

Human weakness in the screwtape letters



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Throughout history there have been no shortages of western Christian writers. In a field so competitive, only those who have created work that is theologically influential are remembered by the masses. Martin Luther is remembered for crafting the 95 theses, a simple list of demands that sparked a divide between Protestantism and Catholicism. Dante Alighieri is remembered for producing *The Divine Comedy*, a literary work that, while not necessarily theologically accurate, was so original and influential that over 700 years later it is still being studied. C. S. Lewis, not one to be outdone by history, wrote *The Screwtape Letters*, a work so rich in theological content and so refreshingly original that to call it a classic would be a disservice; it deserves a far greater title. By portraying the devil's perspective on humanity, Lewis was able to provide criticisms on the Church, Christianity, and the culture that became so influential in modern day theology. The writing of this novel was executed in epistolary form, a compositional risk that gave the work originality. The content of the book is also original, centering around a correspondence between two demons, Screwtape and his nephew Wormwood. Amidst this originality, Lewis brings one very original perspective to light: Lewis's own insight into the weakness of man. Through exploration of several human urges such as sex, gluttony, and fear, Lewis exposes the raw weaknesses of mankind while also including how these urges can be overcome through virtue and faith.

Screwtape advises Wormwood to utilize sex to draw the man away from God by preying upon his natural urges and suppressing his other tendencies. The question of the virtues of sex is often a confusing matter for those involved in the church because of the seemingly backwards logic that discourages the

act. Sex is, after all, the reason humans are able to reproduce, so demonizing the act would be demonizing a human urge. On the other hand, sex in almost every major religion is discouraged unless the party is in a committed monogamous relationship, leaving many confused on how to approach this topic. Lewis, through *Screwtape*, is able to voice his own opinion on the matter, championing the idea that sex was meant for only monogamous committed relationships. This idea is not an original one; it lines up well with the official position of the Church. However, Lewis provides a logical explanation for his belief, allowing for him to appeal to both the theist and the atheist alike.

Screwtape makes it clear that sex in itself is not a bad thing, he even goes to lengths to describe how he hates the fact that humans glean “ pleasure from this action” (Lewis 102). However, he points out that by changing the nature of sex, one can utilize sex to draw man away from God. *Screwtape* advises that sex be indulged when man is at his least energetic state; this paradoxical suggestion is explained in a later quote. *Screwtape* explains that “ The attack has a much better chance of success when the man’s whole inner world is drab and cold and empty. And it is also to be noted that the trough sexuality is subtly different in quality from that of the peak—much less likely to lead to the milk and water phenomenon which the humans call ‘ being in love’” (Lewis 43). The goal of this attack is to construe sex as a remedy for pain instead of an act of love—in essence, to corrupt the original meaning. Lewis makes note not to demonize sex, since he continually understands it as the physical manifestation of the metaphysical idea of

love. He does, however, warn of losing the meaning of sex, leading to the sin which man might commit.

Lewis does not take such liberties to approve of sex before marriage or sex with multiple partners; he even has Screwtape talk of the normalization of casual sex as a great victory, saying "...By persuading the humans that a curious, and usually short-lived, experience which they call 'being in love' is the only respectable ground for marriage;...a marriage which does not do so is no longer binding" (Lewis 93). The phenomenon which Screwtape refers to as 'being in love' is implied to be the thrill of casual sex or sexual experiences with multiple people, yielding a fleeting feeling that fails to hold up in the long run. At the same time, Lewis makes sure not to demonize sex, continually speaking of how it is a pleasurable act created by God and explaining that the sin lies not within sex but rather with how it draws man into a dangerous, self-medicating path. By exploiting man's natural urge for sex, Lewis exposes a weakness in man, the temptation of sex and how it can be spun to lead man down a negative path.

While Lewis's remarks on sex were original, attacking sex as a sin is a common motif in theological writing. Ironically enough, casual sex was never mentioned as one of the seven deadly sins (while gluttony was), yet church doctrine opposes sex far more than it opposes gluttony. Lewis, in seeing the opportunity, spearheaded a movement of temperance in *The Screwtape Letters*, arguing of the evils of gluttony and the expansive nature of gluttony. The first of these is the often-remembered version of gluttony, dubbed by Screwtape the "Gluttony of Excess" (Lewis 87). An extension of this gluttony, commonly known as materialism, is first utilized by Wormwood

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himself in the beginning of the novel. Wormwood attempts to keep his man entrenched in materialism in an attempt to keep him away from God (Lewis 1). Materialism is an issue found in both the spiritual and secular world, with many writers driving home the themes of remembering what truly matters and realizing that possessions are worthless. Lewis, however, points out that to indulge in materialism is to indulge in one of the seven deadliest sins.

