VII | Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center

A "Diagram of Love Himself": Reading C.S. Lewis's *The Four Loves* as Spiritual Practice

Author(s): Toby F. Coley

Source: *VII: Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center,* Vol. 40 (2024), pp. e140-e154

Published by: Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College

Marion E. Wade Center

Marion E. Wade Center • Wheaton College
501 College Ave • Wheaton, IL 60187-5593
630.752.5908 • wheaton.edu/wade

A "Diagram of Love Himself": Reading C.S. Lewis's *The Four Loves* as Spiritual Practice

". . . the rightful measure of our love to God is to exceed all measure."
– Bernard of Clairvaux (qtd. in Patmore 14)

St. Bernard of Clairvaux's eloquent statement is rhetorically balanced, which makes it memorable. A logical follow-up might be expressed as, "How can I learn to love the immeasurable God immeasurably?" The twelfth-century Cistercian monk's answer comes in the form of a famous treatise on the love of God (*De Diligendo Deo*). The title of this work is translated variously as *On Loving God*, *The Love of God*, or *The Four Loves.* Readers familiar C.S. Lewis's writings will notice this last title is the same as Lewis's treatise on love. While the two works differ in their treatment of love,[1] each offers a perspective that can guide Christians into deeper relationship with God through exploration of the nature of human and divine love. In particular, Lewis's *The Four Loves* can be read profitably—similar to the way Bernard's treatise is read—as a work of ascetical (i.e., pastoral/practical) theology. The purpose of ascetical theology is the study of Christian progress toward sanctification and as such includes any means by which we progress toward God: prayer, reading and study, worship and sacrament, service and alms, etc. *The Four Loves* can be fruitful when read as spiritual practice, meant to guide souls in their progress to love God without measure.

(Image from the Wellcome Collection 3662i. Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International [CC BY 4.0].)

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, 1090-1153. Line engraving by Dominicus Custos, 1597.

To support the claim that Lewis's work on love can be read as spiritual practice, we need to understand the nature of ascetical theology and establish Lewis's familiarity with and practice of theology ascetically, after which we can explore how *The Four Loves* fits within this category of *applied* theology for a lay public. A reading of *The Four Loves* that understands it in this way helps draw out some of its benefits.

The argument presented here is not that Lewis explicitly labels the work as pastoral theology, but that it functions as such by the means it uses and by bringing such a lens to bear on the reading. *The Four Loves* (*TFL*) uses traditional ascetical categories as pastoral guides, from dogmatic and moral theology, providing examples of what the natural loves might look like in their human, demonic, and divine (or natural, subnatural, and supernatural) modes. When raised by grace to their supernatural states, the three natural loves of *storgé*, *philia*, and *eros* "become modes of Charity," being rightly ordered by *agape* (God's love) flowing in and through them, as Lewis says in the final chapter—on "Charity"—of *TFL* (133). Lewis appears to use "Charity" to mean the love of God empowering humans to love him and one another, thus it is a natural love raised by *agape*. It has both a vertical (toward God) and a horizontal (toward one another) direction, as seen in the Great Commandment.[2] Charity is the supernatural mode of the natural loves, which have been raised to participate in the divine life through God's love. Such ordering is not passive, however. The loves must, as St. John of the Cross says about our human nature, "co-operate with grace" (qtd. in Thornton 25) in order to be raised. Learning to cooperate with grace is one way of defining the purpose of ascetical theology.

A presupposition born out in this essay is that the spirituality of Lewis—Lewis having been born in Belfast and educated primarily in England—is an English spirituality. An important contemporary source for explaining the English ascetical tradition is Martin Thornton (1915-1986), a respected scholar and Anglican priest who specialized in the history and practice of this discipline. Thornton's most relevant work in defining such a spirituality is his *English Spirituality: An Outline of Ascetical Theology according to the English Pastoral Tradition* (1986).

