

A SCREWTAPE LETTER

1999

What a Senior Devil Might Think about Religion and Politics

IN 1942 the Christian writer and Oxford don C. S. Lewis wrote one of his most influential books, *The Screwtape Letters*, in which a senior devil, Screwtape, instructs a junior devil, Wormwood, in the art of temptation. Lewis's intent was to illuminate matters having to do with faith, life, and human folly by writing about the Christian faith from the perspective of the Devil (thus God is spoken of as "the Enemy"). This essay contemplates what both Professor Lewis and Screwtape might say about religion and politics in our time.

BY PETER WEHNER

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MY DEAR WORMWOOD,

I AM RECRUITING YOU to do our work in a target-rich environment: politics. It is true that the Enemy has sometimes used politics to advance what He foolishly cares about—things like “justice” and “human dignity,” “righteousness” and “mercy.” But the good news for us is that being actively involved in politics without being seduced by it can be difficult—and human folly and egoism strongly work in our favor. As long as your patients remain oblivious to the snares of worldliness, they become unwitting instruments in our cause.

As you surely know by now, one of the best ways to undermine Christian faith and good works is to act insidiously. Avoid a direct assault on faith; it gives the Enemy’s followers time to prepare for the assault and respond. If we succeed in directly planting doubt in the mind of believers, they often go to their knees in prayer, humbly asking the Enemy for strength. When that happens we have lost them. A better strategy is to cloud reality. Keep Christians from realizing what is involved. We want them to think they’re doing the work of the Enemy while they are in fact advancing *our* ends. This approach is much more effective—and much more amusing to watch.

The following methods are ones I have found to be particularly useful.



1. Rely on omissions, distortions, and outright lies.

These are among the sharpest arrows in our quiver. The key is to disfigure the original meaning and context of the Enemy’s play book (they refer to it as the “Bible”). Here are some historical facts that you must continually obscure. First, Christ (the son of the Enemy) and His disciples were profoundly mistrustful of power, and His earthly ministry was directed against the pretensions of earthly power. He came to the world as a lowly servant and never became a political leader. In worldly terms, His disciples had no status or influence, and neither Christ nor His disciples led a political movement of any kind. Indeed, their most sacred symbol, the cross, is an emblem of agony and humiliation that is the antithesis of worldly power and victory. From our perspective it is just as well for Christians to acknowledge these things without taking them seriously. Let them pay lip service, for nominal faith is as good as no faith at all. Your task is to so thoroughly twist your patients’ understanding of Christ’s kingdom that they actually come to believe that by forming coalitions, networking among the politically powerful, writing laws to advance His “social agenda,” and securing “a place at the table,” they are following in His footsteps.



2. Promote ugly division among believers. One reason why politics is such rich ground for us is that it breeds acrimonious debate among followers of the Enemy. As you know by now, politics often inflames human emotions like anger, bitterness, resentment. What could be better for our cause than getting followers of the Enemy on different sides of an issue? What great fun it is to watch them spit venom! Can you imagine my joy when one prominent religious-political figure—he even has the title “Reverend”—accused fellow believers with whom he has political disagreements of being a strong force in Nazi Germany! We must always discourage reasoned and civil debate since it can eventually be turned against us and become an instrument for ascertaining “truth.” What we are after is argument by invective (preferably accompanied by sloppy reasoning).

Christians will deny it, of course, but behind closed doors and in the privacy of their own political offices, on telephone lines, and in “off the record” comments, these “brothers” in the faith will savage one another. Sometimes they do it even when they’re on the same side of an issue! These clanging cymbals not only make for great fun—they do our work for us. Their hypocrisy makes the “unbelievers” whom the Enemy is trying to win over wary and cynical. So long as political passions undermine such contemptible “virtues” as love, humility, forgiveness, forbearance, kindness, and mercy, we have accomplished our goals.



3. Take advantage of the messianic illusion. What you want Christians to believe is that their work is absolutely necessary if the Enemy is to accomplish His goals on earth. Make them think they are indispensable. Do you see why this is so important? Because if Christians believe everything depends on them, they will develop an aggressive, anxious, even desperate spirit. They will show little grace toward others. They will begin to believe that only they and a few of their kind are strong enough to resist “compromise.” And they will disdain fellow believers who do not share their zeal for their cause. The most delicious quarry are those Christians who believe that at stake in their work is nothing less than the influence of Christianity in America. They actually believe Christ depends on them instead of the other way around—which is the surest road to vainglory.



