

THE SCUMSCRAPE LETTER

EDITED AND CIRCULATED BY EARL W STEVICK

Screwtape, just on the verge of enfolding Wormwood in a final and conclusive embrace, perished in a paroxysm of centipedal force, and the job had to be completed by members of his staff. Now Wormwood's cousin and namesake has been detailed to tempter duty with a new patient, an American. His adviser is Scumscrape, younger brother and understudy to the late Screwtape, and recently promoted to the rank of Lecturer (non-tenure track, of course) in the Extension Division of the Lowerarchy of Hell.

Wormwood has expressed concern that his patient has of late been spending increasing amounts of time reading the Scriptures.

MY DEAR WORMWOOD,

I'm glad to see you learned at least one of the basic principles in Tempting 101. Yes, reading the Scriptures can indeed be dangerous for a patient, and that for a number of reasons. Since I'm not sure that old Slubgob was as thorough on this important topic as he might have been, let me give you a brief outline of it, based largely on some of my own experiences.

At the bottom of it all is the fact that the Enemy's Scriptures are a central device in His campaign to attract new recruits and to strengthen old ones. In fact, it's the original and (between you and me, though we don't like to acknowledge this in public) best source from which the humans pick up that propaganda of the Enemy's about His having become a particular man at a particular time and place, a Man Who lived and taught and died and rose again from death; and that if people accept that story it will somehow free them from something dreadful. With that kind of stuff ringing in their heads, it's no wonder we've lost so many of them. Of course, that "something dreadful" they're talking about is nothing more or less than what we have been so patiently offering them all along.

Another reason why the Scriptures are dangerous is that they divert the patient's attention from other books that we have made available to him through writers who are already safely on their way to Our Father's House. In this way, the

"The Enemy" is of course God. A "patient" is a Christian.

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Enemy's Scriptures make the patient more likely to reconsider, and finally to reject, what he has picked up from those of our materials that we have succeeded in getting him to read in the past.

Familiarity with the Scriptures also discourages the patient from following up on and taking too seriously whatever impressions may have occurred to him personally in the course of his life experiences (experiences of enjoying a sunrise, or observing elderly parents as they deal with declining health, or the like) and going on from those impressions to build what he will come to call "my own philosophy of life." Yes, yes, dear Wormwood, you are of course quite right about the deleterious effects of the reading of the Enemy's Scriptures!

But not to worry! Scripture reading can also be turned to our advantage, and when it is, it becomes all the more effective in promoting our purposes by the very fact that it carries the cachet of the Enemy.

As you proceed, remember that from the Enemy's point of view, the object of the game is for the humans to become like Him so that they can willingly glorify Him and genuinely enjoy Him. Therefore if you find your patient just can't be distracted from reading Scripture right now, try to get him to reading it so much that it diverts his time & energy from his main task as the Enemy sees it. Better yet, guide him to read in a way that will make him less like the Enemy, not more. Here are three principles that may help you. I should tell you that I consider them the key to my own (if I may say so) enviable record in freestyle tempting.

1. POWER

First, as I *hope* you got drilled into you at the Training College, all of human existence is filled with struggles over power — power to determine who is going to control what and whom. The greatest of these struggles, of course, is the one between us and the Enemy. Although I am confident of our eventual triumph, there is no question that He has tremendous power. Your patient, like most of the people who call themselves Christians, recognizes the Enemy's power, and understandably desires *not to arouse the Enemy's disfavor*. From this desire we can often trace a productive chain of developments.

- Because a Christian is concerned to avoid the Enemy's disfavor, he wants to be in a *right relationship with the Enemy*. (This is of course the very kind of groveling, sniveling attitude we want to emancipate them from!)

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- Because he wants to be *in* a right relationship, he assumes it's essential for him to have a *correct understanding of* that relationship.¹
- Then his desire for correct understanding leads him into an anxious search for *correct verbal formulations about* that understanding.²
- It's only a short step from that search to the assumption that if a few correct verbal formulations are good, then *the more numerous and more detailed* the formulations, *the better*.

1. A. To illustrate the first of these points, one of my few failures as a tempter was a number of years ago now, with a fellow named Nicholas Harmon, or Berman, or the like, who lived over in Western Europe somewhere.³ I scored an initial success by stirring up in him an intense anxiety about his "salvation," by which he meant his long-term prospects of treatment at the hands of the Enemy. Then one fine day when I had been thinking all was well, he had the effrontery to laugh in my face and turn his back on me, declaring that he had become a Christian "because he loved the Lord (that is, the Enemy)," and that he would "continue to love Him anyway." That way, he said, he would "at least have the pleasure of doing everything he could for the love of God."⁴ This outburst apparently pleased the Enemy's ego no end, so that He began showering my patient with freedom, strength, rejoicing and the like — you know, the kinds of rewards He has so much better access to than we have. Under those circumstances — blatant bribery, if you ask me — poor Nicholas of course became all the more trusting, which pleased the Enemy still further. Soon this vicious cycle got quite out of my control. I simply couldn't compete, and so I lost my patient.

