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*. New York: Double Day 1999.

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*. New York: Harcourt 1955: 166.

²⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* New York: Macmillan 1978: 68-9.

²¹ *Ibid.* 42-3.

²² *Weight* 26