In *English Spirituality*, Thornton argues that ascetical theology is "concerned with Christian progress" (22); it is the whole spiritual life

> in which the spirit of God, sought and nurtured in prayer, controls every minute and every aspect. Similarly, ascetical theology is primarily a practical approach to all other branches of theology, a catalyst or synthesizing agent which welds all the departments into a creative whole. (16)

The end goal (*telos*) of ascetical theology is Christian perfection—union with God. Such perfection is never fully attained in this life, but the striving after it, initiated and assisted always by grace, is the province of ascetical theology. If the *telos* of studying theology ascetically is growth in the love of God, how can Christ-followers learn to be better, more proficient[3] Christians? Ascetical theology addresses "the fundamental duties and disciplines of the Christian life, which nurture the ordinary ways of prayer, and which discover and

foster those spiritual gifts and graces constantly found in ordinary people" (19). More specifically, the subject matter (duties and disciplines) includes "the cardinal and theological virtues, the gifts of the Spirit, sin and its divisions, methods of prayer, the Three Ways, and so on" (21).[4]

The Three Ways: The Purgative, the Illuminative, and the Unitive Way

F.P. Harton, in *The Elements of the Spiritual Life*, explains that the Purgative Way immediately follows baptism into the Body of Christ and involves prayer, mortification of the "flesh," and penitence for the purpose of the "extirpation of sin and the settling of the soul in virtue, along with the spiritual assimilation of the truths of the Christian religion" (Harton 302). This phase of the Christian life is the initial phase of growth and learning—of "purification of the soul"—to live out basic truths and practices and develop real penitence toward one's sin. The next phase, the Illuminative Way, expresses itself in the gaining and practicing of virtues, "growth in prayers and the actualization of sacramental grace" (302). In the Illuminative Way, souls have "made some advance in the spiritual life" to experience a "new and deeper love of God" and a "deepening of infused virtues," particularly of Faith, Hope, and Charity (314–16).

The Unitive Way is primarily "contemplation, the acceptance by the whole being of that union within Himself which God gives as He will, and the unifying life in Charity" (Harton 302) marked by detachment from creatures, abandonment to the will of God, and reliance on Charity as the "motive power of life" (327–30). The Three Ways are dynamic and interrelated; a Christian may move between various aspects of them at any given moment, though progressing in a dominant Way throughout life. The Ways also display variation within themselves for these paths that Christians travel. Another set of terms for these ways focuses on the nature of prayer in each path: the Purgative Way is often referred to as the path of meditative prayer, the Illuminative Way as contemplative prayer, and the Unitive Way as unlocking mystical prayer along this path of progress.

The three ways are not dry, scholastic categories, but intimately practical and pastoral. Christian life flows out of the Incarnation, and thus, a theology of Christian progress "makes the bold and exciting assumption that every truth flowing from the Incarnation, from the entrance of God into the human world as man, must have its practical lesson. If theology is incarnational, then it must be pastoral" (Thornton, *English Spirituality* 21): it must be for the building up of the body of Christ (whether individual or collective). Such an emphasis on the pastoral nature of theology is one of the defining characteristics of English spirituality, "not only as pastoral practice but also as the source and inspiration of ascetical theology" (51). In other words, ascetical theology seeks to apply the lessons Christians have learned about growing in sanctity, and thus it is sometimes referred to as "pastoral" or

"applied" theology. As Lyle Dorsett noted in *Seeking the Secret Place*, Lewis's approach to theology and spiritual direction is likewise *pastoral* at heart, that he "became . . . a spiritual guide" to many (110). David Downing, in *Into the Region of Awe: Mysticism in C.S. Lewis*, argues that Lewis is more concerned with the saint's life—his or her living out sanctification—than with listing out specific mystical-experiential categories (32).[5] Like Evelyn Underhill (an English mystic), Lewis draws on the Trinity and the Incarnation to offer a practical look at the "motives, skill, and constancy of the voyager [mystic], and on the grace of God" (Lewis qtd. in Downing 32).

In addition to the emphasis on pastoral theology in English spirituality, another significant characteristic of English spirituality is, like the theology from which it draws, a primary deference to the authority of Scripture, then the Patristics, followed by the *Book of Common Prayer* (including the Articles of Religion and the Ordinal) and sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Anglican Divines such as Hooker, Taylor, Andrews, and Herbert, who are credited with elaborating early Anglican theological positions in relationship to Roman Catholicism and other Protestants.[6] Thornton makes this point well, and I believe it reflects much of Lewis's own approach:

> Well in the background remains the English School of Spirituality: sane, wise, ancient, modern, sound, and simple; with roots in the New Testament and the Fathers, and of noble pedigree; with its golden periods and its full quote of saints and doctors; never obstructive, seldom in serious error, ever holding its essential place within the glorious diversity of Catholic Christendom. (*English Spirituality* 14)

In other words, English spirituality, and thus an English ascetical approach to theology, "is no medieval invention but is rooted in the faith once delivered to the saints and is all ultimately biblical" (Thornton, *English Spirituality* 21). It is perhaps important here to remember that due to the diverse nature of catholic Christianity, different streams of thought create different emphases in approach. To draw this back to Lewis, we must look briefly at Thornton's additional claims about the English approach.

