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## Inner Circles and True Inclusion

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C.S. Lewis

*Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963) was a highly regarded teacher of English literature at Oxford University from 1925 to 1954. During much of this period he travelled and spoke widely about what convinced him to become and remain a Christian. But it seems likely that this ‘hobby’ caused him to be sidelined from academic advancement while at Oxford.*

*This experience of exclusion seems to have taught him a lot about our longing to ‘belong’. In appreciation of his writing on this theme, Andrew Cameron extends Lewis’s thought to the theological context. Lewis’s diagnosis of the human drive to belong, and of how it may destroy us, is as directly relevant to those who study theology as to any other human group.*

Most of the contributions in this book pay special attention to some of the specific difficulties associated with theological learning. This chapter takes a different path. I want to observe a major occupational hazard for students of theology and for people in Christian ministry. It is not a hazard unique to those tasks, yet it does seem to beset us very much.

It is a hazard that stems from a typical human failing experienced by everyone. But it requires our special attention, because to fail in this way is utterly to deny a central element

of the Christian gospel, leaving our preaching, teaching and pastoring hollow and self-contradictory. Yet unlike our more obvious sins (such as greed, laziness or sexual immorality), this failure blends too easily into the many human interactions of Christian activity and can sit unnoticed for years.

I refer to our passion to belong to some ‘inner circle’ of people who hover temptingly beyond our reach. When gripped by this passion, to be excluded from these circles drives us slightly mad, and to enter them leaves us smugly exultant. This very personal and subjective experience can drive dozens of our daily decisions. C.S. Lewis has called it ‘the quest for the Inner Ring’.<sup>1</sup>

Lewis did not think of himself as a theologian, and his early thoughts about this ‘quest’ were not directed to theological students. Yet this problem is obviously very pressing in the lives of the theological students and ministers, but remains largely unexplored by those theologians who offer advice to students. I will therefore take the liberty of devoting some space to the problem, with C.S. Lewis as our guide. I will expand upon his thought to show its applicability to the lives of theological students and Christian ministers, and will then gesture towards some of the ways that according to the Bible, God releases us from this heartbreaking obsession.<sup>2</sup>

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1. For a more detailed account of Lewis’s thought about ‘The Inner Ring’, see Andrew Cameron, ‘The “Great Permanent Mainspring”: C.S. Lewis on The Inner Ring’, (2006); online: <http://www.cslewisoday.com/conference-2006/the-great-permanent-mainspring-cs-lewis-on-the-inner-ring> (accessed 12th October, 2009).
  2. The longing for entry into the ‘Inner Ring’ is an example of obsession; but there are many versions of obsession. For a more general investigation of the way our desires turn into obsessions and of how theology can help us, see Andrew Cameron, ‘Augustine on Obsession’, in *The Consolations of Theology*, ed. Brian S. Rosner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

In his work of science-fiction called *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis introduces Mark Studdock, a young man who has recently begun working at ‘Bracton College’. He feels like an outsider there, and longs to be accepted by ‘Curry’s gang’. Then, unexpectedly, Curry takes Studdock into his confidence:

You would never have guessed from the tone of Studdock’s reply what intense pleasure he derived from Curry’s use of the pronoun ‘we’. So very recently he had been an outsider, watching the proceedings of what he then called ‘Curry and his gang’ with awe and with little understanding ... Now he was inside and ‘Curry and his gang’ had become ‘we’ or ‘the Progressive Element in College’. It had all happened quite suddenly and was still sweet in the mouth.

... He did not like things which reminded him that he had once been not only outside the Progressive Element but even outside the College. He did not always like Curry either. His pleasure in being with him was not that sort of pleasure.<sup>3</sup>

The thoughts and feelings that Studdock experiences here are what Lewis called ‘one of the great permanent mainsprings of human action’. Studdock, an earnest and insecure young man, becomes involved in a plot by the National Institute for Controlled Experiments (NICE) to deliver Britain over to fascism. The NICE agenda includes indoctrination, eugenics, sterilisation and ethnic cleansing.<sup>4</sup> Bit by bit, Studdock’s involvement erodes him.