4. Rely on worldliness. Although the Christian church has often thrived under persecution, it has been corrupted virtually every time it seizes power or becomes closely aligned with power. The reason, of course, is that more often than not Christians in positions of worldly authority don't transform the world; they are conformed to it. You would think that by now this would be widely understood. Thankfully, it isn't. Here, then, is the dirty little secret we must keep confidential, lest the followers of the Enemy learn from it: religious leaders are easily seduced by political power. Allow these shameless namedroppers access to worldly power and they make sure *everybody* knows about it. For all their rants against worldliness, they are like children with their faces pressed against a toy store window, longing to get in. That's their Achilles heel.

One particularly troublesome Christian once wrote that he was a proud member of a political movement. He rationalized that surely the Enemy must approve what he was doing since he was (in this instance) opposing an unjust war. Except that the political movement, whatever its ideals, did a good deal of *hating*. Christ became subordinate to movement goals. That is exactly what we want to see happen. So we must continue to press the point that religion ought to be an instrument of political ideology. A means to an end. If we succeed in getting Christian witness sacrificed at the altar of politics, we win—regardless of the merits of the particular political issue. I'm willing to lose a vote on H.R. 666 to win souls.



5. Lack of theological integrity. Many Christians explain their involvement in politics as a way to advance the Enemy's agenda in the public arena, and they begin with good intentions. How should we respond? Our goal is to get them to bend the Bible to conform to their political predispositions, so that their political agenda (pursued in the name of Christ) has little or no relation to what He says. I call it cafeteria-style theology, in which His followers arbitrarily pick and choose the issues they care about. As you'll see, this works wonders.

Let me give you a specific example. The Enemy's "New Testament" play book says a staggering amount about riches, more than about almost any other subject. What is said is almost always in the nature of a warning. The reason, of course, is that the Enemy knows the damage we can do to His followers through riches: the danger they pose to one's soul, the pull of worldliness, the corruption of affections. What I most detest, and what I most fear, are earnest followers who take the Enemy's words to heart, who meditate on them, and worst of all, who act on them. Those people are a lost cause.

But don't despair. There are plenty of others. For them, our aim is to obscure the real appeal of their faith—its absolute otherness. We must patiently erase the realization that the Enemy has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the strong; that His power is made perfect in weakness; that they must die to live; that the meek and not the strong shall inherit the earth; that they are called to be servants and not masters;

and that they are called to love and not hate their enemies.

How do we avert their attention from warnings the Enemy has put in bright neon light? Remind them of the weight of the Enemy's demands. Whisper in their ear that these precepts should not be taken literally. Have them strive for "relevance" instead of faithfulness. Encourage them to reinterpret the words of Christ. Once you've done all that you can, watch while those who insist that the words of Christ ought to be a guide to political action become silent on issues of such obvious concern to Him, and speak out on issues He cares little or nothing about. It's bad for them, and it's bad for their witness. But it's good, very good, for us.



Close by reminding you of a crucial distinction. Getting followers of the Enemy involved in politics is not enough; it can even rebound to His glory (I am thinking here of contemptible figures like William Wilberforce and his efforts to end British slave trade). No, what we have to do is coax them into a cul-de-sac of human ego, blind hubris, love of power. Once they become involved in politics, we want to corrupt them—but it is best to do it a little at a time. Do I need to explain why patience will be rewarded? Surely you are familiar with the "frog's dilemma." If you drop a frog in boiling water it will jump out, but if you heat the water slowly, the frog will adjust and accommodate itself to the new temperature—until it finally burns to death. We want to turn up the temperature of political activism slowly but steadily. Surely you have learned enough by now to agree with me that the best sport is to take a bad thing (carefully thinking through the social implications of faith) and turn it into a good thing (political idolatry).

Finally, to anticipate the Enemy's strategy, we must consider His aims. What He cares about are all those things for which we have utter contempt: good works, purity of heart, a joyful spirit, grace, the habit of obedience even during moments of doubt, winning converts by practical demonstrations of love (remember, we want to encourage *abstract* pronouncements of love and compassion; our undoing is when Christians demonstrate *real* love and compassion for people in need). The Enemy always does terrible damage to us when His followers believe deep in their hearts that they are citizens of heaven and not of earth. It is then, paradoxically, that they do the most good here on earth, both within and beyond politics. Do not let this old Christian truth be revealed, my dear Wormwood, or else we're finished.

Your affectionate uncle,

SCREWTAPE