

Academic Bureaucracy as a Paradigm for Screwtape's Hell

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ABSTRACT

C. S. Lewis was elected a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, on May 20th, 1925. He served in this capacity without a promotion, despite wide public recognition and popular acclaim, until 1954, when he was offered the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Magdalene College, Cambridge. When Magdalen College, Oxford, learned of the Magdalene College, Cambridge, offer, they decided, after 29 years, Lewis was finally due a promotion, and counter-offered. Lewis declined the counter offer and accepted the Chair position at Cambridge. Lewis was no stranger to the vagaries of academic bureaucracy.

In the “Preface to the Paperback Edition” of *The Screwtape Letters (1941/1961)*¹ Lewis explains his choice to depict Screwtape's Hell as a bureaucracy. He contends that the greatest evils in the world do not take place in concentration camps, but rather in boardrooms. One can surmise, given his lifelong career in academe, that when he modeled hell as a bureaucracy, it was the bureaucracy with which he was most familiar that served as the prototype: Academic Bureaucracy.

This paper will compare and contrast passages from the demonic mentor, Screwtape, personal experiences drawn from twenty years in academic administration, and principles found in the examples of Scripture and noted authors on Christian leadership^{2, 3, 4}. In my personal experiences, some will describe the decision or actions I chose, others will discuss choices I wish I could say I had made.⁵

¹ Lewis, C. S. (1941/1961). *The Screwtape Letters*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 7-9.

² McCain, D. (2000). *2 Models of Leadership for Kingdom Building*. Jos, Nigeria: CAPRO Media Publishing.

³ Jones, L.B. (1994) *Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership*. New York: Hyperion.

⁴ Mudock, M. (1996) *The Leadership Secrets of Jesus*. Honor Books, Tulsa OK, pp. 199-201.

⁵ Romans 7:14-25 [See endnotes for full text reference.]

INTRODUCTION

The Screwtape Letters were written during World War II as a series of articles for a periodical called *The Guardian*. They were later compiled into a book which became a best seller. It is still in press and continues to be popular today. Lewis, with his keen wit and sense of proportion, did not allow this to greatly inflate his ego. When he addressed the popularity of the letters in the preface to the 1961 paperback edition he said:

“In general, however, they had a reception I had never dreamed of. Reviews were either laudatory or filled with that sort of anger which tells an author that he has hit his target; sales were at first (by my standards) prodigious, and have continued steady.

“Of course, sales do not always mean what authors hope. If you gauged the amount of Bible reading in England by the number of Bibles sold, you would go far astray.”⁶

Lewis’ popular acclaim won him no laurels in traditional academic bureaucratic circles, however. He was viewed with disdain for his popularity with the common citizen through his writings and radio broadcasts. Evidence of this was in his 29-year appointment without a promotion as a fellow in Renaissance Literature at Magdalen College, Oxford. In his 29th year, Magdalene College, Cambridge, learned that Lewis had not been rewarded for his work at Oxford, and offered him a Chair at Cambridge. It was only then that the bureaucracy at Oxford felt that he was sufficiently worthy of a promotion, and thus countered the Cambridge offer. It was obviously too little, too late. Lewis moved his academic appointment to Cambridge in 1954, where he remained until his death in 1963.

The Screwtape Letters was a work of genius. The book was written to portray a collection of letters from a senior devil, Screwtape, who was a mid-level official in the bureaucracy of hell. Screwtape was quite pompous and self-satisfied and obviously felt he was condescending to educate his “nephew” in a manner that far exceeded the training he had receive in the official “Temptors’ Training College for Young Devils.” The book contains a series of thirty-one short letters. Each of the letters is written as if giving advice in strategies for the accomplishment of the spiritual downfall of the subject of the young devil’s temptation efforts. In each of the letters, a description of a potential spiritual weakness in human nature and instructions in how to exploit the particular weakness is addressed.

The letters are very insightful and remain timely decades later. They address the diabolical tactics of spiritual warfare and give razor-like insight into human nature. They also address the love of God and sovereignty of God. We also witness the mentoring methods of Screwtape with his mentee, Wormwood. In these methods we learn of the hierarchical structure of the bureaucracy of Hell and Screwtape’s attitudes for those who were his superiors, subordinates and/or peers.