1. B. The second step in the sequence (the patient's desire to have an understanding *of* his relationship with the Enemy) comes out of the human craving for clarity. That is, they want to find out what to expect from the other party, and what the other party expects from them. I should warn you that the further a patient develops this understanding, the worse his prognosis for eventual escape from the clutches of the Enemy. Since your patient is still a relatively new convert, however, you may be able to forestall this. Do so at all costs, but it must be done quickly, before the patient has accumulated much experience with the Enemy.

1.C. In the third step, our opportunities become much more numerous and more interesting. There are two or three ways in which a patient can develop an

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understanding of his expected relationship to the Enemy. One is to live alongside or among other, more experienced Christians and to watch them. Doing so takes time and patience, however, and a certain amount of perceptiveness. This process seldom works to our advantage, but I'm happy to tell you that the majority of Christians try to short-cut it anyway. Instead, they put their observations, or their understandings of what they have read in the Scriptures, into words. Then they spend time and energy and emotional resources in comparing their own verbal formulations with the verbal formulations of others.

The attractive features of shifting away from living and to talking and writing lie in three assumptions the humans make: (a) that words, once written down, will be *the same tomorrow or a hundred years from now as they were when we wrote them down today*; (b) having things in writing ensures that everybody who sees the words will be able to work with the same ideas — *the ideas that are present in the words*; and (c) that *changes in consensus can be accurately recorded through corresponding changes in wording*. There is truth in each of these three assumptions, but the italicized portions are partly false.

And there's where the fun begins. The false aspects of the above three assumptions immediately begin to generate *unrecognized ambiguities*, out of which arise *unrecognized misunderstandings*. Because these ambiguities and these misunderstandings are not recognized as such, humans tend to attribute any resulting disagreements to other people's *bad character* or to their *unwholesome motivations* or the like. Humans have a great deal at stake in their formulations. (If you took Incitement 221 as one of your electives, you may still have in your notes a brief description of this stake by one of the Enemy's minor writers.⁵) The inevitable conflicts arising out of differences among formulations can be used to generate *anxieties*, the unresolved anxieties lead dependably to *hostile feelings*, and hostile feelings lead to *resentments* or to *open conflicts* or to both. I don't have to tell even a junior tempter like you how quickly these can undermine the "faith" and the "love" that the Enemy is so fond of building among His people.

1.D. The pursuit of ever more detailed formulations on ever subtler points may have various desirable effects, one of which is misdirection of concern. For example, it may set the patient to worrying about whether women should wear head coverings in church, instead of monitoring his own behavior with regard to the main task, or (what would be even worse), turning his attention outward to other people.

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2. SIMPLIFICATION

I urge you to take frequent and full advantage of my second principle, which is that humans have a strong tendency to simplify their conclusions. One obvious reason for this is that in their thinking they have to use a crude physical organ called the “brain,” which is part of their limited animal nature.

A second, and to us more useful reason why the humans have such a tendency to simplify is that they want to reach conclusions they can *control* — conclusions they can remember, and state succinctly to their fellows; conclusions they can summarize, paraphrase, or reason about, and have a minimum of unanswered questions about; conclusions they can argue with each other about.

The simplification process works something like this: The patient starts out by noticing that two verses, or two sets of verses in Scripture, seem inconsistent with each other, or even that just one verse is unclear to him.. At this point, the patient faces three choices:

- A. The patient can decide that the Scriptures are not to be taken seriously, and that the Enemy (if indeed He exists) doesn't know what He is doing. This obviously fits in nicely with our desires.
- B. The patient can continue to believe that the Scriptures are to be taken seriously, and that the Enemy knows what He is doing, even though he (the patient) can't come up with a statement or a paraphrase that will resolve the apparent difficulty or inconsistency. *This is a dangerous condition.* The best treatment is to arrange for the patient to have regular contact with Christians who have reacted in the third way (below), and who look askance at people who react in this second way.
- C. The patient continues to believe that the Scriptures are to be taken seriously, and that the Enemy knows what He is doing, but also believes that he (the patient) can, if he tries hard enough, come up with a statement or a paraphrase that will resolve the apparent contradiction. With effort on your part, and a little patience, you can bring this also to one or another kind of favorable result. The same applies, by the way, to groups of patients working together.

