

In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis wrote instructions for a young tempter, Wormwood, from a senior devil, his uncle, Screwtape. Wormwood was tempting his first subject, and Screwtape sends him detailed advice every step of the way, congratulating him when his subject starts to fall apart and giving urgent instructions when the man seems to becoming more spiritually alive. Like all of C. S. Lewis, there's lots to kind of wince at, but it's also mischievous and astute about human nature. At one point the subject has become romantically involved with a young Christian woman, which the devils of course regard as a real setback. However, Uncle Screwtape detects a weak spot in her makeup. He says that although she is serious about her faith and serious about self-improvement, she has a blind spot, which is a mild kind of parochialism. She has not been exposed to many kinds of people, and has a tendency to think that her own family's ways are the standard by which to measure any other people's ways. Screwtape expresses it as an innocent sense that they have the right kind of fish forks, and other kinds are not quite right. He advises his nephew to exploit this weakness, to try to get her to develop a strong sense of superiority over and separation from other people, while continuing to think of herself as a Christian. Fortunately Wormwood does not succeed in this, or in fact in his larger endeavor; his subject is killed in the war before his soul can be corrupted, and Screwtape eats Wormwood.

The fiancée's innocent parochialism is a mild version of tribalism. We see a more vicious form in Congressman Steve King, who tweeted in March that "culture and demographics are our destiny. We can't restore our civilization with somebody else's babies." His implication is that culture is immutable and that it's genetically

transmitted—that something is lost when people from different backgrounds mingle and come to care about each other. It’s an obscene concept. But people often try to preserve what is good by excluding what is different. In today’s reading from Galatians, Paul tries to thread the needle between tribalism and sloppiness.

Mairi talked last week about the presenting problem in Galatia: although Paul had converted them from paganism to the Jesus Way, since he left other teachers have come through and convinced them that they need to observe the Jewish Law in order to belong to the Jesus Way. They have some good arguments: the Law is God’s gift, and it is a joy to keep it as well as their half of the covenant that makes them special to God. Those who stopped observing the Law in the past, like the ten tribes in the north who were conquered by the Assyrians, have essentially disappeared: they stopped being Jews and became just regular ordinary gentiles. Jesus was a Jew; Jesus’ disciples were Jewish; Jesus was concerned with interpretation of the Law. Why would you not ask converts to Jesus’ Way to adopt the Law?

Paul’s answer in a nutshell is that the death and resurrection of Jesus is plenty; you don’t need any other bells and whistles to become part of God’s kingdom. But to be more granular, his answer has two parts: #1, God set the precedent for this way back with Abraham, who was reckoned as righteous (e.g. participating in the kingdom) just for his willingness to embrace God’s invitation to step out. The law was not given until after many generations after Abraham, so obviously Abraham couldn’t observe it. #2, the Law was perfectly splendid, but it was a temporary patch, like a household servant who walks the kids to school every day until they outgrow it. The word translated “disciplinarian” literally refers to

that servant. “But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all heirs of God through faith.” In other words, we are adult children of God, having been united in baptism with the adult Christ.

The message for us today is not that Christianity has superseded Judaism. Even without the bloody history of Christian anti-Semitism, we would know just from our own life experiences that Judaism is a vital, rich faith tradition that, like our own, assists people to know God. The message for us today is that the dark side of any standard that we use to guide our lives—not the Law, perhaps, but other laws--is that it can become an end in itself, foreclosing the possibility of an unexpected leap of faith like Abraham’s. When I worked in daycare many years ago, I used to have to go pick up a couple of the kids from school and walk them back to the daycare center, just like the Roman household servant. The older of the boys knew the route and was bored with it, so he used to ask me if he could take a shortcut. The so-called shortcut was when we came to a certain house, he would take the walkway that ran around the back of the house and come out to the front again, having covered easily three times the distance that we covered just walking in front of the house. The route itself was not sacred. He knew how to get from school to daycare, and of course I needed to be there not so much as a guide but as a protection from predators, but in terms of knowing how to get from Point A to Point B, he had realized that you could change it up and it would still work. The route, for him, was not an end in itself, and that’s good.

Paul’s Christian opponents were scandalized, because they thought he was

setting aside huge swaths of the Bible in order to be all touchy-feely with gentiles. He was compromising the necessary discipline of Law, and watering down its demands. Paul's answer to that charge is that the compelling and timeless demand of God is that we learn to operate from a place of love. The Law was a fine way to guide us to do that, but it's also possible to follow formal rules and be entirely closed off and impervious to love. It's possible to identify with the rules or the mechanisms that have brought us this far, and then we may miss what is going to keep us alive from this point on.

Last week Tom and I got acquainted with the family whose children I'm going to be the guardian for while they seek asylum in the US. These were unaccompanied minors. Their mother came here to earn enough money to pay for them to get to the US because life was too dangerous in their hometown. She feared for their lives—from a gang, from drug dealers. She worked two jobs for years until she had enough money to pay for their travel. Then in Mexico they were abducted and held for three months till she could pay more. Finally they got here, and she quit one of her jobs so that when they are not in school, she can be with them. She cooked *pupusas* for us, and I showed them pictures of our daughters, and they told us about school and the church that is their only other outlet, because they stay home most of the time in fear of being picked up. If anybody from Crossroads had been there, you would have felt right at home. You would not have felt that you had landed on some strange planet, or that these were "other people's children." It's true that language was a bit of a problem, but really not much. This is a mom like a lot of us, with kids like those a lot of us care about, who work hard and enjoy being in a quiet neighborhood, who

only want to live their lives in relative safety and have jobs and play with their dogs and grow up and grow old. Whatever parochialism separates us from other people, it is not "of God." What is of God is what helps us widen our circles, reconceptualize ourselves as part of a bigger family, and recognize the face of Christ in one another. One is a big number. To be One you need one to include all others coming together to make one body in Christ.

Faithful Deliverer,

You have chosen us to receive salvation by faith, not by the bells and whistles we like to add. Deliver us, then, from the idolatry of old barriers, and free us from the bondage of sin so that with our hands we might serve you in purity of joy and response to your goodness, for the sake of Jesus Christ, who is all goodness. Amen.