⁶ Lewis, p. 5

A preface and postscript were added to the book in later editions. These give us a little more information about the writing of the story and of what happened to Screwtape at a point beyond the end of the letters. In the postscript, Screwtape, who is the guest of honor at a banquet, proposes a magnificent toast to his peer, Slubgob. This is the same Slubgob, who was master of the Temptors' College, and the object of Screwtape's continual thinly veiled criticism throughout the course of the letters.

Lewis addressed many of the questions he had been asked over the course of two decades about *The Screwtape Letters* in his preface to the paperback edition in 1961. He said he had often been asked about how he developed his literary symbol for hell. He addressed this in the 1961 preface:

“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...

“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.”⁷

He goes on to discuss what it would be like to live in that society of devils in the paragraphs immediately following:

“...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 organization. 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.

⁷ Ibid pp 7-8.

“Bad angels, like bad men, are entirely practical. They have two motives. The first is fear of punishment... Their second motive is a kind of hunger. I feign that devils can, in a spiritual sense, eat one another; and us. Even in the human life we have seen the passion to dominate, almost to digest, one’s fellow; to make his whole intellectual and emotional life merely an extension of one’s own—to hate one’s hatreds and resent one’s grievances and indulge one’s egoism through him as well as through oneself.”⁸

In contrast, Lewis points out that God turns his followers into sons with free will to follow and serve him, while simultaneously adopting his principles and retaining a true sense of individuality and autonomy.

In looking at this description of Screwtape’s hell and the advice he offers his mentee, Wormwood, we can compare this with the current academic universe. In particular, we can look at practical application of what we can learn from Screwtape and others within three areas:

- Awareness in fellowship within the academic bureaucracy
- Benevolence in mentorship within the academic bureaucracy
- Conduct in leadership within the academic bureaucracy

LIVING WITHIN THE BUREAUCRACY

In any bureaucracy, there are multiple layers of hierarchy. Each of us falls somewhere within the continuum. We move from student to graduate to faculty. We move from subordinate to supervisor. However, at the same time, there always exists a hierarchy above us and below us. Even the beginning Freshman is looked upon as a role model to the potential students who are still in Secondary School. The Chancellor must answer to the government official or board of directors. But what are our relationships with those above or below us in the hierarchical schema? In any bureaucracy, we do have at least some control over our own behaviors. It is our choice how we choose to behave within the bureaucracy.

In Figure 1, we see the behavior of Screwtape within the bureaucracy. He speaks with constant condescension toward his mentee, Wormwood. He only shows respect to Wormwood on one occasion, in chapter 19 where he exhorts Wormwood not to show certain letters to anyone as they might be construed as heretical.⁹ Screwtape often expressed his feelings of superiority over the standard procedures of the training college. He did seem to be motivated by fear, however, to show respect when punishment could be forthcoming... he knew there was no grace or forgiveness of any kind in his bureaucracy. Rather than trying to guide Wormwood into drawing his own conclusions, he tries to micromanage him into adopting precisely his own philosophies and style.

Screwtape’s attitude toward his peer, Slubgob, was one of constant criticism. However, in the postscript added to the book in 1959, *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*, we

⁸ Ibid p 8.

⁹ Ibid p 73.

find Screwtape sounding as if he believe's Slubgob is finest principal the College had ever known.¹⁰