All ascetical approaches, says Thornton, typically come "in one of three forms": firstly, as "definition and exposition of its fundamental terms"; secondly, as "moral and ascetical casuistry, or the 'case' method"; or thirdly, as a composite of the two that "contains some reference to terms and fundamental categories, and there is an occasional illustration or 'case,' but the main emphasis is upon the living experience of the Church as taught by saints and doctors and interpreted by various schools" (*English Spirituality* 27–28). *The Four Loves* experienced as a composite method where Lewis offers definitions and supporting examples ("cases") provides a practical

asceticism meant to be lived out, exemplified in Lewis's wealth of examples taken from life.

Each ascetical approach presupposes an audience that knows 1) the relevant basic categories or will learn them along the way, 2) that real *lived* experience is the starting point for illustrations—ascetical works introduce concepts and then expect continued application in life—and, finally, 3) that the purpose of such works is "a background knowledge by means of which one can look at human beings in theological terms" (Thornton, *English Spirituality* 28). One thing Lewis is *not* doing here is offering a "how-to" manual of standard practices; while not all of his readers may be familiar with the church's traditional threefold Rule of Eucharist, Daily Office, and private prayer,[7] it is safe to say Lewis assumes at least his Christian audience regularly attends corporate worship and practices private prayer.[8] The Rule (*regula*), which is not a restrictive law but rather a measured way to pattern one's life, is important because it "effects everything that ascetical theology is supposed to effect" and "ensures the most perfect possible balance between the corporate and individual aspects of Christian life" (78). The Rule is foundational to any spiritual practice. The ascetical practices of the spiritual disciplines, such as mortification, prayer, penitence, fasting, and regular sacraments, among others, are the methods used to cooperate with grace, providing an open environment for the Holy Spirit to work fully in each person.

Importantly, these suppositions lead to one final, but vital, characteristic we can see plainly mapped onto *The Four Loves*. Since ascetical theology addresses advancement in the Christian life, most of it

> comes down to us in the form of "progressions" and hierarchies: the Three Ways of Purgation, Illumination, and Union are fundamental to Catholic spirituality. . . . It is not surprising that so many of the spiritual classics include in the titles words like "scale", "ladder", "ascent", and the "mountain" up which the Christian is to climb. Such schemes are, in the best sense, theoretical. That does not mean useless, unpractical, or "academic", but that they must be properly interpreted and used. (Thornton, *English Spirituality* 22)

The penchant for organizing schemes is not unique to English spirituality, but it is typical of ascetical works. How did Lewis, then, interpret and use ascetical categories in his daily practice?

Lewis's Familiarity with English Spirituality

Lewis lived an ascetical life, which recommends the threefold Rule of regular Communion, the Daily Office, and private prayer—a program he consistently followed and increased, as Dorsett demonstrates:

> From the time of his conversion Lewis became devoted to corporate worship and prayer. He saw community worship in one's particular church as indispensable to spiritual health and growth. In addition to maintaining his regular worship at College Chapel . . . he felt constrained to attend his parish church on Sundays. When staying in his rooms at Magdalen College over the weekends, he would attend worship services at the Anglican convental church in the Retreat House of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, located just off Cowley Road within walking distance of the college. Otherwise he attended the Anglican parish church at Headington Quarry, Holy Trinity, which lay within a short walk of The Kilns, the house he and [his brother] Warren owned. (Dorsett 40–41)

For those steeped in the English tradition, this quote should cue us to something very important. In addition to Lewis's consistency of a ruled life, he came under the very English ascetical practice of spiritual direction by none other than one of the monkish Anglican priests known as the Cowley Fathers, named after the village and street where their monastery and the Retreat house of the Society of St. John the Evangelist resided. Dorsett argues that the nearly twelve-year pattern of spiritual direction Lewis maintained with Fr. Walter Adams was perhaps the most formative part of Lewis's faith from 1940-1952, until Adams's death (88):