The key to the success of this third kind of reaction is that the new statement or paraphrase will be *in the patient's (or the patients') own words*, not in the Enemy's. Because it has passed through the filter of the patient's mind, it will naturally

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leave in the *background*, or omit entirely, those parts of the original that the patient doesn't understand or that he finds very uncomfortable. If someone calls the patient's attention to this fact, the patient can easily reply in terms of what is or is not in accord with "common sense." At the same time, the new formulation will leave in the *foreground* those things that are some combination of clear and comfortable to the patient — things that he would say do "make sense."

Any statement or paraphrase in the patient's own words is useful to us in at least three ways:

- The patient's mind will find a thoroughly intelligible formulation easier to ponder, and so he will absorb its meaning better than he had absorbed the difficult meaning of the original.
- The patient often feels an immediate impulse to share his new formulation with others, either to secure their reassurance that he is right, or to help them correct possible errors in their thinking.
- The patient will be able to quote his formulation readily to others. Once it is quoted, it becomes available for comparison with other people's formulations. Even as inexperienced a tempter as you can immediately perceive the endless possibilities for disagreement, ego conflicts, and other delightful outcomes here. As my late brother once remarked to your cousin (#18), we want them to think of their life with each other as a "zero-sum game." An excellent example, with which we had great success among the humans a few years back, was called "One-Upmanship."

I'm sure you have already noticed that this Simplification Principle fits very nicely with the Principle of Power (above). The urge to simplify can provide a great stack of highly combustible materials, and the urge to wield power — or at least not to be overpowered by someone else — can provide the spark that sets that stack ablaze. Then truly, and not in the flippant sense in which humans use the phrase, something wonderful happens and "all Hell breaks loose." Interpersonal conflicts spring up among adherents to the Enemy's camp, optimally leading to estrangement between individuals who might otherwise protect one another from our guidance, and to schism between groups. Then, when these rifts come to the attention of humans who so far have escaped the Enemy's influence, they are less likely to place themselves in company where the Enemy's point of view is promoted or respected.

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3. MIXED MOTIVES

The humans may oversimplify their conclusions, but their motives (unlike yours or mine — or the Enemy’s, for that matter) are fascinating in their complexity. A case in point was one of my recent patients. He had developed a certain sense of craftsmanship in his reading of the Scriptures, and very soon he began looking for opportunities to display his talents. This fellow didn’t actually know any Greek, but he had (as he never tired of telling people) “a broad general background in languages.” On top of that, he was able to make out the letters of the Greek alphabet well enough to get at least something from an interlinear translation of the New Testament. At times, his conclusions from this kind of exercise were exactly the ones we had hoped he would reach, and at other times they were probably pretty close to what the Enemy actually intended. That wasn’t the important thing. What pleased me, and what brought him closer to Our Father’s House, was the quiet, patient way in which he shared his findings with his less sophisticated brothers and sisters. This always built him up in his own eyes. Sometimes it built him up in the eyes of his hearers too, but often at the cost of making them feel undereducated and condescended to.

The two most conspicuous motivations in the example I just gave were the patient’s genuine desire to find out what the Scripture was saying, and an equally genuine, though unacknowledged desire to show off. We can take advantage of this mixture by *subtly* rewarding those motives that we know will eventually work in our favor (here, the showing off), and leaving the other motives unrewarded — the ones that the Enemy would consider “desirable” and “wholesome.” This process is made easier by the fact that many of the most effective rewards are purely mental, so we’re spared all the tedious logistical details of having to arrange for material rewards. All I needed to do was put into his head some simple thought. As I remember, on that occasion the thought was just “See how simply and tactfully I’ve shared my erudition.”

A more dramatic example of mixed motivations is a story about the Elders of Genf, which I know about only through hearsay. The story concerns their treatment of another Christian who persisted in a belief that they considered to be seriously in error. The Elders believed that anyone who held that view was eternally damned, and for that reason they feared that exposing people to it was worse than inoculating them with the bubonic plague. Their conscious and publicly stated motivation in dealing with the dissident was therefore to prevent others from being infected with his view, and since he refused to remain quiet

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about it, the Elders could see no way of protecting the immortal souls of the general population of Genf except to take the man's life, which is what they in fact ended up doing. So far, their motivation seems distressingly straightforward. But the Elders' choice of the manner of execution because it would be both painful and slow is, I like to think, evidence that they had not entirely escaped our influence.

Less dramatic, but subtler and probably more powerful, are the many, many reasons why a person may tend to accept a particular conclusion out of Scripture, or even a whole set of principles for interpreting Scripture. Here are some of the most obvious:

- The person recommending it is someone I like and trust.
- It allows me to make full use of my natural talents and/or my acquired skills and tastes.
- It justifies my engaging in practices that I enjoy or profit from even though some people may question their value or even their rightness: eating meat, holding slaves, being a scholar in the field of medieval literature, being submissive to someone in authority, being an independent thinker, listening to music that is both esthetically pleasing and reminiscent of earlier, more secure times, so on and on. The list is endless.
- And of course there are the motivations that rise out of the first two principles: the concerns that humans have over power issues, and their craving for simplification.

