ABSTRACT

Bombast, Blasphemy, and the Bastard Gospel:
William Stringfellow and American Exceptionalism

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William Stringfellow (1928-1985) was a Harvard-trained attorney, social critic, and popular theologian. His theology and the social and political critique it engendered were developed against the backdrop of American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism refers to the consciousness of moral uniqueness and superiority that characterizes the popular American national image. This consciousness has been expressed in various ways and has referred to different aspects of the sociopolitical framework that defines the country. Politically, American exceptionalism has been expressed in the terms known as the American Creed, the emphasis upon individual rights and the implication that this creed could be and should be universally believed. Economically, American exceptionalism has been associated with the Protestant work ethic, the myth of the self-made man, the American dream, and the sanctity of property. Theologically, it has been expressed most explicitly in the notion of the chosen nation, divinely called for the purpose of spreading its values throughout the world, and in the more specific idea of America as a Christian nation. Pervading Stringfellow's work is a constant critique of all of these notions. In almost everything he wrote there was an implied or explicit critique of America's national ideology, especially its theological justifications.

Consequently, the following is a study of Stringfellow's thought, with particular reference to his criticism of American exceptionalism. His critique may be summarized as follows: Claims of the nation for morally unique status are bombastic in that they are contradicted by many empirically observed injustices and are blasphemous in that they imply a promise to free citizens from death in its various forms, which is something only God can do. Furthermore, some forms of these exceptionalistic claims reflect a bastardized version of the Gospel in that they presume to announce a form of salvation to the world, politically, economically, and, in some cases, religiously.

Bombast, Blasphemy, and the Bastard Gospel:
William Stringfellow and American Exceptionalism

by

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CONTENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

When the internationally renowned Protestant theologian Karl Barth made his famed 1962 visit to the United States, eight theologians were selected to participate in a panel discussion with him at the University of Chicago. Of these elite eight, the activist, attorney, lay theologian, and social critic William Stringfellow (1928-1985) was the only non-academician.[1] At one point in the panel discussion, during his exchange with Stringfellow, Barth turned to the audience and exclaimed, "You should listen to this man!"[2] The following year, writing about his trip to America, Barth alluded to "the conscientious and thoughtful New York attorney William Stringfellow, who caught my attention more than any other person."[3] The questions and comments from Stringfellow that so captured Barth's attention dealt with a theological response to American nationalism. In light of such an endorsement, the following will attempt to "listen to" Stringfellow as Barth suggested. It will also provide a medium for such "listening" analytically and critically, specifically with respect to his thought in relationship to the notion of American exceptionalism.

Following his brief moment sharing the theological limelight with Karl Barth, William Stringfellow achieved relative prominence and gained a reputation as an incisive

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[1]Bill Wylie-Kellerman, *Keeper of the Word: Selected Writings of William Stringfellow* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 1.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), ix.

critic of white racism with the 1964 publication of his book, *My People is the Enemy: An Autobiographical Polemic*.[4] This critique of racism and its attendant urban poverty was woven throughout a firsthand narrative of Stringfellow's experience as a white, Harvard-trained attorney living and working in Harlem in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Two years later he followed up with *Dissenter in a Great Society: A Christian View of America in Crisis*.[5] This work, which ostensibly took on the Great Society policies of the Johnson administration and their effects on the poor, was decidedly more theological[6] in its approach and demonstrates in part what Stringfellow meant when he described himself a few years later as an "empirical theologian."[7] Based upon the observation and experience of empirical political realities, he sought to think theologically about the political situation by applying portions of the Bible to current events while simultaneously interpreting the Bible in light of such events. Beyond mere observation, as an empirical theologian his interpretation and application of the Bible to experienced reality were greatly influenced by certain key events in his own life.

His theology and the social and political critique it engendered were developed against the backdrop of American exceptionalism. In almost everything he wrote there was an implied critique of America's national ideology, especially its theological justifications. Consequently, the following is a study of Stringfellow's thought, with particular reference to his criticism of American exceptionalism. Stringfellow's critique

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[4]New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964.

[5]Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966.

[6]This is demonstrated by the mere fact that it was published by a denominational publishing house.

[7]William Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1970), 40.

can be summarized in part syllogistically: a) all principalities and powers are fallen and therefore "acolytes of death"; b) the United States as a nation-state is a principality; c) therefore, the United States is fallen and an "acolyte of death." Thus, nationalism is merely idol worship. All claims of the nation for morally unique status are consequently bombastic in that they are contradicted by many empirically observed injustices and are ultimately blasphemous in that they imply a promise to free citizens from death, which is something only God can do. Some forms of these claims furthermore reflect a bastardized version of the Gospel in that they presume to announce a form of salvation, politically, economically, and in some cases religiously, to the world.

Justification

Notwithstanding the approbation he received from Barth, one may logically ask why Stringfellow's thought deserves study at this point in time. One response to the question alludes to the little that has been written about him. This is somewhat surprising considering his prolificence as a writer and popularity during his time as a lecturer and the breadth of his influence. In light of the events of September 11, 2001, moreover, his critique of American exceptionalism has contemporary applicability.

First, there is a relative paucity of work on Stringfellow. Three book-length treatments of his life and thought have been published. Two of them are collections of mostly celebratory contributions, while the other is a showcase of his thought in the form of topical excerpts from his writings. Two of these are currently out of print. Only two dissertations have been written on Stringfellow, one by Anthony Dancer at Queen's College, Oxford, and the other by Thomas Zeilinger at Augustana-Hochschule Neuendettelsau in Germany. Dancer analyzes the integral relationship of Stringfellow's

life and work to his thought. Zeilinger studies the work of both Stringfellow and theologian Walter Wink concerning the notion of the powers. Three master's theses have also been written dealing with Stringfellow.

In light of the above, there are at least three reasons that so little has been written about him. First of all, he was not an academic. Most of his works were published by either denominational presses or evangelical publishing houses. Second, his writing is often difficult to understand, both because of its dialectic content and because of his stilted and cumbersome writing style. Third, in light of the bipolar nature of American Protestantism during his day, he could not be acceptably categorized. His work was too biblically grounded for the liberal Protestants of his own and other mainline denominations, but it was not literalist enough for many evangelicals and most fundamentalists. In terms of the latter two, his antiwar, pro-civil rights politics were too liberal as well.[8] Consequently, his appeal was mostly to a relatively small cadre of radicals and activists from diverse segments of American Christianity: the Catholic left, progressive mainline Protestant seminarians, and the "post-American" evangelical left.

The second justification for another work on Stringfellow is the significance of his influence. In terms of his legacy, his thought concerning the powers has influenced such theologians as Walter Wink and Stanley Hauerwas.[9] Evangelical activist and founder of the Sojourners movement Jim Wallis, writing in 1991, suggested that Stringfellow was

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[8]Stringfellow also happened to be gay. While it is true that fundamentalists and many evangelicals would have rejected Stringfellow's thought outright in light of his homosexuality, he seemed to have managed to keep that fact of his life private, identifying himself in many forums as "celibate by vocation." His homosexuality will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Two.

[9]I wrote Stanley Hauerwas and asked him specifically about Stringfellow's influence upon him. Reflecting upon his earliest exposure to Stringfellow, he "recognized someone who seemed to actually embody Barth's prose." Dr. Hauerwas stated that Stringfellow did influence him. He affirmed that Stringfellow and Will Campbell represented the "kind of activist that [he] wanted to be." Stanley Hauerwas, electronic mail correspondence with author, September 24, 2006.

"the most significant U. S. theologian of the last three decades."[10] Finally, his relationship of reciprocal influence with Jesuit priest and peace activist Daniel Berrigan is noteworthy. One who has had such an impact upon significant subjects of church-state scholarship certainly warrants analysis.

Third, in the "post-9/11" milieu, in the midst of intensified expressions of American nationalism, the recovery of a voice that provided a substantive critique of previous examples of such "bombast" is relevant. Moreover, his thinking represents a unique vision, which was clearly driven by a radical critique and embodied by unwavering dissent from the status quo. Stringfellow, however, rejected any posture of withdrawal, quietism, or ecclesiocentric communalism. He consistently argued for a radical involvement in the political order, noting that "the biblical topic *is* politics"[11] and that all are thoroughly implicated in one another's lives: "In politics, and most plainly in the politics of democracy, every citizen and every institution is involved, whether they want to be or not."[12]

William Stringfellow – A Biographical Summary

In 1956, a young, recent graduate of Harvard Law School moved into a one-bedroom, vermin-infested apartment on 100th Street in East Harlem, New York City. For more than ten years William Stringfellow practiced law in the midst of what was at the time urban blight and insidious ghettoization. He defended drug abusers and sexual

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[10]"William Stringfellow: Keeper of the Word," in *Cloud of Witness*, edited by Jim Wallis and Joyce Hollyday (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 79.

[11]*An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, Texas: Word Publishers, 1973), 14.

[12]*Dissenter in a Great Society: A Christian View of America in Crisis* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), 158.

miscreants. He advocated for scores of impoverished individuals and families as they attempted to protect themselves against injustices perpetrated by what Stringfellow would describe as principalities and powers, institutionally embodied entities with names such as Consolidated Edison, the New York Police Department, and "the landlord." As a result of his experiences in Harlem, in 1964 Stringfellow wrote *My People Is the Enemy: An Autobiographical Polemic.* This work established him as an incisive social critic, a prophetic revealer of obscured injustices, and a respected lay theologian.

William Stringfellow was born in Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1928. His father was by trade a knitter in a hosiery factory, but during William's formative years, Mr. Stringfellow was often out of work due to the Great Depression. William was a precocious child who was active in the local Episcopal church. This early involvement in the church presaged his lifelong commitment as an active layman.

Following high school, he attended Bates College in Maine on a full-tuition academic scholarship. While at Bates, Stringfellow distinguished himself both in terms of academics and in terms of student leadership. In addition to his election to Phi Beta Kappa, he served as president of the student representative body. He also was quite active in student Christian activities, including serving as an American delegate to the World Conference of Christian Youth.

After graduating from Bates in 1949, Stringfellow studied at the London School of Economics as the recipient of a Rotary International Foundation Fellowship. He entered Harvard Law School in the fall of 1953, following a stint as an Army draftee. While at Harvard, Stringfellow taught speech and debate at Tufts, lived at the Harvard Divinity

School, worked with the Student Christian Movement, and "on occasion checked in at the law school."[13]

His work in East Harlem was initially as an attorney with the East Harlem Protestant Parish, an urban ministry which was rather innovative for the time period. After fifteen months with the Parish, Stringfellow resigned over differences concerning ministry philosophy. Wanting to remain in East Harlem, he formed a partnership with two other likeminded lawyers and continued his legal advocacy for the indigent.

In addition to practicing law, Stringfellow wrote, publishing more books and journal articles dealing with social ethics, Christianity and the law, and political commentary. The public voice that he gained enabled him to participate in various civil rights activities, visit college campuses and law schools, and travel as a lecturer.

In 1967 Stringfellow left New York with his lover, companion, and friend, the poet Anthony Towne. Together they moved into an estate on Block Island off the coast of Rhode Island. The move was occasioned by Stringfellow's deteriorating health. In 1968 he underwent radical surgery, which left him without a pancreas and thus a surgically-created diabetic. This condition would plague him for the remainder of his days and would eventually kill him.

In 1970 Towne and Stringfellow were indicted by a federal grand jury for harboring and giving aid to Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan, who had failed to turn himself in to the authorities to serve a prison sentence. Berrigan had been convicted for his part in the Vietnam protest activity carried out by the group known as the Catonsville Nine. In this

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[13]Quoted in Andrew W. McThenia, Jr., "Introduction: How This Celebration Began," in *Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer*, edited by Andrew W. McThenia (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 14.

particular case, Berrigan, his brother, and seven other protesters broke into a draft records office in Catonsville, Maryland, and in symbolic protest of the burning of Vietnamese children they poured homemade napalm on draft files.

Although the District Court soon dismissed the indictments against Stringfellow and Towne, this experience, even more than his Harlem observations, crystallized Stringfellow's thinking and resolve concerning the principalities and powers. All of his works written after this encounter with federal law enforcement manifest the effect that the arrest and indictment had upon him.

While Stringfellow suffered the poorest health, it was Towne who died first, unexpectedly passing away in 1980. For the next several years Stringfellow's health worsened. Finally, in March 1985, he died at the age of 56.

American Exceptionalism

The concept of American exceptionalism has a long and varied history. Consequently, it is imperative that I clarify its meaning for the purposes of this study. The origins of the concept of American exceptionalism are mildly disputed. It is possible that its earliest references were connected to economics and the nineteenth-century labor movement. According to sociologist Kim Voss in *The Making of American Exceptionalism*,[14] the idea of exceptionalism comes from Werner Sombart, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*[15] Sombart was one of many observers from Europe who noted that socialism could not seem to take root in the United States. In this work Sombart notes that "the American worker does not embrace the 'spirit' of socialism as we

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[14]Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993.

[15]Trans. Patricia M. Hocking and C. T. Husbands (White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences Press, (1906)1976).

now understand it in continental Europe, which is essentially socialism with a Marxist character."[16] He suggested that the American worker was not inclined to embrace Socialism in its Marxist form because he was generally satisfied with life and work, and because he had an optimistic view of his future and that of his country. Referring to the American worker, Sombart wrote, "He has a most rosy and optimistic conception of the world. Live and let live is his basic maxim. As a result, the base of all those feelings and moods upon which a European worker builds his class consciousness is removed: envy, embitterment, and hatred against all those who have more and who live extravagantly."[17] In fact, Sombart wrote, "There is expressed in the worker, as in all Americans, a boundless optimism, which comes out as a belief in the mission and greatness of his country, a belief that often has a religious tinge."[18] While the specific context to which Sombart refers was that of the American worker, he identified an optimistic mindset that he suggested was common to the general population.

Political analyst Seymour Martin Lipset also suggests that the concept has a European origin, but that the idea, though perhaps not the term, predated Sombart's work by nearly a century. In *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, he writes, "The idea of exceptionalism has interested many outside the United States. One of the most important bodies of writing dealing with this country is referred to as the 'foreign traveler' literature. . . . Perhaps the best known and still most influential is Alexis de

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[16]Ibid, 18.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*."[19] Historian Joyce Appleby dates the concept even earlier, noting, in reference to colonial America's European observers, "Before America became a nation it was a phenomenon."[20] This "phenomenon" was observed perhaps drolly by some but with great interest by others, who wondered what would become of this experiment. Appleby writes, "In the reform-minded salons of Paris, at commemorative gatherings of London nonconformists, among emergent working-class radicals, the struggle for independence undertaken by thirteen of Britain's North American colonies was given ideological shape and weight and infused with magnetic force."[21] Consequently, "[from] these sophisticated reflections about a colonial rebellion 3,000 miles away came American exceptionalism, a concept that began in high-spirited conversations and ended as an uncontested assumption structuring the political consciousness of the American people."[22]

Appleby suggests several reasons why many in Europe deemed America exceptional, or, more precisely, they perceived America as exceptional drawing as much from their collective imagination as from observation. She writes, "America, in the minds of its attentive European observers of the eighteenth century, was exceptional because its healthy, young, hard-working population had won a revolutionary prize of an empty continent on which to settle its freeborn progeny."[23] This, according to Appleby,

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[19]Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), 17.

[20]Joyce Appleby, *A Restless Past: History and the American Public* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 91.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid., 91-92.

[23]Ibid.

reflected a stark contrast from their Old World experience: "America was exceptional because the familiar predators of ordinary folk – the extorting tax collector, the overbearing nobleman, the persecuting priest, the extravagant ruler – had failed to make the voyage across the Atlantic."[24] From this image, Appleby argues, the notion of American exceptionalism was born: "Natural abundance, inhabitants schooled in tolerance, historic exemption from Old World social evils – these were the materials with which the European reform imagination worked to create the exceptional United States."[25]

Regardless of the nature of its European origins, American exceptionalism commonly refers to a national self-consciousness. English scholar Deborah Madsen argues that this consciousness of exceptionalism has characterized America from its colonial period until the present day and has consistently won the upper hand in disputes concerning American identity. From the perspective of literary criticism she contends "that American exceptionalism permeates every period of American history and is the single most powerful agent in a series of arguments that have been fought down the centuries concerning the identity of America and Americans."[26] In Madsen's view, the self-consciousness of the Massachusetts Bay Puritans continues to characterize America and Americans. She writes, "Though the arguments themselves change over time, the basic assumptions and terms of reference do not change, and it is the assumptions that are derived in important ways from the exceptionalistic logic taken to the New World by the

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[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid., 93.

[26]Deborah Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 2.

first Puritan migrants."[27] Stressing the "redeemer nation" motif, Madsen depicts this "exceptionalistic logic" in the following manner:

> Exceptionalism describes the perception of Massachusetts Bay colonists that as Puritans they were charged with a special spiritual and political destiny: to create in the New World a church and a society that would provide the model for all the nations of Europe as they struggled to reform themselves (a redeemer nation). In this view, the New World is the last and best chance offered by God to a fallen humanity that has only to look to his exceptional new church for redemption. Thus, America and Americans are special, exceptional, because they are charged with saving the world from itself and, at the same time, America and Americans must sustain a high level of spiritual, political and moral commitment to this exceptional destiny – America must be as 'a city upon a hill' exposed to the eyes of the world.[28]

This description is apt and suggests the idea of American exceptionalism that I identify as that which Stringfellow critiqued.

American exceptionalism, understood as a rubric under which various expressions of American nationalism are subsumed, can be divided into three primary categories: the political, in the nationalistic ideology embodied in the American Creed; the economic, in the optimistic myth of the glories of capitalism, and the theological, in the notion of the divinely chosen people. These are not rigidly discrete categories; there is considerable overlap between each of these elements.

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[27]Ibid.

[28]Ibid.

Political

Politically, American exceptionalism reflects nationalism as an ideology.[29] Arguably, nationalism is too general a concept to be considered an ideology. Political scientist David Koyzis suggests that nationalism is not in itself an ideology; it is more accurately described as a category of ideology.[30] Nationalism becomes an ideology when it is described in specific terms with respect to a particular nation. Perhaps the greatest example of nationalism as an ideology is found in its American form. Historian Richard Hofstadter has noted well: "It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies, but to be one."[31]

What is this ideology that defines America? It has been variously defined in terms of a creed, a set of values, a specific narrative, and a collection of myths. The one constant in these various descriptions is a certain universal applicability. America's nationalistic ideology, whether described credally, mythically, or narratively, is depicted as having universal relevance. A powerful assumption is that the world wants what we have and that all the world should seek to embody our values. In fact our history is

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[29]Much has been written about nationalism as an ideology and as a religion that is well beyond the scope of this study. For further study see Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origins and Background* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1948); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991 (1983)); Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985); Charles A. Kupchan, "Introduction: Nationalism Resurgent," in *Nationalism and Nationalities in the New Europe*, ed. Charles A. Kupchan (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995); Carlton J. H. Hayes, *Nationalism: A Religion* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1960); Carlton J. H. Hayes, *Essays on Nationalism* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1966). For a long time I debated whether to use the specific term "exceptionalism" or to use the more general term "nationalism" to denote the phenomenon in question. I settled on "exceptionalism," because I am convinced that it more accurately describes the comparative nature of American nationalism, its universal scope, and it suggests its missionary implications.

[30]David T. Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 103-104.

[31]Quoted in Michael Kazin, "The Right's Unsung Prophet," *The Nation*, 248 (February 20, 1989), p. 242.

understood to have analogous implications: other nations could accomplish what we have, if only they adopted our creed.

Is ideology too strong a description of American nationalism? I think not, particularly in light of the universalism inherent in American nationalism. For instance, consider the words of the Declaration of Independence, considered by historian Richard Hughes to succinctly describe the American Creed: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."[32] This creed is not limited in its scope. According to Thomas Jefferson, the truths are "self-evident," "all men" are created equal, "all men" are endowed with the unalienable rights. While it may be an *American* creed, it is universally descriptive. Other descriptions of the American creed are similarly universal. According to Lipset, "The American Creed can be described in five terms: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire."[33]

Another essential characteristic of American nationalism is found in the way one becomes part of the American nation. America is not primarily a nation to which one becomes attached by birthright. As Lipset notes, "The ex-Soviet Union apart, other countries define themselves by a common history as birthright communities, not by ideology." [34] However, in America ideology is the essence of one's connection to the nation. Koyzis recognizes this: "The 'American nation' encompasses all those who are

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[32]Hughes identifies the American Creed as those words from the Declaration of Independence. *Myths America Lives By* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2.

[33]Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), 19.

[34]Ibid.

citizens of the United States, whatever their ancestry, ethnic origins or religion. Yet for Americans *nationality* is more than common citizenship in the body politic. It means adherence to certain ideals, such as liberty, democracy and equality, which have come to be seen as the defining values of the nation."[35] "Furthermore," Koyzis adds, "to be an American means to put one's faith in a particular ideology embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. This ideology is the liberalism of John Locke, as articulated by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, and as modified and adapted by Andrew Jackson, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt." [36]

Economic

Economically, American exceptionalism has found expression in a particular justification of capitalism and its fruits. Hughes argues that capitalism has been legitimated in the popular mind of Americans by what he calls the "myth of Nature's Nation."[37] This myth, he argues, is inherent in the rhetorical phrases such as "Nature and Nature's God" and "self-evident truths" common to the founding era.[38] Hughes summarizes the myth of Nature's nation as follows: "[The] American system was not spun out of someone's imagination or contrived by human wit. Instead, it was based on natural order, built into the world by God himself."[39] Likewise, divinely ordained legitimacy has been attributed to American capitalism. Referring to Americans

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[35]David T. Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 98.

[36]Ibid., 98-99.

[37]Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 126.

[38]Madison commonly used the former term. For example, see his *Memorial and Remonstrance*. Of course the latter term is found in Jefferson, especially in the Declaration of Independence.

[39]Hughes, *Myths America Live By*, 56.

benefiting from the capitalist system, Hughes writes, "Because it seemed so natural, so thoroughly in keeping with 'the way things were meant to be,' it was easy to imagine that the capitalist system was rooted squarely in the self-evident patterns of 'Nature and Nature's God.'"[40]

Another expression of American exceptionalism is associated with what sociologist Max Weber described as the Protestant work ethic.[41] In his definitive work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber suggested that the Protestant emphasis on the virtue of industry was driven by an understanding that the economic fruits of hard work were evidence of one's salvation. Americans have inherited aspects of this view but applied it in such a way that suggests that economic success is not necessarily evidence of *divine* favor bestowed because of hard work. In fact over time this view jettisoned the issue of divine favor and suggested a mechanical scheme in which hard work and individual initiative will inevitably produce success. This guarantee of success is unique to the American context as "the land of opportunity." Popularized in the stories of the late nineteenth-century author Horatio Alger, this is the idea of the "self-made man" who, through diligence, took advantage of "opportunity" when it "knocked." Philosopher Rychard Fink aptly summarized the typical scheme of Alger's stories: "His plot, which recurred with minor variations, depicted a poor boy eager for financial success who, through luck, pluck, and virtue, achieved his goal."[42]

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[40]Ibid., 126.

[41]Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Trans. by Talcott Parsons (Gloucester, Massachusetts: P. Smith, 1988)

[42]Rychard Fink, "Horatio Alger as a Social Philosopher," introduction to *Ragged Dick and Mark, The Match Boy: Two Novels by Horatio Alger*, ed. Rychard Fink (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1962). For further developments of this theme and critical analysis see Gary Scharnhorst,

A final example of American economic exceptionalism is found in the emphasis upon free trade and the idea of "the sanctity of property." This notion was critiqued explicitly by Stringfellow as it found expression in the rhetoric and ideology of Barry Goldwater. A brief examination of the text of Goldwater's acceptance speech for the 1964 Republican presidential nomination reveals not only American exceptionalism in an economic context, it also demonstrates the overlap between its various themes. Referring to a great "Atlantic civilization" that embodies American values of freedom and individual initiative, Goldwater proclaimed: "I can see and all free men must thrill to the events of this Atlantic civilization joined by a straight ocean highway to the United States."[43] Adopting the rhetoric of destiny, Goldwater exclaimed, "What a destiny! What a destiny can be ours to stand as a great central pillar linking Europe, the Americas and the venerable and vital peoples and cultures of the Pacific."[44] This destiny includes a missionary mandate: "And I pledge that the America I envision in the years ahead will extend its hand in help in teaching and in cultivation so that all new nations will be at least encouraged to go our way; so that they will not wander down the dark alleys of tyranny or to the dead-end streets of collectivism."[45]

With specific economic references, Goldwater declared that in the "vision of a good and decent future . . . there must be room, room for the liberation of the energy and the

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comp., *The Lost Tales of Horatio Alger* (Bar Harbor, Maine: Acadia Press, 1989); idem, *Horatio Alger, Jr.* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980); John Tebbel, *From Rags to Riches: Horatio Alger, Jr., and the American Dream* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963); Ralph D. Gardner, *Horatio Alger, or the American Hero Era* (New York: Arco Publishing Company, 1978); and Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

[43]Barry Goldwater, "The Republican National Convention Acceptance Address," San Francisco, California, July 16, 1964, in *Vital Speeches of the Day* 30, No. 21, 644.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Ibid.

talent of the individual, otherwise our vision is blind at the outset."[46] He hoped to "assure a society" that "while never abandoning the needy, . . . nurtures incentives and opportunity for the creative and the productive."[47] This society, he promised, would reflect "a nation where all who can will be self-reliant."[48] This self-reliance, he suggested, would bear much fruit, flourishing where private property is deemed sacred: "We can see in private property and in an economy based upon and fostering private property the one way to make government a durable ally of the whole man rather than his determined enemy." Goldwater then used a term that we will see particularly irked Stringfellow, "We see in the *sanctity* [italics mine] of private property the only durable foundation for constitutional government in a free society."[49] Thus Goldwater's rhetoric reflects an exceptionalistic vision with economic implications. Key elements of this vision are the freedom from interventionist constraints, the celebration of individual initiative, the encouragement of self-reliance, and the sense of a destiny to export the vision to other countries which are presumably benighted and in need of the training and encouragement to adopt the tenets of the "American way of life."

Theological

As I have implied, the theological version of American exceptionalism has a long history. From the "City on a Hill" motif of the redeemer nation through the millennial hope justifying the Revolution through the concept of Manifest Destiny through the

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[46]Ibid.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Ibid.

notion of "one nation under God" until present day cries for a restoration of the "Christian nation" America has been depicted in theologically exceptionalistic terms. Overall, this version of American exceptionalism theologically interprets the other versions, stamping them with the divine imprimatur.[50] Two examples of this category of exceptionalism and its justification will suffice.

Hughes identifies a number of myths that inform American self-consciousness and create the narrative that in many ways defines America. Two of these myths are particularly applicable to this discussion of the theological version of American exceptionalism. The first myth is that of the Chosen Nation. I have already alluded to the substance of this myth in the general discussion of the notion of American exceptionalism. Madsen refers to it in her discussion of the exceptionalist logic that motivated the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In their understanding these Puritans had been chosen by God for special political and spiritual purposes. Hughes demonstrates that the New England Puritans inherited from their forbears in the English Revolution a strong sense of being divinely chosen and with that sense an identification with the biblical nation of Israel.[51] Just as Israel had been chosen by God as a light to the nations, so was the Puritan colonial experiment to exist as a covenantal community that was chosen and therefore obligated to God and one another to faithfully embody a church and society that reflect biblical norms. This sense of chosenness has informed Americans in various ways ever since. During the Revolutionary War, promises that the

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[50]This has been explored in detail by Robert Bellah. See *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[51]Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 26-29.

revolutionaries represented the chosen vanguard of the divinely established millennial reign of Jesus Christ energized the war effort.[52]

As America expanded westward, the concept of Manifest Destiny implied that God had chosen the American nation to extend its borders from ocean to ocean. Hughes points out that the Puritan understanding of the myth of the Chosen Nation was different than that of the mid-nineteenth century Americans. While the Puritans' view was based on an understanding of unmerited chosenness, the later Americans assumed that it was obvious that God would choose them for their virtue and the values for which they stood. Consequently, it was manifestly their destiny to expand and therefore their right to expand westward.[53]

Hughes observes another high point in the expression of the myth of the Chosen Nation in America's role. As justification for involvement in the Philippines Senator Albert Beveridge expressed the idea that America has been chosen by God to bring order to the chaos that characterized the Philippines and other nations like it.[54] The view of chosenness continued to evolve, finding expression in part in America's involvement in World War I in order to "make the world safe for democracy." This vocation was reiterated in World War II when America was engaged in a fight "as God's agent for good in a sinful world."[55] As America moved into its Cold War phase the popular imagination confronted communism in part with the confidence that God had chosen the

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[52]See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1977).

[53]Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 108-110.

[54]Ibid., 36-37.

[55]Ibid.

nation to promote "liberty and justice for all" throughout the world, standing firm against Communism's "godlessness" and projecting her power to spread freedom across the globe.

The second and final example of the theological version of American exceptionalism is found in what Hughes calls the myth of the Christian Nation. The myth is, quite simply, that the United States is and should be considered Christian. Hughes notes that the founders had in mind a secular state, but that many Americans during the time of the Revolutionary War opposed this, believing that such a vision reflected an attack upon Christianity.[56] While the vision of a secular state ostensibly won the day, the opposing sentiment in the hearts of many Americans remained. Hughes argues that the Second Great Awakening brought the myth of the Christian Nation once again to the forefront of national consciousness and in many forms continued to be reflected in much social and political rhetoric until and including the present day.[57]

A current and significant example of the Christian Nation myth is found in the work of David Barton and his organization, WallBuilders. A historical revisionist, Barton seeks to legitimate the Christian America thesis by finding proof-texts from the writings and speeches of significant American founders. He primarily uses these quotes within the debate concerning the application of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. Barton argues that his evidence demonstrates that the founders intended for America to be a Christian nation. Therefore, government-endorsed displays of Christianity are in keeping with the founder's original

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[56]Ibid., 69.

[57]Ibid., 70-76.

intent. His historiography is quite popular in many evangelical and fundamentalist circles, demonstrating that the myth of Christian Nation is alive and well.[58]

American exceptionalism, then, refers to the consciousness of moral uniqueness and superiority that characterizes the popular American national image. This consciousness has been expressed in various ways and has referred to different aspects of the sociopolitical framework that defines the country. Politically, American exceptionalism has been expressed in the terms known as the American Creed, the emphasis upon individual rights and the implication that this creed could be and should be universally believed. Economically, American exceptionalism has been associated with the Protestant work ethic, the myth of the self-made man, the American dream, and the sanctity of property. Theologically, it has been expressed most explicitly in the notion of the chosen nation, divinely called for the purpose of spreading its values throughout the world, and in the more specific idea of America as a Christian nation. Pervading Stringfellow's work, is a constant critique of all of these notions.

Review of Literature

The first book-length treatment of Stringfellow was produced by Bill Wylie-Kellerman. It is entitled *A Keeper of the Word: Selected Writings of William*

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[58]He has written several books, all published by his ministry, and he has spoken often in churches, giving a presentation entitled "America's Godly Heritage." See David Barton, *America's Godly Heritage* (Aledo, Texas: WallBuilder Press, 1993); idem, *Original Intent: the Courts, the Constitution, and Religion* (Aledo, Texas: WallBuilder Press, 1997); and idem, *The Myth of Separation: What Is the Correct Relationship Between Church and State?: a Revealing Look at What the Founders and Early Courts Really Said* (Aledo, Texas: WallBuilder Press, 1989). In 1996 he acknowledged that some of the most popular quotes that he used to justify his position were suspect or unconfirmed. See David Barton, "Unconfirmed Quotations," online article, WallBuilders website, accessed online January 17, 2007, http://www.wallbuilders.com/resources/search/detail.php?ResourceID=20#background; and Rob Boston, "Consumer Alert! WallBuilders' Shoddy Workmanship: David Barton's 'Christian Nation' Myth Factory Admits Its Products Have Been Defective," *Church and State*, July-August 1996, 155-157.

Stringfellow[59], and, as the title implies, it consists of topically arranged excerpts of Stringfellow's writings. It is a helpful resource for someone who desires a basic overview of Stringfellow's life and thought, based primarily upon his own writings. The introduction provides a brief sketch of Stringfellow's life and thought primarily in terms of his influence upon Kellerman. The book also includes a bibliography of Stringfellow's works that was compiled by Paul D. West.[60]

A year after Kellerman's collection was published, Andrew W. McThenia, Jr., edited a collection of celebratory essays entitled, *Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer: Honoring William Stringfellow*.[61] The publication of this collection coincided with the tenth anniversary of Stringfellow's death. Contributors included theologians, legal scholars, and activists such as Stanley Hauerwas, Bill Wylie Kellerman, Walter Wink, Jeff Powell, Jim Wallis, and Daniel Berrigan. The list of contributors in itself provides a telling illustration of the nature of Stringfellow's influence. Many of the contributions are anecdotal in nature, descriptions of Stringfellow's impact upon the authors. Some of the essays reflect attempts to apply Stringfellow's thought to specific issues, such as "The Challenge of Peace in an Age of Desert Storm Troopers" by Valparaiso law professor Edward McGlinn Gaffney, Jr. The more scholarly and critical contributions include those by Walter Wink and Stanley Hauerwas with Jeff Powell. Theologian Walter Wink sketches with some analysis Stringfellow's thought concerning

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[59]Edited with an introduction by Bill WylieKellerman (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994). Kellerman was a friend of Stringfellow's in the late 70s and early 80s. He is a United Methodist pastor and teaches at the Robert H. Whitaker School of Theology in Ferndale, Michigan.

[60]This was a helpful starting point for this project. I am grateful for Mr. West's work.

[61]Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995. McThenia is a professor of law at Washington and Lee University.

the New Testament concept of the "powers and principalities." In "Stringfellow on the Powers" Wink provides helpful insight into some of the fundamental elements of the lay theologian's method, as well as some suggested explanations for the relative paucity of critical work on Stringfellow. Hauerwas, with legal scholar Jeff Powell, contributed "Creation as Apocalyptic: A Homage to William Stringfellow."[62] Notwithstanding the celebratory implications of the title, the essay is a treatment of a central aspect of Stringfellow's thought, the apocalyptic, that teases out some of the ethical implications for such apocalyticism and engages it from the perspective of narrative theology.

A collection of essays about Stringfellow within the context of the Episcopal Church, his ecclesiastic tradition, was published in 1997. This book, edited by Episcopalian rector and scholar Robert Boak Slocum, is entitled *Prophet of Justice, Prophet of Life: Essays on William Stringfellow* and published by Church Publishing, a denominational publishing house.[63] The majority of the contributors to this project are Episcopalian theologians, rectors, and legal scholars. Each essay treats a different facet of Stringfellow's thought, message, or vocation. This collection is generally more critical than *Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer*, which was more of a festschrift.

Bill Wylie Kellerman contributed a chapter on Stringfellow's life and work suggesting that the time is ripe for new scholarly assessments of the lawyer, lay theologian, and activist. Andrew McThenia also contributed a chapter, which dealt with

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[62]This article was also published in Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1994). Reading this essay sparked my interest in Stringfellow as a viable dissertation subject.

[63]New York: Church Publishing, Incorporated, 1997.

Stringfellow as an attorney.[64] In this contribution McThenia depicts Stringfellow as a legal outsider, practicing a profession defined in classically liberal terms but resisting the profession's virtually salvific claims.

Gardiner H. Shattuck, historian and chair of the governing board of the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island, contributed "William Stringfellow and the American Racial Crisis." As the title implies, this well-researched article situates Stringfellow within the broader civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. It details Stringfellow's association with various civil rights activities, such as his involvement in the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU) and his participation as an ESCRU delegate at the National Conference on Religion and Race in 1962. While he lauds Stringfellow's voice for racial equality, Shattuck also criticizes his hope for absolute colorblindness, particularly its implications for African-American churches, which Stringfellow suggested were ironically scandalous to the gospel.

Reading Stringfellow's an *Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, introduced a number of young evangelicals to his work. Many were intrigued by Stringfellow's radical politics combined with his exaltation of the Word of God. The essay contributed by Episcopal priest Jeffrey A. MacKey, "What's a Nice Evangelical Boy Like You Doing Reading a Book Like That?," illustrates this phenomenon. MacKey describes the impact that reading Stringfellow had upon him as a college student at an evangelical college in the early 1970s. Although MacKey fails to distinguish between Stringfellow's use of the phrase "the Word of God" as a synonym for God and his use of

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[64]"Stringfellow's Legacy to Lawyers: Resist the Profession"

the phrase to refer to the Bible, this somewhat autobiographical piece serves as a noteworthy case study for understanding Stringfellow's appeal to certain evangelicals.

The most recent book dealing with Stringfellow's life and thought is *William Stringfellow in Anglo-American Perspective*.[65] This book, edited by Anthony Dancer, contains two sections. The first section provides representative selections of Stringfellow's writings. The second section is a collection of essays, written by scholars from both England and the United States, that reflect theologically upon various aspects of Stringfellow's life and thought. The essays contained therein are generally more critical than those found in other collections. Three of the essays in particular deserve comment. In "The Vocation of the Church of Jesus the Criminal" Mennonite scholar Mark Thiessen Nation provides a helpful critique of elements of Stringfellow's thought. Nation suggests three areas in which he faults Stringfellow's thought: his apocalyptic rhetoric, his weak view of the church, and his ethical method. Bill Wylie-Kellerman also contributed to the book with his essay, "Not Vice Versa: Stringfellow, Hermeneutics, and the Principalities." In this piece Wylie-Kellerman, details various experiences and influences that he believes contributed to Stringfellow's view of the powers. Finally, Oxford theologian Christopher Rowland analyzes Stringfellow's hermeneutical method, relating it to that of William Blake, in the essay "William Stringfellow's Apocalyptic Hermeneutic."

Neither of the dissertations written on Stringfellow have been published in the United States. Only one has been published at all. Thomas Zeilinger's work, *Zwischen-Raume: Theologie der Machte und Gewalten*, is a theological study of the notion of the

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[65]Edited by Anthony Dancer (Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2005).

New Testament concept of the "principalities" and "powers" based primarily upon the theologies of Stringfellow and Walter Wink.[66] This is a useful study of a critical element of Stringfellow's thought. Zeilinger emphasizes the dialectic nature of the notion of the powers and principalities in Stringfellow, noting the tension between their createdness and fallennness. He also contrasts Stringfellow's "prophetic" view of the fallenness of the powers and principalities with Wink's "priestly" more hopeful view, which, at least moreso than Stringfellow, stresses the createdness of the powers. Zeilinger's work, though useful, is geared toward the German-speaking academy and, since it has only been published in that language, is not ideally accessible.

The only English-language dissertation written on Stringfellow was submitted to Queen's College, Oxford University. It was written by Anthony Dancer and entitled "Theology in the Life of William Stringfellow."[67] Methodologically it is a work of biographical theology, in which Dancer traces the development of Stringfellow's theologically-driven political thought throughout his experiences and in the midst of the American socio-political context of the 1950s and 1960s. Dancer demonstrates the integral relationship of Stringfellow's life and theology, examining key elements of his thought as well as significant encounters with other thinkers and dramatic events in his life, particularly leading up to the publication of *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* in 1973. Dancer's helpful treatment of Stringfellow's life and

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[66]Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1999

[67]Unpublished D.Phil. dissertation, 2001.

theology is unpublished and, as is the case with Zeilinger's study, therefore also not ideally accessible.[68]

There have been at least three master's theses studying Stringfellow. Dancer produced one in 1998 that engaged Stringfellow's thought with the notion of Christian identity.[69] The first academic study of Stringfellow was a thesis by Ernest Bartow, written in 1967.[70] Bartow summarizes Stringfellow's thought up to that time and examines his particular version of Christian proclamation. This thesis, though not particularly critical, in part provides useful biographical information based on an interview the author had with Stringfellow. Perhaps the most critical examination of Stringfellow's thought is a thesis by Gregory A. Bezilla.[71] This work treats Stringfellow's theology by focusing upon his eschatological thought. Bezilla argues that Stringfellow failed in his eschatology to suggest a future for human society. The thesis provides some helpful insight into Stringfellow's limitations, particularly the fact that he rarely argued a point, merely asserted it.

Beyond the books, articles, theses and dissertations that have been produced directly concerning Stringfellow, there have been a number of references to him and to his thought, particularly regarding the powers, in other works, some of which are quite

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[68]It took me several months to gain access to it through the inter-library loan service. The copy I was able to read was a microfilm.

[69]"A Critical Discussion of Christian Identity, with Particular Reference to the Thought of William Stringfellow," unpublished thesis, M.Phil., Exeter, 1998.

[70]"Prophet in the Pew: Introduction to a Contemporary Style of Christian Proclamation." Unpublished thesis, Master of Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1967.

[71]Gregory A. Bezilla, "William Stringfellow's Theology and Ethics of Eschatological Existence," unpublished Master of Divinity (Honors) thesis, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, November 1998. I found myself disputing with this work more than any other, including the dissertations. Bezilla is the most critical of Stringfellow, and quite insightful. It is unfortunate that this work was unpublished and that it was only an M.Div. thesis.

significant. Examples of such references are found in John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, and Richard Hays.[72] Walter Wink, in his trilogy dealing with the "powers," makes more than a mere reference to Stringfellow; he attributes his study of the eponymous concept to the impetus of reading Stringfellow's early work, *Free in Obedience*.[73]

No work to date has examined Stringfellow's critique of American exceptionalism. This study is a contribution to the academic conversations about Stringfellow, American exceptionalism, and Christian ethics. To provide such a contribution the following methods will be used.

Methodology

This project is intentionally interdisciplinary in its methodology, integrating aspects of the disciplines and subdisciplines of theology, intellectual history, biography, political science, and social ethics. The majority of the work is based upon content analysis of Stringfellow's published and unpublished material. The bulk of source material is Stringfellow's own work, both that which is published and items from the Stringfellow Papers, archived at Cornell University. I have also utilized memoirs of those who were close to him, such as Jim Wallis, Daniel Berrigan, and others. Secondary source material

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[72]John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus:* Vicit Agnus Noster, second edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994, 1972), 1n, 143n, 159; Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live: Exercises for Christian Practice* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996; Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), 183, 185n. Noteworthy is that these references are all made by thinkers in the Duke Divinity School/Notre Dame community who are communitarians emphasizing virtue ethics.

[73]Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), xi.; William Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1964).

included articles and essays about Stringfellow and his thought, as well as book reviews of his work.

Structure

To develop this analysis of Stringfellow's thought with respect to American exceptionalism, the dissertation is structured as follows: the first three chapters will provide overviews of Stringfellow's life and thought. The next two chapters specifically deal with his critique of American exceptionalism. I conclude the project with a final summary, a few critiques of Stringfellow, and a suggestion for the ethical application of his thought.

The specific structure reflects the above summary. Following this chapter, which has introduced the study, reviewed relevant literature, provided a justification of the subject, indentified American exceptionalism, and outlined the methodology, a second will serve as a brief biography of Stringfellow. It will address his upbringing and early years and will provide a discussion of his work as an attorney, especially the Harlem experience. It will also chronicle his work as an author, lecturer, and activist. This biographical summary is followed by a chapter detailing prominent theological themes in Stringfellow's thought. I have paid particular attention to his notion of the powers and the dominion of death. The third chapter also includes his ethical view of deferred judgment, the relevance of the Incarnation, and, of course, the freedom from death's dominion expressed in the Resurrection. Building upon the general intellectual and theological foundation is the fourth chapter, which develops Stringfellow's ethics as they were derived from his theology. Included in this is his message of radical dissent and radical involvement: vigilant discernment, incessant resistance, and tenacious advocacy.

The chapters dealing with these general elements of Stringfellow's life and pertinent thought are followed by two chapters dealing with Stringfellow's specific critiques of American exceptionalism. Chapter five critically analyzes Stringfellow's critique of American exceptionalism in it political form. American claims of moral superiority, he argued were belied by the racism of white supremacy, which he considered to be, tragically, "the dominant American ethic of society—the most venerable of the old values, dating back three and a half centuries."[74] This chapter also addresses his critique of the economic expression of American exceptionalism, described as the ethics of acquisition. The sixth chapter will analyze Stringfellow's critique of the theological version of American nationalism, exemplified by various expressions of civil religion and the "Christian America" thesis.

As mentioned above, in the concluding chapter I summarize the findings and provide some broad critiques of Stringfellow's thought. I also suggest how Stringfellow's critique of American exceptionalism is helpful for American Christians today as they seek to theologically reflect upon their country and apply the ethics, both individually and socially, based upon the fruit of theological reflection.

In the following pages it is my hope to demonstrate how implicitly and explicitly Stringfellow critiqued American exceptionalism. True to his self-identification as an empirical theologian, he offered his critique empirically and theologically. Empirically, he critiqued the political expressions of American exceptionalism by merely noting the racism dominant in the society of his day and pointing out its effects. Theologically, he

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[74]Unpublished manuscript, "America as Jerusalem Lost: The Ascendancy of the Demonic in American Society,"sermon preached at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut, March 4, 1970, 9.

took to task the American ethic of acquisition, observing that it reflected an obsession with justification. Finally, he critiqued the various forms of theologically rationalized exceptionalism by noting its basis on a false hermeneutic and by flatly declaring it to be blasphemy.

CHAPTER TWO

William Stringfellow: Implication from the Edge

Baptist theologian James William McClendon, Jr., wrote that "the only relevant critical examination of Christian beliefs may be one which begins by attending to lived lives."[1] "Theology," he wrote, "must be at least biography."[2] William Stringfellow echoed a similar view when he described biography as "rudimentary data for theology."[3] Stringfellow critiqued American exceptionalism from a fundamentally theological perspective. It is therefore fitting to begin a study of this critique by looking at Stringfellow biographically, that is, "attending to his lived life." This chapter provides an episodic narrative format of the life and work of William Stringfellow. The episodes selected are significant in that they represent experiences that were both formative of Stringfellow's thought and illustrative of his biographical context. Together they provide, to borrow a term from biblical hermeneutics, the *sitz im leben* of Stringfellow's theology and social thought that served as the basis for and context of his critique of American exceptionalism.