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3. C.S. Lewis, ‘That Hideous Strength’, in *The Cosmic Trilogy* (London: Pan, 1990), pp. 359-60, 361; chapter 1.2.

4. *Ibid.* p. 387.

Students at a theological college might think of themselves as enjoying a far safer environment than Bracton College and NICE. In many ways, they are correct. The fourth-century theologian Augustine summarises the content and practices of Christian fellowship as ‘the enjoyment of God and of one another in God’,<sup>5</sup> and these obviously bear no relation to the fascism of NICE. Seminary students often enjoy an environment that can assist the Christian life in a way that working within a multinational corporation, a government office or a secular institution does not.

Oddly though, Lewis does not present fascism or NICE as the ‘smoking gun’ that destroyed Studdock’s friendships, his integrity and almost his marriage. The real culprit lay within: an inner compulsion to be on the ‘inside’ – that need to become a member of the elusive and desirable groups that Lewis calls ‘Inner Rings’. ‘Of all the passions,’ says Lewis, this ‘passion for the Inner Ring is most skilful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things.’<sup>6</sup>

Even so, the Studdock of Bracton College is a servile young man. Could it be that he is peculiarly prone to this enslavement in a way that many theology students are not? After all, seminaries and ministry training schemes often select

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5. Or near equivalent – twice in *City of God* XIX.13 and once in XIX.17. Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, tr. R.W. Dyson, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought* edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 938, 940, 947.

6. C.S. Lewis, ‘The Inner Ring’, in *Essay Collection*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (London: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 319. The address can also be found in C.S. Lewis, *Transposition and other Addresses* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949), pp. 55-64; C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape Proposes a Toast and Other Pieces* (Glasgow: Collins/Fount, 1977), pp. 28-40; and in C.S. Lewis, ‘The Inner Ring,’ in *The Weight of Glory*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 1949, 1976); online: <http://faculty.millikin.edu/~moconner/in150/lewis2.html> (accessed 13th November, 2009). Page references are to the Walmsley edition.

candidates on the basis of already proven habits of independent thought, leadership and integrity, even if it is understood that these have been formed in frail flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit. Are the Studdocks of this world more prone to enslavement by Inner-Ringism than followers of Christ, who study his word? Rather than answering this question directly, I simply propose to test whether what Lewis depicts can be recognised in theological study and church ministry settings.

Lewis describes the Inner Ring in a 1944 address to young graduates who, like Studdock, are at the start of their careers. (They were exclusively men, but the themes of the address are also very recognisable for women). He begins with a passage from Tolstoy, where a captain talks to a young lieutenant in a manner that subtly isolates and excludes a general. In this moment, the young lieutenant discovers that a formally organised group can include a smaller, invisible, informal group. ‘You discover gradually, in almost indefinable ways, that it exists and that you are outside it; and then later, perhaps, that you are inside it.’<sup>7</sup> No one is formally admitted to this inner circle, yet a particular slang, spontaneous and informal passwords, and a certain style of conversation mark those who are ‘in’ and those who are not.

Yet this invisible group is not constant or clear. Some are obviously in; some are obviously out; and always some are borderline. If you returned six weeks later, you might find it all quite different even though no one has been formally admitted or expelled. Indeed, people can still think they are in after they have actually been pushed out. These people are very amusing for those who are really in, as are those who have never been allowed in yet think they are in. This is a way of ‘belonging’ by negation:

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7. Lewis, ‘Ring’, p. 314.

