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Letters in Hell

Charles Williams

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Letters in Hell

Abstract

Lewis, C.S. *The Screwtape Letters*

LETTERS IN HELL by Charles Williams



A REVIEW OF THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS BY C. S. LEWIS

My dearest Scorpuscule,

I have eagerly swallowed your suggestion; let us have an Official Investigation. The idea is delicious. I sometimes think we have too little formality through all the ten kingdoms of hell; we are too impatient to enjoy delay. But an Official Investigation offers such an exquisite development of injustice that it has to be prolonged. And the slowly eviscerated victims...

Of the publication of these letters I take the most serious view. Letters from devil to devil are not meant for earth. Screwtape himself is a hungry and wily old centipede of a fiend. I gather that the recipient of the letters, Wormwood, was his nephew — so to call it; one of those ancient affairs with Screwtape lusting after himself as a succubus, I believe, but the fashion has passed here, though (largely by our perversion of the human's love-affairs) we have kept such spiritual self-indulgence going on earth. You know it is one of the painful necessities of Hell that we are compelled by Our Father Below to do what we can for the common good (which means his good — O his venom, Scorpuscule, his venom!), much as we hate it. So Screwtape was forced to give Wormwood the best advice he could on the temptations adequate to an ordinary human soul.

He has done it very well — too well. How the human whom Wormwood was tempting escaped us, I cannot think. I took the trouble to devitalize myself so as to read them with as near a human brain as I could, and I am alarmed. If many of the wretches read them, we must be prepared for a serious increase in virtue. They give everything away. In defining our attack Screwtape has had to define man's defense. I hope the usual measures have been taken to cause the letters to be admired on earth for their wit, their psychology, their invention; and then the routine suggestion promulgated that the book should then be put right away by readers on a shelf with any other writings by Lewis — whoever Lewis is. He is called 'Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford.' This I can hardly believe. The Oxford I knew could have been enough tempted by the contemptible Wormwood even without advice. If Oxford is turning virtuous... We must certainly discover how these letters got out. Do not ever let them be re-read.

As you know, my own duties have not been primarily concerned with Earth, and I have learnt a good deal from this perusal. Screwtape is really very clever. I am inclined to feel that the best counterirritant to their publication would be to make the infernal text a primer in our own Training College. Screwtape talks of it; I don't know it, but it must need new death breathed into it. I did wonder if you and I could make it seem that Screwtape had been getting hold of our ideas; Wormwood would say

anything to get away from his present everlasting perishing under his uncle's claws. Let us feel about it.

Among the topics that alarm me most in Screwtape's grasp of the (to devils like us) hostile nature of pleasure. Our Enemy, he up there, "has made the pleasures; all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one." If the humans once realize that, sooner or later, all virtue is ordered delight, our cause is in serious danger. Similarly, his comment on the value we have given to the word Puritanism. It "is one of the really solid triumphs of the last hundred years. By it we rescue annually thousands of humans from temperance, chastity, and sobriety of life." Infernally true, but they must not know it. We may certainly hope to do a good deal (by an opposite trick) with the word Humanism, but we ought to be able to make play with both. Thus chastity is Puritan but fornication is humane — and so on. Screwtape, I see, admired the Philological Arm for managing to substitute our negative Unselfishness for the Enemy's positive Charity. I will cause that Arm to examine the book.

The pages on humility are also very bad reading for us — though I should like to know if this unspeakable louse Lewis enjoys other people's writings as much as he does his own (I see he has written books himself, as well as stealing ours). This projected notion of our Enemy's that man must not think too much about himself is the kind of outworn imbecility that has received new energy from what Screwtape properly calls "that discreditable episode known as the Incarnation." Discreditable indeed — a low trick — an abominable unfair breach of the laws of spiritual warfare. And why can't we do it? Why, Scorpuscule, can't we get into their flesh? Not that one wants to; the vision revolts me; but it would be our duty. I should undertake it reluctantly, but I would undertake it. There — the lowest, the nastiest, the hatefulest gate into man's nature, and we cannot even find it! Yet he, he up there, did it. Our Father Below is said himself to have tried it once or twice, but it is the one thing he never speaks of — when he does speak; coherently, I mean, of course; his breathless whispers go on all the time, drawing us in, drawing us...

I am giddy. I will not now write more. It is a dangerous book, heavenly-dangerous. I hate it, this give-away of hell; so do you — don't you? Don't you? Or don't you? Are you a traitor to Hell? No, no, of course you aren't, curse you. It is this giddiness; you know what the steak of the abyss does; it makes one feel terror everywhere. I must get away — only in Hell one cannot get away.

Your sincere friend,
SNIGSNOZZLE

P.S. — You will send someone, some very tactful devils — to see after Lewis?

In terra tenebrosa, die incognita.

MLL