> Unless one of them was out of town, Lewis met with Walter Adams nearly every week. . . . Adams stressed Lewis's need for daily prayer, weekly Communion, and the reading of the daily office from the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. Lewis, like the Cowley Fathers, used the 1662 Prayer Book. Adams also advised Lewis to go to confession weekly, and to make an annual retreat of two to three days. (Dorsett 94)

In this context of *regula*, Lewis grew and embraced an English ascetical life, and himself became a *de facto* spiritual director to many people through his books and thousands of letters, meeting and corresponding with some of those people over a period of decades. Dorsett reminds us that through Adams's guidance, Lewis "embraced the tradition of the Anglican Reformers in the context of sacramental life and experimental living," which "is evident from things he wrote in *Letters to Malcolm*" and elsewhere (94). Lewis's development during this period predates the delivery and later publication of *The Four Loves*, though his thoughts on the subject of Christian Charity can be traced throughout his life.

One last influence is worth noting. As a medieval and Renaissance scholar, Lewis was steeped in the pre- and immediately post-Reformation

(Photograph by Eugene Starostin. Wikimedia Commons. Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International [CC BY 4.0].)

Holy Trinity Headington Quarry, where C.S. Lewis worshiped and is buried.

period. He notes in many works his debt to people from these periods such as St. Anselm, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Richard Hooker, and others. Thornton argues that the English approach founded in Anselm is exemplified in Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection.* Hilton, according to Thornton, "is at the centre of English ascetical theology, and . . . is a kind of sheet-anchor for the other fourteenth-century writers, consummating the Catholic tradition in the English School, and providing a foundation for everything that was to come" (*English Spirituality* 176). The *Scale* is a work that "brings together all the elements of English spirituality and synthesizes the fundamental teaching of those who have made it up." One such teaching appears both in Lewis and in Hilton in the refrain that the "so-called 'spiritual sins' are more lethal than the fleshly ones . . . but that pride is the direct cause of them all, and humility—'meekness'—is their one certain conqueror" (187).

In a letter to Dom Bede Griffiths OSB on 17 January 1940, Lewis demonstrates familiarity with both the concept of spiritual and physical sin as well as a classic distinction in ascetical theology that undergirds the difference:

> The Platonic and neo-Platonic stuff has, no doubt, been reinforced (a) By the fact that people not very morally sensitive or instructed but trying to do their best recognize temptations of appetite as temptations but easily mistake all the spiritual (and worse) sins for harmless or even virtuous states of mind: hence the illusion that the "bad part" of oneself is the body. (b) By a misunderstanding of the Pauline use of σάρξ, wh[ich] in reality cannot mean the body (since envy, witchcraft, and other spiritual sins are attributed to it) but, I suppose, means the unregenerate manhood as a whole. (You

> have no doubt noticed that σωμα is nearly always used by St. Paul in a good sense).
>
> . . . Yes, I've read *The Scale of Perfection* with much admiration. (325–26)

After his recognition of confusion between types of temptation, Lewis demonstrates his familiarity with both Walter Hilton (at least as early as 1940)[9] and with the distinction between the goodness of the human body and the badness of the "fleshly" (concupiscent) life.[10] This distinction between body (σωμα) and fleshliness (σάρξ) is central to the idea that mortification of inordinate desire (denying the "flesh") is required for growth as an end to union with Christ. The natural body is not evil. The body is raised to new life in Christ, and thus even natural pleasure (such as in a desire for beauty) may be a starting point for our desire for God. Understanding a right use of the body is important for real spiritual progress. St. Paul opposes the life of the Spirit to the life of the flesh (σάρξ). The fleshly life displays our carnal, concupiscent desires, which are any desires—whether sensual or not—that are not reordered to the love of God; these are rooted in "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16). But how do we measure growth against these "fleshly," Spirit-opposed desires?

Our ascetical life is measured by our progress in moral theology (Thornton, *English Spirituality* 22); growth is shown in committing fewer sins and an increase in the fruits of the Spirit through the work of grace, but grace "is not magic; the Church's Rule is the necessary foundation for the exercise of the strengthened will. The moral struggle must issue in Charity. Love for God is ever the goal; Christian morality is teleological" (188). Or, as Lewis writes, our "spiritual health is exactly proportional to [our] love for God" (*Four Loves* 3). *The Four Loves* is directed throughout toward its final chapter's topic—Charity—the supernatural love of God.