You yourself once you are in, want to make it hard for the next entrant, just as those who are already in made it hard for you. . . . [Y]our genuine Inner Ring exists for exclusion. There'd be no fun if there were no outsiders. The invisible line would have no meaning unless most people were on the wrong side of it. Exclusion is no accident: it is the essence.<sup>8</sup>

Back at Bracton College, Curry eagerly introduces Studdock to the sophisticated Feverstone. Studdock thinks Feverstone is another one of 'Curry's gang' – but then Feverstone mocks Curry once he leaves the room. It becomes clear that inner circles are like a layered onion: within the Curry-circle there beckons a Feverstone-circle, and suddenly Studdock hates Curry's old circle and longs for this new one. When Feverstone offers some buttery words about having read everything Studdock has written, 'the giddy sensation of being suddenly whirled up from one place to another . . . prevented him from speaking'.<sup>9</sup> So great is Studdock's longing to be noticed, and approved, that there is a moment of speechless ecstasy as the circle opens to receive him.

Perhaps thoughts and feelings like these are more muted in a theological college. Christians are less likely openly to exult in the exclusion of another, or wantonly to flaunt their 'belonging' in the face of another. Nevertheless, a variety of theological college scenarios do seem to provoke thoughts and feelings similar to what Lewis describes:

- I am new to a college and lonely, and feel an aching envy when I see a knot of three or four others who know each other from some other country, some home church, or some ministry training scheme.

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8. Ibid. pp. 319-20.

9. Lewis, 'Hideous', p. 384.

- I finally master some theological jargon or concept and an accomplished senior student, who has previously taken little notice of me, suddenly smiles and nods in approval.
- I overhear the principal talking with a bishop that so-and-so is ‘worth watching’, and desperately wish it were me.
- A faculty member invites some student to a reading group or to some other project of which I am not a member, and I cannot stop thinking about it.

The cycle that often flares up around such moments – envy, aching yearning, exultation, and back to envy – is precisely what Lewis seeks to bring to our attention. Lewis thinks that this cycle of feelings can drive us in directions that will destroy us. In his address to the graduate students who are about to enter various careers and so become prey to these difficulties, he speaks of how the promise of inclusion might begin with a hint to do something slightly irregular. This hint will come ‘over a drink or a cup of coffee, disguised as a triviality and sandwiched between two jokes’.<sup>10</sup> It will be to do something that others will not quite understand:

... but something, says your new friend, which ‘we’ – and at the word ‘we’ you try not to blush for mere pleasure – something ‘we always do’. And you will be drawn in, if you are drawn in, not by desire for gain or ease, but simply because at that moment, when the cup was so near your lips, you cannot bear to be thrust back again into the cold outer world. It would be so terrible to see the other man’s face – that genial, confidential, delightfully sophisticated face – turn suddenly cold and contemptuous, to know that you had been tried for the Inner Ring and rejected. And then, if you are drawn in, next week it will be something

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10. Lewis, ‘Ring’, p. 318.

a little further from the rules, and next year something further still, but all in the jolliest, friendliest spirit. It may end in a crash, a scandal, and penal servitude: it may end in millions, a peerage and giving the prizes at your old school. But you will be a scoundrel.<sup>11</sup>

Again, we might at first think that no such evil schemes will come our way in a theological college. But perhaps they only take different forms: an implied invitation to abandon ourselves to lacerating slander of some other group or person; an expectation to talk and think mockingly about someone; a quiet signal that it is permissible to do unjust favours for theological friends; an implied demand to give up on something we know to be true. Likewise in subsequent church life: the promise of acceptance by some desirable group of church members, if only we will quietly join them in mocking a senior minister, or just ease up a little bit on some moral or doctrinal position; or the promise of acceptance by some career clergyman if only we will assist his method of church-politicking, or talk roughly about the poor (or even the rich), or adopt his sneering attitude to some other local church. People in Christian training and ministry are constantly being tested for inner circles.