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[1]James W. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1974), 37.

[2]Ibid.

[3]William Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith: My Experience in Mourning* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1982), 21.

Beginnings

Frank William Stringfellow was born in Johnston, Rhode Island, on April 26, 1928 to Frank and Margaret Ellen Stringfellow.[4] His family experienced the deprivation of the Great Depression firsthand; his father, a knitter in a hosiery factory, was often out of work for "long periods of time."[5] Stringfellow grew up in the industrial town of Northampton, Massachusetts, where he graduated from high school. Since his working class father could not afford to send him to college, Stringfellow worked three jobs during his high school years to save enough funds to afford his education.[6] This was supplemented by a full-tuition scholarship that enabled him to attend Bates College in Maine.[7]

Throughout his childhood Stringfellow was deeply involved in the local Episcopal Church. He later described this involvement as "more than routine" and "at least as central as school in terms of its claims upon time, interest and loyalty."[8] This centrality extended beyond his attendance at various organized church activities. It also included hours spent at the parish "playing, doing errands and odd jobs, loitering, watching."[9] The

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[4]Birth Certificate, Frank William Stringfellow. Box 25, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. Will of Frank William Stringfellow, dated July 31, 1973. Box 17, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[5]William Stringfellow, *My People is the Enemy: An Autobiographical Polemic* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), 36.

[6]Andrew W. McThenia, "Introduction: How This Celebration Began," In *Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer: Honoring William Stringfellow*, edited by Andrew W. McThenia (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 14.

[7]Ibid.

[8]William Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1970), 80.

[9]Ibid.

adult Stringfellow related that as a child he had been "religiously precocious" with a profound interest in reading about religion and discussing theological issues with members of the clergy.[10] As a young teenager Stringfellow was strongly encouraged by one particular priest to pursue a career in the clergy. After much introspection Stringfellow concluded "*I would be damned if I would be a priest.*"[11] Apparently, from Stringfellow's perspective his erstwhile mentor had implied that the only way to be absolutely sure that one was a Christian was to become a priest. Whether or not he rightly interpreted the priest's encouragement, it was nonetheless decisive in pushing Stringfellow away from the priesthood. Ironically, this decision perhaps motivated Stringfellow to spend his life engaged in theological thought, in part, as he put it, "refuting any who [supposed] that to be serious about the Christian faith required ordination."[12]

Passions

During his years at Bates, 1945-1949, Stringfellow was thoroughly engaged in his two passions, religion and politics. His interest in issues of faith was transformed from one of intellectual absorption to one of existential centrality. He credited this transformation to the awareness that while religion must be intellectually respectable, it "must also provide the core and motivation of one's whole life."[13] Stringfellow's

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[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid., 82 (Italics in the original.)

[12]Ibid.

[13]William Stringfellow, upublished manuscript of speech on religion and politics: September 4, 1948, 1. Box 25, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. In this speech Stringfellow also attributes this change to an "unusually close relationship with another fellow." As they realized that the end of their college experience could signal the

religious interests were more than intellectual and devotional, however. While at Bates he was heavily involved in various Christian organizations, serving as vice-chairman of the United Christian Youth Movement, chairman of the National Student Christian Federation, and head of the New England Student Christian Federation.[14] Stringfellow later opined that his heavy involvement in these organizations was in part indicative of his desire to prove that one can be a serious Christian without being a priest.[15] He also was selected as the American delegate to the 1945 Anglican World Youth Conference in England and to the 1946 World Conference of Christian Youth in Oslo.[16] This international experience was formative for his views of the United States, its altruistic claims, and the perception of these claims by many in the rest of the world. In an article describing some of his impressions of the conference in Oslo, he suggested that America was "fast becoming the most hated nation on earth."[17] He wrote that the conference "opened my eyes to the desperate reality of the deterioration and confusion which engulfs our generation."[18] While at the time Stringfellow still considered America the "greatest

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end of their friendship, they decided that their friendship would not endure if it were self-centered, only if it were God-centered. Anthony Dancer suspects that this "unusually close relationship" was probably one of Stringfellow's early experiences with homosexuality and that the "conversion" that Stringfellow described had more to do with making peace with his homosexuality and his faith than it did with merely determining to incorporate every aspect of his life into his faith. While Dancer's suspicions may be warranted, I choose to take a more reserved approach regarding Stringfellow's homosexuality, commenting upon it only when the connection of his sexuality to his thought is undeniable. See Anthony Dancer, "Theology in the Life of William Stringfellow," unpublished D.Phil. dissertation, The Queen's College, Oxford, 146.

[14]William Stringfellow, *A Keeper of the Word: Selected Writings of William Stringfellow*, edited with an introduction by Bill Wylie Kellerman (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 27, previously published in Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*.

[15]Ibid.

[16]McThenia, "Introduction," 14.

[17]William Stringfellow, "Does the World Hate America? What an Innocent Learned Abroad," *The Churchman* (October 15, 1947): 10. The biographical information for the article labeled him a "representative of today's younger generation."

[18]Ibid., 11.

nation" with the "responsibility to solve" many of the world's problems, he related in the article a number of conversations with fellow students from other countries who pointed out to him what they perceived to be the hypocrisy associated with many of the claims of America's leaders. This experience was seminal for his later critique of America's exceptionalistic claims.

For his second passion, politics, Stringfellow provided himself a number of outlets as well.[19] He was involved in student government at Bates as well as various "leftist" political activities.[20] One such activity, which Stringfellow relates in his groundbreaking "autobiographical polemic", *My People is the Enemy*, is what he described as "what must have been one of the original sit-ins."[21] In 1948 he and some fellow students had been engaged in advocacy for legislation that "condemned racial or ethnic discrimination." Upon receiving the news that the bill was likely to fail, Stringfellow and three friends, one of whom was black, decided to stage a "sit-in" at a hotel that was known for discriminating against African-Americans. The legislator who sponsored the anti-discrimination bill arranged to eat at the hotel and brought with him a member of the press. Unfortunately, after consulting with the manager the waiter merely took their order. Since the would-be protesters were sure they would be denied service, they had

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[19]According to McThenia and Kellerman, his political activism began during his high school years: "As a high school youth in Northampton, he turned a city-wide Christian Youth Council into a very public political entity challenging the city council, including among other things a very deft media campaign, to get city building space for a youth center for the youth of Northampton." Andrew W. McThenia, Jr., and Bill Wylie Kellerman , Introduction to "Conversation Two: A Conversation on Biblical Politics" in *The Legacy of William Stringfellow: Three Conversations*, edited by Andrew W. McThenia, Jr., and Bill Wylie-Kellerman. Copyright held by McThenia and Wylie-Kellerman, 1997, 47.

[20]Ibid. At least "leftist" is the term McThenia uses. For the time and for Maine in the late forties, perhaps that term is appropriate, as his sit-in experience may demonstrate.

[21]Stringfellow, *My People*, 103-104. Stringfellow dates this as 1943, but Kellerman corrects it as 1948. Since Stringfellow was still in high school in 1943, I accept Kellerman's date.

already eaten, and they were somewhat short of funds. Stringfellow wrote of the incident, "Among the four of us we had only about five dollars, so the unfortunate senator ended up paying the check – for our second dinner of the evening!"[22] Thus was the end of the rather inauspicious inception of Stringfellow's vocation as a confronter of social and political injustice.[23]

Despite the time-consuming involvement in church organizational work and his political activism, Stringfellow excelled academically. During his junior year he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.[24] He graduated with a B. A. in History and Government in May of 1948. His senior thesis was entitled, "A Critical Appraisal of the Impact of the Coolidge Administration Upon the Great Depression."[25] His choice of a topic perhaps foreshadowed his later critical attention to the policies of the presidential administrations of Johnson and especially of Nixon. Following graduation from Bates, Stringfellow received a Rotary International Foundation Fellowship to study at the London School of Economics. Following his year in London, he was drafted into the United States Army and served as a supply sergeant with the Second Armored Division as part of the NATO forces.[26] He was discharged honorably in 1952.

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[22]Ibid., 104.

[23]According to McThenia and Kellerman, while president of the student council at Bates, Stringfellow "challenged the segregated housing patterns at Bates." On a more trivial note, he was instrumental in acquiring Coke machines for the men's dormitories. McThenia and Kellerman, Introduction to "Conversation Two", 47.

[24]McThenia, "Introduction," 14.

[25]Box 32, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[26]It is interesting to note that he must have performed his duties quite well, and that in some ways the military must have agreed with him. He apparently applied to Officer Candidate School in 1951. In his papers is a copy of that application and copies of letters recommending him for the school. I have found no record regarding his acceptance or rejection. He apparently did not pursue this option any further. Perhaps

This experience in Europe was significant in three ways. First, the subject of his research at the London School of Economics, entitled "The relation of modern democratic political theory to Christianity and the relevance of the Christian understanding of vocation and the nature of work to modern democratic politics," involved the nexus of Christianity, vocation, and politics – a theme that would be definitive for the rest of his life.[27] Second, he was afforded the opportunity through work as a special representative of the World Student Christian Federation of the World Council of Churches to tour the continent and engage in conversation with many who had experienced the oppression of the Nazi regime, many of whom had been involved in the Confessing Church movement.[28] These conversations and the acquaintances associated with them would be definitive for the later development of his ethic of resistance and his theology of the powers. Finally, while in London, he experienced somewhat of a second conversion, in which he "elected to pursue no career."[29] He described this decision in the following theological terms: "I died to the idea of career and to the whole typical array of mundane calculations, grandiose goals and appropriate schemes to reach them."[30] This death to career as a renunciation of the pursuit of money, power, and success he

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his decision to pursue "no career" (see below) influenced this process. Box 25, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[27]Box 25, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[28]William Stringfellow, "The Christian in Resistance," unpublished manuscript of an address given at Smith College, April 23, 1972. Box 15, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library; Bill Wylie Kellerman, "Bill, the Bible, and the Seminary Underground" in *Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer*, 64.

[29]William Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith: My Experience in Mourning* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 125.

[30]Ibid.

considered "an aspect of [his] conversion to the gospel."[31] In light of this "conversion" his later decision to forgo a career typical of a Harvard Law graduate was perhaps inevitable.

Harvard and Harlem

Returning to the United States, he entered Harvard Law School in 1953. While his career following law school would be anything but typical, so was his life in Cambridge. Perhaps because of the fact that he was slightly older than the typical law student and that he had served for a time in the military and especially since he had decided to die to career, Stringfellow eschewed the indoctrinating nature of the Harvard Law experience. He later wrote that while observing his fellow students, he "was astonished at how eagerly many of my peers surrendered to this regimen of professionalistic conditioning, often squelching their own most intelligent opinions or creative impulses in order to conform or to appear to be conforming."[32] Consequently, Stringfellow engaged in an eclectic assortment of activities, reflecting his twin passions of politics and religion. Pastor, theologian and friend of Stringfellow Bill Wylie Kellerman noted that Stringfellow's "commitment to the degree was surprisingly minimal."[33] According to Kellerman, during various periods of time as a law student Stringfellow attended theology courses at Episcopal Divinity School, taught speech and debate at Tufts University, traveled as an officer of the Student Christian Movement, and organized the

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[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid., 126

[33]Bill Wylie Kellerman, "'Listen to this Man': A Parable Before the Powers," in *Prophet of Justice, Prophet of Life: Essays on William Stringfellow*, edited by Robert Boak Slocum (New York: Church Publishing, 1997), 4-5.

first of a series of conferences on law and theology.[34] Legal scholar and friend of Stringfellow Andrew McThenia added that Stringfellow "on occasion checked in at the law school."[35] This seemingly frenetic engagement in a diverse array of activities was characteristic of Stringfellow throughout his life.

Graduating from law school in 1956, Stringfellow demonstrated his death to career by accepting the job of counsel for the East Harlem Protestant Parish. Rather than pursue the emoluments normally associated with a degree from Harvard Law School, Stringfellow chose service to the impoverished and the marginalized. Formed in the post-World War II years by seminarians from Union Theological Seminary, the parish had been touted as "a group ministry of twelve men and women working at the neighborhood to help people face and work on their problems."[36] For many, this early endeavor in inner-city ministry represented an "opening-up" of Protestant churches.[37] Stringfellow seemed to have initially agreed. He worked directly with the parish for only about fifteen months, however. He resigned over theological and philosophical differences concerning the ministry. These differences are significant in that they reflect Stringfellow's views of the place of the church in the world, as well his view of the Bible's place in the work of the church. Critically, one may add, these differences indicate that Stringfellow was never much of a team player.

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[34]Ibid.

[35]McThenia, "Introduction", 14.

[36]Quote from an "earlier parish document" by William Stringfellow in *My People*, 86. See also Bruce Kenrick, *Come Out of the Wilderness: The Story of East Harlem Protestant Parish* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962).

[37]Quote from Rev. Paul Moore, Jr., Episcopal Bishop of Washington, D. C. in "U.S. Protestantism: Time for a Second Reformation" in *Newsweek*, January 3, 1966, 34.

According to Stringfellow, the parish had formed as a reaction to what had been considered the tragic inaction on the part of Protestant churches with regards to the problems of the inner city. This tragedy had been punctuated by the churches' abandonment of the inner city. The goal of the East Harlem Protestant Parish was to "bring the ministry of Protestantism back into the inner city and work there among the poor and the dispossessed."[38] Unfortunately, from Stringfellow's perspective, this noble goal was tainted by an attitude of hostility toward the conventional churches not directly related to the parish and "a sincere passion for social change and revolution, even, in East Harlem."[39] This resulted in two problems for Stringfellow. First, the attitude toward the conventional churches produced a mentality of ecclesiastical independence in the parish leadership, which became, in Stringfellow's view, arrogant and sectarian.[40] Second, the parish leaders seemed to believe that social action and transformation had to precede the preaching of the gospel. As he related it, "the way of the Word had to be prepared by improving the education of the people, renovating their housing, finding jobs for them, clearing the streets of garbage and debris, challenging the political status quo, alleviating the narcotics problem, and social action of all sorts."[41] For Stringfellow this was intolerable, reflecting the notion that the task of the parish was apparently to "[make] the

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[38]*My People*, 86.

[39]Ibid.

[40]This resulted in what Stringfellow considered the "paradox of the group ministry." In his resignation letter, he described this paradox: the group ministry "is the chief and constant threat to the emergence of living congregations among the people of the neighborhood while at the same time the emergence of some congregations here is the most substantial threat to the group ministry." [40] Letter of resignation to The Group Minstry, East Harlem Protestant Parish, April 2, 1958, 5. Box 35, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[41]Ibid.

East Harlem neighborhood more nearly middle class!"[42] Stringfellow argued instead that "the preaching and service of the Gospel do not depend upon any special social change."[43] Specifically, he asserted, the preaching of the gospel "does not even depend upon the American way of life, either in its integrity or its breach."[44] It is not that he was opposed to social change; rather, for him the issue was the fact that "the message and the mission of the Church in the world *never* depend upon the specific physical, political, cultural, social, economic, or even psychological situations in which the Church, or the people of the Church as missionaries, find themselves."[45] The gospel had to be culturally independent, for if it were culturally contingent, then it would not be universal.[46]

Perhaps more serious, from Stringfellow's view, was the attitude demonstrated by many in the parish leadership toward the Bible. With rhetorical flourish Stringfellow included the following criticism of the leadership in his resignation letter, "Those professing condolence for people, show mostly indolence for the Bible."[47] Many of the clerical leadership of the parish seemed to Stringfellow to consider Bible study unnecessary. This perspective he considered to be "astonishing in the extreme," since he believed that "intimacy with the Word of God in the Bible, reliance upon the Word of God in the Bible, is a characteristic of the ordinary practice of the Christian life."[48] Stringfellow and others in the ministry had urged the leadership to arrange for some

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[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid., 87.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Ibid., 87-88

[46]Ibid.

[47]Letter of resignation to The Group Minstry, East Harlem Protestant Parish, April 2, 1958, 3.

[48]*My People*, 92.

regular group Bible study.[49] Such efforts to promote the centrality of the Bible to the ministry's work were met mostly with resistance. When the leadership did respond favorably, they decided to include an hour of Bible study preceding weekly staff meetings.[50] To Stringfellow's chagrin, this study was apparently sporadically initiated and sparsely attended. This emphasis upon the centrality of the Bible characterized Stringfellow's theology, political commentary, and social action throughout his life and is the reason that Bill Wylie Kellerman, preacher and activist Jim Wallis, and others would later stress the bibliocentric character of his work.[51]

Based upon his criticisms Stringfellow resigned from his position with the East Harlem Protestant Parish on April 2, 1958.[52] He did not, however, depart Harlem. He remained an attorney and resident in East Harlem for several more years. After a time of working on his own, he joined with two fellow Harvard Law School graduates, William

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[49]Bruce Kenrick implies that he was one of the others in the ministry who encouraged more Bible study. Of course Stringfellow was much less diplomatic in his approach. Kenrick wrote of Stringfellow, "Unlike the other members who shared his profound concern, he made no allowance whatever for the complex nature of the Parish workers' problems, he completely disregarded the feelings of those who had worked there for eight years longer than he; and day after day, week after week, he attacked without mercy those members of the Group who were neglecting the Word of God. He was rude, he was ruthless, he was rigid, and he was right." *Come Out of the Wilderness*, 144.

[50]*My People*, 92.

[51]Three examples of this should be helpful: 1) Kellerman entitled his collection of Stringfellow's writings, *A Keeper of the Word*; 2) Wallis describes him as "radically rooted in the Bible." "William Stringfellow: Keeper of the Word" in *Cloud of Witnesses*, edited by Jim Wallis and Joyce Hollyday (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books and Washington, D. C.: Sojourners Magazine, 1991), 79; 3) Jeffrey Mackey, who first came across Stringfellow's writings as a young evangelical college student, wrote of him, "I was impressed with his use of the Bible: in his home, in his church, in gatherings of friends, and as the raw material for his writing and speaking." "What's a Nice Evangelical Boy Like You Doing Reading a Book Like That?" in *Prophet of Justice, Prophet of Life*, 60.

[52]Letter of resignation to The Group Minstry, East Harlem Protestant Parish

S. Ellis and Frank Patton, Jr., to form the law firm Ellis, Patton, and Stringfellow.[53] As a partner in the firm, Stringfellow continued to work and reside in East Harlem until 1962.

A Home

Rather than live in the suburbs and commute to the inner-city for his legal work, Stringfellow had chosen to reside in the midst of East Harlem. As he described his goal, he "came to Harlem to live, to work there as a lawyer, to take some part in the politics of the neighborhood, to be a layman in the Church there."[54] In 1956 the twenty-eight year old Harvard educated attorney moved into a tenement building on 100th Street, between First and Second Avenues in what had been considered by some to be the worst block in New York City.[55] The first sentence of his book *My People is the Enemy* provides a telling introduction to his residence, "The stairway smelled of piss."[56] His detailed and colorful description of his apartment warrants an extended quotation:

> The place, altogether, was about 25x12 feet, with a wall separating the kitchen section from the rest. In the kitchen was a bathtub, a tiny, rusty sink, a refrigerator that didn't work, and an ancient gas range. In one corner was a toilet with a bowl without a seat. Water dripped perpetually from the box above the bowl. The other room was filled with beds: two double-decker military cots, and a big ugly convertible sofa. There wasn't room for anything else. The walls and ceilings were mostly holes and patches and peeling paint, sheltering legions of cockroaches.[57]

This dwelling, whose prior occupants had been a family of eight, was his home. His initial response was to wonder why. Then, he "remembered that this is the sort of place

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[53]William Stringfellow, Memorandum, March 1961, (no recipient given) announcing his partnership in new law firm. Box 5, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[54]Ibid., 3.

[55]Ibid., 4.

[56]Ibid., 2.

[57]Ibid.

in which most people live, in most of the world, for most of the time."[58] With this awareness he was able to write, "Then I was home."[59]

Gary Commins, in his contribution to *Prophet of Justice, Prophet of Life*, described Harlem as one of Stringfellow's "theological homes."[60] Commins suggested that the Harlem experience for Stringfellow is an embodiment of "the Orthodox contention that only one who prays, who writes from an experience of God, could be a theologian."[61] Arguably, Stringfellow's theology, which served as the foundation of his critique of American exceptionalism, was most significantly formed during his Harlem years. It was there that he became by praxis an ardent advocate for relating Bible study to political activism. It was there that he first became aware of the relationship between various social and political institutions and the New Testament notion of the powers and principalities. It was there that he saw firsthand the ubiquitous power of death in the form of poverty, racism, and marginalization. Finally, it was there that he learned, as he described it, "that all men are outcasts in one sense or another. It is only more vivid that men are outcasts in a place like Harlem."[62]

Stringfellow spent his years in Harlem defending many who were impoverished, marginalized and engaged in criminal activity, such as pimps, drug dealers, and

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[58]Ibid.

[59]Ibid.

[60]Gary Commins, "Harlem and Eschaton: Stringfellow's Theological Homes" in *Prophet of Justice, Prophet of Life*, 128.

[61]Ibid.

[62]Transcript of CBS News, *Look Up and Live 'My People is the Enemy'*, prod. Chalmers Dale, dir. Portman Paget, and writ. Jean-Claude van Itallie, broadcast over The CBS Television Network, Sunday, July 4, 1965, 10:30-11:00 AM CYNT. Box 35, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

prostitutes. He also assisted local residents in their legal disputes with landlords, utility companies, insurance companies, and other institutions to which he would later refer as powers and principalities. Remaining true to his characteristically frenetic pace, Stringfellow also published articles and tracts on theology and the law, was instrumental in the organization of the 1958 National Conference on Christianity and the Law, held at the University of Chicago Law School, served as a Visiting Lecturer in law schools such as Cornell, Ohio State, Ohio Northern, Notre Dame, and the University of Kansas, and gave numerous addresses to legal organizations, denominational meetings, and seminaries throughout the United States and overseas.[63]

During the first several years of his tenure in Harlem, Stringfellow began to acquire a reputation as a public intellectual with particular expertise regarding the relationship of theology to law and politics. Prior to his move to Harlem, while still at Harvard, he had published a faculty paper, entitled *The Life of Worship and the Legal Profession*.[64] This booklet contains unrefined elements of what would later become critical components of his theology. For example, hinting at a justification for his own early decision to eschew ordination, Stringfellow wrote of the centrality for the Christian of the notion of vocation. He lamented that Christians too often draw "comparisons between the matter of calling and the ordained priesthood and vocational decisions in secular work."[65] He considered

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[63]William Stringfellow, letter to Rev. Jones Shannon of the Church Society for College Work, 5 April 1961. Box 5, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. In 1959 he was offered a position with the World Council of Churches. He declined. Letter from W. Jack Lewis of Christian Faith-and-Life Community to WS, September 9, 1959. Box 4, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[64](New York: The National Council of the Episcopal Church, 1955). The following citations are from a facscimile of the original published in 1979 by University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, MI.

[65]Stringfellow, *The Life of Worship and the Legal Profession*, 17.

these comparisons "a spurious game," since "for the Christian the vocational decision is made in conversion."[66] The "single, common vocation" for the Christian is, according to Stringfellow, worship.[67] He defined worship quite broadly, however. For Stringfellow it comprehended all that the Church, gathered congregationally or scattered individually, did in its evangelizing of the world.[68]

Other elements of Stringfellow's thought that are contained in embryonic form are his emphasis upon the dominance of death in the fallenness of creation and the inversion of the relationship between creation and work. Referring back to his notion of worship, Stringfellow distinguished between the Christian on the job and his secular counterpart: "But the difference between the secular worker and the Christian worker lies in worship."[69] Even though both the Christian and the secular worker engage in the same work, the distinction is based upon motivation and orientation towards reality. According to Stringfellow, the fall of creation brought about by sin spoiled humanity's dominion over creation. Consequently, the created order is now "characterized by pain, futility, by toil, and by death."[70] The end result of this is that, rather than engage in the vocation of human dominion over creation which is to "witness to God's glory," instead "men lose their dominion, witness to nothingness, and, actually, work to death."[71] Thus, according to Stringfellow, "the secular worker appropriates the things of the world in work *only* for

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[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid.

[68]Ibid., 16.

[69]Ibid., 14.

[70]Ibid., 6.

[71]Ibid.

death."[72] By contrast, however, since Christians are those who "know Christ as the One who restores Creation," "[the] Christian worker appropriates the things of the world in work to worship God – to glorify Him – to manifest relationship to Him, that is to say, for life."[73] Throughout the ensuing years, Stringfellow continued to develop his perspectives on the fallenness of creation, the dominance of death, and the vocation of the Christian. These would serve in part as the basis for his critique of American exceptionalism and his proposals for the appropriate Christian response.

1962

The year 1962 marked a watershed for Stringfellow in his public life, his theological thinking, his private relationships, and his living arrangements. In April of that year he participated in a panel session at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago with a number of young theologians and the Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth, who was making his one visit to the United States. This encounter with Barth not only increased Stringfellow's public exposure, it also apparently crystallized much of his thinking concerning the prinicipalities and powers and their relationship to the nation-state. In December of 1962 Eerdmans published Stringfellow's first book, *A Private and Public Faith*.[74] The publishing contract was likely enabled by the relative fame garnered from his participation in the panel with Barth. With respect to his private life, it was in 1962

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[72]Ibid., 14

[73]Ibid., 8, 14.

[74](Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962). Ironically, a few years earlier Stringfellow wrote to some friends that in response to a "gushy" letter he had received from Houghton-Mifflin suggesting he write a book, "I have told them there are too many books written already and too quickly written and that therefore I figure I have all the time in the world to get around to writing a book." William Stringfellow, letter to "James and Jeanne," June 17, 1959, Box 4, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. Obviously, he got around to writing that book.

that Stringfellow met, fell in love with, and began to cohabitate with Anthony Towne, whom he would later refer to as "my sweet companion for seventeen years."[75] Finally, the year 1962 marked Stringfellow's departure from Harlem and his move to a penthouse on West 79th Street in Manhattan.[76]

On the evenings of April 25 and 26, 1962, Karl Barth joined a panel of seven young theologians to answer their questions in a program held at the Rockefeller Memorial Chapel of the University of Chicago.[77] Barth had been delivering lectures at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago for several days, and the organizers of the lecture series wanted to demonstrate the impact that Barth had made and would make upon younger theologians.[78] In the public address introducing the panel Jerald C. Brauer, then dean of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, noted that it was "a panel of six theologians and one lay theologian, all of them under forty-five years of age and holding key positions in the American scene."[79] The relatively diverse body of theologians included Edward J. Carnell of the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary, Hans Frei of Yale, Rabbi Jakob Petuchowski of Hebrew Union College, Jesuit priest Bernard Cooke of Marquette, and Shubert Ogden of the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University.[80] Filling the role of "lay theologian" was "Mr. Frank William Stringfellow,

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[75]*A Simplicity of Faith*, 115. Stringfellow's homosexuality will be addressed below.

[76]He terminated his lease at E 100th Street 12/31/61. William Stringfellow, letter to P. Cohen and Son, 11/30/61. Box 7, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[77]"Introduction to Theology: Questions to and Discussion with Dr. Karl Barth" in *Criterion* 2 (Winter 1963): 3.

[78]Ibid.

[79]Ibid.

[80]Ibid., 3-4.

Attorney, New York City."[81] Although Stringfellow was both the youngest member of the panel and the only non-academic theologian,[82] Barth later paid him a significant compliment. In the foreword to the American edition of *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* the great Swiss theologian described his 1962 visit to the United States. As he related some of the encounters he had had with various individuals, he mentioned "the conscientious and thoughtful New York attorney William Stringfellow," describing him as the one "who caught my attention more than any other person."[83] Barth was obviously referring to his interaction with Stringfellow at the University of Chicago, but he also had spent some time in New York, where Stringfellow guided Barth on a tour of East Harlem.[84]

Two questions that Stringfellow posed in his exchange with Barth during the panel session are particularly significant to the study at hand. One of the questions reflects Stringfellow's keen interest in relating his theology directly to the American political context and manifests a justification for his critique of American exceptionalism. In this question, read by moderator Jarisolav Pelikan, Stringfellow pressed Barth to comment upon how the Church, particularly in the United States could avoid giving in to the temptation "to foreswear the Gospel in order to protect our freedom as external

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[81]Ibid., 3. According to Kellerman, Stringfellow "sometimes smarted" when he was labeled a "lay theologian." Stringfellow believed that often he was referred to in such terms in an "accusatory tone by ecclesiastics and by academic theologians who mean it as a put down and a way of disavowing my public views." He suggested a very broad definition of a theologian, arguing that "every man *if* he reflects upon the event of his own life in this world, is a theologian." Kellerman, Introduction to *A Keeper of the Word*, 4; Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 21.

[82]Kellerman, Introduction to *A Keeper of the Word*, 1.

[83]Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, translated by Grover Foley (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), ix.

[84]See Kellerman, "'Listen to this Man'", 5.

institutions."[85] Stringfellow's concern was that in order to protect its freedom to proclaim its message, the Church in America often restrained itself from "[exercising] a vitally critical attitude toward politics, public policy, or the nation's actual life and culture."[86] Instead, Stringfellow lamented, the Church tended to use its freedom only for "socially approved" purposes, which included using religion "to rationalize, to serve, or to sanctify the national self-interest."[87] In light of the above concern, Stringfellow requested that Barth comment upon the biblical admonition in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Romans regarding submission to the governing authorities. For his part, Barth demurred on making a direct comment about the situation in the United States. He did, however, make a general statement with respect to the biblical passage in question. He suggested that for the Church to submit to the governing authorities, it had to be implicated in that government and its attendant society. Therefore, the Church had the responsibility to be thoroughly engaged in political affairs as part and parcel of its submission. Such submission for Barth was "submission to an order; and if we submit to an order, we go within an order . . . becoming responsible for what is done in this order."[88] Stringfellow then asked for clarification on the point that submission did not mean "merely an automatic obedience, but a variety of actions."[89] Barth's response

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[85]"An Introduction to Theology," in *Criterion*, 22.

[86]Ibid. Stanley Hauerwas makes similar claims. As I noted in the introduction, Hauerwas acknowledges that Stringfellow influenced him. See *After Christendom: How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas,* with a new preface by the author (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 69ff. See also, Stanley Hauerwas with Jeff Powell, "Creation as Apocalyptic: A Homage to William Stringfellow," in *Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer*, 31-40.

[87]Stringfellow, "An Introduction to Theology," in *Criterion*, 22..

[88]Ibid., 23.

[89]Ibid.

affirmed Stringfellow's view and also provided the latter with a prospective book title. Barth noted, "there is no true obedience where there is not free obedience."[90] The notion of free obedience would become a common theme for Stringfellow's ethics, justifying his political and theological critiques, and would eventually suggest a title for one of his most important books, *Free in Obedience*.[91]

Another question Stringfellow had for Barth involved the New Testament concept of the principalities and powers, arguably the central theme in Stringfellow's critique of American exceptionalism, as well as the rest of his theology. Stringfellow prefaced his question by implying that while most assume that "the history of redemption" merely involves the relationship between God and man, there may be other parties involved. These parties, for Stringfellow, were most likely the principalities and powers mentioned but not clearly defined in certain passages of the New Testament. Perhaps seeking to clarify and crystallize his own views,[92] Stringfellow then asked Barth, "Who are these principalities and powers?" Barth answered by proposing that powers represent the rule of an ideology. For the contemporary situation powers included communist or anticommunist ideology, money, sports, traditions, fashion, and religion. Stringfellow later integrated Barth's definition of the powers and principalities into his own, defining them as institutions, ideologies, and images.[93]

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[90]Ibid.

[91](New York: The Seabury Press, 1964) In this book Stringfellow provides his clearest and most concise definition of the principalities and powers, which was also a subject in his encounter with Barth. See above.

[92]Dancer points out that Stringfellow was probably still working out his theology of the powers in 1962. Dancer, 96.

[93]See William Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 52ff., as well as *Instead of Death*, new and expanded edition (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 60.

Stringfellow had also asked Barth to comment upon the relationship of the powers and principalities to the creation and fall. In response Barth described powers as representing "certain human possibilities that are given in the very nature of man, as he is – and given as a part, as an appearance of God's good creation in man."[94] Because of the separation between God and man brought about by sin, Barth asserted, man "sees his natural possibilities, powers, become isolated over against him; and instead of being the Lord of them, man becomes their servant."[95] As we have seen in Stringfellow's discussion of work, this inversion of the created order was already a theme in his thought as well.[96] It seems that he later expanded his view to include Barth's notion of the createdness and fallenness of the powers and principalities, injecting his own emphasis upon servitude to death.[97]

Barth concluded his discussion of the powers by proclaiming the antidote to man's servitude to the powers, Jesus Christ. According to Barth, in Christ, "as the Lord, man as a sinning man is replaced by a new man; what binds him in these powers is driven away and in the coming of the Kingdom he becomes free over against these powers."[98] Similarly, according to Stringfellow in his works subsequent to this encounter with Barth,

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[94]"Introduction to Theology," *Criterion*, 23.

[95]Ibid.

[96]*The Life of Worship and the Legal Profession*, 6.

[97]Chapter 2 of this study contains an extended treatment of Stringfellow's views of creation, the fall, the powers, and death.

[98]"Introduction to Theology," *Criterion*, 23-24.

this freedom from the powers comes to the individual Christian through baptism, as he or she is identified with Christ and His victory over death, the ultimate fallen power.[99]

Stringfellow's participation on the panel was significant in terms of the content of his exchange with Barth, especially as it reflects the further development of his thought and the crystallization of various concepts. It also, however, served to confirm his status as a public intellectual and to increase his exposure on the religious and theological scene. As I mentioned above, he published his first book, *A Private and Public Faith*, in December of that year. He was also asked by the Christian Education Department of the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church to write a book for adolescents to be included in the department's curriculum for high school youth.[100] Most significant, however, was an invitation to address the National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago, January 14-17, 1963. His statements at this event would elicit a negative response from many and would serve to help establish his reputation as one who spoke, as Daniel Berrigan described it, "with an altogether embarrassing directness."[101] This event will be discussed below, but before doing so, it is necessary to address Stringfellow's homosexuality in light of his relationship with poet Anthony Towne.

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[99]See *Free in Obedience*, 72-75.

[100]*Instead of Death*, 1. Although ostensibly written for high school students, this book serves as an excellent resource for understanding Stringfellow's thought in terms of basic definitions for his key concepts.

[101]Daniel Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987), 255.

Out?

William Stringfellow never openly declared his homosexuality. McThenia notes that the taking up of joint residency with Anthony Towne was Stringfellow's "first and only 'public' acknowledgement" of his sexual orientation.[102] In his dissertation on Stringfellow Anthony Dancer adds that his reference to Towne as his "sweet companion for seventeen years"[103] was the "closest Stringfellow ever came to becoming uncloseted."[104] For his own part Stringfellow described himself as vocationally committed to celibacy.[105] As for his relationship with Towne, in a memorial address entitled "The Felicity of Anthony Towne" Stringfellow stated that Towne's "vocation – as that may be distinguished from his occupation – was, in principle, monastic, as is my own."[106] He parenthetically added, "That is the explanation of our relationship."[107]

Towne was a struggling poet and free lance writer, who, while serving as a bartender, had met Stringfellow at a party.[108] A few days after their initial acquaintance, Towne secured Stringfellow's services as an attorney in order to avoid eviction from his apartment. Stringfellow was unsuccessful in preventing Towne's ouster, so he suggested that Towne move in with him. "And so," Stringfellow wrote, "our acquaintance became

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[102]McThenia, "Introduction: How This Celebration Began," 15.

[103]Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith*, 115.

[104]Dancer, 145.

[105]Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, 10.

[106]Quoted in full in *A Simplicity of Faith*, 52. A draft of this address is also found in Box 22, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. Towne died on January 28, 1980, preceding Stringfellow's death by a little less than five years.

[107]Ibid.

[108]Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith*, 47.

friendship, then, eventually, community."[109] His association with Stringfellow apparently contributed to the modicum of success Towne experienced. In the late 1960s and early 1970s he collaborated with Stringfellow on three books, contributed articles and poems to the *Christian Century* and other periodicals, and published a satirical work entitled *From the Diaries of the Late God*.[110]

While Stringfellow was never public about his own homosexuality, he was not reticent about identifying with homosexual advocacy. He served for several years as the general counsel for the George W. Henry Foundation, an organization established to help homosexuals and others who, in the words of the time, "by reason of their sexual deviation" were "in trouble with themselves, the law, or society."[111] This association apparently afforded him opportunities to speak about homosexual advocacy to various groups. For example, in 1965 he delivered an address at Christ Church Cathedral in Hartford, Connecticut, entitled "The Humanity of Sex."[112] In the address, besides providing a brief theological and ethical treatment of the issue of homosexuality,

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[109]Ibid., 47-48.

[110]They collaborated on three books: William Stringfellow and Anthony Towne, *The Bishop Pike Affair: Scandals of Conscience, Heresy, Relevance and Solemnity in the Contemporary Church* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967); idem, *Suspect Tenderness: The Ethics of the Berrigan Witness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); and idem, *The Death and Life of Bishop Pike* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976). For examples of Towne's articles see Anthony Towne, "In Defense of Heresy," Christian Century, January 11, 1967, pp. 44-47; idem, "Revolution and the Marks of Baptism," *Katallegete* 1 (Summer 1967): 2-13; and idem, "Reflections on Two Trials: a Plea for Anarchy in the Name of Christ," *Christian Century*, December 4, 1968, pp. 1535-1539. Some of his poetry was published as "Prison Poems," *Christian Century*, December 19, 1973, pp. 1256-1258. See also Anthony Towne, *From the Diaries of the Late God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

[111]Alfred A. Gross, "The Church's Mission to the Sexually Deviated," An address delivered to the Missionary Society of the Berkeley Divinity School, New Haven, CT, 23 November 1964. Box 9, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. Alfred Gross was the foundation's executive director. Stringfellow worked as counsel for the group at least from 1963 through 1965.

[112]William Stringfellow, "The Humanity of Sex," unpublished manuscript of address, Box 9, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

Stringfellow also spoke at length on various legal issues surrounding the gay lifestyle. He framed his address in the context of a Christian's identification with the marginalized in American society. In his introductory remarks he noted that "according to the ethics of American society," homosexuals "are not respectable."[113] Identifying himself as "a Christian, not a moralist," Stringfellow referred to Christ's care for the outcasts as one reason for interest in their legal situation. He stated, "If homosexuals in this society are orphans or prisoners, for a Christian that is itself enough reason to be concerned with them."[114] Beyond his interest as a Christian, Stringfellow was also concerned with the legal situation of the homosexual from the constitutional perspective of equal treatment. He noted that he was "bred in" a legal tradition, "which believes that if anyone is not represented or cannot secure representation before the law, whatever his cause and whatever the popularity or social approval of his cause, the whole society is imperiled."[115] Later in the address, he suggested an association between legal cases involving homosexuals and civil rights cases associated with the "present racial crisis."[116] So, for Stringfellow the justification for an interest in the issue of homosexuality and the advocacy for homosexuals was based upon a sense of Christian responsibility to identify with the outcast and upon a sense of legal responsibility to provide equal treatment under the United States Constitution.

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[113]Ibid., 2.

[114]Ibid.

[115]Ibid.

[116]Ibid., 7. This would appear to presage the association of homosexuality with civil rights that became common in the 1970s and 1980s and remains so today.

Stringfellow's ethic of homosexuality is best understood in light of his overall theological framework, which will be outlined and exposited in more detail in later chapters. At this point it is sufficient to note that his view was not in accordance with that of traditional Christian morality. He assumed a certain "givenness" to homosexuality that was associated with his overall view of the diversity of sexuality. In a 1979 address to the national convention of the group Integrity, Gay Episcopalians and their Friends, Stringfellow complained that "[the] matter of sexual proclivity and the prominence of the sexual identity of a person, are both highly overrated."[117] Consequently, he asserted, "the issue is *not* homosexuality but sexuality in any and all of its species," because "there are as many varieties of sexuality as there be (sic) human beings."[118] Although he never explicated that statement, it would seem that Stringfellow was suggesting that homosexuality possesses no particularly moral status, good or bad. What may be classified as homosexual behavior is merely the natural expression of a specific person's sexuality.

In light of that understanding of sexuality, Stringfellow explained that at Christian conversion "all that a particular person is, sexuality along with all else, suffers the death in Christ which inaugurates the new (or renewed) life in Christ."[119] This new life does not mean the sublimation of sexuality in any of its forms. Instead, according to Stringfellow, conversion means that Christians "have exceptional freedom to be who [they] are, and, thus, to welcome and affirm [their] sexuality as a gift, absolved from guilt

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[117]William Stringfellow, unpublished manuscript of address to the National Convention of Integrity, September 7, 1979, St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Denver, Colorado, 1. Box 22, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[118]Ibid., 2.

[119]Ibid.

or embarrassment or shame."[120] Stringfellow's understanding of Christian conversion is important here, because it was essentially anthropocentric. In the address at Christ Church in Hartford in 1965, he had explained it: "To become and to be Christian is to become utterly vulnerable to God's own affirmation of one's existence . . . and, as it were, to participate in God's affirmation of one's self and of all things."[121]

Based upon such a perspective of homosexuality and Christianity, Stringfellow asked rhetorically, "Can a homosexual be a Christian?" He answered with further questions: "Can a rich man be a Christian? Can an infant be a Christian? Or one who is sick, or insane, or indolent, or one possessed of power or status or respectability? Can anybody be a Christian?"[122] He considered such questions "theologically absurd," since "[nothing] . . . familiar to the human experience, including all the varieties of sexuality deprives any man of God's love."[123] Consequently, Stringfellow answered, "Can a homosexual be a Christian? Yes: if his sexuality is not an idol."[124] In light of the anthropocentric description of conversion, Stringfellow's view of idolatry logically follows. An idol is something that hinders a person "from accepting himself in a way which means loving the whole world just as it is and thereby following Christ."[125] Thus, in Stringfellow's view homosexuality, which is inherently morally neutral, is

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[120]Ibid., 3-4.

[121]Stringfellow, "The Humanity of Sex," 10.

[122]Ibid., 9.

[123]Ibid., 10.

[124]Ibid.

[125]Ibid., 10-11.

paradoxically acceptable for a Christian as long as the homosexual accepts him or herself in Christ, acknowledging and receiving God's love.[126]

Anthony Dancer, in his dissertation on Stringfellow, devotes a section to the nexus of the latter's homosexuality, his work, and his thought.[127] Dancer notes that as a homosexual Stringfellow certainly had a personal point of identification with the marginalized, which "put him in touch with reading the gospel from 'below'."[128] I would agree with Dancer's assessment and add further clarifying comments in light of the study at hand. Stringfellow, as a gay man, remained for his lifetime outside of the traditional family structures that have in many cases characterized the so-called "American dream." Arguably, as an outsider he was more capable of observing the various hypocrisies of "family values" as they have been promoted by various conservative groups. By the same token, however, his critique of the notion of American exceptionalism, a concept which depends in part on the centrality of family values, could likely be dismissed as the rantings of an angry man, excluded from much of the promise of American society. Perhaps, paradoxically, both are the case. Ultimately, his exclusion from the essentials of the American dream helped fuel his critique, substantively and motivationally, of America's claims to moral superiority.

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[126]This dialectic and somewhat cryptic ethic of homosexuality can be perhaps more clearly understood in light of his overall scheme of existential theology. This will be described in more detail in subsequent chapters.

[127]Anthony Dancer, "Theology in the Life of William Stringfellow," 144-153.

[128]Ibid., 146. Dancer also suggests that Stringfellow's advocacy for the marginalized reflected a sublimation of his homosexuality.

Little, Late, and Lily White

On January 14, 1963, the day that Governor George Wallace told the citizens of Alabama "segregation now . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever,"[129] the National Conference on Race and Religion opened in Chicago.[130] Jointly sponsored by the National Catholic Welfare Conference, the National Council of Churches, and the Synagogue Council of America, the three-day, inter-faith conference included over 650 representatives and featured prominent speakers such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Will Campbell, and Abraham Joshua Heschel.[131] Also on the program, as a respondent to Rabbi Heschel's remarks, was "a relatively unknown attorney and theologian from New York" named William Stringfellow.[132] Having spent over six years living and working in East Harlem, Stringfellow was more than a little frustrated with what he considered to be the poor showing of the churches on the civil rights front. For example, as he later noted in *My People is the Enemy*, "In the early days of the present racial crisis, the churches were most hesitant to take any position on the sit-in demonstrations until long after many secular institutions had given their support."[133] Not known for his diplomacy,

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[129]Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 108-109. Quoted in Gardiner H. Shattuck, Jr., *Episcopalians and Race: Civil War to Civil Rights* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 127.

[130]Shattuck, *Episcopalians and Race*, 127. The date was chosen to commemorate the centennial of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.

[131]Stringfellow, *My People*, 135; Shattuck, *Episcopalians and Race*, 126-127.

[132]Will D. Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), 230.

[133]Stringfellow, *My People*, 134.

