

Notes on *The Screwtape Letters*

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The following comments are intended to be a distillation, commentary, and reflection on the major themes of C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*. I hope these notes will be helpful for those charged with leading a study of the book, particularly for students or others who have had minimal theological training. Chapter comments are more extensive in the beginning because Lewis introduces themes early and tends to return to them as the book progresses. Page references are to the HarperCollins 2001 paperback edition.

Chapter 1

One of Lewis' major concerns throughout the book is the intellectual assumptions of his world. At the beginning he notes a "materialist" worldview holds sway, which is to say the assumption that if you can not empirically verify something it does not exist. This, says Lewis, is a backdoor way of avoiding confronting important realities; you simply define them out of existence.

Lewis does not see a conflict between reason and faith; he believes the claims of faith can stand the test of scrutiny. Indeed, he believes that a vigorous application of reason takes one beneath intellectual fad to testing fundamental truth claims. He would disagree with much of the deconstructionist thinking that denies "truth"; he would perhaps argue for some humility in asserting claims, but would say there is a truth to be sought and that it matters what one embraces. The intellectual search is one with an end. (For another treatment of this theme, see Lewis' *The Great Divorce*, chapter 5, in which a one character prefers a hell which includes eternal debate on religious issues to a heaven of certainty in the presence of God).

Lewis asserts that much of "hell on earth" is rooted in an unwillingness to ask deep, probing questions about what is really important, what gives true fulfillment, what is real as opposed to illusion. (In this he would share some ground with the Hindu concept of *maya*). He believes we are often prisoners of "immediate sense experience" and the "pressure of the ordinary," that we seldom step back to reflect on what is important.

Screwtape emphasizes that the demonic is always about "fuddling", that is, obscuring what is really important in favor of the transitory, ill conceived, or tawdry. Lewis clearly believes that faith has nothing to fear from reason rigorously applied, but his is not the reason of materialism or scientism.

Chapter 2

Screwtape takes the church as an example where Wormwood can cause confusion by getting his patient so focused on the immediate and "real" that he loses sight of the transcendent. The Church is both more and less than the immediate manifestation of any one time and place. One will inevitably be disillusioned if one compares the immediate incarnation of the Church to the ideal toward which it strives.

The doctrine of the Incarnation is bigger than the idea that God was in Christ; it also speaks to the concept that the holy is found (however imperfectly) in the real world of imperfect humans. There is a certain tension here. While God is indeed in the imperfect, that is not an excuse for making no effort to have our lives and our community grow into the image of Christ. (As the Scottish New Testament professor told his class, "We do indeed have this treasure in earthen vessels, but ye need not be as earthen as ye are.") That is why "holy habits" are

important. Screwtape notes that the man's habits are still in favor of Wormwood until he cultivates new ones.

Christianity is not magic; it is a lifestyle and as such demands intentionality. Screwtape notes that we have freedom which must be used to embrace that holy vision which is set before us. There is a certain tension in noting that God's love comes to us as grace, but that it must be embraced with a certain intentionality. It is the same tension which an Eastern parable notes: The master told his pupil, "You can no more compel God's revelation by your meditation than you can make the sun rise." "Then why be diligent in prayer and meditation?" asked the pupil. "So you will be awake when the sun rises."

There is an ongoing process of rising and falling, of enlightenment and spiritual dryness. John of the Cross, in *Dark Night of the Soul*, notes that spiritual consolations (emotional surges and enlightenment) come easy and often in the initial stages of serious prayer, but dryness comes later, not because God is absent but so that we grow in maturity, seeking God for deeper reasons than being spiritually goosed—and to keep us humble

Screwtape touches on humility, noting that life in community depends upon our recognition of our depth and need for God and the community. The danger is always that we are operating on a "works righteousness" mind set. The lesson is that we should be neither arrogant when God seems near, nor despairing when our prayer life (or the community which surrounds us) is less than what we hope for.

Chapter 3

Screwtape notes an important dynamic in the spiritual life. We often think of religion or faith as a piece of the pie which represents our whole life, with the goal being for the pie piece to become bigger. In fact, the life of the spirit is a circle at the center of our lives with the goal being for that circle to expand outward to encompass more and more of our lives: fun, relationships, work, everything. One of our temptations is to bracket off the parts of life which we will allow to fall under the influence of Christ ("Well, this love your neighbor thing is all fine and good for personal relationships, but business is business.").

This chapter takes family life as an example of how we can easily put spiritual practices, such as prayer, in one chamber, and never let them influence the very ordinary, day-to-day relationships where we spend most of our time. While "conversion" or "faith" may well entail an internal reorientation, it becomes powerful and real only when it makes a difference in our behaviors. Lewis constantly reminds us that we need to move back and forth from deep reflection on what we believe and how we live to testing out new ways of being in the world.

Intercessory prayer is, therefore, always concrete in some sense; prayers which have no reference point in the real world are just words. A great rabbi once observed that we should never ask God to do something if we are unwilling to be an instrument of God's action. So it is playacting to pray that the hungry be fed, if we are unwilling to change our lifestyle, contribute to relief, and seek justice to enable those goals to be accomplished. It is a delusion to pray for peace and understanding in our homes if we are not willing to listen, endure, and give of ourselves in the mundane things such as washing dishes, arranging schedules, and deciding what sofa to buy.