To summarize, Lewis's ascetic was catholic and English, which means he drew on scripture, the Church Fathers, and the English tradition from the medieval and Reformation periods with a deep reading in St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Julian of Norwich, and Walter Hilton, among others. This ascetic is particularly strong in what I call his pastoral works.[11] The most famous of these pastoral works is *The Four Loves*, to which we will now turn.

Reading The Four Loves *through an Ascetical Lens*

The Four Loves can be read as a work of ascetical theology that describes aspects of both the Purgative Way and the Illuminative Way. In dividing each of the three natural loves into need-love and gift-love, Lewis shows how we might experience the Purgative Way of need along with the Illuminative Way of gift within each natural love. By way of reminder, the four loves

Lewis explores are three natural loves—*storgé*, *philia*, *eros*—and one supernatural love: Charity. Lewis labels *storgé* as familial love, *philia* as friendship, and *eros* as desire for God through union with another person. Each natural love appears as a need-love and a gift-love, except *philia* (friendship), which only displays a gift-love. Need-loves are those versions of love that require external fulfillment as thirst needs water for satiety. Gift-loves overflow from internal desires and are not based in need. Growth in love (of all types) requires the practices of the spiritual disciplines, engaging the will in cooperation with grace.

The Four Loves is replete with references to discipline, prayer, virtue, and vice—all foci of ascetical theology. It assumes a mainly Christian audience, but it stops short of the Unitive Way and thus of mystical theology. Lewis makes this point in the final chapter, where he notes that he has "included two Graces under the word Charity. But God can give a third. He can awake in man, towards Himself, a supernatural Appreciative love. This is of all gifts the most to be desired" (140). This appreciative love, love expressed in pure adoration, is reflective of the Unitive Way. Here, as elsewhere throughout *The Four Loves*, we see Lewis drawing on the hierarchical organizing penchant of ascetical theology. The very fact that Lewis uses three ordered loves, each of which exists on a spectrum and appears to develop, is another clear sign of this schematic (even scholastic?) tendency.

As early as the introduction to *The Four Loves*, Lewis establishes a central theme of the book in a refrain, borrowed from Book II, chapter 10 of Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, that "the highest cannot stand without the lowest": a phrase Lewis uses six times in *The Four Loves*. The idea here is a standard one in ascetical theology. As Pascal Parente, a Roman Catholic ascetical theologian, argues regarding the methods of the Purgative Way (prayer, mortification, penitence), "what seems to be the characteristic trait of the lowest degree of spiritual life must remain with us up to the highest degree of perfection and of the mystical graces" (75). Lewis's main idea is that each natural love is not in itself bad, but, like our bodies, is part of our nature (hence *natural*). But our concupiscence (disordered desire) leads us to misuse the loves, eventually idolizing one. Through sin, that idolized love devolves into a subhuman (demonic) love. Though concupiscence can drive us to idolize a natural love, there is always hope of transformation through grace. When we put God first, the love will "cease to be a demon when it ceases to be a god" (*Four Loves* 6)—another Lewis refrain (drawing on Denis de Rougement's *Love in the Western World*).[12] Charity builds upon the natural loves God creates in us to transform them: the highest stands on the lowest. Thus, we see Lewis's sacramental vision—a vision that sees God working *through* the natural/material creation to pour out grace upon that creation. God does not eradicate our natural loves but *transforms* them as, in the Eucharist, the host is transformed into the body of Jesus Christ.

One poignant and memorable instance in *The Four Loves* of the process of a natural love becoming demonic is the example of Mrs. Fidget, covering several pages in the chapter on *storgé* (affection for the familiar). As noted previously, composite works of ascetical theology offer "an occasional illustration" (Thornton, *English Spirituality* 28) and tend to draw on lived experience. Lewis never says that Mrs. Fidget is fictional. In fact, his language implies a real example, and others have noted that she may have been drawn from Mrs. Janie Moore,[13] the mother of Lewis's war-time friend Paddy Moore. During World War I, Lewis and Paddy promised to take care of each other's families were one of them to die in the war. After Paddy died in the trenches, Lewis took care of Mrs. Moore for the next thirty years.