Stringfellow brazenly expressed his view of the relative impotency of the conference by remarking to the assemblage that it was "too little, too late, and too lily white."[134]

His comments to the conference were classic Stringfellow. They related what he saw as the practical and political implications of the issue at hand to deeper theological realities. He began his comments by describing the contempt with which he believed the white Church was held by the African-American community. He announced, "[You] cannot be very long in any of the Negro ghettoes of the Northern cities without hearing the acrid, mocking, redundant ridicule to which the name of the Church is subjected."[135] Although much national attention at the time was being paid to the racial issue in the South, Stringfellow was one of the rare voices noting the prevalence of racism in the North. He observed,

> Meanwhile, even in the North, perhaps especially there, the estrangement between the races has become almost complete, and, it now becomes the case that almost any public association of Negroes and white becomes suspect – is thought to be a guilty association in which one or the other is somehow selling out his race.[136]

Shifting to his theological critique, he then asserted that the conference evidenced "a mentality which stupidly supposes that there is power and efficacy in individual action."[137] For Stringfellow, "the monstrous American heresy" was the belief that the only actors in the drama of history were God and humanity.[138] His counter to this "heresy" reflects the fruit of his encounter with Barth. Stringfellow argued that

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[134]Ibid., 136; Shattuck, *Episcopalians and Race*, 127; Kellerman, "'Listen to this Man'," 6.

[135]Stringfellow, "Care Enough to Weep," draft manuscript of address at the National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago, January 14-17, 1963, 2. Box 7, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[136]Ibid., 4.

[137]Ibid.

[138]Ibid.

"biblically, theologically, and empirically," the drama of history involves "God and man and the principalities and powers, the great institutions and ideologies active in the world."[139] Racism, according to Stringfellow, is one of these principalities and powers. It is not merely "an evil in the hearts or minds of men."[140] Instead, "racism is a principality, a demonic power, a representative, image, embodiment of death, over which men have little or no control, but which works its awful influence over the lives of men."[141] Stringfellow then bluntly and brashly identified the solution to the "awful influence" wrought by such powers: Jesus Christ, who overcame the powers "at great and sufficient cost."[142] Stringfellow then brought his remarks to their controversial climax:

> The issue is not some common spiritual values, nor natural law, nor middle axioms. The issue is baptism. The issue is the unity of all mankind wrought by God in the life and work of Christ. Baptism is the sacrament of that unity among all men in God.[143]

He closed his inflammatory remarks with the following admonition: "If you want to do something, the most practical thing I can tell you is: weep. First of all, care enough to weep."[144] Will Campbell provided a vivid description of the audience's response to Stringfellow's "uncomfortable directness." After he finished his address, "the delegates

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[139]Ibid., 4-5.

[140]Ibid., 5.

[141]Ibid.

[142]Ibid.

[143]Ibid.

[144]Ibid.

came to their feet again. But not with applause. Boos, jeers and catcalls from outraged Christians filled the hall in apology to the offended Jews who sat in stunned silence."[145]

According to Campbell, the rest of the session "concerned itself far more with Mr. Stringfellow's words than with the solution of the racial crisis."[146] Perhaps such a reaction in part proved Stringfellow's point. One of his criticisms of the conference was that it reflected "the corruption and shallowness of humanism which beguiles Jew or Christian into believing that men are masters of institution or ideology."[147] In other words, the conference embodied the failure to recognize that racism was not merely a human problem that could be solved with human solutions. In fact, despite the good intentions of the attendees, it was telling that they could be so easily and quickly sidetracked from the matter at hand. Campbell observed, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, "Nothing can be more hostile and boisterous than 657 liberals bent on solving someone else's problem when the harmony and unanimity of the occasion is threatened."[148]

Stringfellow's experience at the National Conference on Race and Religion is important for this study for three reasons. First, on a theological level, his remarks represent an early example of his developing understanding of the powers applied to a concrete situation, in this case the racial crisis. Second, it provides an example of Stringfellow as a critic with a prophet's voice and a seer's mind. Although he confronted the representatives of the various faith groups for their relative inaction and inattention to the racial situation, he also proclaimed to them their need to see the situation

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[145]Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly*, 230.

[146]Ibid.

[147]Stringfellow, "Care Enough to Weep," 5.

[148]Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly*, 230.

theologically. For Stringfellow, action, while important, presupposed what was more necessary: the seeing of the situation biblically. Finally, his remarks at the conference and the response to them are evidence to substantiate the claim made by Bill Wylie Kellerman, that while Stringfellow was repeatedly "tempted and drawn to the center, he always moved to the margin."[149] I would add that his invitation to speak at the conference could represent his taking of a place at a center (at least in ecclesiastic circles), while his remarks resulted in his being chased, at least momentarily, to the margin.

Circus Theology

The middle years of the decade of the sixties saw a pronounced increase in Stringfellow's activities. Due to his burgeoning reputation as an incisive social critic, as well as work as a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, he received an ever-increasing number of invitations to speak, which required him to travel "upwards of 200,000 miles a year both in the United States and overseas."[150] The publications of *My People is the Enemy* and *Free in Obedienc*e in 1964 and *Dissenter in a Great Society* in 1966 further expanded his speaking obligations. During this time he continued as a partner with Ellis, Patton, and Stringfellow. Later describing this period in his life, he remembered, "These responsibilities meant that after spending a day in court or at the firm, I would devote three or four hours at night to

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[149]Bill Wylie Kellerman, "Biographical Sketch" in *The Legacy of William Stringfellow: Three Conversations*, v.

[150]Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 36; Stringfellow, letter to Mr. Edward S. Barnard of the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, December 18,1966, 1. Box 11, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library

writing, and then on weekends be on the road for speaking engagements."[151] On top his work as an attorney, his multiple speaking engagements, and his writing, he also "dabbled in city politics, tenant's strikes, assorted demonstrations and protests, and the affairs of a congregation."[152]

Early in 1966 he visited Vietnam en route to Australia and New Zealand.[153] He went there "to observe, to listen, and, hopefully to learn."[154] This experience made him "a convert to radical opposition to the American war there."[155] He later described the war in Vietnam as "a grotesque example of death as social purpose."[156] In contrast to his observations of the effects of death in Indochina, also that year he and Anthony spent most of the summer traveling as "resident theologians" with the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus through New England and part of New York.[157] Stringfellow had a lifelong fascination with the circus, which for him held a certain theological significance.[158] In fact, personally, he considered the circus a reflection of his own

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[151]*A Second Birthday*, 36.

[152]Ibid., 37.

[153]Robert Boak Slocum, "William Stringfellow: A Chronology," in *Prophet of Justice, Prophet of Life*, xii. In the Stringellow papers there are also a number of items from this trip, such as programs from speaking engagements in Australia. See Box 11, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[154]Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 37.

[155]Ibid.

[156]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 71.

[157]McThenia, "Introduction: How This Celebration Began," 15. Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith*, 87.

[158]At least as early as the mid-1970s he was working on a manuscript for a book, *The Idea of Society as a Circus: An Elementary Essay on Ethics and Eschatology*. It was never published. Box 19, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

"sense of absurdity – an instinct for paradox – a conviction that the truth is never bland but lurks in contradiction."[159]

More generally, Stringfellow saw in the circus a metaphor for the Church in terms of its own self-image, which he compared in part to that of circus "purists." These conclude that, rather than restore it "to its former influence and grandeur," they must resign themselves to the fact that the circus "only survives in the nostalgia of the few who can recall the good old days in the hindsight of their own experience."[160] Likewise, "there are ecclesiastical purists who, similarly, look back to a 'golden age' of the church militant, though, as also with circus students, there be considerable dispute about the classic image of the institution."[161] He noted that for the "churchy purists" the question "is whether to memorialize Paul or Constantine or Aquinas or Luther or, even, Pope John XXIII," while for the "circus idealists it was "whether to honor Astley or Dan Rice or Barnum or the Ringling Brothers or, now, John Ringling North."[162]

More broadly and significantly, Stringfellow considered the circus to be "among the few coherent images of the eschatological realm to which people still have ready access."[163] In short, he saw in the circus a parable of the eschatological Kingdom of God and its current ethical embodiment in the world. This parabolic characteristic of the circus was particularly evident in its nomadic nature, the side show tradition, the

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[159]Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith*, 87.

[160]Stringfellow, "The Circus as a Society," unpublished draft of first chapter of proposed book, *The Idea of Society as a Circus*, no date, 2. Box 19, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[161]Ibid.

[162]Ibid.

[163]Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith*, 87-88.

performances of the beast tamers, and the classic "death-defying feats." Regarding the nomadic nature of the circus and the lives of its performers, he made the comparison, "biblical people, like circus folk, live typically as sojourners, interrupting time, with few possessions, and in tents, in this world."[164] Referring to the traditional side show, Stringfellow noted that "[it] assembled and exhibited human 'oddities' and 'curiosities'."[165] He suggested that such an assembly served as an apt symbol for the "eschatological company in which all sorts and conditions of life are congregated."[166] The beast tamers, in Stringfellow's view, symbolized the reclaiming of human beings' "lost dominion over other creatures." This symbol was particularly magnified, he suggested, by the recollection that "biblically, the beasts generally designate the principalities: the nations, dominions, thrones, authorities, institutions, and regimes."[167] Finally, performers such as the tight-rope walkers and the human cannonball represent a people "freed from consignment to death."[168] For Stringfellow these performers reflected "the image of the eschatological person," who was "emancipated from frailty and inhibition, exhilarant, militant, transcendent over death – neither confined nor conformed by the fear of death any more."[169]

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[164]Ibid., 88.

[165]Ibid., 89.

[166]Ibid.

[167]Ibid.

[168]Ibid.

[169]Ibid., 90. By the time he wrote these words, he had been suffering severe health problems for almost twenty years. Hence this statement has an autobiographical flavor to it in that he continually aspired to be that "eschatological person."

Thus for Stringfellow the circus symbolized the citizenry of the Kingdom of God living in the now while waiting for the "not yet." The circus as a parable pointed to "a transcendence of the power of death, which exposes this world as it truly is while it pioneers the Kingdom."[170] So, in his view of the circus Stringfellow situated his critical themes of the powers and death within an eschatological context. This is suggestive of the theological and ethical standpoint from which he launched his critique of American exceptionalism.

Happenings: Physiological and Otherwise

From at least as early as 1963 Stringfellow had been considering writing a fairly comprehensive book on "moral theology or Christian ethics" within the American context. Rather presumptively, perhaps, he hoped to carry on in the tradition of Reinhold Niebuhr, since, in Stringfellow's view, no American had produced "anything of much originality and scope" since Niebuhr had published *Moral Man and Immoral Societ*y in 1932.[171] In that light he found it odd that no similar work had been produced that took into account the "distinctive American experience" since Hiroshima or since the United States became "a pervasive imperial presence in the world or since technology and race became uniquely juxtaposed in social crisis in America."[172] Finally, in early 1968 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship in order to undertake just such a project. He did not complete it, however, due to serious health problems. Noting in 1970 the remaining

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[170]Ibid., 91.

[171]Stringfellow, letter to Mr. Arthur Cohen, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 4 August 1963, 2. Box 7, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. The letter to Mr. Cohen regarded Stringfellow's manuscript for *My People is the Enemy*, which Holt, Rinehart and Winston published. Stringfellow was pitching the idea of a moral theology, apparently hoping that the publisher would bite.

[172]Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 39.

absence of a contemporary American moral theology, Stringfellow speculated that such a void was not filled because it could not be. Perhaps that, he wrote, was "in itself *the* significant insight into the American national experience of the last quarter century."[173]

Stringfellow had hoped to do most of his writing of the proposed moral theology at his new home on Block Island, Rhode Island.[174] In the fall of 1967 he and Towne had moved into a house on the island, which is about thirteen miles off of the Rhode Island coast. Towne suggested naming their home *Eschaton*, from the New Testament Greek term meaning "end", "last", or "uttermost". When they were in the process of moving to the island, a friend who was helping them, upon seeing the island in its off-season state of desertion, had exclaimed, "God! [This] is the end of the world!" Stringfellow had responded, "No . . . it is the beginning of the world."[175] In Christian theological terms *eschaton*, referring to the end of time or the last things, implies the notion of a future hope. In light of their friend's exclamation and the theological paradox suggested by the term, Stringfellow agreed with Towne's suggestion. Thus, as Stringfellow wrote, "At *Eschaton*, Anthony and I lived in the simplicity of that consummate hope."[176]

In the spring of 1968, after experiencing "increasingly frequent interruptions of pain," Stringfellow was forced to abandon his work on a moral theology because of his "virtually immobilizing" illness.[177] For several years Stringfellow's health had been

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[173]Ibid., 40.

[174]He had stepped down as a partner at Ellis, Stringfellow, and Patton in order to work on the project and, presumably, because he no longer lived in New York. He continued on as a "counsel to the firm." Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 40.

[175]Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith*, 140.

[176]Ibid., 141.

[177]Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 40.

somewhat tenuous. According to Kellerman, Stringfellow had contracted hepatitis on a World Student Christian Federation trip to India in 1950.[178] Subsequently, in law school he had suffered gall-bladder attacks - apparently caused by a birth defect - that were so severe that he even missed graduation due to surgery.[179] The procedure did not solve all of his health problems, however. In a letter responding to complaints about missing an engagement because of his health , Stringfellow mentioned a time of hospitalization he experienced in the summer of 1964 that "was very nearly fatal."[180] By the time he wrote the letter in 1966 Stringfellow believed that his ailment was getting worse because his attacks were becoming more frequent.[181] In addition to the pain, Stringfellow was experiencing severe weight loss.[182] In January 1968, he quit drinking alcohol, which he had been abusing for some time as both an anesthetic for the pain and reliever of the stress of his frenetic schedule.[183] His decision to quit drinking was driven by neither doctor's orders nor the recognition that he had a problem; he merely lost the taste for

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[178]Kellerman, "Biographical Sketch," in *The Legacy of William Stringfellow*, v; idem, "'Listen to this Man'" in *Prophet of Justice, Prophet of Life*, 8.

[179]Ibid.

[180]Stringfellow, letter to Rev. A. Richard Petersen, 22 May 1966, 1. Box 11, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. Petersen was the chaplain of Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. In the letter he wrote to Stringfellow complaining about the latter's cancellation, Petersen noted that he had a "rather notorious reputation" for canceling speaking engagements at the last minute. A. Richard Petersen, letter to William Stringfellow, May 4, 1966, 1. Box 11, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[181]Ibid.

[182]Kellerman, "Biographical Sketch" in *The Legacy of William Stringfellow*, v. Kellerman notes that, due to the excruciating pain and weight loss, Stringfellow became virtually a proverbial "ninety-eight pound weakling" before the physicians discovered the source of the problem.

[183]Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 38.

alcohol. Stringfellow considered it a "physiological happening: [his] body would no longer tolerate the stuff."[184]

In light of the several "physiological happenings" the physicians were able to determine the problem. Stringfellow's pancreas had failed.[185] Based upon such a diagnosis, the proposed solution was a radical and experimental surgery to remove the organ.[186] When the surgeons operated on November 22, 1968, they removed his infected pancreas, as well as his spleen, both of which were close to rupturing.[187] Although unexpectedly successful, this procedure rendered him a severe diabetic, requiring him for the remainder of his life to take animal enzymes with every meal to aid in digestion, to maintain a strict dietary regimen, and to inject himself with the prescribed dosages of insulin.[188] As one who wrote so often of the ubiquity of death, his medical condition localized it in physiological form, authenticating it for Stringfellow as an ever present moral reality. Kellerman noted the long term effects of Stringfellow's diabetes: "loss of circulation – especially in his legs, diminished eyesight, episodes of insulin shock and diabetic coma, plus a stroke."[189] Confronted with these physical evidences of the abiding presence of the power of death, Stringfellow, in Kellerman's words, "weathered [them] in prayer and cursing."[190]

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[184]Ibid.

[185]Kellerman, "'Listen to this Man'" in *Prophet of Justice, Prophet of Life*, 8.

[186]Ibid.

[187]Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 175.

[188]Kellerman, "'Listen to this Man'" in *Prophet of Justice, Prophet of Life*, 8.

[189]Ibid.

[190]Ibid.

As he later reflected upon his sickness, his surgery, and his convalescence, Stringfellow wrote that he and Towne had joked about "whether the pain would affect [his] theology."[191] He acknowledged that it certainly would and did, "in ways which I can discern and in ways of which I can never be completely aware."[192] For Stringfellow that was as it should be. Theology could not be abstracted from life experiences. In fact, it was developed in the midst of and in the light of experience. With his health problems in mind he wrote, "Biblical theology, especially the moral theology of the Bible, is itself empirical, a testimony wrought in experience, not academic, in the sense of abstraction."[193] Based upon this notion of theology as fundamentally empirical, Stringfellow critiqued American exceptionalism.

The Block Island Two

Dancer, in his dissertation which he described as a work of biographical theology, identified three "radicalizing encounters" in Stringfellow's life. These encounters were his engagement with Barth, his remarks at the National Conference on Race and Religion, and his relationship with Anthony Towne. As can be inferred from above, I agree that these encounters were formative for Stringfellow. I contend, however, that Dancer fails to adequately consider an event in Stringfellow's life that was arguably the most radicalizing. Particularly in terms of Stringfellow's theological critique of America's moral claims, this event empirically and personally confirmed his view of the nation-state as a fallen power. The event to which I refer is his federal indictment along

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[191]Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 41.

[192]Ibid.

[193]Ibid.

with Anthony Towne for aiding and abetting the fugitive Daniel Berrigan. This indictment, according to Stringfellow and Towne, was the price they paid for exercising the Christian virtue of hospitality.[194]

The apartment that Towne and Stringfellow had shared in Manhattan had become somewhat of a "salon, to which all sorts of people came, and were welcomed."[195] The result was that Stringfellow, as well as Towne, engaged in what the former referred to as "an unpretentious—and almost unintentional—pastoral ministry to an astonishing diversity and far-flung number of persons."[196] They continued their tradition of "pastoral" hospitality on Block Island. Jim Wallis describes *Eschaton* as a place that "literally abounded with humor, hospitality, and very human relationships."[197] He remembered it as "always a prayerful and, above all, a biblically conscious house."[198] For Wallis, "the house had almost a monastic feel to it."[199] The "monastery" was not a cloister of silence, however. Instead, Wallis notes, perhaps reflecting Stringfellow's notion of the empirical nature of theology, it was "a monastery where the news was always on, and the Bible was always open."[200]

The idea of *Eschaton* as a sort of monastery was not merely Wallis's perception. Stringfellow himself, in addition to referring to his and Towne's relationship as

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[194]Stringfellow and Anthony Towne, *Suspect Tenderness: The Ethics of the Berrigan Witness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 120; Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith*, 48.

[195]Stringfellow, *A Keeper of the Word*, 54.

[196]Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 37.

[197]Jim Wallis, "Keeper of the Word," in *Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer*, 93.

[198]Ibid.

[199]Ibid.

[200]Ibid.

"vocationally monastic," characterized their move to Block Island as an effort in part to "establish, as it were, our own monastery."[201] In a memorial address for Towne after his death in 1980, R. Scott Kennedy described life at *Eschaton* as a place where "[visitors] encountered at least three pragmatic expressions of the first monastic communities in the Mid East."[202] These three expressions were, according to Kennedy, gratuitous hospitality, "abundant nourishment," and the "generous opportunity for reflection."[203] In short, *Eschaton* became for many of Stringfellow's friends and fellow travelers a place of spiritual retreat and an oasis for theological reflection.[204]

It was the hospitality of *Eschaton* that Daniel Berrigan was enjoying on August 11, 1970, the day that he was apprehended by agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Stringfellow had known Berrigan for several years, having begun to correspond after the latter had read *My People is the Enemy*.[205] Eventually, Berrigan visited Stringfellow's

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[201]Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith*, 52; idem, *A Keeper of the Word*, 54.

[202]R. Scott Kennedy, "Anthony Towne: An Appreciation," draft manuscript, 1980, 4. Box 22, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. Kennedy had been the brother-in-law of Bishop James Pike, whose biography Stringfellow and Towne had written. William Stringfellow and Anthony Towne*, The Death and Life of Bishop Pike* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1976), 18.

[203]Kennedy, "Anthony Towne: An Appreciation," 4.

[204]It is noteworthy that in 1974, Stringfellow proposed "The Block Island Seminary Project" which was to provide an alternative to traditional seminaries. It would make use of the communal, monastic environment of Eschaton as the setting for studying the Bible in light of the contemporary American socio-political context. In short, it would be a place for learning and producing empirical theology. The intent was to bring students in for one month a year for two years to study with Stringfellow as well as various and diverse visiting faculty such as Daniel Berrigan, Will Campbell, Jim Wallis, Dorothy Day, Mark Hatfield, John Howard Yoder, and Andrew Young. The project was never realized beyond a couple of week-long meetings of some seminarians and friends of Stringfellow and Berrigan in 1975 and 1980. See Stringfellow, "A Proposal for the Block Island Seminary Project," draft manuscript, 1974; idem, letter to Charles Williams, re: The Block Island Seminary Project, 25 October 1974. Box 18, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. For the perspective of one of the participants in the attempt to start the project, see Bill Wylie Kellerman, "Bill, the Bible, and the Seminary Underground," in *Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer*, 56-72.

[205]Murray Polner and Jim O'Grady, *Disarmed and Dangerous: The Radical Lives and Times of Daniel and Philip Berrigan* (New York: BasicBooks, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1997), 227.

Manhattan apartment and they developed a close friendship, "rooted in religious faith and their mutual adherence to the moral authority of nonviolence."[206] Nonviolence characterized Berrigan's life and vocation. Infamous for his protest of the war in Vietnam, Father Daniel Berrigan, Society of Jesus, eventually became a federal fugitive, having been convicted of destroying draft records and refusing to surrender for incarceration.

In May of 1968, Daniel Berrigan, his brother Philip, and seven other Vietnam protesters were arrested for pouring homemade napalm on draft records kept at the draft board office in Catonsville, Maryland. This group, later publicized as the Catonsville Nine, were arrested and charged. Their trial, attended by supporters, the press, and federal agents, was held in Baltimore in early October. Nightly, over the course of the week of proceedings, supporters of the Nine gathered in the basement of St. Ignatius Catholic Church in Baltimore to rally for the defendants.[207] Included in the crowd for those rallies were, according to Stringfellow, "hundreds of Federal agents and double agents and marshals and police turned out and deployed as troops, weapons at the ready."[208] He likened the scene to one portrayed in a "Nazi newsreel."[209] Although he was severely and painfully ill – within a little over a month he would have his drastic surgery – Stringfellow attended the October 7 rally and delivered a brief benediction.[210]

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[206]Ibid., 228.

[207]Ibid., 202-203; Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 129. See also Stringfellow and Towne, *Suspect Tenderness*, 18. Towne mistakenly places the trial in early November.

[208]Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 130.

[209]Ibid.

[210]Polner and O'Grady, *Disarmed and Dangerous*, 202-203.

He approached the pulpit looking like an "elegant skeleton"[211] and announced the following:

> *Remember, now, that the State has only one power it can use against human beings: death. The State can persecute you, prosecute you, imprison you, exile you, execute you. All of these mean the same thing. The State can consign you to death. The grace of Jesus Christ in this life is that death fails. There is nothing the State can do to you, or to me, which we need fear.*[212]

This statement, while displaying Stringfellow's radical perception of the state, also summarizes the theological grounding for his ethic of resistance: A Christian can resist the state because its only weapon is death, which the Christian no longer fears.

All of the Catonsville Nine were convicted and sentenced to as many as three years in prison.[213] Since Philip and another protester had been earlier convicted of involvement in a similar event, they remained incarcerated, while Daniel and the others were freed on bail pending appeal.[214] Once the appeal process had exhausted itself, in the spring of 1970 Daniel Berrigan refused, as a further act of resistance, to surrender himself for his sentence.[215] For the next several months Berrigan was a fugitive, staying in the homes of various sympathizers and making risky public appearances, much to the chagrin of the authorities and much to the delight of his supporters. His life in the "underground" came to an end at *Eschaton* on a dreary, rainy day in August.

Berrigan, who had often visited Block Island to retreat and rest, was arrested there by F. B. I. agents, some of whom had been staking out the house posing as bird

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[211]Daniel Berrigan, "My Friend," unpublished work. Quoted in Polner and O'Grady, 376n. 10.

[212]Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 133. Italics are in the original.

[213]Daniel Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace*, 232; Stringfellow and Towne, *Suspect Tenderness*, 18.

[214]Ibid.

[215]Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace*, 237-239; Stringfellow and Towne, *Suspect Tenderness*, 24-25.

watchers.[216] According to Towne the officers effected the arrest peaceably with no weapons having been drawn.[217] One of the arresting agents was heard to mutter the Jesuit motto, "*Ad majorem Dei gloriam* [For the greater glory of God]," as they took Berrigan into custody.[218] Stringfellow and Towne were indicted soon thereafter on counts of harboring and concealing a fugitive and relieving, receiving, comforting, and assisting a felon as accessories after the fact.[219] Their indictments were dismissed on February 16, 1971 based primarily upon technical deficiencies in the statutory language used in the charges.[220]

The six months of legal wrangling concerning the federal indictments, as well as his overall identification with the fugitive Berrigan, had an important impact upon Stringfellow. Whereas he had been opposed to Nixon in principle and consistently critical of many federal policies and actions, such as the war in Vietnam, certain civil rights policies, and many of Johnson's "Great Society" programs, this experience confirmed his critique with a personalized poignancy that overshadowed his prior

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[216]Polner and O'Grady, *Disarmed and Dangerous*, 229; Stringfellow and Towne, *Suspect Tenderness*, 52-53.

[217]Stringfellow and Towne, *Suspect Tenderness*, 54.

[218]Polner and O'Grady, *Disarmed and Dangerous*, 229; Garry Wills, *Bare Ruined Choirs: Doubt Prophecy, and Radical Religion* (New York: A Delta Book by Dell Publishing, 1971, 1972), 246.

[219]"Indictment No. 7709," District Court of the United States for the District of Rhode Island, *United States v. Stringfellow and Towne*; Edwin Hastings and DeWitte T. Kersh, Jr., "Memorandum in Support of Defendants Motion to Dismiss Count II of the Indictment," in Stringfellow and Towne, *Suspect Tenderness*, 117-119, 144.

[220]*United States v. Stringfellow and Towne*, U. S. District Court of Rhode Island, decision by Chief Judge Edward Day, in Stringfellow and Towne, *Suspect Tenderness*, 160-169. Regarding the count charging them with "harboring and concealing" a felon, the judge determined that it was "fatally deficient in that it [failed] to specify the acts of the defendants for which the Government [sought] to hold them criminally responsible." Likewise, the charge was not apparently specific enough in identifying where the criminal act of harboring and concealing took place. The count charging that Towne and Stringfellow were accessories after the fact was dismissed for those reasons, as well as the fact that the charge did not specify the illegal acts of Berrigan that the defendants were presumed to know. The charges were dismissed exclusively on the basis of technicalities.

assessments. Over ten years after the fact, reminiscing about his experience as one of the "Block Island Two," he wrote that he and Towne were "indicted by the regime of Richard Nixon and John Mitchell and J. Edgar Hoover for harboring Daniel Berrigan, the fugitive priest."[221] He then tellingly and dramatically described the impact of the experience in terms of what he and Towne had learned from it. They learned, he wrote, "firsthand, of the chill of death incarnated politically in the perversion of the legal process" and that "the target of that assault was [our] humanity – the very *esse* of our humanness: sanity and conscience – and we struggled hard not to succumb to paranoia while we were under ubiquitous surveillance and relentless harassment."[222] He, moreover, wrote that while at the time they were ignorant of the characteristics of the administration that would be later revealed in the Watergate scandal, they were "able to recognize that the Nixon administration quite literally stank of death and embodied the idolatry of death as its operative morality."[223]

This harsh, apocalyptic critique of the Nixon administration and the federal government in general characterized Stringfellow's thought for the rest of his life. Shortly after the charges against them were dropped – a fact which to some degree should have contradicted Stringfellow's dour assessment of the legal process - Towne and Stringfellow wrote a letter to Daniel and Philip Berrigan, who were both in federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut. In the letter Towne and Stringfellow did express hope that their "recent relief from indictment" was a "sign . . . that reason can still prevail, justice can be redeemed, moral sanity can be recovered, peace can be achieved, conscience can be

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[221]Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith*, 32.

[222]Ibid.

[223]Ibid.

honored."[224] Despite the slight display of optimism, Stringfellow would not extend any characterization of hopefulness to the Nixon administration. Regarding advice that they keep a low profile to protect themselves from further government scrutiny, Stringfellow and Towne wrote, "It is always characteristic of oppressive societies that fear reigns between regime and people-and not just on the part of the people, but also on the side of the State."[225] According to Stringfellow, while the advice for him and Towne to "play it safe" clearly betrayed a fear of the authorities, it was the authorities themselves who were motivated by fear – the fear of people like the Berrigans and Stringfellow:

> Americans have been suffering an administration which is manifestly afraid of its own citizens; afraid of the young, afraid of the blacks, afraid of the poor, afraid of free speech, afraid of free media, afraid of any doubts about its version of events, afraid of ideas, afraid of truth, afraid of persons who think, afraid of non-conforming, afraid of dissent, afraid of citizens who behave as free men.[226]

Indeed in the subsequent years, Stringfellow did not "play it safe." Instead he behaved as a free man, criticizing the federal government in his unique style of political theology, which following the Block Island Two incident became increasingly more apocalyptic.

As I have detailed, Stringfellow had attempted to write a moral theology for the American context. The project was, however, preempted by his severe health problems and the attendant surgery. Within two years of his involvement with the federal charges, he wrote *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, the nearest approximation to a moral theology that he produced. This work, he wrote, represented an

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[224]Stringfellow and Towne, letter to Daniel and Philip Berrigan, Federal Prison, Danbury, Connecticut, The Fourth Sunday of Lent, 1971, 1. Box 15, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. The text of the letter was also published in Stringfellow and Towne, *Suspect Tenderness*, 172-177. While the letter is ostensibly from Towne and Stringfellow, based upon its style and vocabulary I suspect that Stringfellow actually wrote it.

[225]Stringfellow and Towne, letter to Daniel and Philip Berrigan., 2.

[226]Ibid.

attempt to "understand America biblically," not to "construe the Bible Americanly." He suggested that there "had been much of the latter in [America's] public life and religious ethos."[227] Within his attempt at a biblical understanding of America, Stringfellow applied the symbolism of the Book of Revelation. More specifically, he allegorically equated America with the biblically apocalyptic nation of Babylon. According to Stringfellow, "Babylon represents the essential version of the demonic in triumph in a nation."[228] In that light, he made a drastic comparison: "Babylon is . . . a parable for Nazi Germany. And Babylon is thus a parable for America."[229] Therefore, he asserted, "there is an inherent and idiopathic connection between the Nazi estate in the thirties and what is now happening in America."[230]

The darkness of this critique, both in terms of theological assessment and historical analogy, is contrasted with some of socio-political observations made prior to the Block Island Two incident. For instance, in a 1966 address to the Christian Action Conference of the Presbyterian Church in the United States Stringfellow contended that the "myth" of America's inherently and universally superior virtue was "open to criticism as being unreliable historically and empirically, as well as theologically."[231] In the same address, he described the Great Society "myth" that propelled much of Johnson's domestic

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[227]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 13.

[228]Ibid., 33.

[229]Ibid.

[230]Ibid.

[231]"The Great Society as Myth," unpublished manuscript of address given in Montreat, North Carolina, August 1966, 6. Box 11, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

policies as "a reactionary and retarding influence in American life and in the life of the world."[232]

One might argue that the contrast of these relatively tame criticisms to his more severe, apocalyptic rhetoric can be attributed to a difference in presidential administrations. Indeed, Stringfellow was a lifelong Democrat and 1968 supporter of Humphrey's rival for the nomination, Eugene McCarthy.[233] Consequently, the election of Nixon by the so-called "Silent Majority" in 1968 was not welcomed by Stringfellow, to say the least. However, even in 1969 and early 1970 his rhetoric was not as shrill as it later became. For example, in March of 1970, a few months before the Block Island Two incident, Stringfellow delivered a sermon entitled "America as Jerusalem Lost: The Ascendancy of the Demonic in American Society."[234] In the address he criticized the so-called "return to values" called for by the "Silent Majority," suggesting that the primary value that should be recovered is due process of law.[235] He suggested that the main "enemy of . . . human life as such in America . . . is the ascendancy of the demonic in the great institutions of science, commerce, and the military, and their satellite institutions

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[232]Ibid., 9.

[233]"Block Island Newsletter" (November 1980). Box 23, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. This article notes Stringfellow's loss of an election as Second Warden of Block Island to a Republican. William Stringfellow, letter to Senator Eugene McCarthy, 3 January 1968. Box 13, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. In the letter Stringfellow applauds McCarthy's decision to contest the primary results. He offers "to render any service I am able to, to further your candidacy." See also William Stringfellow and Anthony Towne, "What's At Stake in '76," *Christianity and Crisis*, October 18, 1976, 234-236, for a favorable discussion of McCarthy's 1968 and 1976 candidacies.

[234]Manuscript of sermon preached at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut, March 4, 1970. Box 35, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[235]Ibid., 10-11.

like the university, the labor unions, and, alas, increasingly, the church."[236] Thinking perhaps of Daniel Berrigan, two months later Stringfellow referred to a "burgeoning of totalitarianism" in America that was presumably evidenced by his observations that "any but the most acquiescent citizens are liable to surveillance; due process of law is ridiculed by illegal searches, coerced self-incrimination, political prosecutions;" and "dissenters are intimidated and some driven into exile."[237] While clearly these are indictments of the American political system, the intensity level of the rhetoric is more pronounced in his later statements, such as "America is Babylon" or "there is an inherent and idiopathic connection between the Nazi estate . . . and what is now happening in America," than in the suggestion that America is merely "Jerusalem lost."[238] Thus, prior to the Block Island Two incident, he wrote and spoke of the "ascendancy of the demonic in American society." Following the incident, however, he wrote of the absolute "demonic triumph in [the] nation."[239]

Ultimately, Stringfellow's firsthand experience as a defendant, however brief, darkened his already tragic perception of America as a power, in both the theological and political sense, and intensified his criticism of America's moral claims. Although he already shared the negative view of the Nixon administration held by most of his politically liberal peers and warned of the assumed increasingly totalitarian character of the federal government, his experience with an indictment by the agents of that

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[236]Ibid., 14.

[237]"Human Freedom and the Vengeance of God," unpublished manuscript of sermon delivered to the Rhode Island Baptist State Convention at the Central Baptist Church, Providence, Rhode Island, April 19, 1970, 7-8. Box 35, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[238]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 33.

[239]Ibid.

government served to confirm his perception of its supposed totalitarian designs. As a self-described empirical theologian he responded appropriately to his experience: he theologized it, painting the United States and its federal government in particular in morally dualistic and apocalyptic terms.

Dissenter in God's Society

Throughout the seventies and early eighties, Stringfellow continued at various times to write, speak, practice law, and even engage in politics on Block Island. He followed up *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* in 1977 with a similar work addressing the biblical notion of the apocalyptic and political ethics, *Conscience and Obedience: The Politics of Romans 13 and Revelation 13 in Light of the Second Coming*.[240] He also continued to travel widely throughout the United States, lecturing, preaching, and speaking in a variety of venues. For example, his itinerary for the fall of 1973 itemizes the following engagements:

--September 17-October 12, Theologian in residence, College of Wooster, Wooster, Ohio
-- September 30-Oct. 2, General Convention of the Episcopal Church, Louisville, Kentucky
-- Sept. 30, preach at Buechel Park Baptist Church, Louisville
-- Oct. 2 – lecture at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary
-- Oct. 2 (PM) – Centre College, Danville, Kentucky
-- Oct. 3, Georgetown Baptist College
-- Oct. 14 – Asbury United Methodist Church, Salisbury, Maryland
-- Oct. 15-24: home at Block Island

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[240](Waco, Texas: Word Publishing, 1977). He intended to produce a trilogy of Christian social and political ethics that included *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, *Conscience and Obedience*, and work he never completed, *Grieve Not the Holy Spirit*. The third work in the trilogy was to be a "book about the biblical relationship of the charismatic and the demonic." See Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith*, 16. See also William Stringfellow, Letter to Floyd Thatcher of Word Publishing, December 2, 1975. Box 19, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. It is worth noting that both of these books were picked up by an evangelical publishing house. He had a rather interesting relationship with evangelicals that deserves further exploration beyond the scope of this project.

-- October 25-26: paper at Yale Divinity School
-- October 28-30: Menno Simons Lectureship at Bethel College (Kansas)
-- Oct. 31- Nov. 4, Boston Globe Book Festival, Boston
-- Nov. 5-7: home
-- Nov. 8-11: Chicago
-- Nov. 10-11: Tri-Church Peace Committee
-- Nov. 13-16: New York City[241]

He made national news briefly in 1975 for his involvement in an ecclesiastical trial. A lawyer in the Church as well as out of it, Stringfellow served as the counsel for the defense in the case of William Wendt, rector of the Episcopal Church of Saint Stephen and the Incarnation in Washington, D. C.[242] Wendt was charged with disobeying the orders of his bishop because he had allowed a woman, the Reverend Alison Cheek, to celebrate the Eucharist in his church. Cheek and ten other women deacons had been ordained the previous year in Philadelphia by three retired bishops.[243] A month after the ordinations, the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church had ruled them invalid.[244] Subsequently, Bishop Creighton, Wendt's bishop, forbade the latter from allowing Cheek to preside over communion. After Wendt permitted Cheek to do so, several of his fellow clergymen brought charges against him for disobeying his bishop.

In the resulting trial, which was on its face about Wendt's disobedience, Stringfellow, in his defense, argued instead for the validity of Cheek's ordination. He moreover subpoenaed the Episcopal Presiding Bishop John M. Allin to testify in the

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[241]Itinerary for William Stringfellow (Fall 1973). Box 17, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[242]Susan Cheever Cowley with Stephen Lesher, "'Godly Admonitions'," *Newsweek*, May 12, 1975, 90; Edward E. Ploughman, "The Wendt Case, Women on Trial," *Christianity Today*, May 23, 1975, 55-57.

[243]Ploughman, 55.

[244]Ibid. For Stringfellow's initial response to the House of Bishop's ruling, see his article "The Bishops at O'Hare: Mischief and a Mighty Curse," *Christianity and Crisis*, September 16, 1974, 195-196.

trial. Allin refused, claiming that he had no "relevant evidence to give."[245] The canonical court cited the bishop for contempt.[246] He never appeared. In the ensuing years, Stringfellow adopted a contemptuous attitude toward Allin, as evidenced by an "open letter" he wrote to him in 1980.[247] In the letter Stringfellow accused Fallin of manifesting throughout his tenure "an absence of conviction, a failure of candor, a spirit of confusion, a doublemindedness, [and]a tendency to tailor utterance to the moment."[248] Stringfellow noted Fallin's "initial hysteria about the Philadelphia ordinations" followed by his "violation of . . . canonical duty" in defying the subpoena in the Wendt trial.

Accusing the bishop of being a failure as a leader, Stringfellow asserted that when Fallin was elected as Presiding Bishop, "a void opened in the leadership of the Episcopal Church, which has been filled by management." In keeping with his typical theological orientation, Stringfellow wrote, "In the church, as with other principalities and powers, management is preoccupied with institutional preservation and with condiments of statistical prosperity."[249] The problem with such a mentality, for Stringfellow, was that it reflects worldliness: "The church becomes most conformed to this world where the church is most preoccupied in the maintenance of the ecclesial fabric."[250] If the

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[245]"The Case of the No-Show Bishop," *Christianity Today*, May 23, 1975, 57.

[246]Ibid.

[247]Stringfellow, "An Open Letter to the Presiding Bishop," *A Keeper of the Word*, 280-283. Originally published in *The Witness* (January 1980): 10-11.

[248]Ibid., 281.

[249]Ibid., 282.

[250]Ibid.

management mentality is allowed to persist, Stringfellow suggested, "it renders the church self-indulgent, supercilious, self-serving, and silly."[251]

Stringfellow, while conceding that Allin was not to blame for "everything that is amiss now in the church," wrote that he was "blameworthy because [he was] the incumbent presiding bishop."[252] Noting a "certain Anglican (or, perchance, merely English) etiquette that sometimes inhibits the telling of the truth," Stringfellow claimed that he was not hindered by such an etiquette.[253] Instead, he wrote the bishop, "I verify my regard for you as a person and evidence my respect for the office you hold by telling the truth to you."[254] Concluding the letter, Stringfellow referred to a report that Allin had publicly expressed his desire to return to the parish ministry. In light of that, Stringfellow wrote,

> I take your word at face value. And I say to you: the time is *now* to implement your impulse. As your brother in Christ, I appeal to you to resign forthwith as presiding bishop.[255]

Consistently, as one can surmise from the episodes described above, Stringfellow was a dissenter. The Wendt trial and Stringfellow's subsequent assessment of and appeal to Fallin clearly reiterate this.[256] Yet, as a dissenter he remained a tenuous insider, advocating against the status quo for those he considered the marginalized. Hence he

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[251]Ibid.

[252]Ibid., 283

[253]Ibid.

[254]Ibid.

[255]Ibid.

[256]Stringfellow was also friend and defender of Episcopalian Bishop James A. Pike, who was charged with heresy. Stringfellow and Towne collaborated on two books about Pike: *The Bishop Pike Affair: Scandals of Conscience and Heresy, Relevance and Solemnity in the Contemporary Church* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967) and, after Pike's death, *The Death and Life of Bishop Pike* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1976).

served within the canonical system as a counsel for a fellow advocate of women's ordination. By the same token, writing in a denominational organ, he publicly called upon the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church to resign. Both of these actions reflect his position as one who lived at the margins of his Church. He lived, however, at the margins, not outside of them. This was true of Stringfellow not only with respect to the Episcopal Church, but also with respect to American society. From this vantage point barely inside the margin he mounted his critique of American exceptionalism.

During his final decade Stringfellow and physical death were in constant confrontation. The effects of diabetes brutalized his body. In 1980, he suffered a mild stroke, a diabetic coma, and eye damage, and in 1982 he experienced a retinal hemorrhage.[257] Daniel Berrigan described his friend during this period in poignant terms: "To those who loved him, his appearance all but stopped the heart. His face grew seamed and scored and so noble. He was vulnerable, frail, astonishingly patient."[258]

Stringfellow continued, as much as he was able, to write and speak. He completed his last book, *The Politics of Spirituality*, during the spring of 1984, while working as a writer-in-residence at General Theological Seminary in New York City.[259] In the preface of the book, he referred to his "recurrent, protracted, abrasive harassments of pain,"

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[257]Jim Wallis, letter to William Stringfellow, June 20, 1980; Floyd W. Thatcher, Vice President, Word Publishing, letter to William Stringfellow, February 18, 1980. Box 22, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. Dr. Gillie, Westerly Hospital, Consultation report re William Stringfellow to Dr. Henry Brown, June 11, 1980; William Stringfellow, letter to Mary Ruth, 23 July 1982. Box 23, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[258]Daniel Berrigan, "My Friend," in *Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer*, 102.

[259](Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 25.

which, as he wrote, was "continuous and very aggravated."[260] Within less than a year, he was relieved of his pain; he died on March 2, 1985 at the age of 56. His ashes were buried next to those of Towne on the property at *Eschaton*.[261]

Categories and Conclusions

Stanley Hauerwas and Jeff Powell aptly described Stringfellow as one who "never really quite fit."[262] Powell and Hauerwas elaborated:

> He was not really a theologian, but he had wonderful theological insights. He was not really a lawyer, although he certainly practiced the law. He was not really a social activist, although few did more on behalf of people who lacked power. He tended to make everyone mad because he did not fit. For liberal Protestant social activists, he sounded far too theological. Religious conservatives thought he sounded far too critical of America.[263]

According to Hauerwas and Powell, Stringfellow "did not fit," because he thought in apocalyptic terms and wrote with apocalyptic language. Anthony Dancer picked up on this difficulty with categorizing him and suggested that it was not "Stringfellow who didn't fit, but rather the prevailing categories which do not fit him."[264] Consequently, Dancer's dissertation attempts to respond to this categorizational awkwardness by tightly interweaving Stringfellow's life, work, and thought into a work of biographical theology,

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[260]Ibid., 24.

[261]Bill Wylie Kellerman, "'Listen to this Man'," 14.

[262]"Creation as Apocalyptic: A Homage to William Stringfellow," in *Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer,* 31.

[263]Ibid.

[264]Dancer, "Theology in the Life of William Stringfellow," 5.

which sought to "read him confessionally, on his own terms" within a critical-evaluative context.[265]

Others *have* categorized Stringfellow, specifically in terms that perhaps reflect *anti*-categories: at the margin, a living paradox, and on the edge.[266] For example, Kellerman described Stringfellow in somewhat celebratory terms using these categories:

> . . . I think we see a life full of paradox, and that's going to be in addition to the margin and the powers and vocation. The paradox of someone who is drawn to the center but kept deciding for the edge; someone who is utterly pessimistic about structures of power and the fallowness of the human enterprise who at the same time proclaimed this utter hope, utter freedom which is nothing less than the resurrection. I think his gift to us is substantially learning how to live in that paradoxical freedom.[267]

I agree with these categorizations. Indeed Stringfellow lived life at the margins, organizationally, socially, physically, and geographically. As an attorney he defended those on the edges of the system. An active churchman he was, but *not* a priest. He was a *lay* theologian, not an academic. He experienced government surveillance and suffered federal indictment. For much of his life, his health was *marginal* at best. He was a homosexual, who was "almost but not quite out."[268] At the same time, he was not reticent about associating with homosexual groups as their advocate. He defended the ordination of women and called upon the presiding bishop to resign. With an affinity for the absurd Stringfellow identified with the denizens of a circus freak show. Even his

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[265]Ibid., 7.

[266]Likewise, his theology has been appropriately described as dialectical. See, for example, Timothy F. Sedgwick, "The Dialectics of Faith," in *Prophet of Justice, Prophet of Life*, 149-162. I will take up this theme in more detail in subsequent chapters.