Much of the chapter focuses on how we forget that growth in discipleship, like a journey of 1000 miles, is accomplished one small, ordinary step at a time. Peace on earth begins with patience with an annoying word or tone uttered by one in our own household

Chapter 4

In the preface to *Screwtape*, Lewis notes that Hell is place of constant competition and obsession with ones dignity. In this chapter (though it is not the main focus) he gives us some examples. In the first paragraph he makes it clear that Wormwood is not dealing with a world where he can expect any slack, forgiveness, or grace. He will be held rigidly accountable for failure and can expect no understanding from his mentors. On page 17 he describes God as “cynically indifferent to the dignity of His position, and ours...” This theme occurs repeatedly in *Screwtape*, that God is more concerned about redemption of a beloved creation than guarding divine dignity. In the “through the looking glass” world of this book, the implication is that those who are on the side of the “Enemy” will also have a certain disregard for their own image and false dignity. And if Hell is a place where one can expect no quarter; the unspoken statement is that the realm of the Enemy is different.

The major focus of the chapter is prayer, and Lewis warns of both extremes: making prayer into a purely “spiritual” matter with no anchoring or understanding of its necessary connection to the physical bodies which we inhabit, or on the other hand, of forgetting that no image of God is adequate.

One might expect someone who has been nurtured by the single best collection of liturgical prayers in English (the Book of Common Prayer) to defend formal, structured prayer, and he does (15). Too often we assume that true prayer is unstructured and spontaneous; sometimes it is just sloppy and undisciplined. Lewis makes the case that prayer is a bit like playing scales from notes: before one can improvise, one benefits from a regularized acquaintance with words and thought forms that mature pray-ers have used (the *Our Father* being the prime example). One can certainly make the case that it is possible to err on the other side, allowing liturgical prayers to become pro forma and lifeless, but Lewis asserts that though prayer is more than a matter of the mind and rote repetition, it is not, for most of us, less. He concedes that most of the great literature on prayer speaks of a contemplative state beyond intellectual reflection, but that is not where most of us are in our spiritual development—and it is destructive and dangerous for the novice to presume the skill of the master. (See the section on Coleridge, p. 16).

A major theme in this chapter is that, while it is nice to receive an emotional boost in prayer, our feelings are not the final or even best standard to judge our prayers. The function of prayer is to bring ourselves into the presence of God with as much intentionality as we can (recognizing that, in one sense, we are ever in God’s presence). Ideally the focus is not on taking our spiritual pulse, to see “how we are doing”, rather, it is on opening ourselves to the action of God. Sometimes that action is obvious, and we have the sense of profound comfort or enlightenment; other times it appears that all we do is show up. If we have been open to God, we have done what God desires of us in prayer and the outcomes are not the point. One book on prayer ironically calls it “wasting time with God”; and that suggests why it often hard for us to pray. We want measurable results, and sometimes it seems success as the world measures it is elusive. Lewis, in the last section of the chapter, suggests that if we constantly move the focus from our abilities as pray-ers to trusting ourselves to the Holy Presence, for whatever consolations or spiritual silence that presence offers, we will finally find ourselves confronting God—which we may or may not find welcome.

The final sentences touch on an important theme of prayer. Prayer is not always pleasant. Like looking at the mirror and seeing that we are indeed getting flabby, prayer can undermine our denial that things are not as they should be. Prayer can be disconcerting because it punctures our illusions, but Lewis’ implicit assumption is that it is better to be disconcerted and alert to the

need to change than to be complacently on the road to hell (whether one understands that as eternal damnation or simply on a path that will eventually prove disastrous in life).

Chapter 5

In this chapter Lewis emphasizes the essential theme that suffering, in and of itself, does not serve evil. While the Evil One delights in our “anguish and bewilderment of soul”; the bigger issue is whether these experiences bring us closer or further from God. The key issue for Screwtape is “undermining faith and preventing the formation of virtues.” (p. 22)

Lewis notes that there are spiritual dangers in both being an “extreme patriot” and “ardent pacifist.” But he does not spell these out; it might be interesting to reflect on these. For example, one can easily see the idolatrous possibilities of conflating God and Country in a patriotism which sees the interest of the two as identical. By the same token, ardent pacifism can be the mask of a too delicate moral sensibility which abdicates social responsibility and the willingness to confront injustice.

Screwtape notes that the dangerous things from his perspective (and remember that Screwtape’s interests are always at odds with God’s) are that suffering prompts humans to recognize their need of God, that they are prompted to focus on things outside themselves, and that they are forced to focus on their mortality (Note his scathing critique of a culture that denies death in its medical system, pp. 23-24).

“Contented worldliness” is lifted up as one of the great danger the believer faces. This is a recurring theme in the work.

One might argue that Lewis confuses the suffering which comes to all persons with the suffering which Jesus promises as inherent in discipleship. But it appears that Lewis would assert in both cases that God can redeem suffering if it is offered up to God in trust. Though it may be hard to find purpose in the former case, one will at least find comfort.

Chapter 6

A major theme of this chapter is the relationship between anxiety and fear. As Screwtape notes, anxiety is a major barricade between God and man because it touches at the heart of trust.

One can fear and still trust; it is harder to trust when our hearts are filled with faceless, diffuse anxiety. God’s promise is that we will have resources for what is truly apportioned to us; to worry about what is not yet our concern is a bottomless pit into which we cast our energy.

In the “spiritual law” Screwtape offers (p. 26) he touches a recurring theme in the book: much of the spiritual life is becoming what the Buddha called “mindful”, or reflective. The parallel danger is that we can become overly introspective, or obsessed with keeping a spiritual scorecard of how we are doing. The goal at all times is to be focused on what God desires of us; if we are doing that which is not pleasing to God we do well to notice that, but if we find ourselves in obedience we give thanks and then move on.

A third theme is the relationship between feelings and actions. Screwtape notes that feelings of hatred are not necessarily all that important—if they do not find fruition in actions. Conversely, piety that never moves beyond the intellect is worse than none at all because we have the illusion that we have the real deal, when in fact we have only a fantasy—which is the heart of Screwtape’s image of the personality as made up of concentric circles (p.28). It is important to note that while Lewis is constantly calling for reflection, use of the mind, and reason. He is adamant that true religion must finally find concrete expression in the day-to-day world where we actually live out our lives. He has no illusions that simply knowing the right things, or thinking in the right categories necessarily produces a life pleasing to God.

Chapter 7

The chapter appears to begin with a discussion of whether devils are real, but in fact Lewis is concerned with idolatry. Screwtape sees what he calls the “Materialist Magician” as the ideal. This is one who gives parts the physical world the trust and passion associated with religion while denying the reality of God. Lewis saw the reverence sometimes afforded to science and fashionable social theories as tending in this direction.

Returning to an earlier theme, Lewis takes patriotism versus pacifism as a case study on the dangers of extremism. Screwtape says, “All extremes except extreme devotion to the enemy are to be encouraged” because extremism almost always pulls the focus away from God and toward a “Cause”. The progression he notes (p. 34) is a telling critique of many involved in social justice concerns; the cause becomes more important than the convictions out of which the actions originally grew. Though Lewis does not say it here, the danger of this is that the roots atrophy so that in the long run there is not sufficient spiritual energy to support the “branches” of the action. It is not either/or, many great social reformers have been persons of both prayer and action in the world.

A secondary theme in this chapter is the danger of factionalism. The church can easily become self-righteousness and lacking in charity because it feels elitist and/or besieged.

Chapter 8

This whole chapter pivots around the “law of undulation” and it is one of the most important and beautifully written in the book. It explains why, both from a physiological and theological perspective, we go through periods of spiritual drought. The nature of the beast (pun intended) is that animals have a life cycle characterized by an ebb and flow of energy and enthusiasm, and that cycle finds expression in the life of prayer and devotion. But on a much more profound level, Lewis makes the case that this undulation is both necessary and intended by God so that we grow into the free, mature persons of faith God intends us to be. As Screwtape notes, God can not use the Irresistible and the Indisputable if the goal is to create children and not merely coerced puppets. Though not using the term, Lewis draws on a theology of the cross, showing how God’s power is and must be revealed in apparent weakness. The heart of the chapter is the wonderful section on pages 38-39 in which the purposes of God and Satan are distinguished. Contained in the paragraph on 40 is a moving description of the passion; Christ exemplifies one who embraces the trough and thus finally arrives at the intention of the Father.

Chapter 9

Screwtape notes that we are particularly vulnerable to sensual temptations in the trough times noted in the “law of undulation.” One reason is that the believer is seeking the sense of well being experienced during the good times. Sensuality gives the illusion of intimacy, love, and meaningful passion. Whether it is sex, drugs, alcohol, or anything else which works on the senses, one can temporarily have the sense of well being which comes most fully in communion with God. As Screwtape notes, this is subject to the law of diminishing returns—it takes more and more to provide the same kick, until there is no kick at all.

It is important to note (as Screwtape does) that there is nothing wrong with genuine pleasure, indeed pleasures are God’s gifts to us. It is the perversion of pleasures, in mistaking the gift for the giver, that we run into problems.

When we are in the depths of a trough, Screwtape notes two dangers related to the

assumption that the trough is permanent: On one hand, we can be tempted to despair, and thus abandon the struggle to be faithful because we come to believe we have failed or that the struggle is futile. On the other hand, we can simply become content with a flaccid faith. This is the great danger of urbane, acculturated religion. As Screwtape notes, “A moderated religion is as good for us as no religion at all—and more amusing.”

Lewis ends the chapter with a jab at intellectual fads which ask, not what is true, but what is new, trendy, or historically most recent. He returns to this later in the book.

Chapter 10

In this chapter Lewis notes the importance of friends and acquaintances in the life of faith. Wormwood’s patient is in danger (from a Christian perspective) because he has taken up with those whose values are contradictory to the fragile ones he is cultivating. All of us want to fit into our culture, and so it is very hard when we perceive our values to be at odds with those around us. Lewis notes, “All mortals tend to turn into the thing they are pretending to be.” Allowing ourselves to adopt behaviors contradictory to our faith is dangerous for that reason. But it is important to note that sometimes what we are pretending (that is, trying to inhabit an identity which is not yet established within us) to be is a “Christian.” So it is equally important for us to surround ourselves with fellow believers, in the hope that our playacting can become reality.

Lewis suggests that one of the great problems with our modern world is that we have come to regard “Puritan” virtues with disdain. The issue is not whether temperance, chastity, and sobriety have been tested and found wanting as virtues worth cultivating; rather, Lewis suggests, the modern world simply assumes they are the relics of a bygone day and never asks the question concerning their merit with searching honesty.

Lewis notes that sometimes we find ourselves trying to inhabit two worlds. We are literally schizophrenic—with a divided mind—and thus at home in neither the values of God nor the values of the world. One goal of the life of discipleship is to attain a single-minded passion for the things of God. As Kierkegaard puts it, “Purity of heart is to love one thing.”

Chapter 11

Lewis distinguishes four sources of laughter: joy, fun, joke/humor, and flippancy. In the first two Screwtape sees little value to his cause of undermining the life of faith; they arise from the depths of what it means to be human. The others show more promise. Humor can be used as a way to deaden shame. That which is deplorable can be made into a joke, and thus one slowly ceases to strive against it. Jokes which demean another group are prime examples—we fear being called humorless more than we fear being racist, misogynist, and cruel. Flippancy, which refuses to take anything with seriousness, is the best of all from Screwtape’s perspective because it advances his number one priority, keeping the patients unaware of their peril or of God’s call to them. Flippancy is rooted in the assumption that nothing finally matters, so there is nothing worthy of commitment. An attitude of perpetual flippancy insures that the believer never asks deep questions concerning the nature and purpose of life; and thus lives superficially.

Chapter 12

Screwtape again emphasizes the importance of keeping Christians unaware of their true state, when they are moving away from God. But in this chapter he touches on the important fact that there is a part of us that does not want to be known by God. The sicker we become the more we resist putting ourselves in the presence of the doctor. We cease to need temptations; we

begin actively to move away from God because that keeps us from confronting the need to make hard changes.

The statement of one patient, “I now see that I spent most of my life doing neither what I ought nor what I liked.” is a terrifying warning of how we can fill our lives with trivia which offers no particular joy, excitement, or satisfaction (p.60). Like starving persons with a sense of hollowness we fill our spiritual stomachs with bulk in order to avoid confronting the real hunger.

Repeatedly, Screwtape emphasizes that it is not the great sins that are most likely to doom us (the great ones are more likely to awaken a sense of sin, shame, guilt, and obvious need). It is the subtle change that takes our orbit away from the sun/Son (p. 57) or a barely perceptible turn in the path, gradually leading us away from God, which most imperils us.

Chapter 13

Lewis can sometimes seem rather ascetic, but in this chapter he emphasizes that pleasures are indeed from God. But it is pleasures understood as joy without pretense which he extols. True pleasure, Lewis understands to be a sort of innocent, self-forgetfulness which receives life with delight as it comes. True pleasure has no need to create a facade or pretend to like something only because others find it fashionable. Lewis takes our deepest likes and desires as God’s gifts to us; it is only when we seek to express those desires at the expense of others that they become pathological.

Lewis recapitulates the point he made earlier (chapter 6) that intention without action has a way of finally being impotent. God does not desire us to wallow in grief, shame, or noble intentions (that is what Screwtape wants, because it keeps us focused on unproductive emotions), rather God calls us to turn and live in a new way. The subtle point which Lewis makes at the end of the chapter is that after awhile feeling without action makes it hard for us to even feel the need to turn and take a new course: “The more often he feels without acting, the less he will be able ever to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel.” For example, think of what happens if we regularly hear sermons which call us to compassion for the hungry, but never get around to actually doing something in response to that call. At some point we grow numb and similar words do not even prick our conscience.

Chapter 14

The focus of this chapter is humility. Lewis is at pains to note that humility does not consist in holding a poor opinion of oneself, but in finally getting free of the need to have an opinion at all. To attempt to hold an exaggeratedly negative opinion of one’s gifts is dishonest and ultimately futile. God does not desire dishonesty. Humility is related to detachment (i.e., not being driven by the opinions or priorities of the world). In loving us unconditionally God desires that we no longer have the need to buttress our self-concept by constantly evaluating our accomplishments—including our ability to be humble. Humility does not consist in denigrating our gifts, but in learning to acknowledge them with thanksgiving and move on. If we are not obsessed with evaluating our place in the “temple of Fame” we are freed to be affirming of others because their success does not threaten us.

Chapter 15

Screwtape constantly talks about the importance of misdirection. In this chapter the issue is time, picking up some themes from chapter 6. From Screwtape’s perspective, life can be stolen from humans by getting them to live in either the past (which is gone) or the future (which does not actually exist). Making the same point that the Lord’s Prayer makes in saying, “Give us

this day our daily bread,” Lewis invites us to recognize that the challenges and joys of living are apportioned to us only in the present. If we insist on constantly living in fear of or in anticipation of the future, we are like persons who chase a rainbow (see the wonderful quotation at the top of p.78) which constantly recedes.

An interesting element of this chapter is its noting that living in the future can give birth to either despair (by assuming all the burdens of a lifetime in anticipation of their actually arising) or a kind of hope that is simply wishful optimism—both which are equally useful from Screwtape’s perspective in robbing us of the future. On p. 76 Lewis takes a jab at intellectual trends that are rooted, not in God’s future, but in a naive trust in inevitable progress by historical forces (social, biological, or political). If Lewis’ audience could be tempted to live in the future, how much more true is it of American culture with its emphasis on novelty, progress, and fast paced competition?

That is not to say that one should not care about the future. Rather, one understands that what is demanded in the present is to labor faithfully (including appropriate planning) and then to commend the cause to God, taking up the challenges of the next day on the morrow. One is reminded of the counsel attributed to Ignatius Loyola, “You should labor as though all depends on you, and pray as if it all depends on God.”

Chapter 16

In this chapter Lewis turns his attention to the spirit in which one worships. The use of the word “parochial” in paragraph 2, page 81 may be unclear. Lewis does not use it with the common connotation of “narrow minded” or “limited in vision.” Rather he is lifting up the traditional idea (from an earlier age when one could assume all persons in a town were part of the dominant church) of the geographical parish. To know what congregation a person worshiped at you only needed to know where he or she lived. The result, in theory, was that all persons who claimed to be Christian, whatever their race, class, economic status, or theology, were members of the same parish. From Lewis’ perspective, that was a powerful counterbalance to making the church a club. This was a powerful concept in the early church and part of what made it a social leveling force. One did not choose brothers and sisters in Christ with which one worshiped; as in a biological family, they were simply given.

Lewis sees a shopper mentality (what he calls the “congregational principle”) gaining dominance so that the believer begins to see religion as a commodity to be judged and consumed, rather than as a vision which stands above mere preferences and offers an identity beyond sociological classifications. One implication of the congregational principle is that the fundamental orientation in worship ceases to be receptivity to the subtle gifts which might be received, and becomes instead an orientation of critique. There is little doubt that Lewis’ critique of the Church of England in 1940 would be doubly applicable to the American religious scene which has historically been very congregational and rooted in the concept of free association.

Lewis also turns his attention to two failings he notes in the liberal, established church of his experience: the tendency to spend so much time in “translating” the faith into inoffensive intellectual categories that there is nothing unique to proclaim, and second, the tendency to mistake a cause for the core of the faith, or on the personal level for pastors to mistake their own ideas and prejudices for the gospel they are charged to preach. In each case what is lacking is a clear discernment of the essential from what is purely conventional, or at least negotiable. Here Lewis lifts up a theme which emerges in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession and the Formula of Concord, which is that much of religious practice is “adiaphoria,” a matter of

personal preference or corporate convention, and not essential confession.

It is fun to note in passing the jab which C.S. Lewis the English professor takes at modern poetry, “A sermon which such people could accept would be to him as insipid as a poem which they could scan (p. 83).

Chapter 17

In this chapter Lewis focuses on the vice of gluttony, with an interesting twist. Screwtape notes that we tend to think of gluttony in terms of how much one consumes; the stereotypical image of the glutton is of a grotesquely fat person eating at a great banquet (with the poor perhaps staring on in the background). Gluttony, says Lewis, consists not in how much we eat but in the fact that we are driven and commanded by our desires. The one who insists on having his or her every desire satisfied is a glutton, even if the volume consumed is small. It makes little difference to what the appetite is directed (food, drink, tobacco, music, or collecting Barbie dolls); the essential point is that one places satisfaction of that appetite above all else. Some spiritual writers even warn of “spiritual gluttony” which is the compulsive need for emotional highs in times of prayer. The glutton is above all one who places his or her interests at the center of life. In contrast, the one who has the mind of Christ constantly seeks to place the intention of God at the center. Some writers have suggested that gluttony is rooted in a lack of faith, a fear that there is not enough for all; one must jealously guard one’s interests, since no one else will.

The last section in which gluttony is described as “artillery preparation” (p.90) on chastity is insightful, given the fact that almost all sexual assault cases on university campuses involve alcohol as a contributing factor. Another way of framing the discussion is that giving vent to one’s unchecked desires in one sphere is likely to contribute to a pattern which carries over into other areas of behavior. Rape, drunkenness, and theft all have a common grounding in the assumption that I have a right have what I want, when I want it, at the expense of others—which is to say in gluttony.

Chapter 18

Lewis is unapologetically traditional on the subject of sexual morality, calling for either abstinence or monogamy. Sex, for Lewis is rooted in how one understands relationships in general. Screwtape denies the possibility of love, for him all of life is competition and predation. Sex, therefore, is about using, consuming, or absorbing another. He denies the possibility of love, understood as finding one’s own fulfillment in the good of the other.

Implicit in this chapter is Lewis’ charge that modern society has adopted a “hellish” understanding of sex which reduces sex to predation. In contrast, says Lewis, God intends for sex to be the means by which we learn and express love. But more to the point, sex has a transcendent power to create that which it promises, “one flesh.” The key point for Lewis is that we have gotten it backwards: we have come to think that the emotional sense of “being in love” is the only valid reason for sex and marriage, when in fact it is a promised by-product. Lewis goes so far as to suggest that marriage can and is valid even it does not result in a “storm of emotion.”

Chapter 19

This chapter is primarily a recapitulation of themes raised earlier. It lifts up what a scandal the concept of God’s love for humanity really is—Screwtape can not conceive of it, there must a trick! Lewis again notes that nothing in the world is in and of itself good or bad; it is all

grist for the spiritual mill. Feast or famine, weal or woe, the issue is whether we will be brought closer or pushed farther from God (p. 103). As one example Screwtape notes that sexual temptation can be used either to make one overbearingly ascetic and sour or, by playing to romantic fantasies, to create “tragic adulteries,” which result from being in love with a flawed idea of love instead of embracing the genuine article.

Chapter 20

Lewis turns his attention to the tendency of society to create physical ideals which do not exist anywhere except in fantasy. The result is that we are constantly dissatisfied with both ourselves and with those with whom we might form a fruitful, happy union. Lewis would have a field day with modern MTV, fashion, and advertising. Lewis suggests that men are haunted by two imaginary women, what he calls a “terrestrial and an infernal Venus” (other writers use a dichotomy such as Virgin/whore).

In this he draws on a long Platonic tradition of the sublime and base Venus, or Aphrodite *ourania* (heavenly) and *pandemos* (of all the people). Sublime Venus is that pure love to which Plato aspires; base Venus is the earthy, physical, sweaty, dirty love that he seeks to move past. Before Plato, the attitude toward the two expressions was quite the opposite: Aphrodite Ourania refers to her connection with Ouranos (heaven) where she was born from the castrated testicles of *Ouranos* after he was thrown from power (not a very positive image!); Aphrodite Pandemos (of all the people) is an expression that the politician and poet Solon used in Athens to describe the force that brings all people together in democratic unity (a pretty positive picture). But culturally for the West, Plato won, so heavenly Venus came to be regarded as good, and terrestrial or infernal Venus as bad.

One might wonder if Lewis makes a little too neat a separation of passion/sensuality and “higher love,” implicitly dividing that which can not properly be divided. However, Lewis’ primary point remains: A distorted understanding of the purpose of sexuality creates unhappiness as one perpetually seeks an illusory “love” which does not exist, and misuses the actual persons with whom one might find satisfaction.

Chapter 21

In this chapter Lewis takes up the proper understanding of time. He notes that we tend to regard time as our own to use as we choose, when in fact every moment is a gift entrusted to us. To regard time as our possession has two virtues from Screwtape’s perspective: First, we become petulant and resentful when we find demands being made on our time, demands which are quite appropriate if we are serious about discipleship. Second, it obscures the fact that because we have been entrusted with time by God we are obligated to use it to God’s glory; we are stewards not owners of time.

Lewis takes aim at the radically autonomous individual, the one who seeks to be free of all constraints save those he chooses for himself. The reality, says Lewis, is that we “serve somebody” (to use Bob Dylan’s words), “it may be the devil or it may be the Lord but you gotta serve somebody.” (See the wonderful closing paragraphs).

The creation narrative says God created humanity in God’s image; Lewis notes that by conflating several senses of the first person possessive pronoun, we are likely to create God in our image. We forget that God and God’s desires stand over us, and instead we begin to use God as a means to an end. “My God” ceases to mean, “the god to whom I owe my allegiance” and means, “the God I control and call upon to meet my desires.”

Chapter 22

Lewis reemphasizes that God is the source of all joys and delights. The most interesting thing in this chapter is the contrast of music and silence with Noise. Heaven is place of beauty, harmony, delight. Hell is made up of that which distracts, destroys, and prevents us from reaching harmony. One might ponder the implications of living in a culture which seems committed to engulfing its members in perpetual sound. What does it mean for community and self-awareness when vast numbers of college students spend large parts of the day walking around campus with either a cell phone or an ipod in their ears?

Chapter 23

Screwtape notes that the corruption of spirituality is in some ways more dangerous and destructive to God's intention than mere license or immorality. Then Lewis moves into a discussion of the "historical Jesus." He is noting an important theme in early 20th Century biblical scholarship which sought to move behind the Scriptures, seeking to gain a picture of Jesus before the church imposed its teachings on the narrative. Lewis is of the opinion that one can not get behind the narratives, that what we finally end up doing is simply importing an ideology and then editing based on our previous assumptions. He makes four criticisms of the "quest for the historical Jesus": 1) The historical Jesus does not exist; we are thus seeking a phantom. We can not know Jesus apart from the confession and documents which bear witness to him. All we have is the confession of the church, for good or ill. 2) Those seeking the historical Jesus place more importance on their ideology than on Jesus. 3) The quest destroys devotional life by substituting a mythical figure whose teachings we try to study for the Jesus whom we can encounter and follow. 4) It is a fallacy to believe that faith comes from an historical study of Jesus' biography. The reality is that belief comes first, and the texts later. Certainly, one has to grant the danger of separating the historic figure of Jesus who lived in time and space from the Christ which is the interpretation of that life's significance, but Lewis is perhaps a little too hard on tools that ask what filters have gone into our picture of Jesus.

The final section returns to the danger of using God as a means to an end. Lewis says that it does not work to embrace religion for secular reasons such as public order (see 127). But one might add that, beyond not working, such use of religion has historically been actively evil. Religion is easily used as means of social control, and that is one step from tyranny, Inquisition, and witch trials.

Chapter 24

Lewis makes an interesting distinction between spiritual ignorance and spiritual pride. Many people are ignorant; they assume the world is a certain way because their experience is not broad enough. They assume that their political opinions, preferences in worship, and way of reading Scripture are the "Christian" ways of seeing these things, not because of considered reflection, but because they don't have enough perspective. (It is interesting to note, however, that one of the most important realities in the American religious landscape is that people are *not* as myopic as a generation ago, and thus are less willing to stay with one expression of the faith—or any expression). Lewis says that this ignorance is not ideal, but is relatively harmless.

Spiritual pride is a more serious matter because it goes beyond ignorance to a blindness of how one is in relationship to God and others. Where ignorance is characterized by incomprehension of another way of seeing the world, pride views others with condescension, contempt, and intolerance. Most important, it has lost the awareness that grace is a gift and regards it as an accomplishment of superior breeding, insight, or religious practice (see 130-131).

Where the ignorant are perhaps a little ridiculous and deserving of pity and enlightenment, the prideful are dangerous precisely because they join ignorance to contempt—and thus become the makers of crusade and jihad. The dangerous thing from Screwtape’s perspective is that we will become aware of our pride and remember, in Augustine’s memorable phrase, that we are all “beggars at the table of grace”. Aware of our own unmerited grace we are humbly thankful for what we have received and patient with those who have not come so far (which is precisely how Lewis describes the Christian friends of Wormwood’s patient).

Chapter 25

In this chapter Lewis returns to a theme he sounded earlier, the danger of using Christianity as an add-on to an ideology or conviction which is more dearly held than the faith. “Merely” as Lewis uses it here (and in *Mere Christianity*) means “basic” or “essential” or “core”. Lewis is keenly afraid that the Christian faith may be temporarily embraced, not because it is true, but because it is regarded as politically, socially, or intellectually advantageous. The danger, as he notes in this chapter, is that fashions change, and if we have embraced Christian faith as part of a fashion, we are likely to not hold fast when fashions change.

Lewis notes that humans need both permanence and change. It is his judgment that we are in greater danger of losing a sense of permanence than of becoming too intellectually stagnant. Lewis says that we are prone, in search of appropriate change, to opt for an addiction to novelty. Stated negatively, we have a “horror of the Same Old Thing.” This leads us into a downward spiral because, by definition, novelty demands something new every day and, thus addicted, we then find it impossible to take satisfaction in what is familiar.

This leads us to value “fashion or vogues” over what is substantive. On page 138 Lewis lays out the theological equivalent of the oft quoted dictum that military generals are always fighting the last war. Because fashions change faster than our ability to understand the change, we are likely to be responding to a danger that is less than the one we actually face. Think, for example, of how emotionally cold Lutherans are often terrified of honest expressions of devotion in worship, and theologically anemic Pentecostals may resist asking hard, intellectual questions.

Lewis is constantly reminding us that the important questions do not concern where an idea came from, whether it is fashionable, or if it is new. The most important questions ask whether something is true, life giving, healing, righteous, prudent, and righteous. The task of the Christian is not so much to respond to fashions as to be faithful and let fashions come and go.

That being said, one must also say that there is a very real danger of loving stability so much that one refuses to recognize when the world has indeed changed. One can not be driven by fashion at the deepest level, but fashions are a reality in the world. The obvious place where this arises in the average congregation is in worship. Nobody wants to trade substantive for trendy—but neither does faithfulness call us to speak in language and forms that do not communicate to our intended mission field.

Chapter 26

Here Lewis distinguishes between what he calls “unselfishness” and “charity.” In truth what he calls unselfishness in this chapter is actually a false unselfishness, a pretense that in actuality is resentful at not getting its way. Lewis believes that trying to mandate unselfishness is a doomed proposition because emotional fires cool and we tire of pretending we don’t want what we want. Much better, says Lewis, for us to be up front about our desires, then we are spared the games of pretending we don’t want what we want—and then feeling resentful when the other does not give it to us. We can not always have what we want, but honest expression allows

us to at least see the options cleanly and allows the conflict to be dealt with “within the bounds of reason and courtesy” (p.144).

Implicit, but not very clearly stated, is the idea that genuine “charity” or “love” does not have to be mandated, because as we grow into the image of Christ we genuinely do desire the best for the other; there are fewer things that we feel we must contend for, and those things are the ones for which our Lord would contend: justice, mercy, compassion.

Lewis suggests that unselfishness as a tactic is destructive of human community because it is finally a dishonest way of attempting to attain our goals. Love is not supposed to be a tactic, but rather a transformed way of being in the world. False unselfishness produces bitter martyrs who never tire of telling how much they are sacrificing; charity produces servants whose only desire is to serve as Christ would serve.

By the by, it would be interesting to poll a group studying this book and see if they find Lewis’ characterization of men and women’s ideas of unselfishness valid some 60 years after he wrote them. How does recent research into the different ways that women and men experience the world, both biologically and based on acculturation, affect how we read Lewis’ words on gender differences.

Chapter 27

Lewis turns to discussion of prayer in this chapter. He notes that we often fail to recognize that difficulty in concentrating in prayer may well be the thing which we most need to lift up in prayer. We should not try to muscle our way through distractions, but rather offer them up to God as our greatest need at that moment. Doing this, the result is that we are honest before God (always good) and made even more aware of our need for grace (which is finally all that matters).

Lewis takes a swipe at a spirituality that thinks only pure adoration is the ultimate expression of prayer (an attitude one often finds in mystics). There is nothing ignoble, says Lewis, about petitionary prayer, indeed it is explicitly enjoined by God. Such prayer, however it “works”, reminds the one praying that he or she is dependent upon God for what is needful. We can easily find ourselves dismissing answered prayers as something that would have happened anyway, while seeing unanswered prayers as proof positive that prayer is all bunk (“heads I win, tails you lose, p. 148).

Lewis spends a long time in discussing how God and humanity experience time. The thrust of the argument is that God does not experience time in a linear fashion, but as a totality, so it is impossible to think in terms of the cause/effect relationship which usually characterizes discussions of whether prayer “works.” God desires to make room for human petition and action as one variable in the matrix; “why” is the great question, not “how.”

Perhaps the most important part of this chapter is Lewis’ attack on the Historical Point of View, which others might call the school of Historicism. Lewis’ asserts that Historicism does not ask the fundamental question “Is it true?” Instead it asks questions of philosophical pedigree and implications, assuming that if one knows what influences a writer/thinker experienced, one has “explained” his thought. The implicit idea is that “new” ideas are better than old ones, that ideas are like technology, the new displacing the old. Lewis finds this idea of inevitable intellectual progress absurd. He believes this makes for intellectual games which fail to join the only question that is important: Is it true? The debate becomes more important than settling the question. Lewis would not deny the need for intellectual humility in asserting an answer; what he objects to is the assumption that there is no answer.

Chapter 28

Lewis makes a fairly simple point. It is hard for humans to persevere in anything, whether it be weight loss or prayer. For that reason, Screwtape does not see early death as the evil humans do. Rather he notes how fertile the Middle-Aged years are for undermining faith: the bloom is off the rose, emotions and energy are reduced, and one has been running the race a long time. “All this provides ample opportunity for wearing the soul down by attrition (p. 155).”

Conversely, if the later years are ones of leisure and ease, it is easy for humans to become fat and complacent, wedded to the world, rather than focused on what God is trying to make of them.

Lewis notes that youth may be times of “sin” when “they are always shooting off at tangents”, but the danger of later years is that we become jaded and so focused on the disappointments of the world that we cease to strive toward our heavenly home, and settle simply for striving to make heaven on earth.

Chapter 29

Lewis notes again that failure and cowardice are in and of themselves harmless. The point is whether such experiences lead us to trust God more or less. From Lewis’ perspective the task is to learn to trust God, come what may. Courage is “the form of every virtue at its testing point (161).” How does one have courage at crunch time? Finally, it is in finding something outside the world in which we can trust. Also interesting is Lewis’ insight that we tend to hate in direct proportion to our fear; as we trust we will also hate less. The writer of I John 4 offers a similar insight; embracing love we will find ourselves fearing less. Hate, fear, love, trust—all related.

Chapter 30

Notice how Screwtape suggests Hell is a place where only results count (165). Yet this is just the sort of thinking one often hears in a competitive society; the logical implication being that what we often think of as “realistic” and admirable is hellish.

Lewis distinguishes between “false hope” which is actually a desire that may or may not be fulfilled and, by implication, true hope which is rooted in confidence in God and committed to enduring whatever may come.

Lewis next turns to the different meanings we give to “real”. As he notes, real can either mean the bare facts or the emotional interpretation or we put on them. We are likely in times of crisis to assume the physical facts are the reality and be tempted to dismiss hopes, while at the same time regarding the good we receive as merely “subjective” creations.

Chapter 31

Lewis offers a beautiful “bird’s eye view” of the death experience which includes some important images:

Death is a moment of release –“as if a scab had fallen from an old wound.”

Death is a relative thing—Rather than horrible, Screwtape notes that the violent death experienced by Wormword’s patient was actually an easy experience because it spared the Christian lingering struggle. (172).

Death is a moment of clarity after a time of struggle—All that seemed too difficult to understand is suddenly easily comprehended. Illusions are unmasked and both devil and angels are seen for what they are (173). There is a sense of both coming home and arriving for the first time; as Augustine noted, we are made for God and restless until we find our rest there.

Death is a moment of reunion with the incredible love which gave us life and nurtured us

into maturity along the way (174).

Yet interestingly enough, Lewis seems to suggest some form of “purgatory” where one must still encounter pain (of purification?), but this is a pain which one encounters with the full awareness that one is loved and accepted, the end is assured and wonderful. Though purgatory has historically been a minority concept in Protestant thinking, Lewis here, and even more clearly in *The Great Divorce*, articulates the concept.

Lewis ends with one final assertion of just how inexplicable such love is to Screwtape and all who distrust the possibility of grace. For such people the law of hell reigns, “Bring us back food or be food yourself (165). God does not have to consign those persons to hell; they simply choose it, make it, and inhabit it daily.

Screwtape Proposes a Toast

As noted in the editor’s preface, this essay is very different from the rest of the letters; they focus on corruption of the individual, this is much more concerned with the broader intellectual climate which, in Lewis’ opinion, is undercutting society. A recurring theme is the observation that the evil of modern society has less of the passion, verve, and brash Promethean courage of former days. The modern world is one of tawdry, insipid, passive vice-less chosen than fallen into by lack of intelligence or imagination. This is the point in Screwtape’s critique of the banquet’s courses.

But if the quality of sin is lacking, Screwtape says the quantity has never been better, which is to say few and fewer persons are being drawn into a serious encounter with God’s purposes. Modern humanity, says Lewis, is characterized by being “muddled in mind”, “smallness and flabbiness”, and a tendency to be carried along by mindless repetitions. “Their consciousness hardly exists apart from the social atmosphere that surrounds them (191).

The bulk of the essay is a laceration of what Lewis sees as the moral flabbiness and intellectual weakness of a democratic mindset which denies the need for excellence and the recognition of differences between people. Society has made an ideology of “democracy”, by muddled thinking mistaking a political commitment to equal opportunity for a belief that all must be the same and that those who excel must be cut down. This, says Lewis, is finally rooted in Envy; that which was once deplored or laughed at is now sanctioned by the false statement, “I’m as good as you.”

Lewis believes this attitude finally strives to eliminate all forms of human excellence (201). He takes education as his primary example of how such leveling occurs in society, destroying the excellence that breeds both great leaders and great tyrants (206). The problem is that this means the evil have greater power because the rest of society is less able to discern and respond to the danger. A second danger in embracing this false egalitarianism (I’m as good as you) is that individuals lack humility, charity, contentment, gratitude, and the other virtues which might lead them to heaven (208).

The essay ends with a cautionary description of a fine wine made out of the distilled essence of Pharisee, a reminder that self-righteousness is always the stuff on which Hell feasts...One might wonder whether this is a backhanded acknowledgment by Lewis that he is sounding pretty self-righteous himself. There is a hard edge and nastiness to this essay that is not nearly so pronounced in the *Screwtape Letters*. Lewis sounds every bit the conservative don he was, but that does not mean he is wrong in warning of moral and intellectual flabbiness.