Gluttony of excess is the best known type of gluttony, but is hardly the only type. Screwtape tells of a separate gluttony which he advises Wormwood to utilize. This “gluttony of delicacy” is then mentioned as being more potent than gluttony of excess due to its deceptive nature. Screwtape offers an anecdote in which a woman who does not eat or drink in excess is still a slave to gluttony, as she is so particular with her food that she refuses to eat except when it is prepared in the manner she requests (Lewis 87). This type of gluttony is extremely difficult to identify because it is often found when one attempts to go against the gluttony of excess. Screwtape points out that the woman would certainly be found in shock once she realized that the sin she took so many pains (as well as pained others) to avoid was actually being indulged during these attempts (Lewis 88). While at times it may be questionable to the reader as to whether or not this “gluttony” truly constitutes as a sin, Screwtape continues to laud the effort because of its difficulty to detect. As he explains, “The real value of the quiet, unobtrusive work which [the demon] has been doing for years on this old woman can be gauged by the way in which her belly now dominates her whole life. This woman is in what may be called the ‘All-I-want’ state of mind. All she wants is a cup of tea properly made or an egg properly boiled, or a slice of bread

properly toasted. But she never finds any servant or any friend who can do these simple things ' properly'-because her ' properly' conceals an insatiable demand for the exact, and almost impossible, palatal pleasures which she imagines she remembers from the past" (Lewis 88). Through these two paradoxical versions of gluttony, Lewis points out that this is not a weakness man can easily avoid. It can be exploited in almost every form imaginable.

Yet while gluttony does seem to be difficult to avoid, Lewis then points out a weakness that is truly unavoidable. Fear is brought up several times in the novel as a weapon to draw man away from God. Unlike the other two vices, which are specifically addressed in certain letters, fear is present throughout the entire novel because of its versatility. The old adage " there's nothing to fear but fear itself" rings true here; the actual fear does not cause the sin, but the fear of confronting the various fears mentioned causes man to get wrapped up in sin. The first example comes from the fear of the unknown, specifically when discussing the fear of the unknown in regards to the sciences. Many people studying in the sciences would affirm that there is a vast amount of information that science cannot explain yet. Because of this reality, Screwtape advises a discouragement of deep studies of the sciences, claiming " they will positively encourage [a man] to think about realities he can't touch or see" (Lewis 4). Should the patient study sciences such as biology or physics in great detail, he would affirm the vast amount of knowledge that he does not know and will not know in his lifetime. This would shatter the illusion that the sciences could explain everything, forcing man to confront the fear of the unknown and possibly putting him in a situation where he would accept that some things are beyond mortal

knowledge, making man receptive to God. This in itself spawns a new argument in which science is not utilized to disprove God, but rather is affirmed by faith. This is a relatively new argument, one still not completely accepted by some theologians, but was revolutionary for Lewis's time. Screwtape's advisement to Wormwood reminds the second devil that learning too much science would counter their goals; instead, they must keep the patient with only a surface-level understanding. In this way, the fear of the unknown can be manipulated into keeping man from God.

More examples of the manipulation of fear can be found throughout the novel. Screwtape advises Wormwood to utilize the fear of judgement several times in order to lead his patient astray. Early on when the patient converts to Christianity, Wormwood is told to take advantage of man's natural fear of judgment by exploiting the judgment of Christians (Lewis 10). By fearing the way the people would react to him joining the church, the patient would be put off and would potentially not join the church, rather than facing his fear. While facing the fear would allow the man to shatter this fear quite easily, the path of least resistance would be to not attend the church at all and to continue to care about facing the fear. Fear of judgment again appears when the patient encounters friends that lived against his customs, such as drinking in excess: indeed, fear of judgment from them for not taking part in these customs and fear of judgment from them should he reject them as friends eventually caused the patient to break his customs and live as they did (Lewis 105). By breaking his customs, the patient did not need to face his fear of the judgment of his friends. Finally, fear of judgment from God himself is used, as the patient would not feel worthy in his presence after

living in his sinful manner. Rather than atone for his sins and face his fear, the patient would rather distract himself by not atoning for his sins and slowly leaving God (Lewis 107). In all of these examples, the reaction to the fear of judgment is a means of making man leave God, with the fear itself not being an issue. In fact, the fear could act as a catalyst to further propel the patient towards God, but the fear of the fear of judgment causes the patient to fall in line with the devil's plan.

While Lewis did expose the many weaknesses of mankind and how they could be exploited to draw man away from God, he also provides a relatively simple solution to circumvent the weaknesses prevalent in humanity. Screwtape would express frustration and anger with Wormwood whenever his patient would partake in virtue and deepened faith in God, as these measures would cause him to overcome his weaknesses. The love that the patient felt for God was mirrored in the love he felt for his eventual wife: the two were able to get married and avoid sexual temptation. When the patient began congregating with other believers and his wife, he was able to hold his own emotions in moderation enough to stave off bouts of gluttony. And with God, not fear, as the focus of the patient's life, the patient was able to overcome the various different types of fear Wormwood attempted to exploit.

Lewis, in writing *The Screwtape Letters*, attempted to go where perhaps only two other authors (Alighieri and Milton) went before in explaining the demon world to man. At the same time, he attempted to author a profound theological work, one that would become influential to modern day Christianity. Such an undertaking was ambitious, to say the least. In his <https://assignbuster.com/human-weakness-in-the-screwtape-letters/>

attempt to author a theologically sound work, Lewis exposed several key weaknesses of man, discussing human susceptibility to sex, gluttony, and fear, as well as how to conquer these influences through virtue and faith.

Work(s) Cited

Lewis, C. S. *The Screwtape Letters*. S. I.: Bles, 1961. Print.