When Hannah Arendt attended the trial of Adolf Eichmann, she sought to discover where the heart of evil lay. What would make a man so efficiently able to timetable trains bearing hundreds of thousands of Jews to their deaths? To her horror, Eichmann's reasons were as bland as those of Studdock: he wanted to belong, and to advance his career by impressing his friends and superiors. She journeys into the heart of darkness to

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11. Ibid. pp. 318-19.

discover that nothing real is there – just a corrupted preoccupation with the same social impulse that drives us all. That shocking discovery elicits her famous concluding description of ‘the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*’.<sup>12</sup>

But we eventually discover in bitterness that this yearning to belong never delivers peace. The ‘onion’ effect enslaves us to the perpetual cycle of envy, anxiety, exultation, disappointment and boredom:

You are trying to peel an onion: if you succeed there will be nothing left. ... The circle cannot have from within the charm it had from outside. By the very act of admitting you it has lost its magic. Once the first novelty is worn off the members of this circle will be no more interesting than your old friends. ... You merely wanted to be ‘in’. And that is a pleasure that cannot last. As soon as your new associates have been staled to you by custom, you will be looking for another Ring. The rainbow’s end will still be ahead of you. The old Ring will now be only the drab background for your endeavour to enter the new one.<sup>13</sup>

I will risk a personal reflection from my own context, where I am an ordained person in a prominent Anglican Diocese, and a member of a well-regarded theological college faculty. Some would regard these positions as enviable. But along the way I have felt and perhaps seen in others both the yearning for the next Ring and the ‘onion effect’. Invitation to a ministry training scheme; acceptance to theological college; acceptance for ordination candidature; appointment as ‘senior

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12. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (Revised and Enlarged)* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977; originally published New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 252.

13. Lewis, ‘Ring’, p. 319.

student'; landing the coveted evangelism traineeship (a kind of 'knighthood' in my tribe); ordination itself; approval by a church political party; entry to the governing Committee of our Diocese; the archdeaconry; the episcopacy ... all of these offer, in their own way, the lure of the Inner Ring. Lewis would have rebuked as folly any claim that either Australian egalitarianism or Christian culture can offer me any protection.

Oddly though, we will find Lewis defending the existence of each of these rings. I will return to that defence shortly. But for the moment we need to notice the oppressive weight of their dark side. The onion has endless layers; the sieve can never be filled; the horizon always recedes. Lewis uses these metaphors to show the endless yearning for inclusion that we carry within as we navigate such systems.

To the vast majority who have no interest in my church and its groupings, Lewis will note that there are as many forms of this longing as there are groupings of people. Invitations from the rich and famous might mean nothing to *you*; yet *you* are devoured by your desire to join a fledgling band practising in some seductive, forbidden garage. Some Saturday morning crew has not yet invited *you* to play golf with them, and your desperation and pain increases. You keep dropping in on a regular group of coffee-sippers, or card-players, or mothers and children at play, hoping for more than the usual casual and careless greeting. Your every waking moment is consumed with getting your child into that selective school across town. Or you long for some sacred space – a clubhouse, common-room or coffee shop – where there gathers that knot of people with whom you long to share 'the delicious knowledge that we, we four or five huddled

here, are the people who *know*'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed the desire diabolically conceals itself: the company accountant (or church wheeler-dealer) pulls you aside and whispers, 'Listen mate, Albert and I saw at once that we *must* get you onto our committee.' That would be such a bore. 'It is tiring and unhealthy to lose your Saturday afternoons; but to have them free because you don't matter – that is much worse.'<sup>15</sup>

My main purpose ... is simply to convince you that this desire is one of the great permanent mainsprings of human action. It is one of the factors which go to make up the world as we know it – this whole pell-mell of struggle, competition, confusion, graft, disappointment, and advertisement, and if it is one of the permanent mainsprings then you may be quite sure of this. Unless you take measures to prevent it, this desire is going to be one of the chief motives of your life, from the first day on which you enter your profession until the day when you are too old to care. That will be the natural thing – the life that will come to you of its own accord. Any other kind of life, if you lead it, will be the result of conscious and continuous effort. If you do nothing about it, if you drift with the stream, you will in fact be an 'inner ringer'. I don't say you'll be a successful one; that's as may be. But whether by pining and moping outside Rings that you can never enter, or by passing triumphantly further and further in – one way or the other you will be that kind of man. I have already made it fairly clear that I think it better for you not to be that kind of man.<sup>16</sup>

I urge you to read, reread and read that paragraph again, for theological students spectacularly and regularly fail in the

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14. Ibid. p. 316.