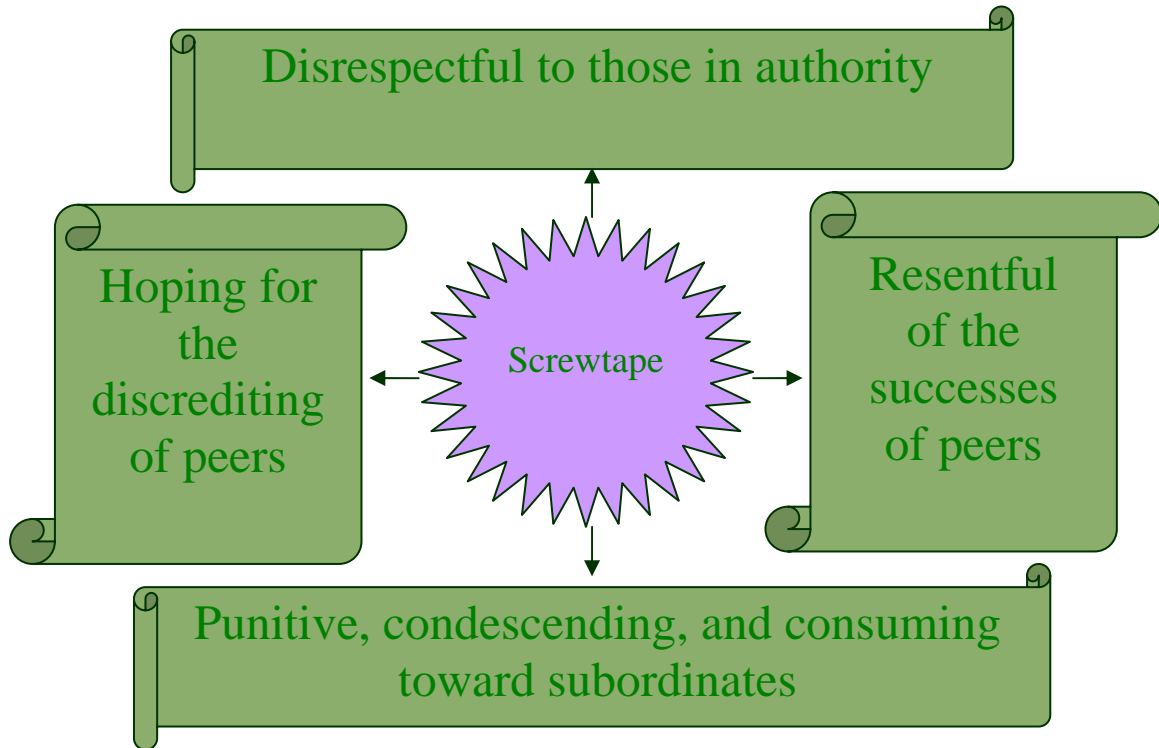


Figure 1. The schema of the demon in bureaucracy shows disrespect toward superiors, malice toward peers and oppression toward subordinates.

In Figure 2 we see the Christian in bureaucracy. The Christian, when following the teachings of scripture, will show respect for those in authority.¹¹ They will be conscious of the fact that their life as a professing Christian is a living testament of the beliefs we hold. The Christian will “rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn,”¹² encouraging his fellow Christians to fight the good fight and press on toward their goal.¹³ Most importantly, the Christian in bureaucracy will use their own positions of authority to teach those subordinate to them, allowing them to make mistakes without fear of ridicule and punishment, and serve as an advocate for them to help promote their own independent careers as individuals.

Any opportunity to serve in leadership is an opportunity to create a more benevolent bureaucracy. In my own experience, I had to be a part of a transition team that had, as a part of its charge, the task of terminating the employment of about 20 employees. In the past, I had served in another academic institution that had to terminate 200 employees. I knew from that experience what I did not want to do, and from it, had

¹⁰ Ibid p 117-128.

¹¹ Romans 13:1-8. [See endnotes for full text reference.]

¹² Romans 12:6-21. [See endnotes for full text reference.]

¹³ I Timothy 1:18-19. [See endnotes for full text reference.]

some ideas of what I did want to accomplish. I did not want to keep everyone in the entire organization in suspense over whether they were targeted for the reduction in force. I wanted to inform those whose jobs were in jeopardy; assure them that our goal was to find employment for them elsewhere in the organization as other jobs were vacated by attrition or retirement; and encourage and assist them with letters of recommendation and telephone to potential employers.

What I did not want to do was inform them of when their last day had arrived by having the cleaning staff place a cardboard box on their desk with a termination letter in it and a security guard standing by to escort them from the building after they had cleaned out their desk. What I did want to do is give them as much time as we could to allow them to find other employment and leave knowing that it mattered to those in leadership that they were going through such a disruptive event in their life. It was an opportunity for compassion and we were able to successfully place 19 of the 20 people in other positions before their proposed termination date arrived.