One of the most important parts of your work is to identify these needs in your patient, and to reward them selectively. By doing so, you can guide him into producing or accepting interpretations (or whole sets of interpretations) favorable to us. A preliminary result is that he will then be in effect worshipping his own formulations — the product of his own mind and hands. This makes it easier for him to take the next step and worship himself rather than the Enemy. By the time he finds this isn't satisfactory either, it will be but an easy final step to the worship of Our Father Below.

Your affectionate uncle,

Scumscrape

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P.S. You blame some of your difficulties on the infallible, incorruptible (etc., etc.) text that your patient and his friends have at their disposal. That's no excuse, my boy! In fact, quite the opposite! What if their text *is* infallible (etc., etc.)? As I've tried to get across to you in this letter, the point is that all the *interpreters* of the text, being human, are *still fallible*. Better still, most of them don't *recognize* this fallibility even in others, and the ones that do recognize it in others don't see it in themselves or in whichever gurus or quasicanonical documents they have committed themselves to. So the Enemy's infallible Scriptures, far from providing you with an excuse for underperformance, offer you even more — in fact, endless — chances to stir up doubts, disorder, and divisions among the humans. Need I remind you that the Field Personnel Office's file on you (which I'm afraid is already growing a little fat) receives a new entry for each missed opportunity of this kind?

S.

EDITOR'S NOTES

¹ The following example of distinguishing between a relationship and the correct understanding of that relationship is taken from a sermon: "Listen to the next testimony you hear. Listen for the language of repentance and faith. Listen for the expressions of sorrow for sin. Listen for the words of how they threw themselves at the feet of Jesus for His mercy because they have offended the majesty and holiness of the Great King and Our Father. You won't likely hear those things. Instead you will see a sweet smile and the words of 'asking Jesus into my heart'. You will hear words of how they accepted Jesus but not how through His Word and Spirit they found acceptance by God in Christ."

² "The central Christian belief is that Christ's death has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start. Theories as to how it did this are another matter. A good many different theories have been held as to how it works; what all Christians are agreed on is that it does work... Theories about Christ's death are not Christianity: they are explanations about how it works. Christians would not all agree as to how important these theories are... But I think they will all agree the thing itself is infinitely more important than any explanations that theologians have produced. I think they would probably admit that no explanation will ever be quite adequate to the reality... On my view, the theories are not themselves the thing you are asked to accept. (*Mere Christianity*, Chapter II.4.)

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³ Editor's note: Reference is to Nicholas *Herman*, better known as "Brother Lawrence."

⁴ Second Conversation

⁵ Some years ago, I came across a game that caught, in a way that is easy to see, something of this inner drive to bring harmony into one's self, or to get the pieces of one's self to fit together. I think the game was called "Spill and Spell." It consisted of nothing but a plastic cup and a set of 15 dice. Instead of spots, each face of each die carried a letter of the alphabet. The first player puts the dice into the cup, shakes them, and spills them out onto a tabletop. The player then tries, within a limited period of time, to fit the dice together so as to spell words with as many as possible of whatever 15 letters came up. The words may cross each other as in a crossword puzzle or in Scrabble. Each letter scores a certain number of points when it is used, with the rarer letters scoring most and the very common letters counting least. Normally it will be impossible to use all 15 letters at once, so the player must decide which letters to leave aside.

It seems to me that this game is true to life in at least four ways. First, things seldom or never come out entirely even. Second, the choices that we make as players depend on what we think the rules are. If one religion, or one culture, or one philosophy, or one outlook on life says that the letter *j* is worth more than the letter *z*, and another says that *z* is worth more than *j*, then two players who follow different philosophies will make different decisions, and starting out with the same 15 letters they may end up with quite different configurations of words. Third, once we have begun to build up one particular pattern of intersecting words, we would rather look for more words to fit into that pattern than start all over and try to use our limited stock of letters in an entirely new way, even though the new arrangement might turn out to be the first step toward an even higher score. Fourth, if we don't know a particular word we can't use it, but if we learn a new word, we then become able to use it. Fitting the new word into our configuration of words may take work, but it may also change our score upward or downward. We must decide whether within the time we have left we are willing to do the work, and run the risk, that the new word would cost us. The worst outcome — the lowest score — would be if time ran out after we had torn up one arrangement and before we were able to put together a new one. Life in this respect is harder than the game because we never know how much time we have left.

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