15. Ibid. p. 316.

16. Lewis, 'Ring', p. 318.

way Lewis describes. One of the most dominant elements in all our lives is the desire to be inside inner circles and the terror of being left outside. Theological students and people in church ministries are no exception.

I meet a lot of people, usually Christians, who hear about ‘inner rings’ and make an obvious response. ‘Well of course the problem is *cliques*. They are bad, aren’t they?’ But at this point Lewis surprises us. To expect people not to have bonds of affection, and not to gather into little knots of affinity, makes about as much sense as expecting them to give up their slavish dependence upon oxygen. Our natural interest in human social relationships is seen in God’s astonishing declaration to Adam – that even when Adam was in harmonious relationship with God himself, ‘it is not good for the man to be alone’ [Gen. 2:18]. Although God’s immediate solution is the provision of a spouse, we may also validly draw the wider inference that *humans need human company*.

There will always be a place for friendship, for shared tasks, for confidential discussions, and for circles of common interest. Inner Rings are not evil simply because they exist. Informal ‘networks’ simply develop while people work on projects or just ‘hang around’ together. ‘Inner Rings’ are necessary, thinks Lewis, and we should not even think of them as a necessary ‘evil’. They are an unavoidable and innocent feature of life. Therefore the myriad structures of my denomination are not inherently evil. They simply represent ways in which thousands of people have banded together to follow Jesus and tell others of him. Little knots of people who like each other and work together cannot be blasted as mere ‘cliques’.

We are drawn into groups by virtue, kindness, loyalty, humour, learning, wit, or common loves. ‘If, say, you want to join a musical society because you really like music – then there

is a possibility of satisfaction. You may find yourself playing in a quartet and you may enjoy it.<sup>17</sup> Lewis's target is not the inner circles themselves, for without them, we would be left with either an undifferentiated collective or with thousands of unconnected individuals.<sup>18</sup> But the 'great permanent mainspring' to which he refers is a *disordering* of our proper desire for human relationship, expressed as the obsession to have it at all costs, the anguish when we are excluded, the dark side of that 'delicious sense of secret intimacy' that inclusion gives us,<sup>19</sup> and the pleasure of excluding others in their turn. Ever since I first read it Lewis's stark, final diagnosis has stayed with me: that 'the quest of the Inner Ring will break your hearts unless you break it'.<sup>20</sup> 'Until you conquer the fear of being an outsider, an outsider you will remain.'<sup>21</sup> The poignant humanity of this diagnosis repeats Augustine's pained recollection of himself, made 1500 years earlier: that 'there is a ... kind of temptation which, I fear, has not passed from me. Can it ever pass from me in all this life? It is the desire to be feared or loved by other men, simply for the pleasure that it gives me, though in such pleasure there is no true joy.'<sup>22</sup>

Lewis thinks that when we 'break' this compulsion to belong, something wonderful happens. Belonging finds us.

[Y]ou will ... find that you have come unawares to a real inside: that you are indeed snug and safe at the centre of something which, seen from without, would look

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17. Ibid. p. 319.

18. Cf. C.S. Lewis, 'Membership', in *The Weight of Glory*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 1949, 1976), pp. 159, 163.

19. Lewis, 'Ring', p. 317.

20. Ibid. p. 320.

21. Ibid. p. 319.

22. Augustine, *Confessions*, tr. R.S. Pine-Coffin, Penguin Classics edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 244 (X. 36).

exactly like an Inner Ring. But the difference is that its secrecy is accidental, and its exclusiveness a by-product, and no one was led thither by the lure of the esoteric: for it is only four or five people who like one another meeting to do things that they like. This is friendship. . . . It causes perhaps half of all the happiness in the world, and no Inner Ring can ever have it.<sup>23</sup>

But *how* does Lewis think we may conquer this fear and ‘break’ this quest? Evangelical Christians, in lucid moments when we know ourselves most well, see only frailty and weakness – unreliable ‘jars of clay’ [2 Cor. 4:7]. We know that we are too easily swept up into our longings which seem so real at the time, but which prove so fruitless and empty in hindsight.