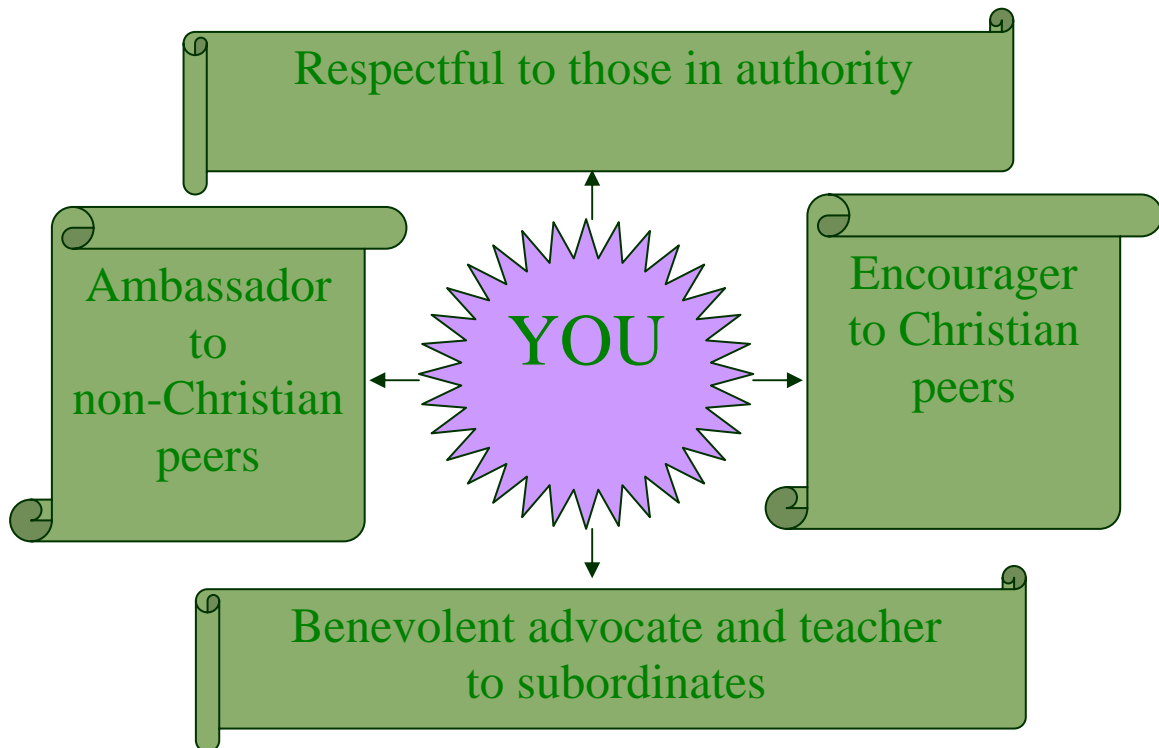


Figure 2. The Christian in Bureaucracy can be an oasis in a desert as a benevolent advocate and teacher to subordinates, an ambassador of Christ to non-Christian peers, a supportive encourager to fellow Christian peers, and a respectful, productive team-player to those in authority.

It was a challenge that gave the opportunity to show compassion in a time of trial. There were many that came to me privately and initiated conversations about God. It was a time when the enemy of their souls could have tormented them day and night, but they

were able to find an oasis because a Christian was available to rejoice when they found a new job and mourn as they had to say goodbye to their long-time friends.

THE SCREWTAPE BUREAUCRACY ABC'S

Awareness in Fellowship

There is an old adage, "Show me your friends and I'll tell you who you are." Lewis repeatedly addresses the importance of our associations in *Screwtape*. The different groups Lewis particularly addresses could be described as the "Smart Set," the "Christianity-And Set" and the "Mere Christianity Set." Wormwood is encouraged to foster the relationships with the first two and try to terminate the relations with the third.

The "Smart Set" are introduced in Chapter 10 and probably have a greater presence within our academic communities than either of the other two. Lewis describes them as

" --- rich, smart, superficially intellectual, and brightly skeptical about everything in the world.... vaguely pacifist, not on moral grounds but from an ingrained habit of belittling anything that concerns the great mass of their fellow men and from a dash of purely fashionable and literary communism."¹⁴

Screwtape questions Wormwood about small acts of spiritual betrayal while trying to curry the favor of these charming, sophisticated people:

"Did he commit himself deeply? I don't mean in words. There is a subtle play of looks and tones and laughs by which a mortal can imply that he is of the same party as those to whom he is speaking. That is the kind of betrayal you should specially encourage, because the man does not fully realise it himself; and by the time he does you will have made withdrawal difficult.