[267]Bill Wylie Kellerman, "Biographical Sketch, in *The Legacy of William Stringfellow*, vii.

[268]See Andrew McThenia, "How This Celebration Began," in *Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer*, 15.

homes were on the margin with one being in one of the worst blocks in New York City and the other being thirteen miles off the coast of Rhode Island.

Although he lived on the margins, he was never disengaged. His passions from an early age were *both* religion and politics. He never became a priest, but he was deeply involved in various organizations and activities of the Episcopal Church. In the throes of illness he still lectured and wrote and preached. He was selected to participate as the only lay theologian in a historic panel discussion with Barth and emerged as the only theologian to receive Barth's individual approbation. He served for a term on the governing body of Block Island. At *Eschaton* the Bible may have often been open, but the news was on as well.

Theologically and morally, Stringfellow departed to varying degrees from traditional Christianity. The paradoxical characterization of him, however, is remarkably consistent with Christian tradition. Stringfellow, as a Christian, understood his vocation (in the classical not careerist sense) to be that of an alien or sojourner, one who is "in" the world but not "of" it. Of course he interpreted this idiosyncratically. For Stringfellow it meant that a Christian needed to be fully implicated and engaged in the human activities of the world, while resisting the temptation to conform to the world and its idolatry. Considering implication and engagement to reflect the essence of holiness, he wrote, "[The] irony in being holy is that one is plunged more fully into the practical existence of the world, as it is, than in any other way."[269] In short, Stringfellow's life, plunged into the practical existence of the world yet at the same time always in dissent, reflected the holy engagement of a sojourner.

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[269]Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality*, 35.

CHAPTER THREE

The Theology of William Stringfellow

Stringfellow was rather reserved about the notion that there would be such a thing as a "Stringfellow's theology." He stated, rather naively perhaps, "There is no such thing as Barth's theology, or Bonhoeffer's theology, or, least of all, Stringfellow's theology. But there is such a thing as the theology of the Word of God itself – that is, the knowledge of God which God Himself has given to men in the world."[1] Indeed, he never produced a systematic theology and, as has been mentioned, was not a purely academic theologian. Nevertheless, his theological thought centers around various themes that are integrally connected, forming a system of sorts. Understanding his theology and its derivative ethics is necessary for an analysis of any of his social or political thought. This chapter and the next will provide an exposition of selected elements of Stringfellow's theological thought. The present chapter will detail and explore the central themes of his theology in its component parts and as a consistently integrated whole. It will be followed by a chapter that connects the theological themes to their ethical implications. In traditional terms, this chapter deals with Stringfellow's dogmatic theology, while the next will address his moral theology.

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[1]William Stringfellow, letter to Don Guynes, 1964. Box 9, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. In 1975, Stringfellow proposed a book, tentatively entitled *Sermons and Second Thoughts*, included in the book was to be a section that he wrote in the draft proposal would sample or introduce "'my theology'." The fact that he placed "my theology" in quotation marks suggests his reservations about the notion. Unpublished draft of book proposal, *Sermons and Second Thoughts*, 2. Box 19, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

There are a number of ways to present and analyze Stringfellow's theology. One is to deal with it in a systematic and doctrinal fashion, taking classical Christian doctrines, such as Christology, anthropology, and theology proper, and unpacking his thought on each. While this may be a helpful approach, it is weakened in Stringfellow's case by the fact that his theology, while relatively consistent with respect to the items he addressed, was not technically systematic in that he did not sufficiently treat all or even most of the classic Christian doctrines. His work centered instead on various theological themes. Another possibility would be to deal with his theological development, to demonstrate the influences and various changes in his thought.[2] This format, which might suggest an "early Stringfellow" and a "late Stringfellow" and perhaps even a "transitional Stringfellow", is insufficient in that the developmental approach fails to provide a good picture of his thought for the purposes of dealing with its implications. Such an approach, moreover, suffers from the fact that, while Stringfellow's thought did develop and in some cases intensify due to significant events and encounters, it did not appreciably change in such a way as to indicate any major disjunctures. It merely progressed and matured. A final example would be to describe his theology as a narrative, with major characters, such as the powers and principalities, and with plots and sub-plots, such as the Incarnation and the Eschaton. This approach would be in keeping

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[2]Examples of this would include Barth in theology and Wittgenstein in philosophy. For brief discussions of Barth's development, see Markus Barth, "My Father: Karl Barth" and John Howard Yoder, "Karl Barth: How His Mind Kept Changing," in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, edited by Donald McKim (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986). Regarding Wittgenstein, see O. Hanfling, "Theories of Meaning: from 'Reference' to 'Use'," in *The Handbook of Western Philosophy*, edited by G. H. R. Parkinson (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988), 40-47. Dancer notes some development in his biographical theology of Stringfellow. I have already alluded to some development of Stringfellow's thought in Chapter One.

with a currently popular theological method, narrative theology,[3] and would parallel aspects of Stringfellow's approach to the Bible.[4] Nevertheless, Stringfellow's thought does not lend itself to this approach completely. While his views can be consolidated into a narrative, each of the central themes must be exposited in order for the narrative to make any sense.

In light of the above, I will take a hybrid approach in the treatment of Stringfellow's theology. I will first deal with each of his major theological themes, presenting them as major components in Stringfellow's story. Then, I will weave them together into a narrative whole, which I will ultimately demonstrate was the position within which Stringfellow critiqued American exceptionalism, which itself reflects a particular American narrative.

*Principalities and Power*s

The notion of the principalities and powers is arguably the centerpiece of Stringfellow's theology.[5] It is certainly the theological theme for which he is most well known. For example, as mentioned in the introduction, Walter Wink derived his idea for the writing of his important *Powers* trilogy from reading Stringfellow's discussion of the

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[3]For a helpful treatment of narrative theology, particularly as it relates to evangelical theology, see Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Ockholm, editors, *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1996). For seminal works treating narrative theology as a hermeneutical and theological method see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1974); George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984); and James W. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1974).

[4]This will be discussed below.

[5]He used the terms principalities and powers interchangeably and in tandem.

powers in *Free in Obedience*.[6] Most occasional references to Stringfellow, as well as extended treatments of his thought, in the works of other theologians refer to his view of the powers.[7]

The terminology of the principalities and powers is derived from a number of New Testament references.[8] Stringfellow took these abstract references and attributed them to social, economic, and political realities. Using Walter Wink's term, Stringfellow "demythologized" the New Testament notion of the powers. He did so by defining the powers in terms of "three contemporary sociopolitical categories: ideologies, institutions, and images."[9] These powers are not merely sociological metaphors, however. They are theologically significant, according to Stringfellow, in that they all in one way or another seek domination over individual human lives and claim to varying degrees "sovereignty over human life and history."[10]

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[6]Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Powers in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), xi.

[7]For example, John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*: Vicit Agnus Noster, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994); Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); Marva J. Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 3-34.

[8]Examples include Romans 8:19-22, Colossians 1:16, 1 Corinthians 15:25-26, and Ephesians 6:10-20. For a brief exposition of each passage, see Dawn, *Powers*, 7.

[9]Wink, "Stringfellow on the Powers," *Radical Christian, Exemplary Lawyer*, edited by Andrew W. McThenia, Jr. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 26.

[10]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 64. Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz has provided a helpful definition of the principalities and powers that parallels Stringfellow's view. Grenz defines them as "structures of existence." Specifically, they are "those larger, suprahuman aspects or dimensions of reality which form the inescapable context for human life and which therefore condition individual and corporate human existence." Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994), 296. This notion is also prominent in Hendrikus Berkhof's seminal work, *Christ and the Powers*. See this work, translated from the Dutch by John Howard Yoder (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1962).

Stringfellow suggested, presumably in light of the various ideologically-based examples of violence and oppression in the twentieth century, that ideology is "the most self-evident principality in the world at the present time."[11] These powers included the multiplicity of "-isms": communism, fascism, racism, capitalism, humanism, rationalism, and nationalism, to name a few. Significant for this study is the fact that Stringfellow included the nationalism of the "American way of life" under this category of powers. Expounding upon this idea, Stringfellow wrote, "Americans are now constantly, incessantly, and somewhat vehemently assailed with the word that the ultimate moral significance of their individual lives is embodied in and depends upon the mere survival of the American nation and its 'way of life'."[12] In that light, as a power seeking dominion over humans, American nationalism promises humans that they "will find [that] their justification is in service to the nation, in the offering of all other things for the sake of national survival."[13] For Stringfellow, ideologies as powers promise to give humans meaning, hope, purpose, protection, or other benefits in exchange for varying degrees of personal sacrifice.

Institutions are powers as well. Stringfellow noted that the "moral principle that governs any institution – a great corporation, a government agency, an ecclesiastical organization, a union, a utility, or university – is its own survival."[14] Since ultimately an institution, regardless of its claims of benevolence or at least benignity, must perpetuate its own survival, "everyone who lives within its sphere of influence" must "commit

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[11]Ibid., 57.

[12]Ibid., 58.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid., 56.

themselves to . . . the survival of the institution."[15] For Stringfellow, those within the institutional sphere of influence include "officers, executives, employees, members, customers, and students."[16] Each person with a relationship to an institution is expected to some degree to sacrifice himself or herself to the perpetuation of that institution.

A final category of power described by Stringfellow is that of image. In *Free in Obedience*, Stringfellow uses the example of Marilyn Monroe to explain this category. He notes that "there was for a time a movie star named Marilyn Monroe. The person is now dead, but the image 'Marilyn Monroe' is by no means dead."[17] This image "is a genuine idol, an entity, bearing the same name and likeness as the person, with an existence, character, and power quite distinguishable from the person who bore the name."[18] For Stringfellow the category of prinicipality described as an image is a persona, an identity that for reasons of celebrity or infamy takes on a proverbial "life of its own" that is greater than and somewhat detached from the person whom it symbolizes. What makes an image a power is that it exists independently of the person for whom it is named.[19] The image furthermore lies beyond its referent's control, "and is in conflict with the person until the person surrenders his life in one fashion or another to the principality."[20]

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[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid., 53.

[18]Ibid., 54.

[19]Ibid., 55.

[20]Ibid.

In sum, for Stringfellow, the powers are diverse, several, and ubiquitous. Wink succinctly describes them as "[comprising] all of social, political, and corporate reality, in both visible and invisible manifestations."[21] In one statement Stringfellow summarized the identity of the powers:

> Thus, the Pentagon or the Ford Motor Company or Harvard University or the Hudson Institute or Consolidated Edison or the Diners Club or the Olympics or the Methodist Church or the Teamsters Union are all principalities. So are capitalism, Maoism, humanism, Mormonism, astrology, the Puritan work ethic, science and scientism, white supremacy, patriotism plus many, many more – sports, sex, any profession or discipline, technology, money, the family – beyond any prospect of full enumeration. The principalities *are* legion.[22]

These legion powers and principalities are not the aggregate product of human being, willing, and acting. They are, according to Stringfellow, creatures. That is, they are entities created by God, "having their own existence, personality, and mode of life."[23] They are "not made or instituted by men, but as with men and all creation, made by God for his own pleasure."[24] Echoing his remarks to the National Conference on Race and Religion, Stringfellow noted that humans were reluctant "to accord principalities their due integrity as creatures," because in part humans suffer the illusion "that they make or create and, hence, control institutions and that institutions are no more than groups of human beings duly organized."[25] In truth, in Stringfellow's theology, institutions and other principalities belie such human arrogance in that mysteriously "something more

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[21]Wink, "Stringfellow on the Powers" in *Radical Christian, Exemplary Lawyer*, 26.

[22]Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, Texas: Word, Incorporated, 1973), 78.

[23]Ibid., 79.

[24]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 52.

[25]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 79.

than that the summation of human thought and activity is involved in the creature identity of principalities."[26]

Stringfellow never posited the exact nature of the creaturehood of the powers. He merely identified them as creatures in their own right. For him, the metaphysics of the powers involved issues that belonged in the realm of mystery equivalent to that surrounding the precise nature of human origin and being. He wrote, "The exact origins of the creatureliness of principalities is a mystery in quite the same sense that the creaturehood of human beings remains mysterious."[27] Noting that mystery does not equate to complete ignorance, he indicated that "what is knowable is partial and ambiguous, limited and fragile."[28] While he left the question of the exact nature of the powers and principalities unanswered, Stringfellow did assert that "concerted or collective human action is, in and of itself, too simple and transient to support the view that principalities are creatures made by men."[29] In other words, there is something ineffable associated with the existence of ideologies, institutions, and images that provides them with an identity that extends beyond that which humans can produce in themselves.

Regardless of the exact nature of their origin and essence, the powers and principalities, according to Stringfellow, have a vocation, a calling, a purpose that is fundamental to their creaturehood. Based upon a particular interpretation of the biblical book of Genesis, Stringfellow asserted that humanity was originally given by God

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[26]Ibid., 80.

[27]Ibid., 79.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid., 80.

dominion over creation. Included in this dominion were the principalities and powers, whose original vocation was thus to "the service and enhancement of human life in society."[30] This suggests that organizations, traditions, corporations, nations, and all other powers ideally should serve humanity by providing various social structures necessary for human flourishing. Unfortunately, however, this vocation is not realized by the powers and principalities. Instead there exists an inversion of humankind's dominion in which people, rather than be served by the powers, find themselves enslaved to them. For Stringfellow, this inversion of dominion is a result of the theological notion of the Fall.

Fall

Stringfellow understood fallenness to be a state of existence rather than a historical event. This state he described as "the profound condition of chaos and disorientation, brokenness and violence, struggle and conflict within and amongst all creatures and all things."[31] The Fall also is the state of human estrangement from God. In the midst of this chaos, disorientation, brokenness, estrangement and violence, humans seek relief. Thus the Fall brings about the inversion of dominion in which humans serve rather than are served by the powers and the principalities. Humans serve the powers hoping to gain some of the relief they seek. This relief is only fully found in God. Recognizing this, Stringfellow described the human condition within the Fall as "their pathetic search for God or some substitute for God within and outside themselves and each other in the

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[30]Ibid., 82.

[31]Stringfellow, *Instead of Death* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 100.

principalities and in the rest of creation."[32] Nonetheless, the powers never provide what humanity seeks. Instead they become idols, promising goods such as meaning, hope, life, peace, and security in exchange for nothing less than worship while ultimately engaging in "relentless aggression against all of life."[33] Ultimately, according to Stringfellow, "[the] principality insinuating itself in the place of God, deceives humans into thinking and acting as if the moral worth or justification of human beings is defined and determined by commitment or surrender – literally, sacrifice – of human life to the survival interest, grandeur, and vanity of the principality."[34] In the Fall the powers have inverted their rightful vocation and usurped the place of God in human life.[35]

Although the principalities and powers arrogate themselves to dominance over human life, they themselves are enslaved. Their master is what Stringfellow describes as death. If the notion of the powers represents the centerpiece of Stringfellow's theology, then the concept of death is certainly the backdrop against which all other elements of his theology are contrasted.[36] Within the state of the Fall, in Stringfellow's view, death is the "preemptive idol" and "apart from God himself . . . the only extant moral power living in

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[32]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 62-63.

[33]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 81.

[34]Ibid.

[35]For his extended discussion of this usurpation of God's prerogative, see Stringfellow, *Imposters of God: Inquiries into Favorite Idols* (Dayton, Ohio: George A. Pflaum – Witness Books, 1969).

[36]Some have suggested that death is itself the central component of Stringfellow's theology, since, as I will demonstrate, it is fundamental to all else in his work. Indeed it is. Nevertheless, the powers are certainly the most prominent element of Stringfellow's theology and therefore deserve centrality of place. See Robert Boak Slocum, "William Stringfellow and the Witness Against Death," in *Prophet of Justice, Prophet of Life: Essays on William Stringfellow*, edited by Robert Boak Slocum (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1997), 18-39.

this world."[37] To be a human subject to the Fall is to be enslaved not only to the principalities and powers but also to be in bondage to death in its pervasiveness throughout fallen creation.[38] Enslavement to principalities and powers is nothing more than an intermediate version of bondage to death because ultimately the powers are themselves "acolytes of death."[39]

Death

What does Stringfellow mean by the term "death"? One of the simplest definitions he provides is found in *Imposters of God*: "not only physical death but all forms of diminution of human life and development and dignity, and all forms of alienation of men from themselves and from one another and from God."[40] Suggesting an antitypical identification with creation, Stringfellow posits that "death is a mystery quite inexhaustible."[41] Therefore death is multivarious in its manifestations, most certainly beyond merely the cessation of physical life. For Stringfellow, death is not only a physical reality but, more significantly, a moral reality: "The name of death refers to clinical death and to biological extinction and includes the event of the undertaker, but, much more than that, the moral reality of death involves death comprehended

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[37]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 68.

[38]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 62.

[39]Stringfellow, *Imposters of God*, 121.

[40]Ibid., 29.

[41]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 69.

sociologically and anthropologically, psychologically and psychically, economically and politically, societally and institutionally."[42] In short, death pervades all of creation.

This moral reality called death is essentially the arch-power. It is the reality to which all of humanity, indeed all of fallen creation, is ultimately enslaved. This enslavement is engendered in part by the ubiquity of the fear of death: "The fear of death is the most universal dread men suffer."[43] This is more than the mere fear of the end of physical life. It includes the fear of any and all of death's manifestations, since

> [death] is the contemporaneous power abrasively addressing every person in one's own existence with the word that one is not only eventually and finally, but even now and already, estranged, separated, alienated, lost in relationships with everybody and everything else, and—what is in a way much worse—one's very own self. Death means total loss of identity.[44]

Consequently, to ameliorate death's effects upon their lives, humans entrust themselves to powers, to institutions, ideologies, and images.

For example, to acquire meaning in life, financial security and status, a corporate executive allows his life to be absorbed by the principality with the corporate name. To demonstrate this phenomenon, Stringfellow writes of an acquaintance of his who worked for a particular company in a town that was "one of those places in which virtually everybody in town . . . was employed in the management of a great industrial corporation."[45] In this town most "lived in a comfortable and spacious house, belonged to the same company, did and thought and said the same things, and acted the same

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[42]Ibid., 70.

[43]Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, 21.

[44]Ibid., 22.

[45]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 67.

way."[46] The executive had given up much of his identity and freedom for the sake of the company. In fact, he and his wife, who had been married for at least four years, "had no children because, as they explained one evening, it seemed better to them to be free to participate fully in the social and business (the two were, of course, inseparable in such a place) life of the community, thereby promoting the husband's career."[47] In this example Stringfellow suggests that to gain significance, meaning, and, in Stringfellow's terms, "moral vindication,"[48] the young executive and his wife surrendered their lives to the company.

Stringfellow notes a poignant irony associated with the devotion of the young executive and his peers to the company. Their lives were infiltrated with the manifestations of death anyway. Stringfellow lists "the two early-middled-aged married couples who had recently exchanged partners; the suicide, a couple of months before my visit, of a prominent and presumably promising junior executive; the experiments 'for kicks' of the town's adolescents with narcotics; and the alcoholism of one of the local clergy."[49] For all its promises of security, affluence, peace, meaning, significance, and moral vindication, the corporate principality could not save its adherents from multiple forms of death.

Even where powers and principalities do deliver on their promises, Stringfellow notes, the delivery fails to endure. He observed, "whatever intrinsic moral power is

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[46]Ibid.

[47]Ibid.

[48]In *Instead of Death*, 57, Stringfellow writes: "The legend, in America anyway, is that in either the product or the reward of work a person can find his or her life morally vindicated."

[49]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 68.

embodied in a principality – for a great corporation, profit, for example; or, for a nation, hegemony; or, for an ideology, conformity – that is sooner or later superseded by the greater moral power of death."[50] Stringfellow puts it simply in empirical terms: "Corporations die. Nations die. Ideologies die."[51] Ultimately, however, "[death] survives them all."[52] In that light, Stringfellow makes a bold assertion: "Death is – apart from God himself – the greatest moral power in this world, outlasting and subduing all other powers no matter how marvelous they may seem to be for the time being."[53] This all means that subservience to a principality, any principality, is ultimately subservience to death. Therefore, "the object of allegiance and servitude, the real idol secreted within all idolatries, the power above all principalities and powers – the idol of idols – is death."[54] Indeed, death is the arch-power.

Demonic

Because both their dominant ethos and their ultimate *telos* is death, all of the powers are, in Stringfellow's terms, quite literally *demonic*, which he defined as "death comprehended as a moral reality."[55] For Stringfellow, however, the term demonic was distinguished from the term evil: "'Demonic' does not mean evil; the word refers rather to death, to fallenness."[56] In that light, then, "[an] angelic power in its fallen estate is

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[50]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 81.

[51]Ibid.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Ibid., 32.

[56]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 62.

called a demonic power, because it is a principality existing in the present age in a state of alienation from God, cut off from the life originating in his life, separated from its own true life and, thus, being in a state of death."[57]

These demonic powers embody the antithesis of Creation; they seek its undoing. Stringfellow wrote, "The work of the demonic powers in the Fall is the undoing of Creation (Gen. 6:11-13)."[58] In that light, because of the reality and ubiquity of the Fall, all powers are to one degree or another demonic, not one of them is benign. Stringfellow rejected the notion that some principalities and powers can be rendered good by the proper human effort. He noted, "human beings generally and, it seems, Americans particularly persevere in belaboring the illusion that at least some institutions are benign and viable and within human direction or can be rendered so by discipline or reform or revolution or displacement."[59] This view he considered "naïve," as well as "theologically false and empirically unwarranted."[60] Theologically, he suggested, such a view dilutes the notion of the Fall, which Stringfellow believed was "an essential condition of disorientation, morally equivalent to the estate of death, affecting the whole of Creation in time."[61] The view also, Stringfellow judged, was a "remarkable expression of human vanity," in that it was based upon the assumption that humans could in their own strength reclaim their lost dominion over the powers.[62] Empirically, he pointed toward the

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[57]Ibid.

[58]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 82.

[59]Ibid., 83.

[60]Ibid.

[61]Ibid., 84.

[62]Ibid.

"enormity and interminability of human suffering" that is prevalent throughout the world as proof of the essential fallenness of the powers and principalities.[63] Stringfellow saw the fact that "[war] or famine or pestilence; persecution or repression or slavery" are the "realities which constitute the daily fortune of the overwhelming masses of human beings on the face of the earth" as evidence of the "parasitical posture of the principalities toward human life."[64]

Rivalry and Chaos

Not only are the principalities and powers parasitic towards human life, they are also complex and chaotic in their interrelationships. A principality or power cannot always be neatly categorized as an image or an institution or an ideology. Stringfellow wondered, for example, "how . . . can ideology and nationalism be distinguished in Mao's China?"[65] Hence, a power may often reflect a combination of categories. In that light one considers the power associated with the pledge of allegiance to the American flag. The immediate object of the pledge is to an image that symbolizes a particular institution, the United States, that itself embodies several ideologies, such as capitalism, constitutionalism, and liberal democracy.

In addition to their complexity, Stringfellow posited a certain chaos that characterizes the interrelationship of the various and several powers. He suggested that since they are demonic, they exist in a constantly competitive state, "thriving in

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[63]Ibid.

[64]Ibid.

[65]Ibid., 82.

confusion, rivalry, and complexity."[66] Suggesting empirical support for his claim and summarizing the relationship of the powers to humans, Stringfellow wrote: "Demonic claims against human life in society are multiple, simultaneous, and competing, as anybody can realize who has endured conflicting simultaneous loyalties to family and nation and work or whatever."[67]

The Exemplary Power

Emerging from this chaotic complexity within and among the powers is the nation-state as the exemplary power. Stringfellow asserted, "All other assorted, diverse principalities resemble them, imitate them, and substitute for them."[68] In fact, implying that nations comprehend more "virtues" than any other single power, he noted, "All virtues which nations elevate and idolize – military prowess, material abundance, technological sophistication, imperial grandeur, high culture, racial pride, trade, prosperity, conquest, sport, language, or whatsoever – are ancillary and subservient to the moral presence of death in the nation."[69] Most other powers that "elevate and idolize" various of the above "virtues," such as "corporations and conglomerates, ideologies and bureaucracies, and authorities and institutions of every name and description," moreover, were for Stringfellow essentially "surrogate nations."[70]

People tend to place more hope for "salvation" in the nation than in any other power. Perhaps this is because the nation's authority and benefits touch upon more aspects of a

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[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid.

[68]Ibid., 68.

[69]Ibid.

[70]Ibid.

person's life than most other powers. Consequently, the promises of nations are more comprehensive. Stringfellow observed this and pointed out that nations, therefore, serve as surrogates for the only source of true salvation, the Kingdom of God:

> More than any of the other great and familiar principalities of this world—more than the university or the corporation or the profession, or even race—the nation is a symbol of salvation for men, an image of the Kingdom; it is a facsimile of that order, tranquility, dominion and fulfillment of life in society which seems lost in the present era and yet after which men yearn persistently despite all disillusionments and defeats.[71]

In the midst of fallen creation, humans long for restoration. According to Stringfellow, many seek that restoration in the social orders proposed by various nations. Or, in simple terms, as Stringfellow observed, "Every revolution promises paradise."[72]

The hope that people place within their nations is nothing more than idolatry, according to Stringfellow. This, moreover, reflects a certain level of derangement, because "the fascination of men with such idolatry can be explained in no other conceivable manner than as moral insanity."[73] Stringfellow believed that this idolatry of nations was most clearly expressed in various forms of patriotism. In fact, people tend to believe that their displays of patriotism to some degree demonstrate their moral worth or manifest their moral justification: "And, thus, an equation is accomplished between the allegiance prescribed for a man and that man's moral significance or justification."[74]

According to Stringfellow, all nations, regardless of the type of governance or various cultural elements, require such expressions of patriotism: ". . . no nation enjoys

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[71]Stringfellow, *Imposters of God*, 92.

[72]Ibid., 93.

[73]Ibid.

[74]Ibid., 95.

exemption from idolatry; no subjects of any nation can escape the claims of idolatrous patriotism, whatever aesthetic or temperamental distinctions may lodge in this or that particular scene."[75] This patriotism, therefore, is not merely the warmhearted expression of love for a country. It is instead the mandated expression of allegiance to the power so idolized. And the mandate is backed up by the threat of a form of death. Stringfellow wrote, "To deviate from the rhetoric and conduct practically recognized as loyalty to the nation, on one hand, is to risk social rejection, loss of livelihood, banishment, imprisonment—all of which are threats of death—or execution; while, on the other hand, it is to court eternal damnation."[76] If the nation is the source of salvation, then the failure to demonstrate proper obeisance to it results in condemnation, socially, politically, and perhaps even eternally. At least, according to Stringfellow, that is what the principality that is the nation would want potential apostates from its faith to fear.

The notion of fearing the condemnation of the nation naturally leads to a discussion of the distinction that Stringfellow made between the principalities of nation and State. Stringfellow defined the State relative to the nation as "the functional paraphernalia of political authority in a nation, which claims and exercises exclusive practical control of coercive capabilities, or violence, within a nation."[77] In such a definition one hears the echo of Max Weber's notion of the State as the institution with a "monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."[78] According to Stringfellow,

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[75]Ibid., 100-101.

[76]Ibid., 95.

[77]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 109.

[78]Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, translated by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 2.

the practical distinction between the State and the nation in any given situation is dependent upon the type of government in question. In both authoritarian and totalitarian regimes "any substantive distinctions between the principality of the nation and the principality of the State are lost."[79] In such a regime, Stringfellow observed a conflation between the "ethos of the nation" and the "apparatus of authority."[80] In fact, he argued, particularly in the case of a totalitarian government, "the spirit and tradition of the nation are abolished by the administration of the State or displaced by a fabricated version of tradition furnished by the State."[81]

In nonauthoritarian societies, in Stringfellow's view the nation and the State, to a point, remain distinct principalities that are nevertheless integrally related. Revealing a classical liberal mindset, Stringfellow suggested that the distinction between the nation and the State is dependent upon "the extent that the identity and character of the nation are embodied in tradition and inheritance, sometimes expressed constitutionally, or sometimes as common law."[82] He saw the constitutional or common law system as reflecting a "restraint or discipline upon the exercise of authority and the functioning of the State."[83] Interestingly, in Stringfellow's theological thinking this arrangement did not represent a form of beneficial checks upon the power of the State. Instead he saw this as the embodiment of the rivalry between competing principalities. He suggested that the benefits society derives from the checks produced by conflicting powers were inadvertent

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[79]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 109.

[80]Ibid.

[81]Ibid.

[82]Ibid., 110.

[83]Ibid.

at best. He observed, "Idealistically, a democratic constitution or a common-law tradition is conceived as representing and protecting human beings against the limited and defined authority of the State."[84] Recognizing that "this may be more recital than practice, more illusory than real," Stringfellow nevertheless asserted that "law and authority, nation and State name rival principalities whose tensions and conflicts may, inadvertently, if no more than that, benefit human life in society."[85]

The nation, together with its erstwhile functional counterpart, the State, for Stringfellow more than any other powers, demonstrates the pervasiveness of death. As savior, the nation promises to free and protect its citizens from various manifestations of death, such as poverty, theft, meaninglessness, and physical harm brought about by enemies within and without. As a fallen creature, however, the nation is ultimately subject to death. As Stringfellow bluntly pointed out, ultimately "nations die."[86] Ironically, however, the State, as a functional apparatus for the nation, quite literally receives its authority from death and exercises its power by means of death. Explicating this irony, Stringfellow wrote:

> Every sanction or weapon or policy or procedure – including law where law survives distinct from authority – which the State commands against both human beings and against the other principalities carries the connotation of death, implicitly threatens death, derives from and symbolizes death.[87]

In other words, given Stringfellow's broad definition of death, any and all of the "prerogatives of the State" embody death in varying forms: "exile, imprisonment,

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[84]Ibid.

[85]Ibid.

[86]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 81.

[87]Ibid., 110.

slavery, conscription; impeachment, regulation of production or sales or prices or wages or competition or credit; confiscation, surveillance, execution, war."[88] Ultimately, then, death "is the final sanction of the State and it is the *only* one."[89]

The principalities and powers, in whatever form, then, are never ultimately benign. All of them in one form or another seek to enslave humans, seek to be idolized, and promise a degree of freedom from some or, in some cases, all forms of death. Despite their promises, though, the end for the powers themselves and for those who idolize them is death. In fact, as I mentioned above, regardless of the power so idolized, death is the ultimate object of such worship: "In all idolatry, then, of whatever dignity or fascination, death is the reality which is actually worshipped. Death is the deity of all idols; every idol is an acolyte of death."[90] Essentially, therefore, all principalities and powers are mediators for the worship of death. Most people, however, do not know this. A significant implication, then, of Stringfellow's thought is that people are fundamentally victims.

Christus Victor

In Stringfellow's thought, the superior counterpart to death is Jesus Christ. This superiority takes many forms, some cryptic, others more straightforward. In his historic existence, he represents the ultimately victorious confrontation with death in its own realm. In the theological concept of the incarnation, Christ represents God's affirmation of and presence within creation in its present existence, not merely as an eschatological

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[88]Ibid., 111.

[89]Ibid. Italics are in the text.

[90]Stringfellow, *Imposters of God*, 121.

possibility. Finally, in the Resurrection, Christ demonstrates the final victory over and freedom from death and its power and he symbolizes the freedom from death that humans can live within in the present, as well as in the *Eschaton*.

From the moment of Jesus's birth, according to Stringfellow, his authority over the principalities and powers and his conflict with death is evident. Stringfellow notes that "those who gathered at the stable to adore him do so as representatives of the whole of creation, as emissaries of all men and all creatures and all things."[91] This "adoration in the Christmas miracle", Stringfellow observes, is contrasted with the "hysteria and hostility of Herod at Christ's coming into the world."[92] This Herodian "hysteria and hostility" represents an initial example of the conflict between Christ and the principalities, foreshadowing the many such confrontations that would characterize Jesus's ministry. In each confrontation, according to Stringfellow, Christ demonstrated his authority over various powers and principalities: in the wilderness temptation, the stilling of the tempest, the many healings of the sick, freeing the demon-possessed, "[upsetting] the traditions of Israel by eating with sinners," cleansing the temple of the moneychangers, and raising Lazarus from the dead.[93] Of course, these confrontations all culminate in the crucifixion and, as the confessions put it, his descent into hell.[94] Of course, in each of these confrontations, regardless of the power ostensibly at work, Christ is actually confronting death:

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[91]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 70.

[92]Ibid., 70-71.

[93]Ibid., 71.

[94]Ibid.

> In some of the episodes, as in the wilderness, the crucifixion, and the descent into hell, death openly confronts Christ; in others, Christ is visited by one or another of the principalities as emissaries of death. In all of these encounters, the principalities represent the awesome and manifold powers of death.[95]

And, for Stringfellow the significant aspect of each encounter is that the victor is always the incarnate Christ, thus demonstrating his power over not only physical death but the "awesome and manifold powers of death."[96]

Incarnation

The theological concept of the Incarnation, God becoming enfleshed, as confessed in "biblical faith" was particularly important to Stringfellow in that it reflected for him "exemplary affirmations about time and history" and a "radical and preemptive concern for life in this world."[97] Paradoxically, although his view of fallen creation was comprehensively tragic, Stringfellow believed that in Christ God demonstrated his presence within creation and affirmed it in the here and now, not merely as a forum for a provisional hope. For Stringfellow, a theology emphasizing the Incarnation, that is, incarnational theology, "regards this world in the fullness of its fallen estate as *simultaneously* disclosing the ecumenical, militant, triumphant presence of God."[98] In that light, Stringfellow rejected the emphasis he noted that some Christians placed upon "rejection of the world as the premise of the gospel and departure from this world as the hope of the gospel."[99] He saw this emphasis as a denial of the meaning of the Incarnation

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[95]Ibid.

[96]Ibid.

[97]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 41.

[98]Ibid.

[99]Ibid., 42.

"for the whole of existence in this world" and as a challenge to the "repetitive tenor of the New Testament witness."[100] This "tenor" emphasizes the Incarnation in such a way that it "reveals God's dominion over, affection for, and vitality in this world."[101] It is this interpretation of the significance of the Incarnation that served as the foundation for Stringfellow's emphasis upon Christian political involvement: if the Incarnation demonstrates God's concern for the "here and now", then involvement in the affairs of this world is inherently sacramental.

Resurrection

For Stringfellow, the ultimate event of the Incarnation, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, serves as the antithesis to the dominance of death in all of its forms. Stringfellow wrote, "The drama of history, exposed in the insight of the Gospel, is not a conflict between evil and good . . . but concerns the power of death in this world and how death is overpowered in this life by the power of the Resurrection."[102] The Resurrection, as the victory of Christ over death, embodies the freedom from enslavement to the powers and principalities. Throughout his life, Jesus encountered various manifestations of the powers and principalities, and through the Crucifixion he explicitly confronted death. The Resurrection, according to Stringfellow, demonstrated Jesus Christ's victory over death, as well as the powers: "Through the encounters between Christ and the principalities and between Christ and death, the power of death is exhausted."[103] By

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[100]Ibid., 43.

[101]Ibid.

[102]Stringfellow, *Dissenter in a Great Society* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1966), 136.

[103]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 73.

overcoming death, Christ ends its reign, as well as "the pretensions to sovereignty over history of the principalities."[104] Writing of Jesus's relationship to the powers, Stringfellow proclaims, "He bears the fullness of their hostility toward him; he submits to their condemnation; he accepts their committal of himself to death, and in his resurrection he ends their power and the power they represent."[105] In other words, Christ beats the powers at their own game, submitting ultimately to their master, death, and overcoming it.

By conquering death, Jesus demonstrates that he is the true Savior and Lord of history. Stringfellow explains, "The claim of a nation, ideology, or other principality to rule history, though phony and futile, is at the same time an aspiration for salvation, a longing for the reality which does indeed rule history."[106] In the life of Christ and, particularly in his resurrection, "the false lords of history, the principalities, are shown to be false; at the same time, in Christ the true Lord of history is made known."[107] Simply put, while the powers and principalities futilely promise freedom from death in its forms, Christ by his resurrection proves that only he can deliver on such a promise.

Because of Christ's resurrection, then, humans can themselves experience freedom from death's myriad manifestations. Following from his view of the significance of the Incarnation is Stringfellow's affirmation that this freedom from death that humans can experience is a this-worldly phenomenon, rather than a mere eschatological hope. Writing of the efficacy of Christ's resurrection, Stringfellow declared, "His power over

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[104]Ibid.

[105]Ibid.

[106]Ibid.

[107]Ibid.

death is effective, not just at the terminal point of a man's life, but throughout his life, during *this* life in *this* world, right now."[108] Since this life is the arena in which humans are constantly confronted with the demands for allegiance from the manifold powers and principalities as acolytes of death, this life is therefore the realm of the efficacy of Christ's resurrection power: "The resurrection of Jesus Christ means the available power of God confronting and transcending the power of death here and now in the daily realities of our lives."[109]

This freedom from death's manifestations and designs is the result of release from the need to justify oneself, to find meaning in life, and to protect oneself from death as a physical and a moral power. Stringfellow describes this freedom in the following terms, equating powers with idols:

> The resurrection constitutes freedom for men from all idolatries, whether of race or money or church or whatever. It constitutes freedom from death as a moral power in history, freedom to welcome and honor life as a gift, freedom to live by grace, unburdened by the anxiety for justification which enslaves men to idols.[110]

Free to Die

In light of his interpretation of the Resurrection, Stringfellow proposed a somewhat simple definition of a Christian. For him, a Christian was one who lived in the here and now, aware of the resurrection of Christ and its implications, freed from the power of death in its various forms. In a radio interview Stringfellow "concretely" defined a Christian:

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[108]Ibid., 72.

[109]Stringfellow, *Imposters of God*, 125.

[110]Ibid.

> one who is freed from the idolization of death, from the worship of death which is reflected in, commonly, in the man's worship of, say, racism in the case of the white supremacist or man's worship of the idols of success, or status, or money, or acquisitiveness, or power, or fame or whatever there may be.[111]

Freedom from death for the Christian means freedom from death's mediate and ultimate forms. The Christian is therefore free from "the slavery that other men suffer of having as an ethic first of all to put their own survival first."[112] In other words, since "[the] Christian is free from worrying about preserving his own life," socially, emotionally, politically, and physically, "[he] is free to die anytime."[113]

Stringfellow provided an example of this freedom to die in discussions of a man named Lou Marsh.[114] Lou was an African-American man from a relatively poor family "living in the North."[115] "By working like hell," he was able to receive a good education "because he was intelligent and sensitive."[116] He eventually attended Yale Divinity School but withdrew after a time. Stringfellow speculated that Marsh's withdrawal was attributed to a sense of guilt he experienced about being at Yale "while his folks were still where they were and while his people were still where they were in this country."[117] As

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[111]William Stringfellow, transcript from "A Conversation with William Stringfellow on the Ethics of Resistance", an interview for KEED, Portland, Oregon, interviewer Father Edgar M. Tainton , taped October 18, 1968, 17. Box 35, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. This conversation was taped but not broadcast because of technical difficulties.

[112]Ibid.

[113]Ibid.

[114]He wrote of Lou in "The Way to Live: Comments on the Murder of Lou Marsh," *The Witness*, February 7, 1963, 10-11, and in My People is the Enemy: An Autobiographical Polemic (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 142-149.

[115]*My People*, 145.

[116]"The Way to Live," 11.

[117]Ibid.

he dropped out of school, Lou, resenting the fact that he was an African-American, also dropped out of "bourgeois white society," moving to New York City, living as a drifter, "unable to look for a job, living on borrowed money, and, it seemed, borrowed time, staying sometimes in flophouses or on the streets."[118] Lou's despair was more than mere self-pity, however. According to Stringfellow, "it was as if he complained about his own creation, as if he was rejecting his own birth."[119]

After a time, Marsh experienced an epiphany of sorts. It was an experience of intimacy "with the presence of death in his own life" in which he at the same time "beheld the reality and vitality of the Resurrection in his own life."[120] He recognized that "he was indulging in his own self, accusing and condemning himself," especially because of his race.[121] As Stringfellow put it, "Then he realized that he was engaged in suicide."[122] This awareness brought about a conversion experience. Stringfellow described it as "the event in which by the power of God in the face of the fullness of death, Lou was emancipated."[123] This newly-discovered emancipation made Lou "free to love himself, to love others, and to welcome and receive the love of others."[124]

In the light of his conversion Marsh took a job with the New York City Youth Board, working with a gang in East Harlem. He became thoroughly engaged in the work with the members of the gang, "so fulfilled in his love for others that he lost his self-

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[118]*My People*, 145.

[119]Ibid.

[120]Ibid., 146.

[121]"The Way to Live," 11.

[122]*My People*, 145.

[123]Ibid., 146.

[124]Ibid.

interest, so confident that he was secure in God's Word that he was not afraid of death."[125] Lou had become, in Stringfellow's terms, "free to die anytime."[126]

At 9:10 P.M. on January 9th, 1963, Lou Marsh did die. He was beaten to death by four men who resented the fact that he had persuaded the members of the East Harlem gang not to engage in a "rumble." Stringfellow noted that "Lou Marsh, when he died, was ready, that is, he had already died in Christ and was, so, without fear of death."[127] This example of freedom from fear of death and, indeed, freedom from death itself, epitomized, in Stringfellow's view, "the meaning of the Resurrection."[128]

Lou Marsh exemplified Stringfellow's notion of the Christian as one who is freed from death in all of its forms. Marsh's despair and ultimate self-hatred was, in Stringfellow's view, a form of death. It, moreover, was a consequence of the work of the principality of racism. Lou's despairing response was therefore a form of idolatry, of enslavement to the principality. In the process of his conversion, when Marsh became aware of both the work of death in his life and the love of God for him, when he became "intimate with the presence of death in his own life" and simultaneously "beheld the reality and vitality of the Resurrection in his own life," he experienced his salvation.[129] Thus Lou Marsh became free from death in its social and emotional forms and, as Stringfellow suggested that his murder demonstrated, in its physical form as well.

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[125]Ibid., 146.

[126]"A Conversation with William Stringfellow on the Ethics of Resistance," 17.

[127]"The Way to Live," 11.

[128]Ibid.

[129]*My People*, 146.

Examples of individuals who, like Marsh, heroically transcend death Stringfellow contrasts with those whose lives in his view manifest nothing but death. In the interview already cited, Stringfellow offers such an example in the apparently benign case of one of his acquaintances. The acquaintance is a man whom Stringfellow describes as dead. The man is dead, Stringfellow suggests, "because it seems that all of his intellectual, emotional, physical energy, all of his capacity as a human being is fixed upon, excessively upon, one thing and that is the goal of retiring at the age of 55."[130] Although he does not elaborate upon the details, the pursuit of this goal, Stringfellow asserts, had "destroyed him."[131] It is irrelevant whether or not the man ever achieves his goal, Stringfellow suggests. The fact that he is so dedicated to it is indicative that he is dead already. Even if he realizes his dream, Stringfellow remarked, the man "will be just as dead when he retires at 55 as he is now in his slavery and his zealous enslavement to that goal."[132]

As one should be able to infer from what has already been discussed of Stringfellow's theology, his description of the man as dead is not simply a hyperbolic metaphor alluding to the emptiness of the man's life. Instead, it is an explicit theological statement. The man is, quite literally, in Stringfellow's view, dead. He is enslaved to the power of retirement in a quest for security or perhaps significance. To be sure, one implication of Stringfellow's description of the man is that if he physically dies before he is 55, he would have to some degree wasted his life. But, Stringfellow means much more than that. As he noted, whether or not the man ever achieves his goal, he is dead in the

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[130]"A Conversation with William Stringfellow on the Ethics of Resistance," 17.

[131]Ibid.

[132]Ibid.

here and now. Likewise, in the example of Lou Marsh, his freedom from the fear of physical death, Stringfellow suggests, only punctuated his freedom to live in the midst of death in its other forms.

The Church

Stringfellow did not limit his discussions of the Christian and freedom from the powers and death to descriptions of individuals so liberated. In fact, just as enslavement to the powers is most clearly defined as a corporate reality, so, Stringfellow would have noted, is freedom from death and its acolytes primarily a corporate phenomenon. In this light, it is important to recognize that his understanding of the Church plays a key role in his theology and derivative ethics. The Church, for Stringfellow, comprised the community of people freed, like Lou Marsh, from the fear of death, and, consequently, freed from enslavement to the powers and principalities. Referring to the biblical account of the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Church and the notion of Church as the Body of Christ, Stringfellow described this freedom: "In Pentecost the Church as the Body, and Christians as members of Christ's Body, are authorized and empowered by God to live in this world, free from bondage to death and free from idolatry of the powers of death."[133]

As a corporate entity, a community, the Church exists as an alternative to the powers and the principalities thoroughly in the midst of their complex, chaotic, and competitive existence. The freedom experienced by Christians is not a freedom to withdraw from the ugly realities in the world brought about by death and the powers, however. "It is," as Stringfellow described it, "a freedom to live in this present age, during the remaining time of death's apparent reign, without escaping or hiding or withdrawing from the full

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[133]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 75.

reality of death's presence, bearing the brunt of its powers, yet jubilantly confident at the same time of Christ's victory over death and all the powers of death."[134] In short, to use Stringfellow's quote of a traditional Christian phrase, the freedom of the Church and its members is "the extraordinary freedom 'to be *in* but not *of* this world'."[135]

The Church has a responsibility, however, in Stringfellow's view, to the world within which it finds itself. In other words, its freedom is to exist in, of, and *for* the world. This freedom is not provided merely as a benefit by which Christians may "covet their own safety from death."[136] Instead, Stringfellow affirms, "[the] Body of Christ receives this freedom for the sake of the rest of the world which still suffers the bondage and agony of death."[137] The nature of this "freedom for the sake of the rest of the world" will be treated in detail in the next chapter. At this point it is important to note that in Stringfellow's thought the entity known as the Church exists in contrast to and in the midst of the various and sundry powers and principalities within the current realm of death. In living out this contrast, the Church ideally serves the world as the exemplary human society.