We find Lewis contemplating an odd paradox: we cannot find shelter from this storm by joining a herd, whether large or small. He knows that various large groupings are necessary, but they are transient, and are usually limited to short-term goals. He has no confidence that our longing to belong will be met by membership in some human movement or cause.<sup>24</sup> Even family life is inadequate finally to meet this need to belong.<sup>25</sup> Rather, ‘the true road lies in quite another direction’, and he proceeds to make cryptic mention of the Christian Scriptures.<sup>26</sup>

For Lewis, *all* our desires are dim anticipations of what was always *finally* intended for us by God.<sup>27</sup> Just as our fleeting,

23. Lewis, ‘Ring’, p. 320.

24. Lewis, ‘Membership’, pp. 159, 163.

25. C.S. Lewis, ‘The Sermon and the Lunch’, in *Undeceptions*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1971), pp. 236-7.

26. Lewis, ‘Ring’, p. 320.

27. ‘I was sent back to the false gods there to acquire some capacity for worship against the day when the true God should recall me to himself.’ C.S. Lewis,

aching moments of joy keep pointing beyond themselves to something more, so also is something similar at work in our unquenchable longings to belong. In a universe where we are constantly treated as strangers, ‘we pine’, ‘longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm’.<sup>28</sup> Whether we realise it or not, our hunger is for ‘acceptance by God, response, acknowledgement, and welcome into the heart of things’. With God, he says, ‘the door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last’,<sup>29</sup> and in the presence of God we find the home we have always sought. Lewis also knows the obverse truth: that from time to time we reckon with the threat of banishment from God’s presence, ‘left utterly and absolutely *outside* – repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored’.<sup>30</sup> If the longing for the Inner Ring is a harbinger of heaven, the terror of exclusion is a glimpse of hell. ‘We are summoned from the outset to combine as creatures with our Creator.’<sup>31</sup> Lewis rediscovers what Augustine knew of human sociality: that stitched into our very marrow is the ultimate purpose of our existence – to

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*Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 88. ‘Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.’ (C.S. Lewis, ‘The Weight of Glory’, in *The Weight of Glory*, ed. Walter Hooper [London: HarperCollins, 1949, 1976], p. 16.)

28. Lewis, ‘Glory’, p. 40.

29. *Ibid.* p. 41

30. *Ibid.*

31. Lewis, ‘Membership’, p. 166.

rest in a ‘perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God and of one another in God’.<sup>32</sup>

The Bible is of course loaded with this way of seeing, and its entire trajectory is a stake through the heart of Inner-Ring-ism. An Almighty God has made us well. Redeeming us from sin and punishment is his ultimate way of loving us. We journey as ‘exiles’ toward his home. When such reality seeps into our core, our freedom from the emptiness of Inner-Ring-ism begins. Consider just three biblical examples:

First: in a series of confrontations with Ahab, the most powerful tyrant ancient Israel ever saw, the lone figure of Elijah twice declares ‘As the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand ...’ [1 Kings 17:1 & 18:15 NRSV]. Perhaps ‘before whom I stand’ is just a turn of phrase for ‘whom I serve’ [NIV]. But it seems to be more: despite Ahab’s awful power, Elijah ‘stands before’, and belongs to, the massive bulk of Almighty God. Any temptation to envy the ‘Inner Ring’ of Ahab’s court is neutralised by *this* God’s ‘backing’. Here is the start of what at first looks like a rugged biblical individualism – the ability not to need the crowd and its promise of false belonging. But of course ‘individualism’ is the wrong term: Elijah knows *true belonging* in a way that makes false belonging undesirable, boring and obsolete.