"No doubt he must very soon realize that his own faith is in direct opposition to the assumptions on which all the conversation of his new friends is based. I don't think that matters much, provided that you can persuade him to postpone any open acknowledgment of the fact, and this, with the aid of shame, pride, modesty, and vanity, will be easy to do. As long as the postponement lasts he will be in a false position. He will be silent when he ought to speak and laugh when he ought to be silent."¹⁵

Personally, I wish I could say that this chapter did not cut me to the quick, but it did. How many times have I been guilty of remaining silent, of laughing at a heretical

¹⁴ Lewis, p 46.

¹⁵ Ibid p 46-47.

joke, of appearing to agree or disagree with something that directly opposes my own spiritual beliefs by simply remaining in silent? It is wearying to often be the sole deist in a conversation with your colleagues. It is frustrating to be considered a fool by those who blindly believe their own intellect and judgment is superior to that of their Creator or who do not even acknowledge his existence. However, after some years of trying to be a step-member the “Smart Set” I have discovered that it is quite liberating to just let your own beliefs be known and let them decide if they still think you worthy of their association. Is it their opinion or your own opinion of yourself with which you need to be satisfied?

The “Christianity-And Set” are those who position other issues inside their Christian belief system. Lewis brings this up in Chapter 25, Screwtape advises:

“What we want, if men become Christians at all, is to keep them in the state of mind I call “Christianity And.” You know—Christianity and the Crisis, Christianity and the New Psychology, Christianity and the New Order, Christianity and Faith Healing, Christianity and Psychological Research, Christianity and Vegetarianism, Christianity and Spelling Reform. If they must be Christians, let them at least be Christians with a difference. Substitute for the faith itself some Fashion with a Christian colouring. Work on their horror of the Same Old Thing.”¹⁶

It is the “Mere Christianity Set” with whom we should desire to connect. Those will be the people that will understand what you feel, what motivates you, what distresses or discourages you, and what can lift you when you are falling. Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes that two are better than one, if one is alone and he stumbles, who will lift him up?¹⁷ One true believer to hold us accountable, to bind our wounds and seek our counsel, can give us the divine strength we need as we know that where two or more are gathered, he is with us. While we should be kind and benevolent to all, it will be that connection with a few mere Christians within the Bureaucracy that will help us as we face the trials of working in Screwtape’s Hell.

Benevolence in Mentorship

Mentees are very vulnerable. They are vulnerable in a variety of ways. Screwtape showed us the worst example of what a Mentor should be. He was condescending, he was belittling, he found fault with both negative and positive results, he was demanding, and he instructed Wormwood to merely follow his own techniques and philosophies rather than trying to encourage him to learn to make decisions for himself.

A good mentor will allow their mentee to make a mistake and learn from that mistake. When Wormwood made a mistake, Screwtape commented on his stupidity and threatened him with punishment. When Wormwood finally completely failed in his

¹⁶ Ibid p 91

¹⁷ Eccl 4:7-12 [See endnotes for full text reference.]

assignment, Screwtape informed him that he planned to eat him.¹⁸ While that is a bizarre concept, it happens figuratively in mentoring relationships, quite frequently. If a mentee or subordinate tries and fails, they are consumed. They completely lose their autonomy and individual identity. If they chose to stay within the organization, they must stay as chattel, with limited or no authority of their own. They have been consumed.

A good mentor will seek out the advice of mentors of their own. As Laurie Beth Jones points out, Jesus “kept in constant contact with his boss.”¹⁹ A good mentor can take advice and guidance as well as give it. A good mentor can give credit to his mentees for their work. A good mentor will take responsibility for the mistakes of their mentees. They will advocate for their welfare and invest their time and effort in teaching them “why” as well as “how.”²⁰

Conduct in Leadership

As we operate in the wisdom of scripture and favor of God, it is likely we will find ourselves in leadership positions. Screwtape was a mid-level manager and used this position for his own advancement and personal gain. We may find ourselves anywhere within the hierarchical structure of our bureaucracy. When leadership opportunities arise, we should do our best to seek them. Not for our own self-aggrandizement, but for the good that we can do and for the opportunity to serve others. A true leader is a dedicated servant.