> I am thinking of Mrs. Fidget, who died a few months ago. . . . Mrs. Fidget very often said that she lived for her family. And it was not untrue. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew it. "She lives for her family," they said; "what a wife and mother!" She did all the washing; true, she did it badly, and they could have afforded to send it out to a laundry, and they frequently begged her not to do it. But she did. There was always a hot lunch for anyone who was at home and always a hot meal at night (even in midsummer). They implored her not to provide this. They protested almost with tears in their eyes (and with truth) that they liked cold meals. It made no difference. She was living for her family. . . . For Mrs. Fidget, as she so often said, would "work her fingers to the bone" for her family. They couldn't stop her. Nor could they being decent people quite sit still and watch her do it. They had to help. Indeed they were always having to help. That is, they did things for her to help her to do things for them which they didn't want done. . . . The Vicar says Mrs. Fidget is now at rest. Let us hope she is. What's quite certain is that her family are. (*The Four Loves* 48–50)

Mrs. Fidget allowed her gift-love of *storgé* to become an idol. This rival to spiritual love is much more dangerous than the physical need-love of *storgé*, especially since it is invisible to the idolater. The final quip in the quote accentuates Lewis's usual pastoral and personal approach, lightening with humor to drive a point home for the audience.

Each natural love, not just *storgé*, possesses its own hierarchy of possibility linked to how one uses it, to one's progress in the Christian life. But the natural loves, like growth toward union with God, cannot do anything of their own and must be transposed by grace. When infused with grace, each natural love becomes a mode of Charity. As Harton argues, the origin of human love "is natural instinct, the origin of Charity is grace working upon the instinct and supernaturalising it" (52).

This potential hierarchy, or "diagram of Love Himself" (*Four Loves* 127), means that each natural love can be lowered by sin (pride) or raised by grace (Charity) according to the object of that love (the "beloved"). The way in which one treats the object of one's loves demonstrates whether one is loving in an *ordered* way. Pascal Parente helps us see how Augustine, on whom Lewis draws, understood Charity's object: "There are four things to be loved: one which is above us, namely, God, another which is ourselves, a third which is nigh to us, namely, our neighbor, and a fourth which is beneath us, namely, our own body" (197). Each of these objects can be loved in an ordered or disordered way; this means that to love in a disordered way is to love from our pride and lower that natural love, whereas to do the opposite would be to rely on grace to raise that love. Even our love for God can be disordered if we mistake our conception of God as God himself and thus worship an idol of our own creation.

Importantly, here we can return briefly to St. Bernard's four loves (*De Diligendo Dei*) as offering some parallel to Lewis's use of divine gift-love in the final chapter of *The Four Loves*. Lewis clarifies that God can gift to Christians "a share of His own Gift-love" that is "different from the Gift-loves He has built into their nature" (128). The difference is that "natural gift-loves" are directed to the "intrinsically lovable" whereas Divine Gift-love "enables [a Christian] to love what is not naturally lovable" (128). It is this divine gift-love that Lewis calls "Charity," and it is in this that we love our neighbor and give back love to God (129). Because divine gift-love originates in God, it is hierarchically above the natural loves. In a similar manner, Bernard's four loves represent a hierarchical progression through four degrees toward selfless humility, as he names them in chapters 8–10: love of self for self's sake; love of God for self's sake; love of God for God's sake; and love of self for God's sake. Here we see Bernard's first two loves captured in Lewis's need-loves since the object of both, the self, ought to be intrinsically lovable. Bernard's second two loves are corollaries to Lewis's divine gift-love because in them love becomes "wholly disinterested and desires what is simply best for the beloved" (128). The transformation affects also our need-loves, transforming them into supernatural need-loves of God and of neighbor.

Versions of a fourfold division of love appear throughout ascetical theology, taken up by Augustine, Bernard, and Thomas Aquinas, and adapted by Walter Hilton and others. The Christian tradition is unified in the claim that divine love (*agape*) is the central feature and necessity of the Christian life. It is, unlike other virtues, the only one "that cannot fall into excesses," for it "is the central force of Christianity, the central, connective force of all virtuous endeavors for Christian perfection" (Parente 198); it is both the root and height of all the virtues. The point is that *agape*, as Lewis rightly notes, is "the whole Christian life seen from one particular angle" (*Four Loves* 115) or "in one particular relation" (114).

We see in Harton two additional points about the centrality and character of Charity to the Christian life. First, Charity is itself a "virtue, not a sentiment in either the psychological or popular sense of the word, and it is dependent upon the free acts of the will, not on those of the emotions" (52). Furthermore, this virtue is "founded on sacrifice" (56). Since the natural loves "are not self-sufficient" (Lewis, *Four Loves* 116), grace must come in and change them—must change people—through cooperation with the will. But this transposition[14] does not mean a destruction of the natural loves. The love of God "does not substitute itself for the natural—as if we had to throw away our silver to make room for the gold. The natural loves are summoned to become modes of Charity while also remaining the natural loves they were" (133). But how is such transposition possible? Only through the sacrificial transposition of one's desires.

The natural loves must die if they are to rise, just as all of one's human nature must die to be reborn in Christ—human desires must be sacrificed to his sacrifice: Christians must mortify their desires. Mortification, from the Latin root *mort* ("to die"), means to "put to death." In this sacrifice, Christians participate in grace's power to liberate (through the will) and reorder their desires—baptizing their imaginations—to their proper place under God's rule. It is a dying to self (the "flesh") to live with Christ:

> Natural loves can hope for eternity only in so far as they have allowed themselves to be taken into the eternity of Charity; have at least allowed the process to begin here on earth, before the night comes when no man can work. And the process will always involve a kind of death. There is no escape.
> (Lewis, *Four Loves* 136–37)

The death and life of human nature is a sharing in the death and life of Jesus Christ. In the Incarnation, where

> Christ is perfect God and perfect Man, the natural loves are called to become perfect Charity and also perfect natural loves. As God becomes Man, "not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God,"[15] so here; Charity does not dwindle into merely natural love but natural love is taken up into, made the tuned and obedient instrument of, Love Himself.
> (133–34)

Christians become God's tuned instruments through the difficult work of constantly "denying or totally mortifying" their need-loves—an ongoing, lifelong work (134) accessed by the means of the threefold Rule of the Church: an earthly rehearsal for Heaven's orchestra of adoration and praise.

Such lifelong work is aimed at what Lewis calls "nearness of approach" to God, or sanctification. Lewis distinguishes, like the church before him, between the image and the likeness of God within humanity. Christian belief asserts that human beings maintain our image forever, for it is within our nature, but our likeness is "dimmed" after the Fall—in the natural order we remained rational, "but in the supernatural order that image did not resemble God any longer. Man became an image that had lost its likeness" (Parente 19). It is in our nearness of approach to God that we are "most surely and swiftly approaching [our] final union with God, vision of God and enjoyment of God" (Lewis, *Four Loves* 5): the *telos* of ascetical theology.

Love in Sum

Five criteria tie *The Four Loves* specifically to interpretation as ascetical theology. First, Lewis uses the subject matter, themes, and categories that fall under the study of ascetical theology. Second, he uses a composite method that explains terms and provides examples, which can be seen in his definitions of the types of loves and his examples drawn from life, such as the memorable Mrs. Fidget. Third, Lewis draws on the penchant of moral and systematic theology to create a "diagram of Love Himself, the inventor of all loves" (*Four Loves* 127). Fourth, Lewis's approach is primarily *pastoral* and thus *applied* theology, presented in his usual informal and directorial voice, a native characteristic of the English ascetical approach. Finally, and most importantly, Lewis's work gives his Christian readers a framework and tools to progress toward union with God—the goal of ascetical theology. His Augustinian refrain to put first things first provides the necessary ordinate foci for the natural loves to flourish, to be transposed into modes of supernatural Charity through the work of grace. In reading *The Four Loves*, readers learn that rightly ordered loves enable each person to love the immeasurable God without measure.

Toby F. Coley

Notes

[1] Bernard's four loves represent a hierarchical progression through four degrees toward selfless humility: love of self for self's sake; love of God for self's sake; love of God for God's sake; and love of self for God's sake. Thus, Bernard's loves are directed toward the internal sanctification of the individual soul in its relationship with God, while Lewis's loves emphasize the external relationships reflected by our loves and how those relationships lead us to God.

[2] Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28. "Jesus replied, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is

the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37-39, *New International Version*).

[3] Martin Thornton uses this term (proficiency) in his important work *Christian Proficiency*, which seeks to advise Christians who have progressed beyond the initial phase of their faith.

[4] The Three Ways referenced here are the Purgative, the Illuminative, and the Unitive Way.

[5] Downing's recent work on Lewis's mysticism aligns well with my claims here since mysticism is the highest form of ascetical theology. Each of these paths carries some overlap with the others but tends to accentuate a particular element in the Christian experience.