Second: the New Testament authors feel the weight of this divine backing with even greater force when they consider what Christ’s death must imply. After Paul’s long exploration of it in Romans 1–8, he is astounded at his conclusion:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will

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32. See fn. 5 above in this chapter.

he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ... neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. [Rom. 8:31-33, 39]

Against *this* acceptance, the excluding sneers of an Inner Ringer can be no threat. Paul does not mean to minimise the transient pain of human condemnation and exclusion. Indeed his own frequent and sometimes awful experiences of exclusion give his statement in Romans 8 the ballast of authenticity. His point, though, is that no human condemnation can find any lasting point of attachment to the person whom God himself has forgiven and approved in Christ.

Third: in the letter to the Colossians, Paul addresses himself to a situation where esoteric ‘insiders’ leverage the desire for the Inner Ring, torturing vulgar ‘outsiders’ with tales about how as ‘insiders’ they adhere more strictly to food laws, more flawlessly observe religious festivals, and have seen angels. But, says Paul, ‘God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Christ]’ [Col. 1:19]. ‘All the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form’ in this Christ [Col. 2:9] – and in a brilliantly unanticipated reply to these excluders, Paul declares to the vulgar Colossian outsiders that in reality, ‘you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the Head over every power and authority’ [Col. 2:10]. To be with Christ in this way is to be at the centre; in fact the Colossian Inner-Ringers have ‘lost connection with the Head’ [Col. 2:19]. Their aloofness to Christ puts them, by their own choice, on the outside.

If I may return again to the problem of ‘belonging’ within the structures of my own church denomination, I am

reminded of Archbishop Jensen's inaugural address to the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. There are many small churches on the geographical and social 'edge' of this large and slightly powerful institution. They often perceive themselves to be marginalised and alone. It is, in its own way, an 'inner ring' problem. But for Jensen neither the episcopacy, the denomination's structure, nor the Diocesan head office are any kind of real or final 'centre', since 'our true centre is in heaven; we march to the beat of His drum'.<sup>33</sup>

This view of social reality is unusual for an organisation's most senior official, and starkly counterpoints that of Studdock, Tolstoy's general, and ourselves at our most frail and driven. Christian theology shapes a powerful alternative vision of true 'belonging'. True inclusion is found, to borrow Paul's commonplace yet superb phrase, 'in Christ'.

With Lewis, I remain pessimistic about my own chances of breaking my desire for the inner circle through the 'strength' of my own will-power, or (worse) by 'believing in myself'. I may as well trust in my power never to fall ill. Rather, Lewis's comments on a related matter give some clues about how we might daily become released of our chains:

I am not in despair. At this point I become what some would call very Evangelical; at any rate very un-Pelagian. I do not think any efforts of my own will can end once and for all this craving ... Only God can. I have good faith and hope he will. Of course, I don't mean that I can therefore, as they say, 'sit back'. What God does for us, He does in us. The process of doing it will appear to me (and not falsely) to be the daily or hourly repeated exercises of my own will renouncing this attitude, especially

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33. Peter F. Jensen, 'Presidential Address', in *Yearbook of the Diocese of Sydney* (Sydney: St Andrews House, 2002), 383 (delivered 26<sup>th</sup> October, 2001).

each morning, for it grows all over me like a new shell each night. Failures will be forgiven; it is acquiescence that is fatal ... We may never, this side of death, drive the invader out of our territory, but we must be in the Resistance, not in the Vichy government.<sup>34</sup> And this, so far as I can yet see, must be begun again *every day*.<sup>35</sup>

For theological students and workers gripped by the quest for inner circles, the ‘exercises’ needed are discussed throughout this book. But they are not so different than for any Christian. We remember before whom we really stand. We know the One who is ‘for us’. We allow our breath to be taken away by the One who gives us his ‘fullness’. We recognise the appropriateness of human loneliness, friendships, and belonging, with sadness at their absence. We enjoy friendship and belonging when, in God’s kindness, they happen upon us. We prayerfully wait upon his Spirit for help in our great frailty.

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34. Lewis is referring to the puppet French government of Nazi-occupied southern France. The metaphor is meant to highlight and oppose the way we become sold out to cultures around us.

35. C.S. Lewis, ‘A Slip of the Tongue’, in *The Weight of Glory*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 1949, 1976), pp. 191-2.