Dr. Danny McCain, founder of International Institute of Christian Scholars, gave some sage advice about Christians in leadership:

“In my younger years, I was somewhat timid when it came to leadership. I had always enjoyed public speaking; I had usually been active in the decision-making process of organizations of which I was a part. In high school, I was a class officer. In seminary, I was the president of my class for three years and vice president the fourth year. However, nearly all of those leadership positions were imposed from the outside. I never volunteered to contest for office but always accepted leadership roles when they were thrust upon me.

“I remember when it finally dawned on me that God had called me to be a leader. If I were going to be a leader, I would have to lead. I would no longer have the luxury of waiting for people to ask me. I would no longer be able to hide behind the “humility shield” when I saw things that needed to be done. I would have to step out front and be a leader. Coming to that decision was a very liberating experience. It freed up my creativity. I helped me to realize God is the one who gives good ideas and that I should

¹⁸ Lewis, pp 109-111

¹⁹ Jones, L.B. (1995) *Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership*. Hyperion Press. New York, pp . 10-12.

²⁰ Mudock, M. (1996) *The Leadership Secrets of Jesus*. Honor Books, Tulsa OK, pp. 199-201.

push to get those ideas in action. It helped to stifle the “false humility” which kept me from suggesting ideas and volunteering to do things which I knew needed to be done.

“No one should ever push to become a leader. However, once it is obvious God has called one to be a leader, he or she should not hesitate to exercise leadership in the realm God has given him or her.”²¹

CONCLUSION

The Screwtape Letters of C. S. Lewis are a great resource for thoughtful study in how we conduct ourselves in the academic bureaucracy or any bureaucracy. We are leaders, we are subordinates, we are peers. A descriptive term can be added before each of those nouns. Would it be “supportive” or would it be “self-concerned?” Would it be “benevolent” or would it be “ruthless?” Would it be “Christ-like” or would it be “apathetic?” We cannot change the world... as many people continue to feel compelled to inform me... but, I counter: we can change small portions of it. A bureaucracy is made up of people. It is people that write the guidelines, make the decisions, offer the recommendations, and determine the consequences. Each one of us has a sphere of influence within our organizations.

We can be loyal and respectful supporters of those in authority over us, sympathetic to the many competing priorities they must consider with every decision they make, offering advice that is for the good of the entire organization rather than serving only our own small area of interest. We can be kind to those who are in positions subordinate to ours. We can help them succeed and rise to their potential... even if that is beyond our own. And we can be true colleagues to our peers, not being resentful when it's their turn in the limelight, but celebrating their victories and helping them to meet their challenges.

The Screwtape Letters is a short little book with a giant impact. Consume it with all the relish Screwtape showed toward his nephew in the final chapter and let us defeat our own human weaknesses through greater understanding of them.

²¹ McCain, D. (2000) *2 Models of Leadership for Kingdom Building*, CAPRO Books, Jos, Nigeria, pp. 16-17.

FULL SCRIPTURAL REFERENCES

For the convenience of the reader, full text references have been added below in the order in which they appear in the manuscript above.^{xxii}

Romans 7:14-25

14 We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. *15* I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. *16* And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. *17* As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. *18* I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. *19* For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing. *20* Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. *21* So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. *22* For in my inner being I delight in God's law; *23* but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. *24* What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? *25* Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

Romans 13:1-8

1 Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. *2* Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. *3* For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. *4* For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. *5* Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. *6* This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. *7* Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. *8* Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.

Romans 12:6-21

6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. *7* If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; *8* if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. *9* Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. *10* Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. *11* Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. *12* Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. *13* Share with God's people

who are in need. Practice hospitality. *14* Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. *15* Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. *16* Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. *17* Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. *18* If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. *19* Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. *20* On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." *21* Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

I Timothy 1:18-19

6 But godliness with contentment is great gain. *7* For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. *8* But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. *9* People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. *10* For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. *11* But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. *12* Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

7 Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: *8* There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. "For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" This too is meaningless-- a miserable business! *9* Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: *10* If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! *11* Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? *12* Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

²² Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.