[6] The Anglican (or Caroline) Divines were Anglican clergy who wrote primarily during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, often defending Anglicanism from both Roman Catholic and Protestant attacks. They are responsible for articulating much of what we know as classic Anglican positions today and include such formidable characters as Jeremy Taylor—whom Lewis often quotes and recommends in his letters—George Herbert, Lancelot Andrews, Izaak Walton, and William Laud.

[7] *The Four Loves* was originally a radio series broadcast in America—though recorded in London—for the Episcopal Radio-TV Foundation of Atlanta, Georgia, in 1958. The talks were then revised for publication in March 1960. Thus, the original audience was first American, then English, and now global.

[8] C.f. Lewis's letter to Mary Van Deusen: "But the New Testament does not envisage solitary religion: some kind of regular assembly for worship and instruction is everywhere taken for granted in the Epistles. So we must be regular practising members of the Church" (12 July 1950, *Collected Letters III*: 68).

[9] It is also relevant that Lewis's book *The Problem of Pain* was published this same year (1940), for in the preface to that work, Lewis references Hilton: "Let me confess at once, in the words of good Walter Hilton, that throughout this book 'I feel myself so far from true feeling of that I speak, that I can naught else but cry mercy and desire after it as I may' (Scale of Perfection I. xvi)" (9).

[10] C.f. Walter Principe, "Toward Defining Spirituality," and Philip Sheldrake, "What Is Spirituality."

[11] For my purposes, I believe his pastoral works include the following, which were written mostly late in his life: *Reflections on the Psalms*, *The Four Loves*, and *Letters to Malcolm*. Many of his letters are also pastoral, but these are not a single published work but a collection spread through time.

[12] Lewis is indebted to other twentieth-century writers, beyond de Rougement, for their influence on *The Four Loves*, but as the scope of this article is limited to an ascetical reading of the book, to which those influences are less germane, they are not discussed here.

[13] See Duane Litz Jr. ,"Recovering Mrs Fidget" (31n3). Litz claims that Warnie Lewis, Walter Hooper, and Roger Lancelyn Green all believe Mrs. Moore was the real-life inspiration for Mrs. Fidget's affection.

[14] For more on Lewis's concept of transposition, see C.S. Lewis, "Transposition."

[15] Here Lewis is quoting the Athanasian Creed: https://www.ccel.org/creeds/athanasian.creed.html

Works Cited

Bernard of Clairvaux. "Bernard of Clairvaux on Love," edited by Dan Graves, *Christian History Institute*, https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/bernard. Accessed 27 Oct. 2022.

—. *On the Love of God*. Translated by Marianne Caroline Byles Patmore, C. Kegan Paul, 1881.

Dorsett, Lyle W. *Seeking the Secret Place: The Spiritual Formation of C.S. Lewis*. Baker Publishing Group, 2004.

Downing, David C. *Into the Region of Awe: Mysticism in C.S. Lewis*. InterVarsity Press, 2005.

Harton, F.P. *The Elements of the Spiritual Life: A Study in Ascetical Theology*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004.

Kempis, Thomas à. *The Imitation of Christ*. Translated by Rev. William Benham. *Project Gutenberg*, 1 Feb. 1999, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1653/pg1653-images.html.

Lewis, C.S. *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume III: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy, 1950 - 1963*. Edited by Walter Hooper, HarperSanFrancisco, 2007.

—. *The Four Loves*. HarperCollins, 2017.

—. *The Problem of Pain*. New York, Macmillan, 1977.

—. "Transposition." *Essay Collection: Faith, Christianity and the Church*. Harper Collins, 2002, pp. 267–75.

Litz, Duane. "Recovering Mrs Fidget: An Analysis of the Rise, Fall, and Restoration of *Storge* as Envisioned in *The Four Loves* and Lewis's Fiction." *Journal of Inklings Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, Apr. 2017, pp. 29–101. https://doi.org/10.3366/ink.2017.7.1.3.

Parente, Pascal P. *The Ascetical Life*. B. Herder Book Co., 1944.

Principe, Walter. "Toward Defining Spirituality." *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, vol. 12, no. 2, June 1983, pp. 127–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/000842988301200201.

Sheldrake, Philip. "What Is Spirituality?" *Spirituality: A Very Short Introduction*, edited by Philip Sheldrake, Oxford University Press, 2012. https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199588756.003.0002.

Thornton, Martin. *Christian Proficiency*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010.

—. *English Spirituality: An Outline of Ascetical Theology According to the English Pastoral Tradition*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012.