As the exemplary society, the Church, by its very identity and by a direct confrontation with the powers and principalities, bears witness to God's ideal for human life, which the power of death has currently distorted. Stringfellow described the Church's exemplary identity as "the new society in the midst of the old," and "the new creation during the era of the Fall," and "as the example and vindication of life

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[134]Ibid.

[135]Ibid., 76. Italics are in the original.

[136]Ibid.

[137]Ibid.

transcending the power of death."[138] At the same time, the Church is to confront "every assault and disguise of death . . . exposing and overcoming them all within this history."[139] It does this by "confronting the powers with their creaturehood – admonishing the principalities about their vocation as creatures called to serve the social need of human beings."[140]

While the Church is thus a prophet, confronting the powers and principalities with the truth about their bondage to death and reminding them of their true vocation, it is also pioneer, both "the herald and the foretaste of God's own accomplishment in Christ."[141] In this "inherently eschatological" role, the Church is the "embassy of the Eschaton," serving as "the trustee of the society which the world, now subjected to the power of death, is to be on that last day when the world is fulfilled in all things in God.[142] The Church, then, for Stringfellow, is the exemplary society expressing itself in contrast to all other fallen societies, that is, the powers and principalities, living in freedom from death, and foretelling a time when all societies will be restored to their proper creaturehood.

Holy Nation

Stringfellow considered the Church in its ideal embodiment to be a holy nation, "always [standing] over against the nation [America or other nations] and all other

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[138]Stringfellow, *Dissenter*, 146.

[139]Ibid.

[140]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 57.

[141]Stringfellow, *Dissenter*, 142.

[142]Ibid.

principalities and powers in this world."[143] In *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, Stringfellow posited the biblical city of Jerusalem, particularly as it is depicted in the book of Revelation, as "the parable for the Church of Jesus Christ."[144] He likewise suggested Babylon as a parable of America or whatever nation at any given time within which the Church exists. He then responded to the rhetorical question, "Where is Jerusalem?" by describing first what it was not:

> The answer cannot be in some spiritualized, spooky, sentimental conception of the Church. The biblical precedents in the Old Testament witness and in Pentecost are not of some nebulous, ethereal, idealistic, otherworldly, or disembodied Church but of a visible, historic community and institution.[145]

That is, the Church is not merely a loose connection of individuals scattered throughout the world among the various nations, mysteriously connected by their common faith in Christ. Instead, the Church as it is "signaled" by the biblical precedents is "a new nation incarnating and sacramentalizing human life in society freed from bondage to the power of death."[146]

As a holy nation the Church exists as a living and literal alternative to the principality which is the fallen nation. In fact, for Stringfellow, the Church from its constitution at Pentecost, has been fundamentally a political community. As the "pioneer and prophet" and the "trustee" of the Eschaton, the Church, Stringfellow believed, represented the continuation of the vocation of the biblical nation of Israel: "The Church is the new Israel, the holy nation, the priest among the nations, the foretaste of the

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[143]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 89.

[144]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 52.

[145]Ibid., 58.

[146]Ibid.

Kingdom, the pioneer of the world's reconciliation."[147] Important, then, is the fact that, according to Stringfellow, "[these] are all images of a new political society; they are not mere religious images."[148] The ethical implications of this are numerous. Some of these will be discussed in subsequent chapters. A further quote from Stringfellow will suffice, at this point, to suggest the radical implications of the Church's identity in relationship to the nation and State: "Thus the Church as a nation always stands over against the other nations, prophetically, in protest, in criticism, in non-conformity,[and] in dissent."[149]

As alluded to above, in Stringfellow's view the priestly, prophetic, and ambassadorial role of the church reflects the succession of the vocation of the Biblical Israel. He wrote, "[The] Jews were chosen by God as an exemplary people, as His own nation, as His priest among the nations."[150] Stringfellow noted that this was an "*ecumenical* vocation": "But the election of the Jews does not constitute their own salvation only; it consists of their witness as the pioneers of the salvation of all mankind."[151] This mission was inherited by the Church. In that sense, Stringfellow wrote, "Christians are now the true Jews."[152] This vocational succession came about, in Stringfellow's view, because "Israel grew skeptical of the wisdom delivered unto her and

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[147]William Stringfellow, Letter to Russell Hitt, Editor of *Eternity* magazine, n. d., 1966, 1. Box 11, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[148]Ibid.

[149]Ibid., 1-2.

[150]Stringfellow, *Count It All Joy*, 36.

[151]Ibid.

[152]Ibid., 37.

became suspicious of God's abundance of grace as the prophets have told."[153] Consequently, he claimed, "when the day came to pass that Israel beheld in Jesus Christ the grandeur and scope of God's election, Israel's skepticism and suspicion triumphed over her faith."[154] By rejecting Jesus as Christ, according to Stringfellow, "Israel . . . abdicated her election to the ecumenical mission."[155]

Stringfellow was quite aware of the inflammatory nature of his successionistic view of the relationship between the Church and Israel. He acknowledged quite clearly that "the singular issue between Judaism and Christianity has been, simply, *Jesus Christ*."[156] Specifically, the fundamental differences between Jews and Christians involve conflicting answers to various questions concerning Jesus: "Who is He? What does His coming among men mean? How shall He be received? . . . Was He truly raised from death? Does He reign in history? Is He the One who is Judge of all?"[157] Stringfellow rejected, however, the notion "that such questions be put aside lest they upset relations between Jews and Christians."[158] Instead, he argued, "only when there is candid dialogue between Jews and Christians about what fundamentally distinguishes them from each other can there be mutual respect and, indeed, love between the two."[159]

Foreshadowing current discussions on the nature of tolerance, Stringfellow suggested that it was intolerant to suppress candid discussion of the differences between

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[153]Ibid., 38-39.

[154]Ibid., 39.

[155]Ibid.

[156]Ibid., 37.

[157]Ibid.

[158]Ibid., 38.

[159]Ibid.

Christians and Jews. He saw such suppression as evidence of "the deep secularization of Judaism and the radical sectarianism of Christianity in America."[160] He argued, "The *real* intolerance possesses those who, in the name of tolerance, would suppress men of faith by forbidding the open proclamation of what they believe, why they so believe, and how they differ."[161] To demand that both Christians and Jews remain silent rather than affirm their differences in truth privileges a supposedly neutral position that invalidates the core beliefs of both.[162]

Whither Jerusalem?

Continuing his discussion of the Church as Jerusalem contrasted with the nation as Babylon, Stringfellow wrote, "In their practical existence, the familiar, inherited churchly institutions here bear little resemblance – even residually – to the Church as holy nation."[163] He suggested instead that "the conventional American churches" are more aptly symbolized by Babylon, existing as a power "within the precincts" of that city that symbolizes the nation. As a fallen power, then, the institutional churches exist parallel to and in competition with other principalities, "like the Pentagon (to name a rival bureaucracy), or the Mafia (to mention a rival in wealth), or the Teamsters Union (as an

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[160]Ibid.

[161]Ibid.

[162]Stringfellow did acknowledge the real problem of anti-Semitism, particularly when based upon the notion that the Jews were "solely, or, at least, especially, responsible for the Crucifixion both at the time of the actual event and also in the present day." He rejected this indictment of the Jewish people by asserting that all mankind is equally responsible for the Crucifixion. "Thus, no man, whether he be Jew or Roman, Christian or pagan, whether he lived in Biblical times or lives today, no man at all escapes innocently from the shadow of the Cross. No man is unimplicated in consigning Christ to the suffering of death. No man has ever lived or ever will who does not try to kill God." Stringfellow, *Count It All Joy*, 40-41.

[163]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 58.

ethical rival)."[164] Thus classified, it follows, then, that these "churchly enterprises are much engaged in elaborate worship of death."[165]

In no way for Stringfellow was this "elaborate worship of death" more obvious than in the accommodation of many American churches and denominations to American culture. Referring to these churches and denominations as "aboriginal American religions," Stringfellow observes that some of them "impute the biblical vocation of the holy nation to America, in place of the Church of Christ."[166] These groups, according to Stringfellow, are predisposed to confuse the vocation of America with that of Jerusalem, the true Church, because of their particular historical and cultural origins. "It is not surprising to hear their propagation of the civic religion of the nation since their own traditions were generated in American culture, in Babylon, and not in Pentecost or in the subsequent biblical witness in history."[167] This does not mean that these churches have lost something they once had or departed from the gospel message and "become acculturated and conformed."[168] They "have been from their origins American cultural productions or Babylonian shrines." In sum, it is understandable to Stringfellow (though not excusable) that many American churches are confused as to their vocation. In truth, their story is not the biblical story of the Church of Christ. Instead it is the American story. This divergence of stories is central to an understanding of Stringfellow's view of American exceptionalism.

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[164]Ibid.

[165]Ibid.

[166]Ibid.

[167]Ibid., 59.

[168]Ibid.

Stringfellow did not suggest that all Christians within American churches were in bondage to a fallen principality, a Babylonian surrogate. He demurred, "I do not conclude that no Christians can be found on churchly premises, including those which most blatantly are Babylonian shrines."[169] He instead suggested a somewhat chaotic relationship between true Christians, allegorically citizens of Jerusalem, and the ecclesiastical institutions: "I am saying that if you look for the Jerusalem reality of the Church among the established ecclesiastical and churchly bodies, what you will find is chaos."[170] In the midst of this chaos, Stringfellow observed, borrowing a term from the experience of the Church in Nazi Germany, there is "a confessing movement."[171] This movement, in some cases "secreted within the established churches" and in other cases "detached from them," consisted of "some congregations and paracongregations, some happenings, some celebrations, some communities, [and] some human beings who do suffer and enjoy the Jerusalem vocation in the midst of the chaos."[172]

This movement is amorphous, and its boundaries are undefined, both temporally and organizationally. Using a series of parallelisms, Stringfellow described it as "dynamic and erratic, spontaneous and radical, audacious and immature, committed if not altogether coherent, ecumenically open and often experimental, visible here and there and now and then, but unsettled institutionally, most of all – enacting a fearful hope for human life in society."[173] Since embodiments of this movement are expressions of the

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[169]Ibid.

[170]Ibid.

[171]Ibid.

[172]Ibid.

[173]Ibid., 60.

"Jerusalem event in history," they tend to be "singular or momentary or unique," perhaps best described as "happenings."[174] This reflects what Stringfellow understood as a key aspect of the nature of the true Church or in his allegorical terms, the Jerusalem event, its freedom from time. Contrasting the archtypical principality and the Church, the power of death and the power of the Resurrection, Stringfellow wrote, "[While] Babylon represents the principality in bondage to death in time – and time is actually a form of *that* bondage – Jerusalem means the emancipation of human life in society from the rule of death and breaks through time, transcends time, anticipates within time the abolition of time."[175]

The presence of the true Church for Stringfellow is clearly an anti-establishment phenomenon. It is anti-establishment using the full range of meanings for the prefix, *anti*. The Church exists or momentarily emerges in events, groups, congregations, and other "happenings" that manifest a reaction to and confrontation with the idolatrous designs of the various powers embodied in the churches and in the nation and that manifest a life-affirming, freedom-expressing alternative to those powers in bondage to death. Stringfellow suggested some examples of this movement: "communities of mutual help" and "intercessory witness" that are "deeply rooted in and informed by Bible study" existing in "the jails and prisons" in America, "young Christians such as the 'Post-Americans' [referring primarily to Jim Wallis's group which was later to become Sojourners] . . . the charismatic movement, immature though it may be," and "some of

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[174]Ibid.

[175]Ibid. Italics in the text.

the house churches or similar gatherings."[176] The common thread weaving through each of these groups, other than Christianity in some form, is that they all represent marginalized groups with respect to the more culturally prominent churches and with respect to American society as a whole.

Religion versus Gospel

This distinction between the true Church or the Jerusalem event or the confessing movement and the aboriginal religions or Babylonian surrogates or churchly institutions parallels another distinction that is characteristic of Stringfellow's work, especially in his earlier writings and sermons. In *A Private and Public Faith*, as well as in subsequent other literary and oratorical venues, Stringfellow argued for a stark contrast between the "Gospel" and "religion."[177] Stringfellow's distinction between these concepts can be understood in terms of various polarities: question and answer; speculation and knowledge; possessiveness and liberality; secrecy and revelation; searching and being found; and absence and presence.

Religion, for Stringfellow, described a primarily anthropocentric phenomenon. It began with human speculation, propositions, and curiosity; it involved the human striving and seeking after the object of such speculation, propositions, and curiosity; and, ultimately, it resulted in idolatry. According to Stringfellow, "religion is the attempt to satisfy the curiosity of men in this world about God" and it logically "begins with the

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[176]Ibid. Stringfellow's allusion to the prisoners' groups may have come from his friend Father Daniel Berrigan, who, while serving time in Danbury Federal penitentiary, was associated with such groups, perhaps even initiated some. For more on Daniel Berrigan's career of dissent and protest see Murray Polner and Jim O'Grady, *Disarmed and Dangerous: The Radical Lives and Times of Daniel and Philip Berrigan* (New York: BasicBooks, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1997).

[177](Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962).

proposition that some god exists."[178] Based upon the proposition of a divinity, then, religion proceeds as "men, mind you, usually sincere and honorable and intelligent men, searching for God, or, more characteristically, searching for some substitute for God – that is, some idea of what God may be like."[179] Humans then worship that idea of God and "[surround] that substitution with dogma and discipline." This worship is

> fulfilled . . . in one of two ways: either (1) in consecrating some object or power or ideology or man – or, in earlier days, some commodity or natural phenomenon or animal or any thing – as a god, and as, hopefully, *the god*, or (2) in projecting god beyond history, into the unknown and the unknowable, enthroned perhaps, before this life or in some after life but never in *this* life, out of this world, oblivious of the present existence and grandly indifferent to it, abstract, irrelevant, impotent, indifferent – a ridiculous god, in fact, no god at all.[180]

In essence, then, in Stringfellow's view religion is the worship of a creature rather than the true God, and it is the projection of this creature-god outside of history. In short, religion is the worship of a god who is both false and other-worldly.

Stringfellow saw examples of this false worship with its abstract and other-worldly emphases in more than merely the academic speculation upon the god of the philosophers or the blood sacrifices of animists or the absolute dualism of various eastern religions. Stringfellow argued that much of American Protestantism, particularly by its individualism and its privatization of faith, revealed that rather than reflecting true Christianity and the Gospel it was nothing more than mere religion. "For more than a century and a half," he wrote, "Protestantism has nurtured this notion of autonomous and

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[178]Stringfellow, *A Public and Private Faith*, 15.

[179]Ibid.

[180]Ibid.

personal religiosity."[181] This notion, according to Stringfellow, was derived in large part from America's history of pluralism and the attendant threats to order and community. By making religion "a personal and optional matter," early Americans sought "to avoid those debilitating religious controversies which divide and corrupt the national life, and the persecutions in the name of religion which had induced some of the settlers of the country to flee Europe."[182] As the result of this privatization of religion, now, according to Stringfellow, "[the] central idea about religion in America is that religion has only to do with religion, not with life."[183]

Thus, many of the churches in America were characterized by what Stringfellow called a "desperate and lonely and unloving religiosity."[184] This privatization, "this American persuasion that religion has to do with religion and not with the world," contradicted true Christianity. In fact, Stringfellow wrote, "this American idea of religion is openly hostile to the Biblical description of the Church as the Body of Christ living in the midst of the traffic and turmoil and conflict of the world on behalf of the world."[185] In short, much of American Protestantism is religion, not true Christianity, because it operates under the assumption that faith in God should be compartmentalized and thus privatized.

For Stringfellow, the antithesis to religion in any and all of its forms is the human response to or, perhaps more accurately, human participation in the Gospel. This Gospel

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[181]Ibid., 19.

[182]Ibid. 18-19.

[183]Ibid., 18.

[184]Ibid., 19.

[185]Ibid.

"ends all religious speculation; demolishes all merely religious ceremonies and sacrifices appeasing unknown gods; [and] destroys every exclusiveness which religion attaches to itself in God's name."[186] The Gospel is also quite this-worldly, because it "attests that the presence of God is not remote, distant, and probably out-of-reach – but here, now, and with us in this world already."[187] For Stringfellow, the Gospel ended speculation and revealed God as present in this world because it reflects the recognition that "Jesus Christ once participated in the common life of men in the history of our world."[188] This Gospel, which for Stringfellow "tells when and how and why and where God has sought us and found us and offered to take us into His life," is the message of the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A significant aspect of Stringfellow's distinction between religion and the Gospel is that it reflects an early emphasis on incarnational theology. This theme would be refined throughout his career and would be picked up again in *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*. By that point, moreover, the distinction between the Jerusalem reality and the institutional churches would be in his thought defined in a similar vein to that of the distinction between religion and the Gospel. Religion was prevalent and indeed prevailing in most of the "American churchly scene" while those who were part of the "confessing movement" who reflected the Jerusalem reality were those who had responded to and were participating in the Gospel.[189]

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[186]Ibid., 15.

[187]Ibid.

[188]Ibid.

[189]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 60.

Stringfellow's distinction between religion and Gospel also displays his emphasis on the importance of faith lived out in this world dealing with various temporal realities, especially politics. This served in part as the basis for his assertion that the "biblical topic is politics." Since in the Incarnation God revealed his affirmation of creation and his involvement in the world as it is, then the political realm, the arena that in which people order their lives together, is where Christianity is most clearly lived out. The specific ethical implications of this will be taken up in the next chapter.

The End

While the church had a calling to live in the "here and now," for Stringfellow there was a particular future to keep in mind. Consequently, his eschatology was characterized by two themes that were central to his ethical thought. The first deals with the notion of God's judgment , and the second deals with the idea of the Eschaton as a future state of being. Stringfellow's understanding of God's judgment was central to his understanding of sin, morality and Christian behavior. His view of the Eschaton, likewise, informed much of his understanding of the political nature of true Christianity.

Judgment

Walter Wink labels Stringfellow's notion of God's judgment, "the exclusivity of God's judgment."[190] With this label he is referring to Stringfellow's view that all judgment of right and wrong or good and evil is completely and exclusively reserved to God: "Biblically, God alone is judge, solitary and exclusive in His prerogative, beyond

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[190]Walter Wink, "Stringfellow on the Powers," 23.

appeasement by any man or any nation."[191] God is moreover the only being privy to his judgment: "God's judgment is *His* knowledge, not to be apprehended or imitated by men or by institutions. His judgment is His secret."[192] Therefore, Stringfellow asserted, "No man, no nation, no creature whatever has even a clue as to how he or it is judged in any matter."[193]

Since judgment is reserved to God alone, then for humans to claim to discern something to be good or evil is to arrogate to themselves God's prerogative and to reveal their self-interest. Radically, Stringfellow asserts that there is no such thing as "objective evil," which he defines as "some knowledge or idea or principle of evil which people can learn or discover or discern and then, by their own will, do evil or good."[194] Thus, "[if] humans knew or could know what is good or what is evil in that sense, then they would be like God himself."[195] In fact, what humans or other creatures declare evil is that which works against their self-interest. Stringfellow expressed it as follows: "Evil, in the sense in which men know of evil, exists only in some action, word, deed, or other event that threatens the self-interest (not, notice, selfish interest, but self-interest, that is, welfare) of a person, institution, ideology, or nation."[196]

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[191]William Strinfellow, *A Second Birthday* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1970), 88.

[192]Ibid.

[193]Ibid. This view is similar to that suggested by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. See *Ethics*, translated by Neville Horton Smith (New York: Touchstone Books, published by Simon and Schuster, 1955), 30-41.

[194]Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, 18.

[195]Ibid.

[196]Ibid.

This understanding of God's judgment and of the notion of evil informed Stringfellow's view of the concept of sin. Rather than being an evil act, sin is in part presuming to actually know what is evil and thereby labeling something as such: "Sin is not essentially the mistaken, inadvertent, or deliberate choice of evil by human beings, but the pride into which they fall in associating their own self-interests with the will of God."[197] In this light, then, "[sin] is the radical confusion as to whether God or the human being is morally sovereign in history."[198] This confusion in humans reflects a profound state of alienation from all life, "including their own life and the life of all others and all things."[199] In turn, this alienation is a manifestation of bondage to the power of death. Therefore, for Stringfellow, "Sin is consignment to death, to be cut off from the one in whom all life originates and in whom all life is fulfilled; to be, in fact cut off from life itself."[200] Thus, simply put, rather than a willful or inadvertent act that violates God's standard of right and wrong or good and evil, sin is bondage to death.

Stringfellow also declared God's judgment to be utterly comprehensive. No part of creation is exempt. He wrote, "To His judgment, there are no qualifications or exemptions: He judges all men and all things, every decision, every action, every thought, every omission; neither sparrows nor a hair on the head are neglected in judgment."[201] The comprehensiveness of God's judgment includes all actions within and transcendent of time: "His judgment is in time and yet in the consummation of time; His

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[197]Ibid., 19.

[198]Ibid.

[199]Ibid.

[200]Ibid., 53.

[201]Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 88.

judgment is contemporary but also transcendent; his judgment encompasses all that was, all that is, all that is to be, as if it all were a single event which, in the end it is."[202]

This comprehensiveness of God's judgment parallels the ubiquity of the fallenness of creation. Since all of creation is fallen and subject to death, then no decisions made in this state of fallenness can escape judgment. In this sense, Stringfellow claimed, people misconstrue "the size and moral scope of their own decisions," somehow believing that they can know how God will judge particular decisions."[203] This reflects the attempt "to circumscribe the realm of God's judgment as much as possible."[204] In truth, Stringfellow suggested, humans cannot know for certain how God will judge a particular decision, and they tend to neglect the fact that fallenness corrupts all decisions, even those that may appear benign. Consequently, "[by] imagining that only select decisions risk judgment, men delude themselves about their own moral standing, which is to say, about their humanity."[205] This attempt to avoid judgment by discriminating between decisions is ultimately to no avail, because, "in all things—in every act and decision—humans are sinners and in no way, by any ingenuity, piety, sanction, or social conformity, may a person escape from the full burden of the power of sin over his or her whole existence."[206]

Consistent with his other views of freedom from bondage to death is Stringfellow's suggestion as to how one may "escape from the full burden of the power of sin over his

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[202]Ibid.

[203]Ibid., 86.

[204]Ibid.

[205]Ibid.

[206]Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, 51-52.

or her whole existence." The answer, quite simply, is "in Christ."[207] More specifically, this means "in beholding Christ who is in his own person the true human, the person living in the state of reconciliation with God, within himself, with all men, with the whole of creation."[208] Christ, for Stringfellow, embodied what he called "a coincidence of mercy in God's judgment."[209] In the Christ event, forgiveness as a critical aspect of God's judgment is revealed. While the specifics of God's judgment are unknown, Stringfellow noted, "much has been made known in the world of the *character* of God's judgment, and that notably, if not exclusively, in the history of Israel, which, in this reference, includes the ministry of Jesus as the climatic happening in Israel's sojourn."[210] In other words, while God's verdict concerning specific actions remains hidden, the merciful and forgiving character of God's judgment has been revealed: in Christ. Thus, "[forgiveness] displaces and abolishes punishment" and "[repentance] thereby counts as righteousness in God's judgment."[211]

Faith in the forgiveness and mercy of God revealed in Christ provides the freedom from the fear of divine punishment that humans in bondage to death seek to secure by attempting to judge their own decisions as good or evil. The result is that the Christian is free from anxiety "about how those decisions are judged by God."[212] This freedom is derived from the certainty that, in Walter Wink's words, "[in] Christ, God declares us

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[207]Ibid., 55.

[208]Ibid.

[209]Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 89.

[210]Ibid., 88-89.

[211]Ibid.

[212]Ibid., 91.

beloved, *regardless*."[213] Because the Christian is free from anxiety over the judgment of God, then, for Stringfellow the primary ethical question for the individual becomes "how can a person act humanly now?"[214] Likewise, for the Church, the primary ethical question becomes "how can the Church of Jesus Christ celebrate human life in society now?"[215]

In answering these questions, Stringfellow cautions, Christians "cannot, and need not, imitate or preempt or displace the will of God."[216] Instead, acting humanly and celebrating human life describe "an existential event, an exercise in conscience – transient and fragile."[217] While by definition such ethical action cannot be prescribed, Stringfellow does suggest that it will display a "radical reverence for the vocation of God and an equally radical acceptance of the vocation to be human."[218] This "ethical posture" moreover "frees human beings, in their decisions and tactics to summon the powers and principalities, and similar creatures, to their vocation – the enhancement of human life in society."

By suggesting this ethical scheme, Stringfellow extracts his homosexuality from his own moral judgment and that of others. If God's judgment is hidden and exclusive to God and ethical living is simply living humanly, which in part means recognizing that one's life is lived under the simultaneous judgment and forgiveness of God, then to judge

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[213]Wink, "Stringfellow on the Powers," 24.

[214]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 56.

[215]Ibid., 57.

[216]Ibid.

[217]Ibid.

[218]Ibid.

one's sexuality by social or biblical or ecclesiastical standards of morality is to usurp God's exclusive prerogative and to fail to live humanly. Therefore, the determination of what behavior, sexual or otherwise, is sinful belongs to God alone. In *Instead of Death*, a book he originally wrote for high school students, in discussing the exclusivity and hiddenness of God's judgment Stringfellow used the example of sexual sins to make his point: "None of the acts of sex which society regards as criminal or antisocial, should necessarily be regarded as sin. On the other hand, those forms of conduct that do not fall under the legal or moral censure of society should not be considered free of sin."[219] God alone is the judge of sin. In that light, Stringfellow asserted that the sinfulness of any form of sexuality is "the failure, refusal, or incapacity to acknowledge and treat one's own self or another as a person."[220] Hence, homosexual sex, as long as the partner is not objectified, degraded, or abused, is ethically acceptable.

It would seem that this view in general appears self-defeating. If God's judgment is hidden and exclusive, then on what basis did Stringfellow judge American exceptionalism or racism or the war in Vietnam? How could he know that in God's hidden judgment these are not favorable? A possible answer is that Stringfellow did not claim to be speaking for God in judgment of these or any other issues that he wrote or spoke about. He instead pointed out how that which he critiqued departed from reality as he understood it as part of holy history, that in those areas death appeared to reign. Beyond such an inference, however, it would seem Stringfellow never satisfactorily addressed such questions.

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[219]Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, 52.

[220]Ibid., 53.

The closest Stringfellow came to explicitly addressing these questions was in his discussion of what he called "the Bonhoeffer dilemma."[221] Stringfellow suggested that reflection upon Dietrich Bonhoeffer's involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler, helps "to expose the simplistics of ideological pacifism."[222] To adopt a consistently pacifistic ethic, according to Stringfellow, is to "attempt to ideologize the gospel."[223] Such an attempt seeks to "ascertain idealistically whether a projected action approximates the will of God."[224] Such a "query which seeks assurance beforehand of how God will judge a decision . . . . only betrays an unseemly anxiety for justification quite out of step with a biblical life-style that dares in each and every event to trust the grace of God."[225] In Bonhoeffer's case, then, the dilemma could be framed in a question: "If one who is committed to pacifism has the chance to stop one of the world's most brutal tyrants by killing him, would it be God's will to do so, or would it be God's will to uphold the ethical ideal of pacifism and let the tyrant live, thus dooming many more to their deaths? Stringfellow invalidates the question: "No decision, no deed, either violent or nonviolent, is capable of being confidently rationalized as a second-guessing of God's will."[226] In other words, one cannot know for certain what God's will is in any situation.

This brings the discussion back to the apparently self-defeating nature of such a view of judgment. How can one judge his or her own actions, let alone those of a nation,

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[221]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 131.

[222]Ibid., 132.

[223]Ibid.

[224]Ibid.

[225]Ibid.

[226]Ibid.

church, or society, if God's view is hidden? Stringfellow's answer involved a dialectic of judgment and mercy. While "the specifics of the historicity of God's judgment" cannot be known, "the *character* of his judgment – that is, that his mercy and forgiveness are coincident in judgment," is known to Christians.[227] In that light, Stringfellow advises a fundamentally existential response: boldly act, aware of God's judgment while trusting in God's mercy. Referring to the question of pacifism and violence, Stringfellow demonstrated this existential position: "[Where] Christians, in the same frailty and tension as any other human beings, become participants in specific violence they do so confessionally, acknowledging throughout the sin of it."[228] In other words, Stringfellow calls Christians to act according to their consciences without concern for their justification before God, confident of both their inherent sinfulness and God's abundant mercy.[229]

Eschaton

Stringfellow's understanding of the Eschaton, the end of all things, like much of his thought, was somewhat opaque. While he seems to have assumed a final consummation of time and all creation under God's reign, he interpreted it in light of his radically incarnational theology.

A theme of Stringfellow's eschatology which has already been discussed is the notion of God's ultimate judgment of all things. At times Stringfellow referred to what

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[227]Ibid., 133.

[228]Ibid.

[229]There is an obviously Lutheran perspective at play here. See Martin Luther, Letter to Philip Melancthon, 1 August 1521, Letter No. 501, in *Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, Vol. II, 1521-1530, translated and edited by Preserved Smith and Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1918), 50: "Be a sinner and sin mightily, but believe more mightily, and rejoice in Christ, who is victor over sin, death and world."

appears to be a specific event, "the Last Day," in which God reveals his judgment: "Indeed, on the Last Day, though not before, God's own judgment of every act, word and deed of every man will expose the moral disposition of each man in relationship to all other men."[230] While this judgment will result in the condemnation of some, it will mean the vindication of others, especially the poor and oppressed: "For the poor, the diseased, the oppressed, the dispossessed, the captive, the outcasts of this world the day of judgment in the word of God means not only the day of justice but also the day of justification when their suffering is exposed as grace."[231] So, in Stringfellow's thought, there will be a specific time of God's judgment in which he reveals his assessment of human action and vindicates those who have suffered the consequences of such action.

Stringfellow also assumed that there would someday be a future existence for the Church following the day of judgment but that this existence would be in a sense a continuation of history. Using the metaphor of the City of Salvation for the Church, he wrote, "It is not some never-never land, some alabaster city beyond the realm of time, but a City, whatever be the final shape and reality of its fulfillment at the end of time, which has form and actuality here and now in the midst of history."[232] Writing of the biblical notion of the Second Coming of Christ, Stringfellow asserted that "for all its mystery, the Second Advent is faithful to the mission of the First Advent, and is no disjuncture or

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[230]William Stringfellow, "The Political Witness of the Church of Christ," draft of an address delivered to the Council of Churches of Greater Tulsa Annual Assembly, November 9, 1964, 7-8. Box 8, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[231]Ibid.

[232]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 32.

disruption."[233] While assuming but not defining this future existence at the end of time, this Eschaton, Stringfellow remained bound to his radically incarnational emphasis.

His eschatology was not speculative; he did not propose to describe a future state designated by the terms, "heaven" or "hell." Stringfellow instead stressed the this-worldly nature of all of Christianity, including its eschatology. Therefore, he eschewed views of heaven or eternal life that caused Christians to focus upon an other-worldly "hereafter." This he considered a "patent distortion" of "what the [biblical] author of Hebrews calls 'the elementary doctrines of Christ'"[234] Viewing heaven or eternal life this way, Stringfellow argued, relegated Christ and his work to the realm of abstractions; he is "levitated out of time": "In all these circumstances, Christ is no longer beheld as the Lord of time and history, as the sovereign of Creation, as the new Adam, as the Redeemer. Rather he is demeaned to become a nebulous, illusive, spiritualized figure, a sacred vagueness severed from his own historic ministry."[235]

As a result of this critique Stringfellow defined heaven as "that estate of self-knowledge and reconciliation and hope – that vocation, really; that blessedness – to which every human being and the whole of creation is called to live here in this world, aspires to live *here*, and by the virtue of Christ is enabled to enter upon *here*."[236] Likewise, for Stringfellow, eternal life described a primarily temporal state of being: "biblically, 'eternal life' means the recognition of time as the redemptive era *now*, the

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[233]Stringfellow, An Ethic, 153.

[234]Ibid., 43.

[235]Ibid.

[236]Ibid., 43-44.

affirmation of life in time without displacing or distorting the reality of time *now*, the transcendence of time within the everyday experience of time *now*."[237]

With the same incarnational approach Stringfellow defined hell. It is "the realm of death . . . . when and where the power of death is complete, unconditional, maximum, undisguised, most awesome, and most awful, unbridled, most terrible, perfected."[238] This also described a this-worldly phenomenon: "That Jesus Christ descends into hell means that as we die, in any sense of the term die, our expectation in death is encounter with the word of God which is, so to say, already there in the midst of death."[239]

Despite his emphasis upon living in the here and now, he did write of a future hope in which time would find its fulfillment and redemption: "The eschatological hope, biblically speaking, anticipates the end of time which is, simultaneously, time's redemption."[240] On the other hand, the hope was lived out now, in time: "the biblical hope, eschatologically, is no disembodied abstraction, no ethereal notion, no antiworldly vision, but a hope currently foreshadowed and empirically witnessed in events taking place now, and all the time, in the common history of persons and nations in this world."[241] So the Christian lives "watching for and hoping for the next advent of Jesus Christ."[242] At the same time, however, he or she lives *now*. So, here and now biblical

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[237]Ibid., 44.

[238]Stringfellow, sermon preached at Church of St. John the Divine, 11 March 1984., 4.

[239]Ibid.

[240]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 44.

[241]Ibid.

[242]Ibid., 152.

people live and act, discern and speak, decide and do, in expectancy of Christ's promptness."[243]

In sum, for Stringfellow the Eschaton is indeed a future event looked forward to by Christians. Anticipation of it, however, is not to distract Christians from living in the here and now. In fact, just as the Christian lives in the knowledge of God's ubiquitous judgment and his equally ubiquitous mercy displayed in Christ, so he or she lives within an eschatological paradox: "So, in the same event, in any happening whatever, there is the moral reality of death and there is the incarnation of the Word of God, the demonic and dehumanizing and the power of the Resurrection, the portents of the Apocalypse and the signs of the imminence of the Eschaton."[244] Stringfellow summarized it thus: "In this history, in this time, Eden and the Fall, Jerusalem and Babylon, Eschaton and Apocalypse converge here and now."[245]

The Story

To conclude this discussion of Stringfellow's main theological themes, it is helpful to outline them in a broad narrative format, depicting each theme as a chapter within a story.[246] This grand narrative will provide cohesion and serve as a launching point for a discussion of Stringfellow's ethics.

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[243]Ibid., 153.

[244]Ibid., 152.

[245]Ibid., 48.

[246]I borrow this grand narrative form from theologian Gabriel Fackre. See Gabriel Fackre, "Narrative: Evangelical, Postliberal, Ecumenical," in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, edited by Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 124-127.

For Stringfellow, the prologue is the Creation, not as an event but as a state of being. The story proceeds under the assumption that God created the world. He does not posit a primordial event known as the Creation; he merely assumes the creaturehood of humans, powers, and nature. Of particular significance is the notion that the original purpose of the powers and principalities was to serve humankind. Chapter One for Stringfellow is the Fall. The effects of this fall encompass all creatures, including humans, and of course the powers and principalities. As with creation, Stringfellow did not argue for a historical event in which the humanity and the powers fell from their original vocations. Instead he assumes the fallenness of creation in which death becomes the dominant moral reality, enslaving humans by the agency of the powers and principalities. Chapter Two is the election of Israel in which God forms a nation and calls it to a priestly role to represent Him in the midst of the fallen nations, enslaved to death. Chapter Three is the event of Jesus Christ in which God himself walks and lives within the fallen creation displaying his power over death by his life and teaching, then conquering death through the Crucifixion and Resurrection. In Chapter Four, the church inherits the priestly vocation of Israel. It exists as an alternative society with respect to the powers and principalities, receiving its inheritance through the event of Pentecost. In Chapter Five, God reveals his judgment over all the actions of humans and the powers and establishes an eternal reality of life, free from the presence of death.

Within the scope of the grand narrative, humanity lives within Chapter Four, awaiting the consummation in Chapter Five. Fallenness characterizes the world: death enslaves through the agency of rival principalities and powers, yet Christ has conquered and has established a community that provisionally bears witness to his conquest of

death. The question, then, for the church is how to live in the midst of this fallen reality. Stringfellow's answer to this, the ethical question, will be taken up in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ethics

In light of the drama, the eschatological story in which Christians become participants, how, according to Stringfellow, are they to live? Beyond the somewhat cryptic references to "living humanly" or "celebrating human life", what are the ethical implications of such a theological outlook? The simple answer for Stringfellow is that Christians are to live in accordance with the reality that is narrated in light of theology. In doing so, Christians bear witness to this reality in the midst of the fallenness of the world, the arrogations of the powers, the rivalry of the principalities, and the pervasiveness of death. Five primary elements characterize this witness. First, it is a witness that is defined by the notion of the Word of God. Second, it is a witness that is inherently political. Third, it reflects a constant exercise of God-given discernment. Fourth, the witness, enlightened by discernment, demands a posture of resistance. Fifth, in resistance to the powers that would seek to enslave humans, the witness is characterized by advocacy for those who have been most victimized by the powers and principalities: the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed.

The Word

The concept of the Word of God played a pivotal role in Stringfellow's thought, serving as a bridge between his theology and his ethics. It is a bridge because, for Stringfellow, the notion of the Word of God was associated with a theological concept, a theological source, and an ethical practice. As a theological concept for Stringfellow, the Word of God refers to God revealed in history. It was not synonymous with the Bible,

although the Word of God was often manifested in the Bible and experienced through Bible reading. In fact, in many of his works, especially those written in the last decade of his life, Stringfellow used the phrase Word of God to refer to God. Stringfellow preferred this appellation for God because, as he wrote in *The Politics of Spirituality*, "[in] American culture . . . the name of God is terribly maligned."[1] When Ronald Reagan spoke of God, Stringfellow suggested, the president was merely "imagining some idea of God."[2] Echoing the distinction between religion and the Gospel, Stringfellow asserted, "Yet *no* idea of god is God; no image of god is God; no conception of god, however appealing or, for that matter, however true, coincides with the living God."[3] According to Stringfellow, to describe God in generic or abstract or vague terms was to do injustice to the living God and to engage in idolatry. This living God, "which the biblical witness bespeaks," is "present, manifest, militant in common history," and "discernible in the course of events through the patience and insight of ordinary human beings."[4] Consequently, "biblical people in this day attest to God, as he is revealed in this history, as the *Word of God*."[5]

Stringfellow's goal, then, when referring to God in those terms, was "to invoke the Scriptural saga of the Word of God active in common history from the first initiative of creation."[6] The Word of God refers to God described in the Bible as living and involved

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[1]Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 33.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid., 33-34.

[5]Ibid., 34.

[6]Ibid.

in history. Thus, in Stringfellow's view, the Word of God was incarnate in Jesus Christ; the Word of God is "permeating the whole of creation and ready to be discerned in all things whatsoever in the fallenness of this world; and, the Word of God "as the Holy Spirit" is "incessantly agitating change in this world (as the event of Pentecost and the Acts of the Apostles each verify)."[7] In other words, God, the living God of the Bible, was revealed in Jesus Christ and is being revealed throughout creation and in the Church, the beneficiary of Pentecost.

The implications for Christians of this view are thus: the Word of God incarnate is the one who overcame death and in whom Christians place their faith and are therefore freed from bondage to the principalities, powers, and death; the Word of God manifest in creation is the one whom Christians seek to discern at work in various places and events and in various groups of people; and, the Word of God as the Holy Spirit is the one by whom Christians are empowered to resist and confront the principalities.

The Bible

While Stringfellow considered the Word of God to be thoroughly and variously engaged within the fallen creation, he clearly understood the presence of this Word in the Bible to be central. Stringfellow believed that God's revelation, the Word of God, can be discerned in the words of the Bible. He wrote of listening to the Bible in order to "discern the Word of God in the Bible."[8] This is quite close to a Barthian view of the Bible. For Barth the relation of the Word of God to the text of the Bible was similar: "The Bible is God's Word to the extent that God causes it to be His Word, to the extent

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[7]Ibid.

[8]Stringfellow, *Count It All Joy: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Temptation Seen Through the Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 17.

that He speaks through it."[9] The difference between Stringfellow's and Barth's view appears to be that Stringfellow places more emphasis upon the reader's ability to discern the Word of God in the Bible. Barth, in keeping with his emphasis upon God's transcendence and freedom, placed more of the onus upon God to reveal Himself. Stringfellow assumed that the Word of God is present within the Bible, while, nevertheless it is by God's grace that one may hear it.[10] The central issue, though, is for the reader to "listen" for the Word: "What the ordinary Christian is called to do is to open the Bible and listen to the Word."[11]

Listening to the Word of God in the Bible is, according to Stringfellow, "a primitive act of love, in which a person gives himself to another's word, making himself accessible and vulnerable to that word."[12] Just as when one actively and considerately listens to another person by avoiding preoccupation with one's own response or "debating about whether the word being spoken is true or relevant or agreeable," so one listens to the Word in the Bible.[13] Thomas Zeilinger referred to this method of "listening" to the Bible as "*nichthermeneutische Bibellekture*", that is, non-hermeneutical Bible-reading.[14] It is non-hermeneutical in the sense that, in Stringfellow's words, one reads the Bible "putting

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[9]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1, The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Part 1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 109. Quoted in Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Twentieth-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 71. A thorough study of the influence of Barth upon Stringfellow would be both fascinating and helpful for understanding Stringfellow and perhaps for understanding the relevance of Barth's thought for the American political scene. Such a study is beyond the scope of this paper.

[10]Stringfellow, *Count It All Joy*, 18.

[11]Ibid., 16.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Thomas Zeilinger, *Zwischen-Raume: Theologie der Machte und Gewalten* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1999), 46.

aside, for the time being, such other issues as whether the Word is credible or congenial or consistent or significant."[15] In such a scheme, one comes to the Bible with a certain confidence that, prior to the use of various methods of interpretation, he or she will discover the Word of God. While the questions posed by hermeneutics may serve a useful purpose, the priority must be to listen first: "By all means, if you will, raise these questions, but, first, *listen to the Word*."[16]

Stringfellow recognized that this approach was somewhat naïve. Nevertheless, he believed, it was in keeping with the way God has revealed himself in the world, and was accessible to "ordinary human beings." In that light, Stringfellow understood the Bible to be the report of God's work in the world, more akin to a newspaper than a theological or doctrinal exposition: "It is a view that regards the Bible more as a newspaper than as a systematic body of theological doctrine or religious instruction or as a moral law or, for that matter, as mere esoteric mythology."[17] Rather than being a book of morality or religion, it is an account of the work of God in the world: "The Bible reports the news of the Word of God manifest and militant in the events of this history in a way that is accessible, lucid and edifying for the common reader."[18] By listening to the Word in that fashion, then, the reader becomes a part of the history of God's activity in the world. In that light, the story depicted in the Bible becomes the reader's story.

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[15]Stringfellow, *Count It All Joy*, 17.

[16]Ibid. Italics in the text

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

Sunday School

Stringfellow provides an example of this form of Bible reading by relating an experience he had as a Sunday school teacher for a "certain parish in New York City" in an area of Manhattan that was economically declining.[19] His class consisted of neighborhood teenagers who were "educationally deprived, commonly bereft of parents," and "unfamiliar with the Church."[20] Initially, their sole incentive to attend Stringfellow's class was an arrangement by which the rector allowed them access to the parish gymnasium and swimming pool during the week if they participated in Sunday school. It proved to be enough of an incentive to encourage thirteen teenagers to take part in the class.

Stringfellow began by discarding the denominational curriculum and encouraging each of the students to secure a copy of the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament.[21] For the first dozen or so weeks, the class session consisted of nothing more than Stringfellow reading out loud the entire text of the book of Romans while the students ostensibly followed along in their copies of the New Testament. Stringfellow next suggested that they spend their class times reading the book of Romans sentence by sentence. After each sentence was read aloud they would "pause and ask one question: *What does this say?* Not, what do I think? Not, do I agree? Not is this relevant to my life and circumstances? But, straightforwardly, first of all, *What is this word?*"[22]

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[19]Ibid., 62.

[20]Ibid., 63.

[21]Ibid., 65.

[22]Ibid., 67.

After many weeks of silence in response to the questions, the teenagers began to respond by engaging in the discussion, prompted in part by the "ring leader" who, although initially manifesting a rebellious attitude, became interested in the Bible study. The duration of the study corresponded to the school year, and by the time the year ended the class was only in the middle of the fourth chapter. Nonetheless, the following year, when the class resumed, this time studying the book of Colossians, six new students showed up, joined by seven who had been in the class the previous year.

Stringfellow's own iconoclastic attitude likely contributed to the success of the class.[23] He was convinced, though, that it was successful because his method facilitated a maximum opportunity for the teenagers to listen to the Word of God in the Bible. It was particularly successful with those teenagers, Stringfellow suggested, because they were better inclined than most adults and almost all clergy to actually listen to the Bible. Stringfellow asserted that "to confront the Word of God in such a way – in naivete, without presuppositions or conditions, without compulsion to prove doctrine, without necessity to vindicate any opinions or conduct – is the most somber discipline of the Christian witness in this world."[24] In other words, those teenagers, as Stringfellow suggested all Christians should be, were "free enough from petty moralism, religiosity, intolerance of youth, and churchly indoctrination to place themselves at the disposition of the Word of God in the Bible and naïve enough to listen to the Word speak."[25]

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[23]For example, when during one of the early sessions the "ring leader" brought a case of beer to class, Stringfellow confronted the boy by encouraging him to share the refreshments with the whole class, which he did.

[24]Ibid., 72.

[25]Ibid.

Listening to the Word of God in the Bible is prerequisite to recognizing God's activity in the world. By understanding and discerning the Word of God in the Bible, Stringfellow suggested, a Christian then becomes a participant in God's activity in the world. Being a Christian for Stringfellow meant "living within these events [described in the Bible] which have taken place or which are taking place, in history."[26] Fundamentally, Stringfellow asserted, "the biblical witness, of course, is that the redundant event in history is the drama of death and resurrection, epitomized in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ but, as it were, reiterated constantly in every other event or circumstance in the lives of nations and of persons."[27] "The Christian," he added, "is the knowing participant in that drama."[28]

Ethics is *Politics*

For Stringfellow, for the Christian to bear witness by participating in the drama that reflects the power and activity of the Word of God in history, she must also engage in a witness that is fundamentally political. For this, he offered several reasons. Perhaps his most simple reason was that political involvement - in a democratic society in particular - was unavoidable. Refusal to be involved is involvement by default. Stringfellow also argued that the Bible was essentially about politics. Therefore, the witness of those who claim to be living within the biblical story is inherently political. Another reason for a political witness was derived from his understanding of the nature of the Incarnation. It demonstrated God's concern for the world as it is. Stringfellow also argued that Jesus

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[26]Stringfellow, "A Conversation with William Stringfellow on the Ethics of Resistance," 17-18.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Ibid.

was a criminal. Consequently, to be a follower of Jesus meant to live in a similar relationship with the law. Finally, since for Stringfellow the Church was a holy nation, then it existed alongside other nations and therefore the witness of the Church occurs in the public square.

No Neutrality

Stringfellow eschewed what he described as a "common and popular view within the Church in this society."[29] It was a view that reflected a concern that the Church might be too involved in "worldly affairs." Because of this concern, the view adopted by many, Stringfellow explained, was "that the Church of Christ and Christian people [should] remain outside of, or above, or withdrawn from the political and social conflicts which separate and divide and disrupt men in their secular lives."[30] This perspective, Stringfellow suggested, was derived from a desire that "the Church be uncontaminated by worldly business," that it "be a place of rest and abstinence from worldly cares," and that it "be a refuge from the world."[31] Stringfellow argued, quite simply, that such an escapist mentality evidenced a certain delusion. The truth was, he wrote, "there is no such thing as neutrality about any public issue."[32] In all societies to some degree, but especially in a political democracy, "[every] citizen and every institution is involved in one way or another either by intention or default."[33] To make his point, Stringfellow, provides the example of a citizen who does not vote. This citizen's abstinence, Stringfellow argues,

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[29]Stringfellow, "The Political Witness of the Church of Christ," *The Witness*, December 3, 1964, 8.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid., 9.

[33]Ibid.

amounts to support for the winner, "since, his vote, if cast, might have defeated the candidate who won."[34] The citizen who abstains, Stringfellow further proposes, allows others to determine "the political consequences of his default."[35]

Stringfellow suggests a more serious example by discussing the "silence and default" of the Church and the university in Germany in the 1930s. "[By] their blindness to political realities, by their preoccupation with academic theology, by their reluctance to speak out [and] by their refusal to protest," he argued, many clergy, academics, and church members "became accomplices to Hitler's rise to power."[36] While there were, to be sure, many in German society who were radically, violently, and fanatically committed to establishing Nazi power, they were, Stringfellow surmised, "indispensably supported by abstention, neutrality, silence, and default by Christian people and by the intelligentsia."[37]

In light of the severe consequences resulting from an ostensible lack of involvement, which in truth is a *de facto* form of involvement, Stringfellow asserts that in politics every citizen is unavoidably involved. The question was, then, "not whether one is involved, but how one is involved: naively, complacently, stupidly or intentionally, outspokenly and intelligently."[38] In response then to those who were concerned about the Church being contaminated by the world, Stringfellow suggested a paradox: "the way to

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[34]Ibid.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Ibid.

be defiled in one's involvement, is in vainly practicing abstinence and supposing that one is thereby not involved."[39]

The Political Witness of the Bible

As Stringfellow read the Bible, he was struck by the political nature of its theology. He observed that "the theology of the Bible concerns politics in its most rudimentary meaning and in its most auspicious connotations."[40] For Stringfellow, the Bible portrayed salvation as "the preemptive *political* issue."[41] Tying together his incarnational emphasis, his eschatology, and the related notion of the Church as the exemplary society, Stringfellow described the biblical view of salvation as he saw it in the following political terms: "[The Bible] bespeaks the reality of human life consummated in society within time in this world, now and here, as the promise of renewal and fulfillment vouchsafed for all humans and for every nation – for the whole of Creation – throughout time."[42]

Contrasting what he saw as an American tendency to read the Bible as an apolitical book, Stringfellow pointed out that many biblical symbols, particularly in apocalyptic literature, were "explicitly political - *dominion, emancipation, authority, judgment*, *kingdom*, [and] *reconciliation*."[43] He further noted that "most biblical events are notoriously political," citing as examples "the drama of Israel the holy nation, the Kingdom parables in Christ's teaching, the condemnation of Christ as King of the Jews by the imperial authorities, the persecution of the Apostolic congregations, the

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[39]Ibid.

[40]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 14.

[41]Ibid., 15.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid. Italics in text

controversies between Christians and zealots, [and] the propagation of the Book of Revelation."[44] If the Bible is so inherently political in its witness, then the active witness of the Church, Stringfellow suggested, is likewise political.

Politics and Incarnation

For Stringfellow both the manner of Jesus's work in the world and the circumstances surrounding his death were also reasons for the Christian witness to be fundamentally political. "The Incarnation," according to Stringfellow, "means God's passion for the world's actual life – including its politics, along with all else – is such that he enters and acts in this world for himself."[45] Christians, then, according to Stringfellow, "are involved profoundly in politics because they honor and celebrate God's own presence and action in this world."[46] In fact, Stringfellow argued, when the Church gathers to worship they are merely celebrating and proclaiming "God's presence and action outside the sanctuaries in the common life of the world."[47]

The universal nature of the reconciliation brought about by Jesus's life, death, and resurrection also demand that the Church's witness be essentially political. Stringfellow believed that Jesus Christ was "the new Adam – the true man – the man reconciled in God."[48] This reconciliation applied to all humanity, indeed all creation: "The outreach of the reconciliation which is God's work extends to the whole of creation throughout all

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[44]Ibid.

[45]Ibid., 10.

[46]Ibid.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Stringfellow, *Dissenter in a Great Society*, 130.

places and times."[49] Consequently, the work of Christ did not just apply privately to individual Christians but to all of society. It is therefore a profoundly political event. "Reconciliation, in terms of Christian orthodoxy, is not some occasional, unilateral, private happening, but, much more than that, the transcendent, universal, and profoundly political event in all time."[50] Since reconciliation was a corporate event comprehending all of humanity, "it is impossible to consider the reconciliation of one man outside of, or separately from, the estate of all other men and institutions, that is, *politically*."[51]

The nature of Jesus's death and his relationship with the authorities that such a death reflected further warranted a Christian witness that was profoundly political. In a provocative article Stringfellow boldly asserts that, contrary to what many may think, Jesus was a criminal. He wrote, "It is unambiguous in each of the gospel accounts that Jesus Christ was a criminal."[52] Rather than being "a mere nonconformist" or "just a protester" or "simply a dissenter", Jesus was, according to Stringfellow, a criminal. He deserved this appellation because "*he was guilty*."[53] Stringfellow contrasted his position to that of many, including himself, who had been taught "to regard Jesus as an ingenuous and hapless victim of a gross miscarriage of justice."[54] That was not true, Stringfellow argued. In fact based upon the account in the biblical book of Luke, "it appears Jesus

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[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid., 131. Italics in the text

[52]Stringfellow, "Jesus the Criminal," *Christianity and Crisis*, June 8, 1970, 119. As with many of his articles, this was originally a sermon entitled, "The Criminality of Jesus." Transcript of sermon preached at Sage Chapel, Cornell University, October 19, 1969. Box 35, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[53]Ibid., 120. Italics in the text

[54]Ibid.

benefited from more than perfunctory due process."[55] In other words, according to Stringfellow, Jesus had violated the laws of the Romans as well as those of the Jews and was therefore, rightfully, from the perspective of the political and ecclesiastical authorities, condemned: "For Jesus, the justice of both the Roman State and the nation of Israel was perfected on the Cross."[56] Jesus was furthermore crucified in an exchange for the revolutionary, Barrabas. If Jesus is an outlaw, indeed a revolutionary in the eyes of the State, then his followers are likewise identified with his criminality.

Consequently, Stringfellow believed, the "Christian is an incessant revolutionary."[57] Of course, the revolution that Christians represent "is not a revolution the world can abide."[58] Rather than utilizing the power of death to bring about a revolution that will eventually die itself, the Christian, according to Stringfellow, "is constantly welcoming the gift of human life, for himself and for all men, by exposing, opposing and overturning all that betrays, entraps or attempts to kill human life."[59] In other words, the Christian lives in constant confrontation with the power of death. The power of death, as we have seen in Stringfellow's thought, is perhaps the most pervasive in the exemplary principality known as the nation and serviced by the State. Hence, the Christian's confrontation with death is inherently political.

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[55]Ibid.

[56]Ibid.

[57]Ibid., 121.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Ibid.

The Holy Nation

As has been discussed, in Stringfellow's thought the Church stands as a holy nation, "always . . . over against the [political] nation and all other principalities and powers in this world."[60] Just as individual Christians in the tradition of Jesus's relationship to the State are incessantly revolutionary in their relationships with the State, so the Church as an alternative nation stands against other nations. It stands over and against the other nations primarily because it claims another king. Stringfellow noted that "[the] kingship of Jesus Christ possesses extraordinary connotations."[61] One of these connotations is that Christ's kingship exceeds that of Caesar as well as that of any other power that would claim to rule over humanity or parts thereof. Christ, for Stringfellow, was the ultimate ruler, "exercising dominion in history over all creatures (including all principalities and powers, institutions and ideologies, corporations and nations), over the whole of nature, over all things."[62] In light of this, according to Stringfellow, the State views Christ and in turn his Church as threats. Referring to the circumstances surrounding Jesus's crucifixion, Stringfellow wrote, "The authorities of Rome . . . perceived quite accurately that Christ as king threatened them poignantly and urgently."[63] This threat was seen in the fact that Christ and his Church embody freedom, as humanity "no more enslaved to institutions, no longer a pawn of technologies, no mere servant of the State or of any other authority, no incapacitated victims of a damaged environment."[64] "Christ the King

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[60]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 89.

[61]Stringfellow, "Jesus the Criminal," 122.

[62]Ibid.

[63]Ibid.

[64]Ibid.

means," furthermore in Stringfellow's view, "[humanity] . . . free from revolutionary causes as well, free from idolatry of Caesar and, not least of it, free from religion that tries to disguise such slaveries as virtuous, free from all these and all similar claims that really conceal only death."[65] Thus, the Christian witness is political because "Christ as king embodies an unrelenting revolutionary threat to each and every nation and, paradoxically, to all revolutions within any nation, as they become incarnations of the power of death feigning to be the definitive moral power in history."[66]

In this revolutionary posture the Church does not seek to overthrow the current nations, it merely lives as an "exemplary society" in the midst of the fallen principalities. This in turn adds to the political nature of the Church's witness. Rather than engage in some sort of pietistic withdrawal, Stringfellow argued, "the vocation of the people of the Church of Christ, in the world as a nation, as a peculiar society, as, indeed, an exemplary society, is one which leads them into an inherently, inevitably, and unavoidably revolutionary posture vis-à-vis the prevailing status quo in secular society."[67] This posture does not merely mean that the State considers the Church a threat. It also means that the Church's active witness is one that is radically involved in the political realm: "So it leads them to the most authentically radical involvement and action in everyday affairs of the secular state."[68] The reason for this is that in living as the exemplary society it also confronts the falsehoods issued by fallen societies. Declaring the radical nature of the Christian witness, Stringfellow wrote, "The Christian is perpetually in the

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[65]Ibid.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Stringfellow, "A Conversation with William Stringfellow on the Ethics of Resistance," 2.

[68]Ibid.

position of complaining about the status quo, whatever it happens to be."[69] This is the case because the Christian's "experience of reconciliation in Christ is such that no estate in secular society can possibly correspond to or much approximate the true society of which he is a citizen in Christ."[70] Consequently, the Christian is, according to Stringfellow, "everywhere in every society, an alien" who is "always, in any society, in protest."[71]

A Modest Witness

Even as the Christian works for certain intermediate goals within a given society, Stringfellow suggested, he or she is never to be quite satisfied with the achievements. "Even when a cause which he has himself supported prevails, he will not be content, but will, so to speak, be the first to turn around and say – 'That's fine. We have now done this or that, but it is not enough.'"[72] As an example of this Stringfellow addressed the struggle for racial integration, an issue with which he was intimately acquainted. He declared, "The Christian in that struggle, however, will characteristically be the first to recognize that integration of American society, as much as it is absolutely essential to the survival of this nation, is in no way to be confused with or identified with the Kingdom of God."[73] Instead, Stringfellow argued, the Christian should view success in the struggle for integration "as a modest, conservative, attainable, and necessary social and political

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[69]Stringfellow, "The Political Witness of the Church of Christ," 11.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Ibid.

[72]Ibid.

[73]Ibid.

objective in this nation at this time," but "it is by no means the measure of reconciliation among men in this world."[74]

In light of the above, it is significant that while for Stringfellow the Christian witness was fundamentally political and its posture was incessantly revolutionary, it remained a *witness*, not a political attempt at creating a new social order. In other words, the political witness of the Church is not overly concerned with issues of effectiveness or ideological transformation. According to Stringfellow, "The Christian does not enter the scene on the basis of some kind of ideal as to what society should be nor equipped with some kind of ideological scheme."[75] Christians, according to Stringfellow, do not attempt to bring about a better world, because they realize that any attempt is to be tainted with the fallenness of the world as it is.[76] This, for Stringfellow, made the Christian "the most blunt and relentless realist." This realism informs the Christian that "no institution, no ideology, no form of government, no society can heal the brokenness or prevail against the power of death."[77] This realism, Stringfellow argues, gives the Christian a certain freedom to act without fear of the outcome or consequences: "[The Christian] is free to face the world as it is without flinching, without shock, without fear, without surprise, without embarrassment, without sentimentality, without guile or

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[74]Ibid.

[75]Stringfellow, "A Conversation with William Stringfellow on the Ethics of Resistance," 3.

[76]"This may sound strange, but Christians are not particularly engaged in 'making a better world.'" William Stringfellow, unpublished transcript of dialogue sermon preached with Dr. Hugh McCandless, Protestant Episcopal Church of the Epiphany, New York, New York, May 20, 1962, 4. Box 6, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[77]Stringfellow, "The Political Witness of the Church of Christ," 11.

disguise."[78] Indeed, Stringfellow declared, the Christian "is free to live in the world as it is."[79]

While the political witness of the individual Christian and the corporate Church reflects a commitment to neither ideology nor institution, it also is not informed by specific moral propositions or principles. As was quoted above, Stringfellow wrote, "There is no convenient set of rules, no simple blueprint, no simplistic ethics of decision for the Christian."[80] Since this is the case, then, Stringfellow admits that the Christian witness "will appear inconsistent to others in public views and positions."[81] The Christian "cannot be put into a neat pigeonhole, his stance and conduct are never easily predictable."[82] The Church's witness, then, cannot be too closely identified with any particular movement, political theory, or utopian design: "And though the Christian acts in this world and in particular circumstances in a society for this or that cause, he does so not as the servant of some race or class or political system or ideology but as an expression of his freedom from just such idols."[83] Indeed, Stringfellow noted, "Biblical politics are alienated from the politics of this age."[84]

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[78]Stringfellow, *Dissenter in a Great Society*, 161.

[79]Ibid.

[80]Stringfellow, "The Political Witness of the Church of Christ," 10.

[81]Stringfellow, *Dissenter in a Great Society*, 161-162.

[82]Ibid.

[83]Ibid.

[84]Stringfellow, "The Political Witness of the Church of Christ," 10.

Being Human, Living Humanly

Since the witness of the Church, according to Stringfellow, is fundamentally political, but not to be identified with any particular ideology, scheme, institution, or system, in what form is it actualized? Since the witness of the Church is an incessant revolt against the status quo, but is not prescribed by specific principles or propositions, how is it lived out? Before answering these questions by detailing the further characteristics of Stringfellow's ethic, it should be stressed that essentially for him, ethics is nothing more than living out the implications of theology. In other words, for Stringfellow ethics involves living within reality as he understood it. Consequently, being is doing. This view he based in part upon a particular notion of God's grace. Contrary to those who "think that to be a Christian one must do something beyond what already has been done in Christ," Stringfellow argued that "[the] task is, rather, to live within the victory of all that has been done by God."[85] Ethics, then, in light of Stringfellow's view, is "not so much about what [the Christian] does in this world but about who [he or she] is in this world."[86] Thus, "[there] is no serious distinction between who the Christian is and what he does, between being and doing."[87]

So, in that light the question becomes, how does this Christian "being" that Stringfellow claimed is fundamentally political manifest itself in society, in the world? If the Church is to live as the exemplary society and the holy nation in the midst of other societies and death-enslaved nations and if the condition of the world is so tragic, what are to be the characteristics of the Christian life and the Church's witness? In *An Ethic*

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[85]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 114.

[86]Ibid.

[87]Ibid.

for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land, Stringfellow acknowledged that his theology begged such questions. The following are several that he asked rhetorically:

> If, as I have said, the moral reality of death in the Fall is so mighty, so ubiquitous, so relentless a power, what then?
>
> If God's judgment be hidden from human insight now, so that we have no clue about whether what we decide and do is right or wrong, why bother to risk decision or action at all?
>
> If Jerusalem, the holy nation, is manifest as the reality of the Church of Christ here and there and now and then, in curious episodes and other occasions, is that any consolation?
>
> And if, when we do dare decisions and take actions, we know them to be ambiguous and inconsistent, extemporaneous and transient, paradoxical and dialectical – always at once saying *no* and saying *yes* – what witness is that?[88]

Stringfellow's answer, which he considered to be the "biblical response," was "hope is only known in the midst of coping with death."[89] Taking an apparently existential turn, Stringfellow asserts that, rather than following a set of rules or subscribing to particular ideology, "[it] is a person's involvement in the crisis *in itself* – whatever the apparent outcome – which *is* the definitively humanizing experience."[90] Hence, Stringfellow's ethic is one of living within the reality of death's reign yet resisting it in the freedom wrought by God through Christ. In fact, the struggle against death's many forms reflects that freedom: "Engagement in specific and incessant struggle against death's rule renders

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[88]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 137-138.

[89]Ibid., 138.

[90]Ibid.

us human."[91] This, Stringfellow declared, is "the only way to live humanly in the midst of the Fall."[92]

Discernment

The resistant witness is simultaneously for Stringfellow a witness of affirmation, that is, the Christian's "affirmation of and surrender to and participation in the witness of God to himself in each and every event in history."[93] Consequently, the third element of Stringfellow's view of the Christian witness is that it must be informed by discernment. The Christian must be able to discern the activity of both death and God in the midst of fallen creation. In fact the "gift of discernment" was for Stringfellow, "basic to the genius of the biblical life style."[94] One form of discernment, which Stringfellow called "discerning signs," he believed, "has to do with the ability to interpret ordinary events in both apocalyptic and eschatological connotations, to see portents of death where others find progress or success but, simultaneously, to behold tokens of the reality of the Resurrection or hope where others are consigned to confusion or despair."[95] This gift is the ability for the Christian to see "the remarkable in common happenings," to "[perceive] the saga of salvation within the era of the Fall."[96]

The necessary counterpart to the ability to discern signs, Stringfellow suggested, was the ability to discern spirits. "This gift," he wrote, "enables the people of God to

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[91]Ibid.

[92]Ibid.

[93]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 116.

[94]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 138.

[95]Ibid., 319.

[96]Ibid., 138-139.

distinguish and recognize, identify and expose, report and rebuke the power of death incarnate in nations and institutions or other creatures, or possessing persons, while they also affirm the Word of God incarnate in all of life, exemplified preeminently in Jesus Christ."[97] While the notion of the discernment of signs stressed the ability for the Church to recognize and respond to the activity of the Word of God within creation in all of its fallenness, the notion of the discernment of spirits emphasized the ability of the Church to recognize and respond to the militant presence of death within the principalities and powers. Stringfellow considered this type to discernment "the gift which exposes and rebukes idolatry."[98]

I would suggest that the notion of discernment encapsulates Stringfellow's method of thought and was fundamental to his social and political critiques. In fact this notion of discernment ties together his theological themes and serves as the basis for their practical application. For example, "Discerning signs," wrote Stringfellow, "does not seek spectacular proofs or await the miraculous."[99] In fact, he asserted, "it means sensitivity to the Word of God indwelling in all Creation and transfiguring common history, while remaining radically realistic about death's vitality in all that happens."[100] Two of Stringfellow's theological themes stand out in this statement: the importance of the Word of God present and active within creation and the ubiquity of death and the pervasiveness of its effects. Similarly, wrote Stringfellow, "the discernment of spirits refers to the talent to recognize the Word of God in this world in principalities and

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[97]Ibid., 139

[98]Ibid.

[99]Ibid.

[100]Ibid.

persons despite the distortion of fallenness or transcending the moral reality of death permeating everything."[101] Likewise, this statement simultaneously engages Stringfellow's notion of the Word of God, the presence and power of death, the fallenness of the world, and the principalities and powers. In fact, Stringfellow recognized that discernment was a foundational concept for ethics: "Discernment furnishes the context for other tasks and functions of the people of God."[102] I would suggest, though, based upon the generally negative nature of his social and political observations, that Stringfellow was more likely to exercise the gift of discerning spirits than the gift of discerning signs. He seemed to spend more ink rebuking idolatry than he did affirming the presence of God in various events of history and aspects of Creation.

In *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, Stringfellow sought to provide an example of his notion of discernment by applying it to American national leaders, specifically those of the executive branch in the early 1970s. He suggested that Christians had been guilty of "[two] major blunders based upon false perceptions," even as they "sought to resist official violence and to refute babel [the term he used for official government lies]."[103] The first blunder was "the presumption of rationality in the nation's leaders."[104] On the contrary, he argued, the presidency in particular appears to "be a pathetically dehumanizing ordeal, harmful to both sanity and conscience."[105] In other words, the president is not quite sane. Stringfellow suggested that, instead, the

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[101]Ibid.

[102]Ibid., 140.

[103]Ibid., 141-142.

[104]Ibid., 142.

[105]Ibid.

president should be perceived "as a victim and captive of the principalities and powers."[106]

The second blunder to which Christians were prone was akin to the first: "imputing malice to the nation's reputed leaders."[107] Whether or not "Mr. Nixon or General Westmoreland or John Mitchell" were wicked or malicious was to Stringfellow "of much less moral significance, or political relevance, than the enthrallment of men such as these with the power of death and their entrapment and enslavement by the powers and principalities in relation to which they nominally have office."[108] In other words, the malice or wickedness of the particular individuals in office is not the issue. What is important for the Christian exercise of the gift of discernment is to see that the officeholders are merely front men, enslaved to the principalities and powers and therefore enslaved to death.

If this is the case and Christians discern the presence of death in the nation and "its reputed leaders," then Stringfellow declares that the following "befits the Christian witness:"

> In the face of death, live humanly. In the middle of chaos, celebrate the Word. Amidst babel . . . speak the truth. Confront the noise and verbiage and falsehood of death with the truth and potency and efficacy of the Word of God. Know the Word, teach the Word, nurture the Word, preach the Word, defend the Word, incarnate the Word, do the Word, live the Word. And more than that, in the Word of God expose death and all death's works and wiles, rebuke lies, cast out demons, exercise, cleanse the possessed, raise those who are dead in mind and conscience.[109]

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[106]Ibid.

[107]Ibid.

[108]Ibid.

[109]Ibid., 142-143.

Resistance

Informed by the gift of discernment, the Christian life is characterized by the fourth element of Stringfellow's view of the Christian witness: a posture of resistance to the powers and principalities. This posture is manifested, however, by specific acts of resistance. To do otherwise, argued Stringfellow, was to engage in a form of suicide. His notion of resistance was greatly informed by his acquaintance with various Christians who had been involved in resistance against Nazi Germany. In fact, their modes of resistance became for Stringfellow somewhat of paradigm for the Christian life. Writing of their experience, he declared, "To exist, under Nazism, in silence, conformity, fear, acquiescence, obeisance, collaboration—to covet safety and security on the conditions prescribed by the State—caused moral insanity, meant suicide, was fatally dehumanizing, constituted a form of death."[110] Consequently, Stringfellow asserted, "Resistance was the only stance worthy of a human being."[111] Of course this notion does not apply merely to those under the assault of explicitly totalitarian regimes. Resistance characterizes the lifestyle of every Christian: "This style life, this ethics of witness, means that the essential and consistent task of Christians is to expose the transience of death's power in the world."[112]

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[110]Stringfellow, "The Christian in Resistance," upublished draft of an address given at Smith College, April 13, 1972, 2. Box 15, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[111]Ibid.

[112]Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 44.

Minimal Acts Against a Maximal Foe

Specific acts of resistance, according to Stringfellow, more often than not appear to be relatively insignificant. He observed that much of the resistance to the Nazi regime "consisted, day by day, of efforts which, if regarded each one by itself seem far too small, too weak, too temporary, too symbolic, too haphazard, too meek, too trivial to be efficacious against the oppressive, monolithic, pervasive presence which Nazism was, both physically and psychically, in the nations which had been defeated and seized."[113] In the same way, Stringfellow implied, Christian acts of resistance against and confrontation with the powers and principalities may in themselves seem trivial and insignificant.

One of the most important acts of resistance, Stringfellow suggested, is Bible study. From his discussions with the Christians who were engaged in resistance to the Nazis, Stringfellow was struck by "the strenuous emphasis" that many of the leaders of the confessing movement placed upon Bible study. In fact, Stringfellow observed, "*recourse to the Bible was in itself a primary, practical and essential tactic of resistance*."[114] "Bible study," Stringfellow believed, "furnished the precedent for the free, mature, ecumenical, humanizing style of life which became characteristic of those of the confessing movement."[115] This, Stringfellow suggested, applies to all Christians as a principle part of their resistant witness. By engaging in Bible study, particularly in small groups, Christians in America or Nazi Germany or anywhere else incorporate their

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[113]Stringfellow, "The Christian in Resistance," 1.

[114]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 120. Italics in the text.

[115]Ibid.

witness into the biblical witness.[116] Christians are informed how they may incorporate their own stories and the story of their congregations in the present into the historically transcendent biblical story.

Liturgy, Sacrament, Charisms

The resistant witness for Stringfellow also includes acts that are liturgical, sacramental and charismatic. These are ritualized, though not ritualistic, and tradition-informed acts that are simultaneously, since they are performed by Christians, empowered by the Holy Spirit. They are sacramental because they use as symbols "the ordinary things of the common existence of the world – bread, wine, water, money, cloth, music, words, or whatever else is readily at hand."[117] These liturgical, sacramental, and charismatic events or actions are of course highly political as well. Stringfellow wrote, "At no point in the witness of the Church to the world is its integrity as a reconciled society more radical and cogent then in the liturgy, the precedent and consummation of that service which the Church of Christ and the members of this Body render to the world."[118] "All authentic witness in the name of Christ," asserted Stringfellow, "exemplifying in the world the virtue of Christ, which Christians undertake in their dispersion in the practical life of the world, is portrayed in the liturgy celebrated in the gathered congregation."[119] In other words, liturgical events dramatically portray the

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[116]Ibid.

[117]Stringfellow, *Dissenter in a Great Society*, 153.

[118]Ibid., 150.

[119]Ibid., 153.

Gospel and its implications. "The liturgy, therefore," Stringfellow wrote, "wherever it has substance in the Gospel, is a living, political event."[120]

The sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, for example, are significant acts of resistance that are politically charged. Stringfellow implies that both these sacraments are to be contrasted with the social and political disunity engendered by racism. Thus Baptism is a symbol of unity, not merely ecclesial but also political and social. He wrote, "There can be no unity which is witness unless there be both a common understanding and universal recognition within the whole Church of the Baptism of each member of the Church."[121] Furthermore, he argued, there can be no such "unity unless all who are baptized are welcomed into the common life of the Church, which is the Holy Communion."[122] This is not mere a religious activity symbolizing a religious unity, because "[both] Baptism and Holy Communion are sacraments in the most ecumenical meaning of 'ecumenical' – that is, both are sacraments of the unity of all mankind in Christ."[123] The Church does not exist for itself. Therefore, its sacraments are not symbols applicable only to its own religious life and unity. This they are, Stringfellow argued, "only in the sense in which the Church is called to be the image of the world in reconciliation."[124] Inasmuch as Baptism and Holy Communion are marks of the Church

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[120]Ibid., 154.

[121]Ibid., 149.

[122]Ibid.

[123]Ibid.

[124]Ibid.

as the exemplary reconciled society, they are "far from being esoteric, religious rituals" but are "most concretely political and social in character."[125]

In *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, Stringfellow emphasized the importance of the charismatic gifts, the abilities given to Christians by the Holy Spirit, for the political, resistant witness of the Church.[126] In his view, these charismatic gifts are "concerned with the restoration or renewal of human life in society."[127] With that concern, all of these gifts, Stringfellow argued, "have to do with how, concretely, human beings are enabled to cope with the multiple and variegated claims of death."[128] In fact, Stringfellow believed, "[the] charismatic gifts furnish the only powers to which humans have access against the aggressions of the principalities."[129] The political nature of charismatic gifts, he noted, is more obvious in the case of some gifts than it is with others. Prophecy, for example, "where apocalyptic insight and eschatological foresight converge in utterance of action here and now," has obvious political implications as it involves the critical recognition of the designs of the nation as principality. The charismatic gift of administration, Stringfellow suggested, was highly political, given his view of the Church as a holy nation. He observed that administration was a politically-oriented gift:

> where [it] is comprehended within the Church's vocation as the holy nation or as the

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[125]Ibid.

[126]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*. See especially 143-151. Stringfellow intended to publish a book on the political significance of the charismatic gifts. Various drafts of the preface and other portions of the proposed book can be found in the William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. See especially box 19.

[127]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 144.

[128]Ibid.

[129]Ibid., 145.

> priest to the nations, and where, therefore, a bishop is called to be an exemplary ruler or governor juxtaposed to the thrones and authorities of the nations, and where, moreover, the ecclesiastical bureaucracy, both in its order and its personnel, has a radical vocation in relation to the bureaucracies of the State considered in the same aspects.[130]

Stringfellow wrote of three charismatic gifts that he suggested were particularly significant for the Christian witness of resistance though not as obvious as others in their political implications: glossolalia, healing, and exorcism. Glossolalia, or "speaking in tongues," Stringfellow wrote, was at Pentecost "related concretely to evangelization and to the radically ecumenical scope of the Church in its outreach to all sorts and conditions of human beings, as they are, where they are."[131] In that light, then, he argued, "[at] Pentecost, ecstatic utterance means the emancipation of human beings from the bonds of nation, culture, race, language, ethnicity."[132] Similarly, modern-day glossolalia in the Church reflects emancipation. Stringfellow understood that speaking in tongues reflected in part a Holy Spirit engendered "response to the yearning of the professed church people for integrity in liturgy and public worship, a need frustrated for so long by divisiveness and sham, vaingloriousness and dissipation, facetiousness and religiosity, joylessness and blasphemy."[133] While indeed, Stringfellow argued, glossolalia may reflect the desire of many Christians for a spiritual purity and authenticity in their worship, as well as manifesting a rebellion against lifeless proprieties in worship, it also serves as a parody to the lies of the political principalities. He wrote, "In an American atmosphere heavy-

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[130]Ibid.

[131]Ibid., 147.

[132]Ibid.

[133]Ibid.

laden with babel, glossalalia bespeaks the rebuke of the Word of God."[134] To practice speaking in tongues, according to Stringfellow, is one way of actively resisting the principalities and powers and their master, death. Claiming that "[ecstatic] utterance witnesses the vitality of the Word of God against the ineptness of blasphemy," Stringfellow asserted, "[speaking] in tongues is a sign of human beings set free by the Word of God from the captivation of the official and babel and is an encouragement to all persons still oppressed by babel."[135]

The gift of healing also, for Stringfellow, represented another example of resistant witness. The actual means by which the gift was exercised, whether "medically or miraculously," was not the important issue.[136] What was important, Stringfellow noted, was the significance of healing as a manifestation of Christ's victory over death and the principalities and powers. This victory, as has been suggested, was politically significant. Referring to Jesus's and the Apostles' healing activity, Stringfellow wrote, "Yet the healing episodes reposted in the New Testament are very much implicated in politics."[137] "The healings attributed to Jesus," for example, Stringfellow noted, "became prominent in provoking his condemnation."[138] By the same token, Stringfellow implies, to exercise the gift of healing is to confront death and in doing so to clash with the political principalities: "To so surpass death is utterly threatening politically; it shakes and

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[134]Ibid., 148.

[135]Ibid.

[136]Ibid.,

[137]Ibid.

[138]Ibid.

shatters the very foundation of political reality because death is, as has been said, the only moral and practical sanction of the State."[139]

Stringfellow also understood exorcism, particularly as a form of liturgy, to be an important form of resistant witness. Noting that exorcism has "in modern Christendom . . . been generally regarded with apprehension and suppressed, it nevertheless has venerable prominence in the biblical tradition."[140] Because of this prominence, Stringfellow argued, exorcism should not be disregarded. In fact, just as healing reflects victory over death in the form of disease, so exorcism reflects victory over death in the form of the demonic. Exorcism, according to Stringfellow, is a liturgical act of resistance to the demonic. For example, Stringfellow considered the Lord's Prayer to represent a form of exorcism, its political significance "rendered . . . emphatic . . . by the political circumstances of the impending condemnation of Christ which attended his commendation of this prayer to his disciples."[141] He noted that in the Lord's prayer, "the invocation of the name of God, followed at the end of the prayer by the plea to 'deliver us from evil' or from 'the evil one,' constitutes an act of exorcism."[142] As a contemporary example of exorcism, Stringfellow suggests the action of the Catonsville Nine. He described their act of burning the draft records as "a sacramental protest against the Vietnamese war – a liturgy of exorcism, exactly."[143] "It exposed," he wrote, "the death idolatry of a nation which napalms children by symbolically submitting the nation to the

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[139]Ibid., 149.

[140]Ibid.

[141]Ibid., 150.

[142]Ibid.

[143]Ibid.

very power upon which it has relied, by napalming official pieces of paper."[144] In summarizing the significance of the Catonsville action, Stringfellow ties together several of the elements of the Christian witness: political, sacramental, liturgical, biblical, and discerning. He wrote,

> The Catonsville action is, thus, a direct outreach of renewal of the sacramental activity of the sanctuary, a liturgy transposed from the altar or kitchen table to a sidewalk outside a Selective Service Board office, a fusion of the sacramental and the ethical standing within the characteristic biblical witness.[145]

Advocacy

Informed by the gift of discernment, manifested in specific acts of resistance that are simultaneously liturgical, charismatic, and sacramental, the Church bears its witness in the midst of the power of death and in the face of the principalities and powers of this fallen creation. Yet, Stringfellow's ethic of witness includes one more characteristic. He asserts that the biblical witness is also one of advocacy on behalf of the oppressed and marginalized against the oppressors. Arguing that such advocacy is "characteristic of the New Testament," Stringfellow offers as partial proof "every episode in the Gospels in which Jesus ministers to the despised, the diseased the dispossessed or in which he confronts the rich, the powerful, the mighty."[146] This advocacy is epitomized in the Resurrection, "wherein Christ serves as advocate of all humanity throughout time."[147] By the same token, then, Stringfellow suggests, the Church carries on that mission with particularly political implications: "So, in this age the church of Christ is called as the

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[144]Ibid.

[145]Ibid., 151.

[146]Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience: The Politics of Romans 13 and Revelation 13 in Light of the Second Coming* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1977), 94.

[147]Ibid.

advocate of every victim of the rulers of the age, and that, not because the victim is right, for the church does not know how any are judged in the Word of God, but because the victim is a victim."[148] In this notion of advocacy Stringfellow's understanding of the hiddenness of God's judgment is also brought to bear.

Advocacy, for Stringfellow, logically follows the idea of resistance as the essential posture to the Christian life. If the Christian is free from death and its minions, the powers, then advocacy for those victimized by those powers is a primary way to celebrate life and oppose the victimizers. "Advocacy," asserted Stringfellow, "is . . . how the church expends its life in freedom from both intimidation and enthrallment of death or of any agencies of death, how the church honors the sovereignty of the Word of God in history against the counterclaims of the ruling principalities."[149] While other acts of resistance may be political in their implications, advocacy, according to Stringfellow is the church's explicitly political task, while at the same time, as with other acts of resistance, it is a form of worship. He wrote that advocacy "constitutes the church's political task, but, simultaneously, exemplifies the church's worship of God, as intercession for anyone in need, and for the need of the whole of creation, which exposes and confounds the blasphemy of predatory political authority."[150]

Stringfellow suggests several examples of Christians who embody this witness of advocacy. His examples parallel those he suggested for the presence of Jerusalem, the

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[148]Ibid.

[149]Ibid., 94-95.

[150]Ibid, 95.

notion of the Church as a "happening."[151] The examples also reflect the political radicalism of the Christian left, Protestant and Catholic, which was his primary intellectual, political, and social community, as well as the main audience for his speaking and writing. One example of Christian advocacy he suggests is Will Campbell, whom Stringfellow described as "an advocate of the outcast, who was, as a white Mississippian, an early and singular pioneer in the struggle of Southern blacks against racism, and who has had an extraordinary pastoral ministry among the Ku Klux Klan since they became despised and lowly."[152] Another prominent example of his notion of advocacy, Stringfellow suggests, is Dorothy Day, whose "exemplary effort . . . perseveres – literally giving water to those who thirst, clothing the naked, offering shelter to the desolate, caring for those imprisoned."[153]

While Stringfellow argues that "the church of Christ is to live in advocacy in the world on behalf of all sorts and conditions of humanity," he stresses that they are to do so especially for those who are "victims of predatory political authority."[154] In fact, he asserts, "in freedom to take the part of any victim, the church is plunged into the most radical sort of political witness in which the church besets political authority on every

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[151]See *An Ethic*, 60.

[152]Ibid., 95-96. See Will D. Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977); Merrill M. Hawkins, *Will Campbell: Radical Prophet of the South* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997); and Thomas Lawrence Connelly, *Will Campbell and the Soul of the South* (New York: Continuum, 1982).

[153]Ibid., 96. For information on Dorothy Day who, along with Peter Maurin, founded the Catholic Worker Movement, see Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952); William D. Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982); Mel Piehl, *Breaking Bread: The Catholic Worker Movement and the Origin of Catholic Radicalism in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); Anne Klejment and Nancy L. Roberts, editors, *American Catholic Pacifism: The Influence of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1996); and Marc H. Ellis, *A Year at the Catholic Worker: A Spiritual Journey Among the Poor* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2000).

[154]Ibid., 97.

side, incessantly, resiliently, eclectically, dynamically, and with marvelous versatility, which the diversity of the gifts of the Holy Spirit abundantly supplies."[155] Thus, in the form of advocacy all of the characteristics of Stringfellow's ethic of resistant political witness culminate.

The Story: A Summation

According to Stringfellow's story of reality, the world is irreparably fallen. Affected by this fallenness are the myriad powers and principalities, which are the social, corporate, ideological, and political entities that govern human existence. These powers and principalities are competitive and chaotic, rivaling one another, competing for their own survival and the dominance of human beings. God has not, however, abandoned his creation to the mercy of the powers. He has entered and continues to enter into the fallen world through his Word. This Word was incarnated in Jesus Christ, has been at work in the world in various events, such as the history of the biblical nation of Israel, and continues to be revealed in history through various circumstances and relationships. The most significant act of the Word Incarnate in Jesus was the Resurrection for it displayed God's victory over death. This Word is most clearly discerned through the medium of the Bible.

Formed by and gathered around the Word of God is a community, a society, a Holy Nation that exists in contrast to the various fallen powers and principalities, most significantly the political powers known as nations. This community, the Church, is comprised of those human beings who have been freed from death and the powers by the Word, who listen to the Word, who discern the Word, and who are empowered by the

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[155]Ibid., 98.

Word. This sets that community at odds with the powers and principalities, who inherently arrogate themselves to the position of God. Consequently, the Church is a resistant community, resisting the powers and principalities that constantly seek its members' obeisance.

Central to its resistance is the need for the Church to be aware of the versatility of the powers and principalities in their quest for domination. The powers take multiple forms, often possessing the institutional forms of the Church and always possessing the State. The Church must therefore be vigilant, guarding against the encroachments of the powers upon its freedom from death. This requires discernment, given as a gift by the Holy Spirit and provided through Bible study.

While passively discerning the machinations of the powers, the Church also actively resists by means of many seemingly insignificant acts. Some are sacramental, such as baptism and communion. Others are prophetic, such as engaging the political authorities through non-violent protest. These acts are not engaged in with an interest in effectiveness as much as they are mean to serve as witnesses to the truth of the Resurrection against the lies of the power of death. Perhaps the most significant acts of resistance are those performed in the advocacy of the marginalized and oppressed. By these acts the Church identifies with the most serious victims of the powers, for the marginalized and oppressed suffer at the hands of others who are themselves enslaved to the powers.

It is thus as the bearer of a particular story of reality that Stringfellow engages American exceptionalism. The next chapters will demonstrate various particulars of what is in truth a clash of two stories, that of Stringfellow's story of death, the powers,

the Word and the Church and that of America as the just, the free, the superior, and the chosen.

CHAPTER FIVE

Race, Poverty, and the Ethics of Acquisition

Stringfellow's experience, theology and ethics fitted him with a hermeneutical lense through which he interpreted and critiqued events, circumstances, and schools of thought in American society. Two of his major critiques are of particular interest to this study in that they demonstrate narratives counter to those common to American exceptionalism and they expose what to Stringfellow was a corruption, a bastardization of the gospel. The first critique is that of racism, particularly as it reflects the exclusion of African-Americans from the promises found in the American creed. For Stringfellow, there was an inexcusable inconsistency between the claims common to founders and the experience of African-Americans throughout the history of slavery and later more subtle forms of white supremacy. Attendant to this critique was his emphasis on the culpability of the white churches in the racist regime.

The second significant critique was that of what I call the ethics of acquisition. Stringfellow took to task the ideology that informed the economic elements of American exceptionalism. He severely criticized what he saw to be forms of moral justification by means of acquisition and consumption. Particularly odious to Stringfellow was what he considered to be the primary ideology that informed the ethic of acquisition: the priority of property over human rights. A further inherent critique of the ethic of acquisition was his proposal for the church's response to it.

The common theme of Stringfellow's critiques of racism and the ethics of acquisition is that both take to task key elements of the American exceptionalistic

narrative. His critique of racism and the culpability of the church stand as contradictions to the political elements of American exceptionalism, especially those found in the American creed. His critique of the ethics of acquisition confronted the economic element of American exceptionalism by pointing out its flaws and its failures, empirically and theologically.

Race

The relationship of racism to the American exceptionalistic narrative reflects the nexus of the empirical and the theological aspects of Stringfellow's empirical theology. Theologically, racism as a power, particularly expressed in the form of white supremacy, rivals the American nation as a power by contradicting its exceptionalistic bombast. Empirically, this is demonstrated by the fact that the historical experience of African-Americans in the United States belies the grand narrative of America as the great repository of "justice for all."

As has been mentioned, Stringfellow considered white supremacy to be "the dominant American ethic of society—the most venerable of the old values, dating back three and a half centuries."[1] This view of racism in America reflects his sense that despite the American mythos and its claims that this country is something of a quintessential repository for the values of freedom and truth and justice, America's history with race, particularly concerning the treatment of African-Americans, contradicts those claims. In short, from an empirical standpoint, racism in America belies the notion of exceptionalism.

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[1]Unpublished manuscript, "America as Jerusalem Lost: The Ascendancy of the Demonic in American Society,"sermon preached at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut, March 4, 1970, 9. Box 35, , William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

Stringfellow's experience in Harlem enabled him to identify with those who were victims of racism and in turn defined in many ways his view of America. In a discussion of the mission work of the East Harlem Protestant parish, Stringfellow described the phenomenon of African-American exclusion from the "American way of life." He noted the fact that, unlike other subject of missionary activity, "the American Negro [was] not foreign to the traditions, culture, class ethos, and social mores of American society."[2] Referring to the collective memory of African-American society, Stringfellow points out that what the representative "American Negro" remembers is "American, not African." Unfortunately, Stringfellow pointed out, what he or she remembers are "the very promises of the American revolution – human dignity and equal treatment, fair representation and the opportunity to be politically free, the right to education and employment and a decent place to live and raise [his or her] children."[3] These promises, which are descriptive of the so-called "American dream" and serve as justification for the notion of American exceptionalism have remained, according to Stringfellow largely unfulfilled for African-Americans. Instead, while the promises are rightfully the "inheritance" of the African-American as much if not more so than any other American, his or her experience has been that of deliberate exclusion from the American ethos. More succinctly, according to Stringfellow, "what he remembers is that he has been forcibly separated from those things which are as much his own as any other American's."[4]

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[2]William Stringfellow, *My People is the Enemy: An Autobiographical Polemic* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 87.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

"Old Values"

Stringfellow mocked the calls to return to the so-called "old values." These calls were effected by leaders representing various segments of American society and reacting to the perceived moral crisis of the 1960s. Stringfellow facetiously wrote about the supposedly "sudden" rejection "by rebellious youth, Blacks in revolt, and . . . the recalcitrant poor" of the "values long nurtured by the hard-working, tax-paying, law-abiding, church-going, public-spirited, predominantly white middle classes."[5] This rejection of the old values prompted a response by those whom Stringfellow labeled "the chief priests of both church and society." This response was an attempt according to Stringfellow to restore the old values "by whatever means proves efficient and appropriate to the race and social status of the particular dissident faction."[6] These means included, according to Stringfellow, actions such as increased government surveillance of professors, incarceration of draft card burners, cessation of student loans, subsidy of white investment in black communities under the label of "black capitalism," the maintenance of *de facto* segregation, violent military response to student protests, and the investment of political control of welfare in local authorities who have a vested interest in the dependency of their constituents.[7]

Stringfellow argued against the justification for such actions, the pleas to return to the old values. The problem with the old values, he declared, was that most of them were

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[5]William Stringfellow, "The Demonic in American Society," *Christianity and Crisis*, September 29, 1969, 245.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid.

"illusory."[8] Furthermore, many that were legitimately *old* values in American society were in truth "decadent."[9] Finally, he suggested, the old values that were "authentic" and truly in need of "restoration" had been "eroded or neglected or subverted."[10]

Stringfellow argued, betraying his legal vocation, that many of the old values "lacked standing in history."[11] In fact he suggested that "[their] prominence in the mind of the white majority is the result of pathetic self-deception."[12] He implied furthermore that this self-deception masked white hypocrisy:

> Consider the cry about law and order. When, in current times, did respect for law and order break down? When students occupied the office of the Columbia University president or when a governor stood at the threshold of the University of Alabama to obstruct the law of the land? When did adherence to the rule of law waver? When black citizens began demonstrations to register to vote or in the 84 known racial murders since 1954 (and there has not been a single conviction)?[13]

As a further challenge to the "standing in history" of the old values, Stringfellow wondered what era of American history best reflected them. With several rhetorical questions he sarcastically suggested a number of possibilities: "back in 1619 when chattel slavery was sanctioned" or "during Shays rebellion," or "when some 40 slaveowners, including Thomas Jefferson, signed the (one might say *their*) Declaration of Independence" or "during the women's suffrage movement" or "when labor revolted" or "in the heyday of Klan terrorism when more than a thousand citizens were lynched or castrated in a single decade" or "when veterans were routed from the nation's capital by

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[8]Ibid., 246.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid, 247.

[11]Ibid, 246.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

tanks." In sum, he wondered, "When was this splendid day of American law and order that is to be restored?"[14]

In answer to his rhetorical questions, Stringfellow criticized harshly the "chief priests" and the society they represented. He asserted that "the ethics of violence are deep, terrible, and generic" in America.[15] He therefore lamented:

> There will never be law and order that is stable, equitable, and enduring so long as (sic) an incumbent majority importunes the constitutional ethic or manipulates the legal system to mask or excuse their violence against the humanity of others.[16]

In this criticism of the call to return to the so-called "old values," Stringfellow attempted to expose the inconsistency and hypocrisy of those sounding the call, the leaders of self-deceived white society.

Not only were some of the old values "illusory" because they were historically invalid and because they were masks for violence, others were, according to Stringfellow, "quite real and truly decadent."[17] In his view the quintessentially decadent old value was white supremacy. I have already noted that he referred to it as "the dominant American ethic – dating back three-and-a-half centuries." Stringfellow believed that white supremacy "[had] been pervasive from its primitive but radical form in chattel slavery to its sophisticated but virulent forms in today's apartheid."[18] Its pervasiveness, he claimed, was virtually boundless: "It infects every institution, every investment, market, election,

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[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

public policy, custom, issue, man, woman and child."[19] Stringfellow followed that declaration with a statement that encapsulates the essence of his critique of the political element of American exceptionalism, challenging the inconsistencies of those who crafted and promoted the American creed and those who are their descendants:

> How white men who could subscribe to the American revolutionary cause could at the same time condone and institutionalize white supremacy stands as an in-comprehensible hypocrisy that none of the ensuing generations of American whites have undone or have wanted much to undo.[20]

Stringfellow did believe that some of the old values were indeed "authentic" and that they did indeed need to be restored. Referring to these authentic values, he observed, "They have been eroded or neglected or subverted and desperately need restoration."[21] He furthermore suggested that if they were restored to some degree, "they could do much to arrest America's moral decline."[22] Of course Stringfellow's understanding of moral decline and that of the "chief priests of church and society" in America were radically different. In fact, Stringfellow's statement of his hope for the restoration of authentic "old values" was fraught with a certain sarcastic irony. For Stringfellow, America's moral decline was represented by the very actions that white middle-class society promoted to recover its view of the old values.

What were the authentic old values, according to Stringfellow? They were most concentrated in the due process of law, "especially as it is embodied in the Fourth, Fifth,

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[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid, 246-247.

[21]Ibid, 247.

[22]Ibid.

Sixth, Eighth, and Fourteenth Amendments [of the United States Constitution]."[23] Of course, Stringfellow believed that due process was increasingly ignored in "an accelerating assault upon the rights of persons."[24] Stringfellow claimed that evidence of this assault could be seen in violations of due process such as those executed "by electronic surveillance, no-knock statutes, prosecutions undertaken to intimidate dissenters, false arrests, harassment, [and] infiltration and entrapment by secret police."[25]

To Stringfellow these violations of due process were more serious than those of the McCarthy era because of the power of their perpetrators and the relative powerlessness of the victims. These violations were "more loathsome than the Congressional inquisition of that disgraceful episode" because they were "mounted by the governmental authorities against whom citizens have no protection except through due process of law."[26] To ignore and indeed to reject the venerable "old value" of due process was particularly insidious, because to do so stripped away the only defense of the powerless against an unchecked government.

Stringfellow's admonishment to the leaders of white society was simple: "show some passion toward due process." If "those who [boasted] nostalgia for the redemption of old values" began to do so, then he and others that shared his perspective could "have a confidence that they are concerned for some values worth redeeming and not just

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[23]Ibid. It is appropriate that Stringfellow, an attorney, would suggest due process as a representative of authentic "old values."

[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

anxious about their own vested status."[27] In an unpublished manuscript of a sermon he preached Stringfellow also had a word on behalf of the protesters and the poor and others who were the target of the "chief priests of church and society" and their exercise in restoration:

> As for the rebels – the dissenters and resisters and those who talk of revolution – the blacks and the poor and some few white youth – bless them as the closest thing the nation has to conscience, remembering that Saint Paul admonished all to recognize in the vitality of conscience a sing of the Holy Spirit at work. And if the conscience which the rebels bespeak seems erratic or immature, be glad for even that, for you will find precious little evidence of conscience anywhere else.[28]

Reparations

Stringfellow repeatedly accused the white churches and synagogues of culpability with respect to racism in America. A helpful example of this accusation is found in his treatment of the 1969 call for economic reparations in the "Black Manifesto." In his support of this declaration, Stringfellow reiterates his indictment of the Church as well as his suggestions for its penance.

The Black Manifesto

In April of 1969 in Detroit on the campus of Wayne State University the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) sponsored the National Black Economic Development Conference (NBEDC). This three-day conference was organized to bring together a wide a variety of black leaders to strategize concerning

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[27]Ibid.

[28]Unpublished manuscript, "America as Jerusalem Lost: The Ascendancy of the Demonic in American Society,"sermon preached at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut, March 4, 1970, 12. Box 35, , William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

black-directed community development.[29] The sponsoring organization, the IFCO, had been established in 1967 as a consortium of denominational organizations cooperating "to fund locally-based organizations upgrading the conditions of the poor and offering participation and self-determination to people shut out of power."[30] The IFCO was neither exclusively black in its membership or emphasis nor was it narrowly focused upon the issues of race and poverty.

By contrast, however, the NBEDC was anything but "too lily-white."[31] On the contrary, "[it] was a black, black meeting." Not even white journalists were allowed inside.[32] While it was not initially convened to produce a reparations statement, that is precisely what resulted from the NBEDC. At one point during the meeting civil rights leader James Forman, who had formerly been a prominent leader in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), addressed the participants, reading a statement that he had in part authored. The statement was the "Black Manifesto" for which Forman called upon the group to vote. While there remained controversy over the details of the

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[29]Robert S. Lecky and H. Elliott Wright, eds., *Black Manifesto: Religion, Racism, and Reparations* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 8.

[30]Ibid., 7. "Major religious agencies signing up [with each paying $1000 to join] were the American Baptist Home Mission Societies, the National Division of the United Methodist Board of Missions, the Board of Christian Social Concerns of that denomination, the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church, the Boards of National Ministries and Christian Education of the Presbyterian Church, U. S., the United Presbyterian Board of National Missions, the Board for Homeland Ministries of the United Church of Christ, the Board of American Missions of the Lutheran Church in America, the American Jewish Committee and the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice."

[31]This is a reference to Stringfellow's description of the National Conference on Race and Religion in January of 1963. I discussed this in Chapter Two. See also William Stringfellow, *My People*, 136.

[32]Consequently, the conference was not widely reported by the mainstream press. Lecky and Wright, 10.

vote, the conference attendees approved the manifesto as a formal statement of the NBEDC.[33]

The "Black Manifesto" was a statement that called upon white churches and synagogues in America to pay reparations to the African-American community. The manifesto declared, "We are demanding $500,000,000 from the Christian white churches and the Jewish synagogues."[34] Proportionately, as the authors of the document crudely put it, that figure "comes to fifteen dollars per nigger."[35] The justification for this demand was declared in the introduction, written by Forman:

> We, the black people assembled in Detroit, Michigan, for the National Black Economic Development Conference are fully aware that we have been forced to come together because racist white America has exploited our resources, our minds, our bodies, our labor. For centuries we have been forced to live as colonized people inside the United States, victimized by the most vicious, racist system in the world. We have helped to build the most industrialized country in the world.[36]

The reparations were not to be provided as a per capita payment or divvied up among various organizations. Instead, the manifesto set forth specific uses for the funds that would hopefully benefit the broadest range of African-Americans and serve to help reverse the effects of centuries of injustice. One of these specific uses of the funds was for the establishment of a southern land bank to help African-Americans who had been displaced from their land because of racist activity and to assist in the formation of cooperative farms. Some of the funds were to be used to establish four television networks in major markets throughout the United States. Other uses included

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[33]Out of the over 500 people registered for the conference less than half of them voted on the measure. The vote was 187 to 63. Ibid.

[34]Ibid, 119.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

establishing publishing houses, organizing research centers dealing with the "problems of black people," setting up a legal defense and relief fund specifically for striking black workers, founding a black university, and developing a fund to promote investment in cooperative businesses in America and on the African continent.[37]

The idea was not to merely make the demands and expect the white churches and the synagogues to produce the money. The "Black Manifesto" also included statements that called African-Americans to extreme and in some cases implausible action to enforce its mandate. For example, the manifesto called for "the total disruption of selected church-sponsored agencies operating anywhere in the United States and the world." To help achieve this goal, members of the NBEDC were urged to "stage sit-in demonstrations at selected black and white churches." Echoing the language of the black power movement the Manifesto stated: "We call upon all delegates to find within the white community those forces which will work under the leadership of blacks to implement these demands by whatever means necessary."[38]

On May 4, 1969, Forman interrupted the morning worship services at the Riverside Church in New York City. He read the Black Manifesto and demanded that congregation's share of the $500 million.[39] The news media noted the event, and after Forman read the manifesto at some of their headquarters many of the mainline Protestant denominational agencies as well as various Jewish groups sheepishly responded to the

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[37]Ibid, 120-122.

[38]Ibid, 123.

[39]Ibid, 3.

demands. For example, the Executive Council for the Episcopal Church gathered three weeks after Forman appeared at their national headquarters and decided on a response.[40]

Stringfellow's Response

For his part, Stringfellow responded with a generally positive defense of the Black Manifesto. He suggested that it had legal precedent, that it was not unreasonable, and that it would reflect true repentance on the part of the white churches. His mild criticism of the statement was, in his words, "directed to its modesty, to its indefiniteness, and to the tentativeness with which it has been advanced, rather than to its substance or to its fundamental rationalization, either legally or theologically."[41]

For Stringfellow from a legal perspective the reparations demanded in the Manifesto paralleled those paid in various circumstances to certain Native American tribes, to the families of interned Japanese-Americans, and to the victims of Nazi concentration camps. Based upon these and other precedents, Stringfellow endorsed the demands and challenged any argument that would claim the expectation of reparations to be out of order: "There can really be no rational opposition to reparations for American blacks on ground of novelty or lack of precedent."[42] In fact Stringfellow suggested that the demand for reparations could justly be expanded to include an expectation of the payment of punitive damages. Citing "three and half centuries of chattel slavery, segregation and systematic exploitation," he declared that an "overwhelming case can be argued for

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[40]Gardiner H. Shattuck, Jr., *Episcopalians and Race: Civil War to Civil Rights* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 189-190. The Episcopalians were the first major denomination to offer reparations funds. See Seth S. King, "Episcopal Leaders Vote $200,000 in 'Reparations,'" *The New York Times*, September 4, 1969, 1.

[41]William Stringfellow, "Reparations: Repentance as a Necessity to Reconciliation," in Lecky and Wright, eds., *Black Manifesto*, 53.

[42]Ibid., 55.

exacting punishment against American whites."[43] Nevertheless, implicitly arguing against its detractors, Stringfellow noted the inherent conservatism of the Manifesto in demanding merely reparations and not punitive damages as well.

Stringfellow argued that the conditions of the Manifesto would in part help to solve two problems that in his mind had plagued previous white action in combating racism and its effects in the United States. The first problem according to Stringfellow was that there had been "no necessary acknowledgement of responsibility – much less confession of guilt – on the part of white society, or its people, or any of its institutions, including those religious, in any of these racial programs under either governmental or private auspices."[44] He observed that these programs tended to reflect an attitude of paternalism and a reticence to admit culpability. The second problem, Stringfellow suggested, was that whites called the shots when it came to these programs. He wrote, "Up to now, virtually all civil rights, antipoverty, and related enterprises undertaken by the governments, the universities, the unions, businesses and industries, the social work bureaucracies, and the churches have vested control over funding and policy in the whites."[45] Stringfellow argued that both of these problems would be solved in part by the payment of the reparations demanded in the Manifesto, since the payment of reparations would reflect the inherent admission of guilt and since the disposition of the funds would be determined by blacks and black organizations.

If the response of the white churches and synagogues to the Manifesto did not include the payment of reparations, Stringfellow argued, then black grievances would

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[43]Ibid., 54.

[44]Ibid., 55.

[45]Ibid., 56.

only be compounded. He recognized that many churches and church agencies would be tempted to merely increase their programs to assist African-Americans, stopping short of meeting the demands of the Manifesto and thus maintaining control of the assistance. Such a response, Stringfellow sardonically noted, "can only be heard by the blacks as one more insult to their humanity and as one more provocation to insurrection, though I suppose white church-people typically suffer such vanity about their own good intentions that they do not comprehend how they thus compound their offense."[46]

Stringfellow was convinced that the churches were a most appropriate target for the Manifesto. Practically speaking, they were appropriate because, theoretically at least, the individuals who together comprised other social systems such as government agencies, educational institutions, and commercial enterprises were the constituents of the churches and synagogues of the nation. Since this was the case, he argued acerbically, "there is no reason for the black to forego confronting the churches and synagogues just because the whites tend to be schizophrenic about religion, separating it from their other roles and responsibilities in society."[47]

The culpability of church and synagogue constituency was not the only issue, however. Institutionally, Stringfellow believed, these entities had profited greatly from the white supremacist system. The churches were culpable in part because of their investment practices: "the white ecclesiastical institutions in America are and have long been directly implicated in profiteering from slavery, segregation and other forms of white supremacy through investment and management of their endowments and other

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[46]Ibid.

[47]Ibid., 57.

holdings in the American economy."[48] Consequently, Stringfellow alleged, "[the] predominant social witness of the churches racially, for generations, has been incarnated in the wealth and property of white religion, and not in the redundant preaching or pronouncement about racial justice."[49]

The expectation for reparations to come from the churches was also appropriate in Stringfellow's view because of what he considered their corporate claim as "custodian of the conscience of the nation."[50] In that sense, they should lead the way in admitting culpability and exemplifying repentance. Aside from this issue of the appropriateness of the churches as the target for the reparations demands, Stringfellow believed that the notion of repentance was, more broadly, *the* theological issue that justified the expectations laid out in the Manifesto. He wrote, "A parallel logic applies in a broader sense to what white religion has so familiarly preached and taught. Theologically, reparations is a means of validating repentance."[51]

If the churches on their own behalf and as representatives of white society were to acknowledge their corporate guilt on the matter of racism and turn from such behavior, then a substantive expression of repentance would be in order. Unfortunately, however, Stringfellow had little hope that such an acknowledgement of guilt was forthcoming. In fact, denial of corporate guilt was the typical response: "There is, one observes, a now

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[48]Ibid.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid., 58.

almost monolithic rejection among the whites, both Christians and Jews, of the reality of corporate guilt."[52]

Stringfellow saw this denial as theologically untenable and patently unbiblical. Both the biblical notion of the Fall of humankind and the "drama of the crucifixion" reflect the idea of corporate guilt. He argued that the meaning behind the biblical account of the Fall is "that each man bears moral responsibility for that which befalls every other man," and he observed that "one of the cosmic dimensions beheld in the drama of the Crucifixion is the corporate guilt of all mankind throughout the ages (and not the particular guilt of some hapless Pharisees or soldiers contemporaneous with the event)."[53] Thus appeals of innocence by individual white Christians and Jews or white churches and synagogues expressed a theological perspective that contradicted the biblical tradition which they claimed to uphold: "White religionists of all varieties on the present scene may clamour, if they wish, about their innocence in the centuries-old brutalization of American blacks, but let not one indulge the notion that there be warrant for such a wish in the Bible."[54]

Such protests of innocence, moreover, were themselves symptoms of corporate guilt which Stringfellow deemed to be inherently "a pathological state, a condition of profound disorientation, and even a kind of moral insanity."[55] Consequently, he believed that the payment of reparations should provide for a welcome "confrontation with the issue of guilt" on the part of the white churches and synagogues. In fact, he suggested, the call

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[52]Ibid.

[53]Ibid, 59.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Ibid.

for reparations should be heard gratefully by whites, much as an invalid or a diseased man would welcome news that he can be healed."[56]

Overall, Stringfellow viewed the demand for reparations to be a limited but helpful step on the road to the reconciliation that was the critical issue with respect to racism. The reparations would reflect the repentance that reconciliation demands. He feared, though, that such repentance was not forthcoming: "The chief obstacle now to an effectual reparations program is that white Christians and Jews loathe repentance: they are deceived into supposing they have nothing to repent of, or they are afraid they may repent too much."[57] On both counts, Stringfellow believed, white Christians and Jews were deluded, because, he noted, "[there] are none who have nothing to repent of, not even one," and "it is just as impossible to repent too much as it is not possible to forgive too much."[58]

Reconciliation

For Stringfellow, Baptism represented reconciliation with all men. The Church is the reconciled community. Therefore, the white Christian who promotes or merely suffers racist conditions denies his baptism. Long before he wrote about reparations he suggested a rather extreme response for white Christians to in part atone for their culpability in the racial crisis. From the early 1960s Stringfellow predicted that the African-American community would, in light of the ineffectiveness of the nonviolent "Negro Revolution", adopt a violent approach. The proper Christian ethic for whites in

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[56]Ibid.

[57]Ibid, 64.

[58]Ibid.

the face of this violence was, in the spirit of the crucifixion, to receive the violence as the wrath of God and "take the knife in the belly."

Three hundred years of white supremacy would, according to Stringfellow, birth a violent response on the part of the African-American community. The attempt at nonviolent revolution would merely represent a final gasp in the birthing process. He predicted the explosion of violence a few years before it became a reality. His prediction was not that it would occur in the south, where racism was overt, but instead riots would erupt in the north where the racism was more subtle but just as oppressive: "The estrangement of the races in the North is more volatile, more apt to explode into violence, as far as I can discern, than is the segregation of the races in the South."[59]

In a 1964 interview conducted by novelist, poet, and essayist Robert Penn Warren, Stringfellow expressed his concerns about the further viability of the non-violent character of the civil rights movement. He was particularly concerned with northern cities: "I think the thing that concerns me now is that the northern city is the frontier . . . ." This frontier, he observed, reflected "a great acceleration now of mass uncontrolled and unled lives."[60] Consequently, Stringfellow surmised, "that the watershed of the peaceful demonstrations has been pretty much reached (sic)."[61]

The racial situation in the United States in the 1960s reflected a comprehensive cultural revolution. Stringfellow wrote, "The Negro revolution is, rather, an authentic *revolution*, in which the whole prevailing social order of the nation is being overturned in

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[59]WS, *My People*, 103.

[60]William Stringfellow, interview by Robert Penn Warren, March 13, 1964, New York City, cassette recording, 030H31 RPWCR 20, Robert Penn Warren Civil Rights Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky.

[61]Ibid.

the face of three hundred years of slavery, segregation, discrimination, and *de facto* racism throughout the country."[62] He believed that all social, political, economic, and cultural structures were being affected: "Every important institution in the public life of the nation – education, employment, unions, churches, entertainment, housing, politics, commerce, investment, welfare, transportation, public accommodations – is immediately affected by this revolution, and this revolution will not spend its course until every such institution surrenders to its objectives."[63]

What remained to be seen in the early sixties was what form this revolution would ultimately take. Would it be violent, like all other revolutions in history, or would it miraculously remain non-violent? Stringfellow doubted it would remain peaceable, noting, however, how unusual a non-violent revolution was. In his interview with Robert Penn Warren, he pointed out that "[in] all other great American social revolutions, with the exception only I think of the Women's Suffrage Movement, the tactics on both sides have been those of violence."[64] He feared a leader would emerge "who [would] turn to his people and preach a blunt doctrine of hate and revenge."[65] This leader would embody the frustrations of the African-Americans for whom, particularly "in the urban North, revenge [would] seem sweeter than equality, and violence more decisive than patience, and both more honorable than the tolerance of further appeasements and postponements."[66] The result, if such a leader emerged, would be chaos: "If that comes

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[62]Stringfellow, *My People*, 128.

[63]Ibid.

[64]Stringfellow, interview with Robert Penn Warren (RPW).

[65]*My People*, 113.

[66]Ibid., 103.

to pass, the peaceful demonstrations in the streets will cease and peaceful protest will turn into chaos."[67] He hoped that at least the chaos would be instructive to white society: "if there is a violent and bloody calamity, perhaps white men will then recognize that the incumbent leadership of the Negro revolt – notably Martin Luther King, Jr., with his great dignity and discipline and restraint – has been the best friend of white Americans, both in the North and the South."[68]

Again in his interview with Warren, Stringfellow expressed his doubts that the potential violence would have a positive effect on the society in that it would be "so shocking to the white community, that they would get off their butts and really do something."[69] Instead, he surmised, "that if there is spontaneous violence on the part of negroes and aggression by negroes against white people and white stores and white institutions, that the reponse of the white community will be to suppress that violence."[70] In view of the white response, Stringellow added, "then we'll really be in trouble."[71] Nevertheless, each day without substantial change would bring society closer to that "trouble." Stringfellow wrote, "Each day of die-hard indifference of white people in the North, each day of die-hard segregation in the South, invites disaster by making it more difficult for the Negro leadership favoring and practicing nonviolent protest to maintain its leadership."[72]

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[67]Ibid, 113.

[68]Ibid.

[69]Stringfellow, interview with RPW.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Ibid.

[72]*My People*, 113.

When the riots broke out in several urban areas in 1965, Stringfellow appeared to have been prophetic.[73] His response was matter-of-fact: "Negro violence now is the offspring of white supremacy. The sins of the fathers are indeed visited upon their sons."[74]

Stringfellow did not consider the overt white supremacist segregationist to be the most blameworthy for the racial crisis. Instead, he saw that "the real recalcitrant in the racial crisis, the element in society to represent the real obstacle to public integration, is . . . the nice, white, northern liberal."[75] This liberal, "with all his sincerity and good intentions" asks the question, "'Well now, what do the negroes want?'" The question itself was patronizing, Stringfellow believed, because by asking it the liberal "fails to realize . . . that he is assuming that it is his prerogative to dispense to the negro what the negro will get."[76] That, Stringfellow believed, was "the real essence of white supremacy."[77]

Along the same lines, Stringfellow believed that the preface to a proper response by white society to the civil rights revolution was to dispense with the patronizing attitude reflected in liberal references to the civil rights struggle as merely a "good cause." He

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[73]Robert Penn Warren noted this: "Some time ago, before the riots, in a conversation, William Stringfellow, author of *My People Is the Enemy*, graduate of the Harvard Law School, Episcopal layman, seven-year resident of Harlem in what the Times has called the worst block in New York, predicted to me such riots . . . . When his predictions came true, and the riots broke, we saw the news photographs of police, steel helmet on head, drawn revolver in hand, advancing up the dark street." *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965), 180-181.

[74]William Stringfellow in *New Theology*, No. 2, edited by Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1965), 295.

[75]Stringfellow, interview by RPW

[76]Ibid.

[77]Ibid.

considered such description to be "condescending and stupid."[78] Instead of maintaining control of the process of integration, whites should, "surrender their prerogative of decision." They should, moreover, "face the fact that the real decisions determining how the racial crisis will be resolved are for the Negroes to make." Whites should also jettison the idea that they "have the prerogatives of white supremacy ." Ultimately, Stringfellow believed, "white people must die to that mentality [prerogatives of white supremacy] by suffering the hostility and rejection of Negroes and by risking their lives and the future of this society in the hands of the Negroes."[79] This, Stringfellow proclaimed, was "the preface to reconciliation between black men and white men."[80]

Stringfellow proposed a specific response on the part of white Christians suffering in the midst of racial violence. They should do what Christians in all situations are called to do and what African-American Christians had been doing for years: bear witness. This witness, he asserted, "must surely be the same as the witness already, during these long years of protest and agony, exemplified by so many Negro Christians: the witness of the Cross."[81] The Cross was no mere religious symbol or "once upon a time event". Instead it reflects "the invincible power of God's love for the world even though all the world betrays, denies, fears, or opposes the gift of His love for the world."[82] According to

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[78]Stringfellow, *My People*, 129.

[79]Ibid.

[80]Ibid. His emphasis on reconciliation parallels that of Will D. Campbell. See Campbell's *Race and the Renewal of the Church* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962). Stringfellow and Campbell were fellow travelers. They corresponded periodically. See, for example, Will D. Campbell, letter to William Stringfellow [1980], Mount Juliet, Tennessee. Box 22, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[81]Stringfellow, in *New Theology*, 295.

[82]Ibid., 296.

Stringfellow this love is voluntary, and it is "unfazed by any hostility or hatred or violence or assault."[83] Moreover, in keeping with a central theme in Stringfellow's theology, this love "is not threatened by death."[84] Consequently, this love is a gift "even to the one who would take one's life."[85]

Therefore, in the midst of violence, when white men and women are attacked or "endure ridicule or humiliation or interference or taunting or torture" or lose "their possessions, or status, or jobs, or property, or homes, or even families," their response is to bear cruciform witness.[86] More specifically, Stringfellow bluntly asserted, "When the knife is at the belly, let the white Christian not protest. Let him receive the assault without prudence, without resistance, without rationalization, without extenuation, without a murmur."[87] In sum, "[let] him love in the face of his own death."[88]

In fact, Stringfellow argued, there was no other road to ultimate reconciliation: "And so there is *no other way* that this enormous, desperate, grotesque accumulation of guilt, enmity, estrangement, and terror can be absolved. There has never been – for any man anywhere at any time – any other way."[89] Ultimately, Stringfellow poetically

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[83]Ibid.

[84]Ibid.

[85]Ibid.

[86]Ibid.

[87]Ibid.

[88]Ibid.

[89]Ibid.

affirmed, "In the work of God in our midst in reconciling black men and white men there is no escape from the Cross."[90]

Ethics of Acquisition

Stringfellow responded to the economic aspects of American exceptionalism with a critique of the secular mythology that informed the mid-sixties notion of the "Great Society." While the Great Society notion would eventually fade from the public view, the substance of Stringfellow's critique would stand even as that particular expression of the secular mythology gave way to the ideology of the "Silent Majority."

Secular Mythology

Stringfellow identified the economic component of American exceptionalism as a secular mythology: "The primitive American secular myth is that individual enterprise in any secular pursuits – like the acquisition of property, the achievement of social status, the access to political power – is morally right if the objective sought is in fact attained."[91]

This economic version of the adage "might makes right" was in some sense understandable to Stringfellow as he considered its foundation in "the struggles of the colonies for national independence or, later, the pioneer era in which the frontier was explored and subdued all the way to the Pacific." This context understandably led to the mythology, "because then the odds against individual initiative were so formidable that

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[90]Ibid.

[91]William Stringfellow, "The Great Society as a Myth" – address given by WS at the Christian Action Conference of the Presbyterian Church in the United States at Montreat, NC, August 18-21, 1966, 4. Box 11, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library. .

such accomplishments it seemed could happen only if Providence favored them."[92] Nevertheless, circumstances changed over the years and such a view had drifted from its somewhat heroic moorings to something more base: "Gradually, of course, this mechanistic ethic of extreme individualism has been transmuted so that initiative now covers and allegedly justifies not only authentic ingenuity, audacity and hard work, but inheritance, luck and, on occasion, a little bit of larceny."[93] Stringfellow summarized this "mythologizing of the secular," referring to it as a "generic doctrine" encapsulated in two adages: "'God helps those who help themselves,'" and "'nothing succeeds like success.'" The obvious notion then, he noted, was that "if a man prevails, it is because he is righteous."[94] Stringfellow observed the irony that this doctrine had been extended to apply to all manner of institutions "to minimize or excuse the most startling aggressions of corporations, unions, universities, and other immense institutional powers against, paradoxically, the individuals."[95] Beyond the various national corporate entities, this "idea of enterprise" had been expanded to describe "the final destiny of the American nation" and to justify America's international policies.[96] For Stringfellow, the nationalized version of the mythology was thus summarized by the following statement that essentially defines American exceptionalism: "American economic, political, and

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[92]Ibid., 4-5.

[93]Ibid., 5.

[94]Ibid.

[95]Ibid.

[96]Ibid.

military power has reached its present enormity in the world because of the virtue of America's national purpose and the moral superiority of 'the American way of life.'"[97]

Idolatry of Money

Reflected in the economic "might makes right" mythology was the idolatry of money, which for Stringfellow meant "that the moral worth of a man is judged in terms of the amount of money he possesses or controls."[98] In that light, then, Stringfellow observed, "those without money are morally inferior."[99] Thus, "[where] money is an idol, to be poor is a sin."[100]

Stringfellow critiqued this idolatry of money with two major arguments. First, he noted simply that salvation by works, economic or otherwise, is antithetical to the Gospel: "In the Gospel no man is saved by any works of his own, least of all by the mere acquisition of money."[101] Instead, grace is the source of moral justification: "The Gospel . . . has to do with the readily available power of God's grace to emancipate men from all idols of death, even money – and even in America."[102] The acquisition of money is thus a cheap substitute for the confidence in God's grace that the Gospel promises.

The second argument that Stringfellow made against the idolatry of money was based on his view of the financial and theological interdependence of humanity. He

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[97]Ibid., 5-6.

[98] William Stringfellow, *Dissenter in a Great Society: A Christian View of America in Crisis* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1966), 40.

[99]Ibid.

[100]Ibid.

[101]Ibid., 40-41.

[102]Ibid., 44.

wrote, "In this world men live at each other's expense, and the affluence of the few is proximately related to, and supported by, the poverty of the many."[103] Practically speaking, Stringfellow cautioned, "Indeed, every American would be wise to remember how dependent their earnings are on cheap, plentiful labor."[104] He challenged his readers, "Each time a prosperous American peels a banana, let him remember the peon who picked it; whenever a housewife uses a pan, let her recall that the copper from it was made was probably mined by slaves; the next time a middle-class citizen pays an insurance premium, let him intercede for the people of the ghettoes."[105] This dependence of the prosperous upon the poor Stringfellow labeled intercessory and invested it with theological significance: "The travail of the poor is intercessory for the rich – for *them*, in their behalf, in their place, it substitutes for their own suffering."[106]

Reflected in the economic dependence of the rich upon the poor is the deeper theological truth: "To affirm that men live in this world at each other's expense is a confession of the truth of the Fall rather than an assertion of economic doctrine or a precise empirical statement."[107] This truth, he wrote, is that "[all] men, in short, live in a history in which every action and omission and abstention is consequentially related to all else that happens elsewhere."[108] Stringfellow was not saying that "there is in every transaction a direct one-for-one cause and effect relationship, either individually or

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[103]Ibid., 41.

[104]Ibid, 42.

[105]Ibid., 43.

[106]Stringfellow, *My People*, 29.

[107]Stringfellow, *Dissenter*, 42.

[108]Stringfellow, *My People*, 29.

institutionally, between the lot of the poor and the circumstances of those who are not poor."[109] Instead, he was asserting the more general theological statement "that all human and institutional relationships are profoundly distorted and so entangled that no man or principality in this world is innocent of involvement in the existence of all men and institutions."[110] Thus, to idolize money, to see its acquisition as the source of moral justification, is to ignore the practical and theological complexities of human existence. Those who make money and keep it never do so in a vacuum. Practically speaking, they benefit from the intercessory experience of the poor in making certain goods and services affordable. Theologically, they cannot take credit before God for their individual works nor can they be absolved from the corporate nature of sin.

Work: Moral Vindication

The theme of justification by economics was a common one for Stringfellow. Work and its fruits play a significant role as evidence of the Fall. "Work," he declared, "is the common means by which human beings seek to justify their existence."[111] This view of work, he believed, was particularly prevalent in America. Echoing his earlier statements about the secular mythology informing "The Great Society" motif, he wrote, "The legend, in America anyway, is that in either the product or the reward of work a person can find his or her life morally vindicated."[112] He answered this statement of the secular mythology with his own theology of work. Rather than being a source of justification,

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[109]Stringfellow, *Dissenter*, 42.

[110]Ibid.

[111]Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, 57.

[112]Ibid.

work, which is so critical in America as an expression of one's identity, is in truth further evidence of the Fall and a reflection of enslavement to the powers. For Stringfellow not only was work "the common means by which people seek to justify their existence," it also is used to "sustain their existence, in a fashion, after they die."[113] Ironically, therefore, "[work] is a foretaste – a preliminary experience – of death."[114]

In light of the Fall, then, work is a common means by which the powers enslave: "The estrangement between human beings and the rest of creation means, among other things, the enslavement of persons to the institutions for which they work."[115] Making this point, Stringfellow rhetorically asked, ""Does anyone seriously suppose that the high-ranking executives involved in the price-fixing scandals in some of America's great corporations are anything but prisoners, no freer than serfs, confined and conformed to the interests of the principalities they serve?"[116]

Choice in work, Stringfellow believed, did not refute his argument that work inherently enslaves, because few have any real alternatives. Those who, because of relative affluence, think they have choices fail to realize their bondage to custom, heritage, and other powers that limits their real alternatives. He wrote, "Choice of work is largely illusory, too."[117] Many have no choices: "The multitudes of the poor in the world do not choose what work they will do if, indeed, there is any work for them to

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[113]Ibid, 59.

[114]Ibid.

[115]Ibid., 61.

[116]Ibid., 60.

[117]Ibid., 61.

do."[118] On the other hand, "even among more economically secure, somewhat educated people," there may be more options, but they are merely alternatives of coercion "by the ethics of conformity – the preferences, prejudices, and traditions of family, class, or race; the idols of status and success; the lust for money and possessions."[119]

If work is inherently enslaving, what then of non-work? Stringfellow found evidence of the Fall in non-work as well: "Non-work, like work, represents the broken relationship between humanity and the rest of creation and, in American society, non-work is of increasing significance."[120] Stringfellow observed that non-work in America was a significant problem, particularly in the form of unemployment. This, he saw, "[embodied] not only the threat to life in the obvious terms of economic insecurity and instability, but also . . . prolonged, enforced idleness which is profoundly debilitating psychologically."[121] Ultimately nothing in creation is immune from the Fall and its effects. If one works, he or she is enslaved to the work itself, to the institutional context of the work, and to the "ethics of conformity" inherent in the potential choices of work. If one does not work, then physical and psychological survival is threatened. In sum, Stringfellow wrote, "The burden of work, which is the threat of death, is neither mitigated nor overcome in the choice, product, or rewards of work, in non-work, in the moral vanity of work."[122]

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[118]Ibid.

[119]Ibid.

[120]Ibid.,62.

[121]Ibid.

[122]Ibid.

Stringfellow critiqued the American work ethic in a way that paralleled his earlier views of the secular mythology informing the notion of the Great Society. He suggested that although "the inherited American work ethic has neither biblical origin nor rationale, there was a certain coherence in attributing significance to human labor in pre-industrial society."[123] When work produced tangible results in the form of harvested crops or constructed shelters or household furniture or other items, it was understandable to connect moral worth to labor. This view was then reinforced "by the idea that privileged classes – those of inherited property and station – ruled by divine right."[124] Of course, according to Stringfellow America's inheritance of central aspects of "this pagan, unbiblical work ethic" had an extensive pedigree. Expression of it had been found "in established Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism when each of these became vested in the *status quo*; in Anglicanism during the period of British exploration and colonization; and in Puritan pietism and its derivatives."[125] In Stringfellow's view this ethic "greatly abetted the oppression and brutalization of human beings," such as that found in the exploitation of the medieval peasantry or the victims of American chattel slavery, by proclaiming to the oppressed that their lot was ordained by God and implying that they would receive divine favor if they accepted their circumstances dutifully.[126]

The extraordinary changes wrought by the industrial revolution served to further truncate the American work ethic by redefining the ultimate nature and proximate goal of work. Stringfellow saw the ability to produce a superfluity of goods as particularly

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[123]Ibid. 72.

[124]Ibid.

[125]Ibid.

[126]Ibid., 72-73.

significant. This brought about the need for middlemen and the benefits of increased leisure, which necessitated a service sector. Stringfellow described this type of labor as "intangible work – activity included within the realm socially and economically defined as work, but which does not produce tangible goods of any sort."[127] Consequently, Stringfellow observed, "there have multiplied (geometrically) lenders, brokers, agents, managers, middlemen, transporters, packagers, salespeople, merchandisers, handlers, promoters, bureaucrats, facilitators, consultants, insurers, advertisers; in short, a profuse and complex array of personnel engaged in forms of work unimagined before industrialization."[128] The result of this profusion is that work has been redefined as "activity, *any* activity for which compensation is paid, whether or not it is tangibly productive."[129] Stringfellow argued that this redefinition of work as "compensated activity" eventually produced an emphasis upon consumption: "products which could be acquired and controlled through payment of some sort."[130]

While the nature of work changed, Stringfellow noted, the rhetoric of the American work ethic did not. Consequently, he observed, "justifying significance, earlier imputed to productive work, is now attached to compensation and consumption."[131] This resulted in a loss of "moral discrimination between utility and uselessness, between necessity and luxury, between human need and profligate consumption." Whereas, Stringfellow argued, "[the] most persuasive part of the proposition that work proves moral worth was

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[127]Ibid, 74.

[128]Ibid.

[129]Ibid., 75.

[130]Ibid.

[131]Ibid.

the tangible productivity of work," that notion had disappeared and with it the nearest thing to a rationale of the American work ethic. Work was now, according to Stringfellow, "merely unproductive, compensated activity and, at the same time, increasingly useless or harmful as far as the sustenance of human life is concerned."[132]

Stringfellow saw two primary sources for the American work ethic in its industrialized expression. One source was the extension of the "myth concerning the 'sanctity' of private property and the consequent priority over human life."[133] The second source was a common expression of the economic component of American exceptionalism: "the creedal lexicon of *laissez faire* capitalism with its familiar articles about 'individual initiative,' 'free enterprise,' 'the profit motive,' and 'the law of supply and demand.'"[134] Stringfellow's argument against both of these sources was quite simple: neither notion in the reality that is contemporary America obtains. He asserted, "private property – in the classic meaning of the ownership of land or slaves has long since virtually disappeared."[135] This virtual disappearance of private property can be seen in the fact that people own mortgages, banks own land, and chattel slavery was abolished. Thus the complexities of property ownership dilute the substance of any argument in favor of its sanctity. Moreover, l*aissez faire* capitalism, Stringfellow argued, "had been extinguished since the First World War," being a dubious proposition anyway in light of "the traditional manipulation of public funds by private entrepreneurs from the

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[132]Ibid, 76.

[133]Ibid.

[134]Ibid.

[135]Ibid, 77.

outset of industrialization in America."[136] Nevertheless, the rhetoric remained: "Yet, as radically diminished as the ownership of private property may be and as extinct as *laissez faire* capitalism is, the archaic shibboleths attending property and capitalism remain alive."[137]

The idea of a mutually excluding conflict between property ownership and human rights was significant for Stringfellow. He articulated his views on this quite extensively in *Dissenter in a Great Society*. He wrote,

> The venerable ideological conflict in our society between those who regard property, and the ownership or management of property, as the moral basis for society and those persuaded that human rights must have precedence in the ordering of society and the making of public policy once more dominates the American scene.[138]

He noted that as a Christian he was "not at all opposed to the private ownership of property, so long as property becomes no yardstick of a person's moral posture."[139] In essence he did not believe that there was an inherent conflict between property ownership and human rights; however, a conflict does arise when property ownership is attached to moral worth. In that case, then, "as in the era of chattel slavery, property is accorded such a radical preference over persons as to have idolatrous status."[140] The consequences of such a "radical preference" are most significant in there effect upon the poor, because

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[136]Ibid.

[137]Ibid.

[138]Stringfellow, *Dissenter in a Great Society*, 55.

[139]Ibid, 56.

[140]Ibid.

then "the propertyless, the dispossessed, the so-called "minorities," are morally certain to be gravely restricted – if not altogether stifled – in their freedom as human beings."[141]

Holy Property: The Religion of the Acquisitive Man

Stringfellow critiqued this preference of property over humanity in an extended discussion of his observations of the 1964 Republican convention in which Barry Goldwater was nominated as the presidential candidate. He wrote, "The San Francisco convention was repeatedly characterized by the media covering it as a happening more like a religious revival than a political convention."[142] Stringfellow suggested that that characterization was appropriate, "because a real religion *was* revived there" that was "indigenous to America's past."[143] He found the credo to this religion in the words of Barry Goldwater in his acceptance speech at the convention: "'From this moment, united and determined, we will go forward together dedicated to the ultimate and undeniable greatness of the whole man.'"[144] This, Stringfellow noted, was not mere rhetoric. Instead it suggested a specific doctrine of man. He supports this argument by again quoting Goldwater, pointing out the senator's acknowledgement that those who do not share his views laid out in the speech are not guilty of "'mere political differences or mere political mistakes,' but 'of a fundamentally and absolutely wrong view of man, his

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[141]Ibid.

[142]Ibid., 58. This reminds me of several characterizations of the 1992 Republican convention. For an example of an academic response to the 1992 Republican convention see James E. Wood, Jr., "Religion and the U.S. presidential election of 1992. (Editorial)," *Journal of Church and State* 34.n4 (Autumn 1992): 721-728. For an example of a popular response from a pundit see Ivins, Molly. "Notes from another country. (Republican Party convention) (Cover Story)." *The Nation* 255.n7 (Sept 14, 1992): 229(3).

[143]*Dissenter*, 58.

[144]Ibid, 59. Stringfellow is accurate in his quotations of Goldwater. See Barry Goldwater, "The Republican National Convention Acceptance Address," in *Vital Speeches of the Day*, August 15, 1964, Vol. 30, No. 21, 642 (642-644)

nature, and his destiny.'"[145] This conservative ideology Stringfellow understood to be indeed a religion.

The "anthropology of this religion" according to Stringfellow was that "a man is whole if he procures, possesses, and profits from property."[146] Thus, "the greatness of man is dependent upon 'the sanctity of property.'"[147] Stringfellow labels this anthropology "the doctrine of the acquisitive man."[148] Expressing a theme common to his theological critiques, Stringfellow interprets this doctrine as one of "self-justification."[149] In accordance with this doctrine then, "[a] man who wills to do so and who does not suffer the hindrance of government can perfect his own salvation by the getting, holding, and using of private property."[150] Of course, then, "[to] have property is evidence of moral excellence, defines individual dignity, and is the divine reward for self-reliance."[151]

Stringfellow noted that a tragic implication of this notion of salvation through property ownership is that the failure to acquire property is a reflection of sin or a nefarious impediment of freedom: "In such a view the failure of a man to acquire property not only aborts his personal fulfillment but must be counted as sin or as the

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[145]Ibid. See also Goldwater, "The Republican National Convention," 643.

[146]Ibid, 60.

[147]Ibid. Stringfellow loosely quotes Goldwater from the speech. That accurate quote is "sanctity of private property." See Goldwater, "The Republican National Convention," 644.

[148]Ibid., 61.

[149]Ibid, 60.

[150]Ibid.

[151]Ibid.

consequence of the interference of evil."[152] The practical results of this doctrine, Stringfellow observed, was the denigration of most if not all social services and regulations:

> it considers welfare assistance as reward for weakness, social security as surrender of self-reliance, public works as restraints of commerce, Medicare as an invasion of privacy, product quality, packaging, and advertising standards as subversive of a competitive market, the war on poverty as indulgence of sinners, fluoridation as a restraint of choice, and taxation as a necessary – but temporary – evil.[153]

While recognizing the fact that ultimately Goldwater lost in a landslide and that his ideology was not taken into the White House, Stringfellow feared that Goldwater's campaign "represented a great victory for political extremism" and brought together a number of individuals and groups that shared the religion of the sanctity of property and who "are avowed and militant totalitarians."[154] It is important to note here a possible irony in Stringfellow's statements. Many would consider him to represent a form of "political extremism." Describing Goldwater conservatives as militant totalitarians could represent an alarmist and extremist position. Anticipating such critcism, Stringfellow wrote, "My argument is not that *all* those who esteem property rights as more fundamental in society than human rights are totalitarians, or even that they *all* supported the Goldwater nomination and candidacy."[155] His concern was that "the Goldwater effort provided a catalyst which brought into contagious proximity those who regard property idolatrously and the pathological racists and paramilitarists and Fascists in America."[156]

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[152]Ibid.

[153]Ibid, 61.

[154]Ibid, 65.

[155]Ibid.

[156]Ibid, 66.

Of course, a conversative could have likewise responded by making the parallel argument that Stringfellow's views had the potential of rallying violent leftist radicals.

Overall, Stringfellow's critique of the Goldwater doctrine is important for two reasons. First, it serves as a clear example of his criticism of the notion of the sanctity of property that informs the economic elements of American exceptionalism. Second, it foreshadows his shrillness in his later criticisms of so-called totalitarianism in the United States under Nixon.

Stringfellow took Protestantism in the United States to task for what he saw as culpability in the promotion of the idolatry of property. He suggested,

> What is now needed is some inquiry into the relationship of American white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism to the idolatry of property proper to those fascinated by totalitarian remedies for social problems."[157]

Observing that the idolatry of property is "an old religion," practiced in "medieval feudalism and colonial empires," Stringfellow asserted that its American roots were in "certain forms of Protestantism which developed and flourished among owners of land, holders of slaves, frontier settlers, country people, and pioneer capitalists."[158]

Stringfellow observed that times had changed. For example, in the twentieth century, "[real] property and the production of tangible goods are no longer so important."[159] Despite this change and others like it, the idolatry of property remained a characteristic of American Protestantism. Such change, Stringfellow argued:

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[157]Ibid.

[158]Ibid.

[159]Ibid, 67.

> does not in itself destroy religion so convenient to men who judge their own initiative as their moral justification and so reassuring to those white Anglo Saxons who suppose that God gave them this land as a reward for their enterprise.[160]

In that light, he observed, "the doctrine of the acquisitive man as the whole man is still defiantly preached with only those allowances for change required to maintain property as an idol."[161] In the following statement Stringfellow provided a humorous example, juxtaposing the technological changes and the ideological stasis:

> The push of a button, in these times, can turn on a light bulb or exterminate mankind. Yet in 1964 a man who inherited a department store ran for president of the United States, extolling initiative and self-reliance in a world in which toilet paper is a luxury most human beings cannot afford to buy.[162]

The idolatry of property, Stringfellow noted emphatically, adapted with the changes in the society and the economy. Consequently, "the courage of the pioneer became equated with the guile of the so-called self-made man!"[163] Paper, moreover, "replaced land as the symbol of property!"[164] And, the "piety of the settler" was "attributed to the salesman!"[165] Ultimately, Stringfellow observed, "[whatever] the verdict on the faith [the sanctity of property] in its earlier expressions in previous centuries, it is by such mutations as these that it has managed its survival in this century."[166]

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[160]Ibid, 66-67.

[161]Ibid, 67-68.

[162]Ibid, 67.

[163]Ibid, 68.

[164]Ibid.

[165]Ibid.

[166]Ibid.

A Perverted Gospel: Protestantism and the Idolatry of Money

Tragically, Stringfellow lamented, many churches were guilty of this idolatry of property and "the teaching of justification by acquisition."[167] As evidence of this, he noted the ministry of Norman Vincent Peale, whom he described as "the most notorious of Protestant preachers."[168] "How often," Stringfellow declared, "has [Peale] . . . assured his listeners that religion is a business asset because God rewards the man determined to get what he wants!"[169] Stringfellow suggested a number of other examples of church compromise with the idolatry of property. In his view churches that moved from the inner city to the suburbs were "forsak[ing] the dispossessed."[170] "[Many] Protestants," he charged, "think that their only involvement with the poor, if any, is a matter of their generosity and charity."[171] Stringfellow challenged the fact that "so very much of the wealth of churches [was] invested in merely maintaining churchly institutions."[172]

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[167]Ibid.

[168]Stringfellow could just as well have used that phrase to describe Billy Graham, whom he criticized often. In fact, Stringfellow intended to write a book critical of Graham and his ministry. He apparently worked on it for many years but never finished. This criticism will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapter. See, for example, Stringfellow's draft manuscript of *The Politics of Billy Graham: Religion, White Racism, and the Totalitarian Threat*, n.d., Box 34, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[169]Stringfellow, *Dissenter*, 68. In 1964 Stringfellow and Peale exchanged heated letters concerning some of Stringfellow's comments about Peale (this was prior to the above statements). Peale wrote, "For your information may I say that anyone who interprets my humble message in such a distorted and preposterous manner is either totally ignorant of what I do say, or (I regret to say it) is a liar. But in your case we shall just assume that you are mistaken." Norman Vincent Peale, letter to William Stringfellow, October 19, 1964. Stringfellow responded with his caustic wit: "I am not a liar and it is, if I may say so, rather negative thinking on your part to even venture such a suggestion against the integrity of a person who happens to disagree with you. I will assume that you were angry or otherwise upset when you wrote your letter with such a ridiculous remark in it." William Stringfellow, letter to Norman Vincent Peale, November 6, 1964. Box 8, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[170]Stringfellow, *Dissenter*, 68.

[171]Ibid, 69.

[172]Ibid.

Finally, he noted critically that "the acquiring and managing of property [had] become symbols of the 'successful' congregation of 'respectable' folk."[173]

By contrast, Stringfellow asked, "How many Protestants care for the Gospel of visiting prisoners, healing the sick, loving outcasts, and giving all that one possesses to the poor to follow Christ?"[174] Stringfellow did acknowledge that there were examples within Protestantism that "embodied a protest against perversion of the Gospel in the idolization of property."[175] These examples, however, had had little impact upon the consciences of the majority of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants in America. In fact, their voices of protest against the "perversion of the Gospel" may have driven "the idolaters" to tighten their alliances and provoked acts of reprisal against clergy who represent the voices of protest.[176] Stringfellow related one example of such reprisals:

> I know one Presbyterian minister who preached a sermon on poverty and the Christian conscience; the next morning, his automobile had been painted red, and his wife began receiving obscene telephone calls, threatening her children and her own safety if this 'Communist' clergyman did not leave the community.[177]

Stringfellow suggested that such incidents could be multiplied by the thousands. He furthermore suggested them as evidence of "the extent to which the Gospel is being quite literally persecuted by those whose idol is property."[178] The persecution, he claimed, was

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[173]Ibid.

[174]Ibid.

[175]Ibid.

[176]Ibid.

[177]Ibid, 70.

[178]Ibid.

the reaction of those idolaters of property "whose religion is now being threatened by the crises of poverty and race, and whose real god is Death."[179]

The above statement reflects Stringfellow's assumption about the underlying motives of those who he labeled idolaters of property. Noting that many were "solid, well-intentioned, honest and sincerely . . . self-righteous folk," he assumed that they were nevertheless fearful doubters of their own faith. [180] Relating his construction of their thinking, Stringfellow wrote:

> If their cherished beliefs do not somehow prevail, it would mean either that God had abandoned them to *His* own enemies – in which case, there must be no God at all – or else He has long been displeased with their supplications and burnt offerings – in which case their religion is false and their faith is in vain.[181]

Because of the fear that their faith may be false, Stringfellow argued, they also suffered from a haunting sense of guilt that they are the cause of society's great problems: "If they are not vindicated by their idolatry, it will mean that the ideals to which they have been dedicated are significantly responsible for the conditions they most fear."[182]

Attempting to play the psychoanalyst, Stringfellow summarized the motives of the idolaters of property as including "a sublimated sense of guilt."[183] This guilt reflected the latent fear that their "worship of acquisitiveness" was in truth the cause of "poverty and slums," provoked "crime in the streets," incited "racial disorder," and was "a major

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[179]Ibid.

[180]Ibid.

[181]Ibid.

[182]Ibid, 71.

[183]Ibid, 72.

reason why American power is resented abroad."[184] It is questionable that Stringfellow was accurate in his assumptions about the motivations of those he criticized. Arguably his "psychoanalysis" was based upon straw men. At best his arguments in this case manifested his beliefs more than the motives of the so-called idolaters of property. Stringfellow did believe that God was displeased with them and their "faith," and he did believe that they were responsible for many of the conditions society.

Nevertheless, the above discussion of Stringfellow's accusation of the culpability of much of Protestantism in the idolatry of property is significant. Stringfellow concluded with the claim that the most important question for all those who value property as an idol was "does the doctrine of man's Fall apply to them, as well as to everyone else?"[185] By asking the question, Stringfellow implied a negative answer that in his mind demonstrated that much of the church failed to believe its own theology and the implications derived from it.

Compensation and Consumption

Under the contemporary version of the American work ethic, Stringfellow noted, "it is the common belief that compensation determines moral worth and, thus, to be uncompensated or undercompensated betrays moral deficiency."[186] Under that "public doctrine," then, "not working, which only means not being compensated, is a state of sin."[187] Of course, Stringfellow complained, this view fails to take into account the

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[184]Ibid.

[185]Ibid.

[186]Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, 77.

[187]Ibid.

effects of racism, lack of education, and "the institutionalization of unemployability among dispossessed Americans."[188] It also degrades those in the welfare system and "[renders] welfare recipients scapegoats for compounded failures of this society to provide training and opportunity for employment."[189] Furthermore, this thinking ignores the intercessory nature of poverty in that those who are "uncompensated or undercompensated" subsidize the employed and affluent.[190]

Since work is redefined as "compensated effort" and identified with moral worth, the evidence of such worth is found in consumption. Stringfellow noted that historically mere acquisitiveness, such as "the amassing of personal fortune, the purchase of conspicuous luxuries, [and] the control of investment holdings," was the indicator of moral worthiness. "Now," he argued, "compensation mainly enables consumption and consumption displays the virtue or the justified status of the consumer."[191] In other words, no longer is it necessary for one to demonstrate moral worth through the acquisition and possession of instruments and items of conspicuous wealth. Now, merely to consume is evidence enough of one's virtue.

The result of this notion of consumption as virtue is that the consumer becomes indiscriminate and insatiable in his or her quest for the ersatz virtue that consumption represents. At some point the quest to consume exceeds the compensation that supports it. The shortfall is then filled by credit, which ironically and perhaps paradoxically results in a new form of poverty. "Thus," Stringfellow suggested, "the absurd reality

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[188]Ibid.

[189]Ibid., 77-78.

[190]Ibid.

[191]Ibid.

emerges in which the compensated classes of society, in order to maintain the consumption which supposedly verifies their superior moral status, become so overburdened with debt that they are poorer than those classes officially labeled 'the poor.'"[192] Paradoxically, then, "[affluence] in America is a new kind of poverty."[193]

Based upon this somewhat extreme assessment of the situation of the affluent with respect to credit, Stringfellow argued that this opens them to the pressure to conform to the whims of "a totalitarian rule which offers to protect the consumption of the affluent by escalating the persecution of the official poor."[194] The affluent, Stringfellow suggested, "having endorsed the fiction that poverty is a sin," during the recession of the 1970s were "suffering the practical realities of their own poverty and the haunting anxiety that their consumption will be curtailed and, thus, their virtue lost."[195]

In response to the ethic that finds moral worthiness in work, in compensation, and in consumption, Stringfellow proposed a completely different narrative. In his view, human work is sacramental; it bears the image of God's work in the world. The role of the Christian is to understand his or her daily work in that light as part of the Body of Christ. He wrote, "For Christians, work – the analysis of its meaning, the concrete problems of work, the personal experience of work – must be understood in the context of the work of God in the world."[196] The confession that God was at work in the world - a belief that Stringfellow called "the scandal of the gospel" – was a "confession of God's real

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[192]Ibid, 82.

[193]Ibid.

[194]Ibid.

[195]Ibid.

[196]Ibid., 63-64.

presence – his life, power, vitality, action, and work in and for the world."[197] Stringfellow understood this divine work to find its ongoing fulfillment in Christ: "Thus the critical question about work concerns the identity of Jesus Christ and the work of God in him for the world."[198]

God and Work; God at Work

Stringfellow suggested four primary aspects of God working in Christ for the world. First, God works in Christ vindicating himself in the world. This vindication is achieved via the road of rejection, especially in the events surrounding the Crucifixion: "In our history, in Christ, God accepts and assumes the fullness of the burden of the rejection of both persons and nations."[199] This rejection culminated in the Crucifixion by means of which Christ "manifests decisively his own identity and power in God and, at the same time, affirms and renews the lives of the people in this world."[200]

The second aspect in Stringfellow's view of God's work in Christ for the world is the restoration of fallen creation. This restoration is biblically described in various ways with respect to a number of contexts. Stringfellow notes that in Christ there is ultimately a new creation and proximately a new birth for human beings.[201] There is also in Christ the election the Church, a new people saved from death. Finally, in Christ there is the absolution of the world from the Fall, "from the reign of death," and the rescue and

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[197]Ibid, 64.

[198]Ibid.

[199]Ibid, 65.

[200]Ibid.

[201]Ibid.

restoration of "the integrity of creation."[202] Stringfellow describes this also as the restoration of dominion: "In Christ is the image of human dominion over the rest of creation which God first gives in creation and which is lost in sin."[203] Those who belong to the Body of Christ in the world represent the restoration of this dominion.

Stringfellow also understood God's work in Christ for the world to include judgment of the world. This judgment is in Christ and is merciful and reconciling in nature: "In Christ the mercy of God in reconciling the world to himself is the event by which the world is judged."[204] In light of this the vocation of the church is to serve as the world's representative of reconciliation with God, to live as the Body of Christ, and to announce the world's judgment in Christ. As the Church fulfills this vocation, it can expect to experience "the same hostility of the world that Christ himself bore."[205]

Finally, in Stringfellow's view the work of God in Christ for the world will be to end the world: "In Christ God is bringing all things and all men to their fulfillment and to their end in himself."[206] Since Christ is Lord, he is the beginning and the end. This prompts the Church to live in "expectancy of and in readiness for the consummation of the world in Christ, not for the sake of herself, but for the sake of the world."[207]

The significance of this view of work is that by confessing its truthfulness and living accordingly, the Christian is free from the bondage of work. This is a result of the

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[202]Ibid.

[203]Ibid, 68.

[204]Ibid, 65.

[205]Ibid.

[206]Ibid., 66.

[207]Ibid.

freedom from death: "For one to be free in work or in non-work – free from merely working to death, free from enslavement to the principalities and powers – one must be set free from the bondage to death."[208] Work is thus invested with meaning beyond its day-to-day tedium and instead of its worldly significance as an instrument of justification. Thus, Stringfellow wrote, "[it] is the work of God in Christ for the world that frees people from this bondage [to death] and that enables any secular work to become and to be a witness to the work of God."[209]

Consequently, the sacramental character of work is derived from its reflection of God's work in Christ in the world. The Christian's work is therefore a witness of that work, in both motivation and end: "For the Christian, work is not what people do for God's sake or their own, but a witness to what God does for the sake of all and for the sake of the whole world."[210]

Vocation of Poverty

Stringfellow also proposed for the Church a "vocation of poverty." He believed that this would serve as an institutional witness against the notion that moral worth is to be found in compensation or consumption and against the further notion that poverty is sinful. Stringfellow believed that such a witness by the Church *as an institution* was critical because only "an institution," as opposed to the, in effect, symbolic actions of

> individuals and small communities] can confront, challenge, rebuke, and (to use a New Testament image) engage in warfare with the principalities and powers,

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[208]Ibid.

[209]Ibid.

[210]Ibid, 67.

> institutions and structures, bureaucracies and authorities which constitute the technocratic regime which rules American society.[211]

The witness of a vocation of poverty would mean "disassociation from privilege, from power, from property."[212] Stringfellow suggested a number of practical ways to achieve this disassociation. These included the renunciation of tax exempt status, divestiture of various endowments and investments "from the predatory regime of the corporations, conglomerates, and the entire complex of assorted commercial, military and scientific principalities which now cripple the Church's humanity," and the "unqualified expendability" of its resources to meet human needs.[213] These needs, according to Stringfellow, included "health, education, employment, [and] play."[214]

Stringfellow argued that the Church should renounce its tax exempt status, so that it could be, in his words, "free to practice tax resistance."[215] In other words, giving up tax exemption did not necessarily mean paying taxes. It meant being required to pay taxes but refusing to do so as a form of protest against the government and its various policies. Believing that the "claims of the Gospel [cannot] be rendered compatible with those of the State," for Stringfellow such protest would reflect a recovery of the "Apostolic

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[211]Ibid, 83-84.

[212]Ibid, 84.

[213]Ibid, 85.

[214]Ibid.

[215]Ibid.

witness against the ruling powers."[216] He considered tax exemption to be "an elementary offense against the Gospel" because it made the Church a "beneficiary to the regime."[217]

The idea of tax exemption has a venerable history in the United States.[218] Ironically, it has in part symbolized the freedom of the Church from the claims of the State. The famous adage, "The power to tax is the power to destroy," served as an argument for exempting the Church and churches from taxation. To tax the church would be to acknowledge a subordinate relationship of the church to the state. Tax exemption has also been argued as an acknowledgement of a *quid pro quo* relationship between the church and the state. In light of this notion, the Church and churches are exempted from taxation in recognition of the benefits to society they provide. Stringfellow, of course, saw this as the state serving as the Church's benefactor. The acceptance of the benefits of tax exemption reflected a subservience to the state that ignored the freedom from slavery to all principalities and powers, including the state – perhaps *especially* the state – that has been secured for the Church through the resurrection of Christ. In renouncing tax exemption and then refusing to pay the required taxes the Church bore witness to that freedom and protested specific policies.

Stringfellow acknowledged that the Church's vocation of poverty expressed through the "disassociation from prerogative" would likely "[render] the familiar fabric of the

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[216]William Stringfellow, "The Military Chaplaincy from the Perspective of the Church," draft manuscript, June, 16, 1975, in Box 23, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[217]Ibid.

[218]See John Witte, *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment: Essential Rights and Liberties* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000). For a detailed study of the issue of tax exemption, see chapter 9, "Religious Liberty Doctrine in Miniature: Tax Exemption of Religious Property."

Church – the churchly sanctuaries and the like – monuments or museums only."[219] Nevertheless, such a witness would enable the Church to more faithfully embody its calling. This would not reflect a "drop-out or withdrawal" nor a "retreat or escape." Instead, it would represent "the Church's profound engagement with the world as it is."[220]

The Christian's proper acknowledgement of work as a sacrament and the Church's witness by a vocation of poverty embody a dissent from the economic elements of American exceptionalism. Instead of being enslaved to work as a means of justification, the Christian works to bear witness to the justification that is found in Christ. Instead of treating poverty as a sin, the Church voluntarily disassociates with privilege, becoming poor herself. Thus, rather than live according to the doctrines of the bastard gospel that is American exceptionalism, the members of the Church, individually and institutionally, refute it by bearing witness to the Gospel of Christ, the good news of grace for the unworthy and freedom for the poor.

The Piety of Poverty

In notable contrast to the idolatry of property, the ethic of acquisition, and the notion of justification by consumption that characterized the economic elements of American exceptionalism, Stringfellow asserted a particular piety that belongs especially to the poor. This piety was the evidence of a certain "sophistication of the suffering of the

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[219]Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, 85.

[220]Ibid.

poor."[221] This sophistication was produced by "the proximity of their life every day to death."[222] What made this proximity more significant for the poor than for others was that they did not have the access to various institutional, social, financial, or educational resources that others could use to pretend an exemption from the claims of death upon their lives:

> The awful and ubiquitous claim of death is not different for the poor than for other men, or, for that matter, for nations or ideologies or other principalities or powers; but among the poor there are no grounds to rationalize the claim, no way to conceal the claim, no facile refutation of the claim, no place to escape or evade it.[223]

In Stringfellow's view the suffering of the poor was characterized by a particular "lucidity," and "straightforwardness with which it [bespoke] the power and presence of death among men in the world."[224] In other words, while death in its many forms was ubiquitous, its manifestations were particularly concentrated among and amidst that poor.

This proximity to death, however, "yields," Stringfellow wrote, "in the common life of the poor a most remarkable social morality."[225] As a curious example of this morality, Stringfellow cited gang society, which "nurtures a morality which induces its members actually to risk their lives for each other and for their society, and for causes which outsiders would think unworthy."[226] He noted that gang members will risk their lives for such apparently worthless causes as "a street filled with garbage" or "a girl who probably

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[221]Stringfellow, *My People*, 29; "Poverty, Piety, Charity and Mission," *The Christian Century*, May 10, 1961, 585.

[222]*My People*, 30.

[223]Ibid

[224]Ibid, 29.

[225]"Poverty, Piety, Charity and Mission," 585.

[226]Ibid.

is not a virgin."[227] Of particular significance to Stringfellow was that the social morality of gang society was so contrary to common American morality, "in which few would think of actually giving up their own life for another, much less for that which seems unworthy."[228] This represented a remarkable freedom. These "kids" had "apprehended a different way" in which they were free "to offer their lives for another in spite of the undeservingness (sic) of the one for whom the offer is made."[229] This, for Stringfellow, represented a form of piety, because the freedom to offer one's life for the unworthy was "strangely reminiscent of the gospel, in which One offers his life for all, even though none are worthy of his life."[230]

Stringfellow provides another ironic example of the piety of poverty by relating his observations concerning a young drug addict. Stringfellow had defended him in some of his legal troubles. The young man often used Stringfellow's apartment as a place to shave and wash up, "after having spent most of the week on the streets."[231] Stringfellow related that the young man, as is common with addicts, was an accomplished liar who had "contrived so many stories to induce clergy and social workers to give him money to support his habit that he [was] no longer believed when he [asked] for help."[232] The hardness of the boy's life, moreover, had taken its toll upon his young body. Consequently, Stringfellow observed matter-of-factly, the young man was "dirty,

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[227]Ibid.

[228]Ibid.

[229]Ibid.

[230]Ibid.

[231]Ibid.

[232]Ibid, 586.

ignorant, arrogant, dishonest, unemployable, broken, unreliable, ugly, rejected, [and] alone."[233] "And," Stringfellow added, "he knows it."[234]

The fact that the young man knew his condition was the critical issue for Stringfellow. Concerning the boy Stringfellow wrote, "He knows at last that he has nothing to commend himself to another human being. He has nothing to offer."[235] The young man recognized that he was unlovable, that "[there was] nothing about him which permits the love of another person for him."[236] In that recognition Stringfellow saw evidence of the gospel. In the young boy's "confession that he does not deserve the love of another," he represented everyone else.[237] "For none of us," Stringfellow wrote, "is different from him in this regard. We are *all* unlovable."[238] Beyond that, however, the boy's confession suggested God's response of love to the unlovable as announced in the gospel. Stringfellow saw the young man's condition and confession as illustrative of the gospel, pointing to "God, who loves us though we hate him, who loves us though we do not satisfy his love, who loves us though we do not please him" and "who accepts us though we have nothing acceptable to offer him."[239] In short what Stringfellow observed

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[233]Ibid.

[234]Ibid.

[235]Ibid.

[236]Ibid.

[237]Ibid.

[238]Ibid.

[239]Ibid.

in this example of the piety of poverty was that "[hidden] in the obnoxious existence of this boy is the scandalous secret of the Word of God."[240]

Stringfellow's notion of the sophistication of the suffering of the poor and its attendant piety reflects a telling contrast to the ethics of acquisition in which the poor are at best pitied and at worst blamed for their condition. In suggesting gang society and an apparently unrepentant drug addict as parables of the gospel, Stringfellow demonstrated his counter-narrative to the bastard gospel. In the world of the true gospel, according to Stringfellow, the poor are exalted not because of their inherent worth but because of their unworthiness, because it represents a profound theological truth about all humanity. Furthermore, rather than denigrate them because they have not acquired a job, money, education, status, property, or any of the other symbols of economic justification, Stringfellow lauds them, implying that they are closer to justification than the affluent.

Conclusion

Racism, the dominant ethic in American society according to Stringfellow, represents an indictment of that society and the nation that encompasses it. It moreover is an inherent contradiction to the claims of American exceptionalism. Churches, who ostensibly were the centers of national conscience are culpable in the racist scheme. Stringfellow predicted that violence would erupt, contradicting once again any claims of moral superiority on the part of Americans. The appropriate penitential response on the part of White church members is to passively accept the attacks upon them, receiving the insults, the blows, and the "knife in the belly" with a confessional humility. This

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[240]Ibid.

response in no way reflects the typical flag-waving, law and order-promoting, and military-celebrating, mentality that is informed by American exceptionalism.

The claims of exceptionalism expressed economically are merely false avenues to moral vindication and personal justification. They reflect an idolatry of money that, rather than be confronted by the white churches, is abetted and even promoted by them. The appropriately penititential response to this great wrong is to, contrary to the ethic of acquisition that represents American exceptionalism, recognized the sophisticated piety of the poor and to adopt a vocation of institutional poverty.

CHAPTER SIX

Stringfellow and the Theology of Exceptionalism

While for Stringfellow racism and poverty provided empirical evidence for his critique of the political and economic elements of American exceptionalism, his theology inherently contradicted exceptionalism's theological elements, their justification, and their expressions in the form of civil religion. In this final chapter, I will examine Stringfellow's critique of the theological elements of American exceptionalism, ultimately demonstrating the inherent incompatibility of Stringfellow's theology with any notion of an exceptional character or vocation for America. This incompatibility is based upon Stringfellow's tragic view of creation, specifically those principalities and powers embodied by nation-states. I will further suggest that Stringfellow, in light of his self-designation as an empirical theologian, argued from both an empirical perspective as well as a theological one, displaying a reciprocal relationship between his theology and his observations of the social and political situation in America. In that light, for Stringfellow, the empirical and the theological informed one another.[1]

Billy Graham: Exceptionalist Apologist

Believing that he represented the worst of "fundamentalist pietism" as an apologetic for white racism and totalitarianism, Stringfellow criticized Billy Graham extensively. Contained in the William Stringfellow Papers at Cornell University are two drafts of portions of a book on Graham. The book was never published. The titles of the drafts

[1] Stringfellow used the phrase "empirical theologian" literally, not in its technical sense.

are telling: *The Apostasy of Billy Graham* and *The Politics of Billy Graham: Religion, White Racism, and the Totalitarian Threat*.[2] While these drafts are similar, the latter appears slightly more developed. Stringfellow's critique of Graham is "squarely and succinctly" summarized in *The Politics of Billy Graham*:

> Billy Graham exemplifies and nourishes a form of religion inherently capable of rationalizing an American totalitarianism in the name of God and of justifying any extremity of its violence against human life as civic virtue.[3]

Stringfellow's criticism of Graham was inordinately harsh. Labeling him "America's archpharisee," Stringfellow suggested that ideas and actions associated with "that which Graham incarnates and encourages" were as harmful to human life as "the inculcation of radical anti-semitism among the German middle classes within the established churches during the ascendancy of Nazi totalitarianism."[4] Stringfellow, moreover, implied that Graham was motivated in part at least by a desire for fame and worldly success. Believing that from around 1954 until the late 1960s Graham's success waned, Stringfellow suggested that the reactionary nostalgia of the sixties for a "restoration of the securities of both the society and the churches that have been or are being overturned" were cynically used by Nixon and helped Graham to "revive his fortunes."[5]

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[2] Unpublished notes for book entitled *The Apostacy of Billy Graham* (sic), no date given, Box 35, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library; unpublished drafts with foreword and notes for book entitled *The Politics of Billy Graham: Religion, White Racism, and the Totalitarian Threat*, n. d. [Both drafts appear to have been written during the Nixon presidency prior to Watergate.], Box 34, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[3] *The Politics of Billy Graham*, 8.

[4] Ibid., 9.

[5] *The Apostacy of Billy Graham* [sic], 2. Curiously, although throughout the late sixties and early seventies Stringfellow appears to have despised Graham, in 1977 he was reported to have endorsed him.

Theologically, Stringfellow believed that Graham was "one of the most unbiblical preachers ever to cross the American scene."[6] He considered Graham to be guilty of apostasy in four major elements of his thought.[7] First, Stringfellow believed that he misrepresented the doctrine of sin. Second, he claimed that Graham promoted a false doctrine that man is capable of mechanical justification. Third, Stringfellow accused him of preaching an apostate view of the nation that misidentifies the vocation of the United States with that of the biblical nation of Israel. Finally, he suggested that Graham reduced God to a mere ideational symbol.

As I discussed in chapter three, Stringfellow's view of sin represented a departure from traditional Christianity.[8] Walter Wink, I mentioned, labeled Stringfellow's notion of God's judgment, "the exclusivity of God's judgment."[9] This idea informed Stringfellow's view of sin. He believed that God alone has the right and the knowledge

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There was an apparent misunderstanding surrounding this endorsement, however. He, William Sloan Coffin, Jr., Eldridge Cleaver, Robert McAfee Brown, and two other leaders known to have been critical of Graham had been asked by David Poling, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Albuquergue, NM, and author of *Why Billy Graham?,* to use their names in a joint statement that affirmed the financial integrity of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Soon after Poling released the statement Stringfellow and two of the other endorsers denied their support for the Graham "enterprise," claiming that they gave the statement only in support of the evangelist's personal integrity. See "Graham's Beliefs: Still Intact," *Christianity Today*, January 13, 1978, 50 [49-50], and "Correction," *The Washington Post*, December 17, 1977, A2. For evidence of the misunderstanding, see Billy Zeoli, letter to William Stringfellow, January 6, 1978. Zeoli, president of Gospel Films, Inc., apparently had not read the retraction when he commended Stringfellow for endorsing Graham and the "integrity of his organization." Zeoli writes, "I just want you to know that I admire your courage in standing up for a truly great man, but more than that, Brother [sic] in the Lord." I can imagine that Stringfellow chuckled at the irony of Zeoli's letter. Box 21, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[6]William Stringfellow, transcript from "A Conversation with William Stringfellow on the Ethics of Resistance", an interview for KEED, Portland, Oregon, interviewer Father Edgar M. Tainton , taped October 18, 1968, 2. Box 35, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[7]Stringfellow outlined these criticisms in *The Apostacy of Billy Graham* [sic], 2.

[8]See the extended discussion of Stringfellow and judgment in chapter 3, pp. 43-50.

[9]Wink, "Stringfellow on the Powers," 23.

to judge good and evil. The presumption on the part of a human to discern God's judgment of a particular behavior by identifying it as evil reflects arrogance on the part of the human and is in fact sin. Arguably, the main thrust of Graham's message dealt with identifying sin in the human condition and then offering the assurance of forgiveness by encouraging his listeners to decisively respond to Christ in faith. This represented a form of presumption that for Stringfellow was tantamount to sin.

This false view of sin, according to Stringfellow, led to the second aspect of Graham's thought that Stringfellow labeled apostasy: the notion of mechanical justification: the idea that through some act, such as responding to an evangelistic invitation (a form of *manipulation*, Stringfellow would say), a person can be assured of justification before God. According to Stringfellow no one can know precisely what his or her status is before God. What is required is to "live humanly" by trusting in God's grace and leaving judgment up to Him.

The third evidence of Graham's apostasy, according to Stringfellow, was the popular evangelist's view of the nation. In his view the popular evangelist failed to recognize the utter fallenness of all nations including, and perhaps especially, the United States. This failure then led Graham, according to Stringfellow, to presume America had a special destiny within the world to promote the values of freedom and democracy, functioning as a savior of sorts. Of course for Stringfellow this thinking denied the fact that the United States is a power in bondage to death, and in fact as a nation it is an exemplary power.

Finally, Stringfellow argued that Graham was guilty of reducing God to a mere idea. This is a curious charge that he also later made against President Ronald Reagan. Of this

reduction of God to an idea, Stringfellow wrote, "To take a very obvious and familiar example, when Ronald Reagan, in his pronouncements on the school prayer issue and otherwise, says 'God,' it is difficult to fathom what he may be fantasizing, though it would appear, at most, that he is imagining some idea of God."[10] As in other elements of his thought, Stringfellow is somewhat difficult to understand here. He appears to base his charge upon the Barthian assumption that no idea of God is actually God: "Yet *no* idea of god is God; no image of god is God; no conception of god, however appealing or, for that matter, however true, coincides with the living God – which the biblical witness bespeaks – present, manifest, militant in common history, discernible in the course of human events through the patience and insight of ordinary human beings."[11] Of course by that argument Stringfellow opens himself to the same charge of reducing God to an idea, merely one other than that of Reagan or Graham or fundamentalist piety. It appears that what Stringfellow is really criticizing is the association of God with the policies of the Reagan administration and, in the case of Graham, with the Nixon administration.

Stringfellow also saw in Graham a tremendous inconsistency with respect to political involvement. In Stringfellow's view, Graham's suggestions that clergy should remain out of politics and that Christians were not ultimately about changing the political order was inconsistent with his close association with presidential politics.[12] Stringfellow

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[10]William Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 33.

[11]Ibid., 33-34. This is why, Stringfellow wrote, "I commonly use, herein, and have used, for more than a decade . . . the *Word of God* as the name of God, in preference to the mere term *God*."

[12]Compare Graham's comments in his article "Facing the Anti-God Colossus," *Christianity Today*, December 21, 1962, 6-8, to those reported in the article "The Election: Who Was for Whom," *Christianity Today*, November 22, 1968, 43-44. In the former article even as he criticizes communism, he suggests that Christians should be relatively apolitical. In the latter piece he is reported to have announced that he voted for Nixon. Moreover, the article mentions that Graham was prominently supportive of Nixon during his 1968 campaign.

explicitly criticized this apparent inconsistency. He furthermore took Graham to task for his disavowal of the ultimacy of politics with respect to the mission of Christians. As I discussed in chapter four, Stringfellow saw an integral relationship between Christianity and politics.[13] In that light, it was impossible for a Christian or anyone else for that matter to be apolitical.

This was particularly evident in America. Stringfellow wrote, "the interaction of religion and politics in American history is a chronicle replete in paradox, contradiction, and hypocrisy."[14] Insightfully, he suggested that the complexities inherent in the relationship of the religious to the political were due to the fact that both deal with issues of ultimacy. "Both religion and politics," Stringfellow wrote, "have . . . to do with justification (to invoke a religious term) or with the moral significance of human life in this world (to phrase the same thing politically).[15] Because of the ultimate nature of both realms, he argued, religion and politics tend to rival one another: "It is not surprising, given this similarity between the two, that religion and politics tend to threaten, usurp or absorb one another: the religious is always becoming political; politics is constantly taking the place religion."[16] In fact, Stringfellow argued, the popular encouragement to keep religion and politics separate was actually a manifestation of the rivalrous entanglement between the two realms: "The familiar and popularized disavowals of the admixture of religion and politics are in themselves specific ways in which the two are

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[13]See Chapter Four, pp. 8-14.

[14]Stringfellow, "The Apostacy [sic]of Billy Graham," 2.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

reciprocally implicated."[17] Thus Stringfellow argued that Graham was wrong to assume that a Christian could remain politically neutral. In fact, Graham's association with Nixon, as well as with other presidents or presidential candidates, proved Stringfellow's point. On the other hand, he took Graham to task for the inherent hypocrisy of demurring political involvement and in turn implicating himself in a presidential campaign and in the White House.[18]

In that light perhaps Stringfellow's strongest criticism of Graham and, frankly, the impetus for his apparent distaste for the evangelist was the latter's association with Nixon. Stringfellow wrote, "I complain here, obviously, about the literally pharisitical office as 'chaplain' to the President which has been bestowed upon Graham."[19] Not only did Stringfellow criticize Graham's chaplain role as "subversive of the Protestant tradition" and as a Constitutional "aberration," he also viewed it as proof of the evangelist's manipulative ambition: "there is ample evidence that Graham long ago conceived, coveted and besought from [sic] himself just such political eminence as he now enjoys in the court of Richard Nixon."[20] Stringfellow suggested, however, that the most significant issue with Graham's role as the so-called "President's chaplain" was the fact that it symbolically associated Graham and the form of Christianity he represented with the administration's policies: "Still, as pernicious a precedent as it may be, the

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[17]Ibid., 3.

[18]Following Watergate, Graham associated himself less prominently with the occupants of the White House. By his own admission, the evangelist was too close to Nixon and the administration. See Richard V. Pierard, "Billy Graham and the U. S. Presidency," *Journal of Church and State* 22, no 1 (Winter 1980): 107-127; William Martin, *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991); and Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

[19]Stringfellow, "The Politics of Billy Graham," 9.

[20]Ibid.

political chaplaincy of Billy Graham is, I suggest, the public symbol of a far deeper and a multifarious implication of white religion with racism and repressive politics."[21]

Stringfellow portrayed Graham as the personification of a form of white Christianity that provided a theological justification for white racism and totalitarian politics. In many ways Stringfellow's critique of Graham was his critique of the theological justification of American exceptionalism writ small. Unfortunately, however, Stringfellow was neither fair nor accurate in his portrayal of Graham. He established a straw man and named it Billy Graham. While Graham's association with Nixon and other presidents opened him to the charge of embodying a form of civil religion that is unbiblical, he consistently limited his preaching to a very narrow expression of the gospel in propositional terms dealing with individual soteriology. Most of Graham's statements about communism and his love of America were incidental to his primary evangelistic message.[22] In truth, Graham was the target for criticism primarily because Stringfellow despised Richard Nixon.[23]

The Myth of the Justified Nation

A recurrent theme in Stringfellow's writings was the misdirected quest for justification that he believed motivated most Americans. Generally, the quest was prompted by "a vain anxiety for justification" that was "at once pervasive and

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[21]Ibid.

[22]For an example of this see again his article "Facing the Anti-God Colossus." While ostensibly an article against communism, it actually provides a context for Graham's evangelistic message which is the main thrust of the piece. This is typical Graham.

[23]In several articles Stringfellow vilified Nixon, describing him , for example, as "a barbarian" and as "demon-possessed." See William Stringfellow, "Impeach Nixon Now," *Commonweal*, May 26, 1972, 280-281; idem, "Watergate and Romans 13," *Christianity and Crisis*, June 11, 1973, 110-112, and idem "High Crimes and Misdemeanors: The Macabre Era of Kissinger and Nixon," *Sojourners*, January 1984, 33-34.

incessant."[24] This quest was evident in a number of ways. I have already mentioned Stringfellow's critique of it in the context of the ethics of acquisition.[25] Stringfellow also saw evidence of this anxiety and the resulting quest in "the idolatry of youth."[26] He wrote, "Behind the dominance of youth in the culture are notions of justification: that youth is superior, practically and morally, and to be old is inferior; that youth is effectual, but to be elderly is to be ineffectual; that youth means health, but age means infirmity; that youth anticipates success, but to grow old is failure; that youth deserves esteem, but to be old is a matter of embarrassment or shame."[27] The result of this idolatry of youth was the "discard of the elderly," as well as of the "handicapped, disabled, retarded, and in many, many instances, the ill" or any other life that "varies noticeably from the stereotype of youth – and success, capability, beauty, health – which the culture sponsors."[28]

The anxiety over justification that elevated youth to a level of veneration also had its effects in American nationalism. Specifically, it gave rise to the "myth of the justified nation."[29] According to this mythology, which Stringfellow believed was "the most notorious consequence" of the anxiety for justification, America is the holy nation. This belief, which encapsulates the theology of American exceptionalism, was described by

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[24]Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality*, 48.

[25]See chapter five, 24-42.

[26]Ibid., 51.

[27]Ibid., 50. Stringfellow wrote this within a few years of his death. He had suffered long with his numerous physical afflictions. Although he was only in his middle fifties by this point, his body was nearly worn out. He was, therefore, keenly aware of the premium that American society places upon youth.

[28]Ibid. 50.

[29]Ibid.

Stringfellow in the following terms: "The doctrine, which has diverse origins in the American experience as a nation, is that America is a nation with a unique destiny, bestowed upon it by God."[30]

Stringfellow was concerned about expressions of this mythology that were particulary common to Ronald Reagan during his presidency. "In many instances," Stringfellow noted, Reagan "pronounced America the embodiment of good, while America's presumed enemies, especially the Soviet Union, embody objective evil."[31] This, Stringfellow added, went "significantly beyond conventional or simplistic patriotic rhetoric"; it instead referred to "imagined ultimate, cosmic confrontations."[32] In other words, Stringfellow recognized Reagan's statements as theological claims regarding America's destiny.

Such claims, Stringfellow noted, had a familiar ring to them. In them, he observed, "what is thus alleged about America's character and about the historic destiny of the nation has a curiously familiar sound."[33] These claims for the vocation and destiny of America were familiar, Stringfellow suggested, because they were reminiscent of elements of the biblical gospel. Provocatively, he described the claims as reflecting "a bastard version of the biblical news about the election of Israel and then, in the New

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[30]Ibid., 52.

[31]Ibid., 53.

[32]Ibid. Stringfellow probably had in mind Reagan's famous "Evil Empire" speech given at the annual meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals on March 8, 1983. Accessed January 9, 2007, online at http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ronadreaganevilempire.htm. Had Stringfellow been alive it is likely that he would leveled the same criticism against President George W. Bush for his statements about the "axis of evil" following the attacks on September 11, 2001. See Bush's initial statement in his State of the Union address, January 29, 2002. Accessed online at the official White House website, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html.

[33]Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality*, 53.

Testament, the vocation of the church as the exemplary nation or as the priest among the nations."[34] In other words, to suggest that America is objectively good and that certain other nations are objectively bad and that God has chosen the United States for a particular mission, that of promoting freedom throughout the earth, and that this essentially sets America apart as divinely called is to suggest that America shares, if not supercedes, the vocations of the biblical Israel and the church.

According to Stringfellow, this "appropriation of the biblical tradition concerning the holy nation for application to *any* secular regime . . . is a profound affront at once to biblical faith and to the witness to the biblical events, as well as to the church of Christ."[35] The holy claims for America's destiny were therefore patently unbiblical and were degrading of the biblical narrative describing the callings of Israel and the church and represented an insult to the church, the true holy nation. Stringfellow furthermore believed that if an appropriate authority could be identified anyone such as the president who proclaimed such falsehood should have been officially subject to "the sanction of anathema."[36]

While Reagan was the proximate target of Stringfellow's example, he was merely the most current representative of a long tradition of such "pontifical remarks in regard to the nation's moral disposition and its ultimate destiny."[37] "There are now," Stringfellow wrote, "and there have been for generations Americans prominent in the political establishment, rulers and authorities of many partisan affiliations, in addition to

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[34]Ibid.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid., 54.

ecclesiastical leaders and officials and hosts of preachers, who have mouthed various versions of this same fabrication about America being especially favored among nations by God."[38] He suggested a number of reasons historically given as warrant for believing that divine favor has been bestowed upon the United States. These "signs" included "the natural and diverse beauty of the continent, . . . the grandiose dimensions of American technological prowess and military superpower, . . . the 'American standard of living,' or *laissez-faire* capitalism, or prosperity, or preeminence in science." Stringfellow further argued that "the whole political discussion about maintaining American as 'Number 1' among the nations" throughout the Cold War was "part of this pathetic syndrome." That particular discussion he moreover suggested was a reaction to the "frustration of American superpower in Korea and then, grotesquely, in Vietnam, and subsequently in Lebanon and in Latin America."[39] Thus, the rhetoric not only had a venerable tradition, but it also could serve to justify military action, particularly when the failure to act militarily could result in a situation that would cast doubt upon the divine favor allegedly bestowed upon the United States.

The Christian Nation Thesis

Stringfellow criticized vehemently the idea that America was a "Christian nation." He described that view as "utterly without biblical warrant" and "apostate."[40] As I have already discussed, for Stringfellow no country, empire, or nation of this world can make the claim that it is Christian. Only the Church in its various idealized expressions can

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[38]Ibid.

[39]Ibid., 55.

[40]Stringfellow, "A Conversation with William Stringfellow," 2.

make that claim.[41] He declared, "The Christian nation that exists in the world – the historic Christian nation – is in fact the Church of Christ."[42]

During the Reagan administration and the rise of what would later be called the Religious Right, Stringfellow expressed concern that groups such as the Moral Majority were "seeking to transmute the mythology and rhetoric concerning America the holy nation in to a political and ideological movement to 'convert' America into a so-called Christian nation."[43] He rejected their calls to restore America to its supposed status as a Christian nation, claiming that such a view reflected a "blatant falsification of history as well as a remarkable distortion of what it means, in biblical perspective, to be Christian."[44]

Stringfellow's concerns about this movement betrayed elements of conspiracy theory. Although he made the claim, "I do not give much credence to conspiratorial interpretations of history," his accusations regarding the Moral Majority and its ilk reflected such an interpretation.[45] Writing of their motive and methods, Stringfellow declared, "Their determination already is sufficient to rationalize the purging (I use that term literally) of those who stand in their way, whether the latter be from the churches or the traditional political parties or the media or among incumbent office holders or assorted non-Christian minorities."[46] Suspiciously, he claimed that members of this

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[41] See the treatment of Stringfellow's understanding of the church as "happenings" in Chapter Three.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality*, 56.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Ibid.

group, "actually gather; they meet, they strategize, they launch pilot exercises, they recruit support, they get ready for their own style coup d'etat."[47] Displaying a hint of elitism, Stringfellow accused the leaders of the Moral Majority of manipulating and exploiting a disenchanted, disenfranchised, and by implication ignorant constituency. