

Reflections

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Bureaucratic Hell



One of C.S. Lewis's best-known books is the fictional *The Screwtape Letters*, a series of letters, from a senior devil to his nephew, on how to tempt an ordinary human. First published in 1942, Lewis wrote a new preface for the 1961 paperback edition in which he addressed some of the questions which had been raised by readers. After addressing the most common question — whether he really believed in the Devil — Lewis observed that “(i)t should be (but it is not) unnecessary to add that a belief in angels, whether good or evil, does not mean a belief in either as they are represented in art and literature.”¹ Lewis offered a brief discussion of some of the ways angels and devils have been symbolized over the centuries and then explained his own choices for *Screwtape*:

We must picture Hell as a state where everyone is perpetually concerned about his own dignity and advancement, where everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives the deadly serious passions of envy, self-importance, and resentment. This, to begin with. For the rest, my own choice of symbols depended, I suppose, on temperament and on the age.

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I like bats much better than bureaucrats. I live in the Managerial Age, in a world of “Admin.”

The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid “dens of crime” that Dickens loved to paint. It is not done even in concentration camps and labour camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried, and minuted) in clean, carpeted, warmed, and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voice. Hence, naturally enough, my symbol for Hell is something like the bureaucracy of a police state or the offices of a thoroughly nasty business concern.

Milton has told us that “devil with devil damned Firm concord holds.” But how? Certainly not by friendship. A being which can still love is not yet a devil. Here again my symbol seemed to me useful. It enabled me, by earthly parallels, to picture an official society held together entirely by fear and greed. On the surface, manners are normally suave. Rudeness to one’s superiors would obviously be suicidal; rudeness to one’s equals

might put them on their guard before you were ready to spring your mine. For of course “Dog eat dog” is the principle of the whole organisation. Everyone wishes everyone else’s discrediting, demotion, and ruin; everyone is an expert in the confidential report, the pretended alliance, the stab in the back. Over all this their good manners, their expressions of grave respect, their “tributes” to one another’s invaluable services form a thin crust. Every now and then it gets punctured, and the scalding lava of their hatred spurts out.²

What do you think of Lewis using a particular kind of bureaucracy as a symbol for Hell? While the bureaucracies we encounter at work, business, government, and even churches, are presumably nowhere near as dark as the ones Lewis had in mind, can you think of any “hellish” aspects of ones you are familiar with? Whatever the nature of the bureaucracies you encounter, are there ways in which you could bring the light of Christ into them?



“...You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

MATTHEW 5:14-16 (ESV)

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1980), pp. vii-viii.

² *Ibid.*, pp. ix-x.

