

THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS

by C. S. LEWIS

Letter # 2 (for November 23)

MY DEAR WORMWOOD,

(1) I note with grave displeasure that your patient has become a Christian. Do not indulge the hope that you will escape the usual penalties; indeed, in your better moments, I trust you would hardly even wish to do so. In the meantime we must make the best of the situation. There is no need to despair; hundreds of these adult converts have been reclaimed after a brief sojourn in the Enemy's camp and are now with us. All the *habits* of the patient, both mental and bodily, are still in our favor.

(2) One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread but through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is the half-finished, sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks around him he sees just that selection of his neighbors whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbors. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like "the body of Christ" and the actual faces in the next pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on the Enemy's side. No matter. Your patient, thanks to Our Father below, is a fool. Provided that any of those neighbors sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous. At his present stage, you see, he has an idea of "Christians" in his mind which he supposes to be spiritual but which, in fact, is largely pictorial. His mind is full of togas and sandals and armor and bare legs and the mere fact that the other people in church wear modern clothes is a real—though of course an unconscious—difficulty to him. Never let it come to the surface; never let him ask what he expected them to look like. Keep everything hazy in his mind now, and you will have all eternity wherein to amuse yourself by producing in him the peculiar kind of clarity which Hell affords.

(3) Work hard, then, on the disappointment or anticlimax which is certainly coming to the patient during his first few weeks as a churchman. The Enemy allows this disappointment to occur on the threshold of every human endeavor. It occurs when the boy who has been enchanted in the nursery by *Stories from the Odyssey* buckles down to really learning Greek. It occurs when lovers have got married and begin the real task of learning to live together. In every department of life it marks the transition from dreaming aspiration to laborious doing. The Enemy takes this risk because He has a curious fantasy of making all these disgusting little human vermin into what He calls His "free" lovers and servants—"sons" is the word He uses, with His inveterate love of degrading the whole spiritual world by unnatural liaisons with the two-legged animals. Desiring their freedom, He therefore refuses to carry them, by their mere affections and habits, to any of the goals which He sets before them: He leaves them to "do it on their own". And there lies our opportunity. But also,

remember, there lies our danger. If once they get through this initial dryness successfully, they become much less dependent on emotion and therefore much harder to tempt.

(4) I have been writing hitherto on the assumption that the people in the next pew afford no *rational* ground for disappointment. Of course if they do—if the patient knows that the woman with the absurd hat is a fanatical bridge-player or the man with squeaky boots a miser and an extortioner—then your task is so much the easier. All you then have to do is to keep out of his mind the question “If I, being what I am, can consider that I am in some sense a Christian, why should the different vices of those people in the next pew prove that their religion is mere hypocrisy and convention?” You may ask whether it is possible to keep such an obvious thought from occurring even to a human mind. It is, Wormwood, it is! Handle him properly and it simply won’t come into his head. He has not been anything like long enough with the Enemy to have any real humility yet. What he says, even on his knees, about his own sinfulness is all parrot talk. At bottom, he still believes he has run up a very favorable credit-balance in the Enemy’s ledger by allowing himself to be converted, and thinks that he is showing great humility and condescension in going to church with these “smug”, commonplace neighbors at all. Keep him in that state of mind as long as you can.

Your affectionate uncle

SCREWTAPE

Analysis Questions

1. In paragraph 1, Screwtape mentions that many *converts* have been reclaimed after sojourning in the Enemy’s camp. How does this belief match with John 10:28-30; 1 Peter 1:5; Romans 8:31-39; John 17:12; John 6:37?
2. In paragraph 1, why does Screwtape get excited about the lingering *habits* of the patient even after conversion? How does this compare with 2 Cor 5:17; Rom 7:1-25?
3. In paragraph 2, the “church itself” is mentioned as being an ally to diabolical cause of Screwtape. In what sense is this true? Do you agree or disagree?
4. How important do you think specific expressions of the church are (e.g. denominations; forms and styles of worship, etc.)? When can such things become barriers, rather than aids, to worshiping and serving God?
5. At the end of paragraph 2, why does Screwtape encourage Wormwood to keep his patient’s mind hazy in relation to what he expected church people to look like? How does this trip us up today when we get disillusioned by our expectations? How do we personally let Satan take advantage of our misconceptions of what Christians should be?
6. In paragraph 3 what “anticlimax” does Screwtape expect the patient will experience? According to him, why does God allow Christians to go through such experiences? Have you faced these experiences in your own spiritual life? What has resulted?
7. At the end of paragraph 3, what role does the initial dryness period and emotion play in our susceptibility to temptation?
8. In paragraph 4, Screwtape claims that Wormwood’s patient is not fully convinced of his own sinfulness. Comparing Genesis 6:5; Psalm 14:1-3; Jeremiah 9:23-24; 17:9; Luke 18:9-14; Rom 3:10-28; Eph 2:1-10; 1 John 1:5-10; How do these passage speak to the issues of (1) our ability to know fully the extent of our sin; (2) the meaning of true humility; and (3) whether or not we can, as Screwtape puts it, “run up a very favorable credit balance” with God? Do you have genuine, biblical sense of humility?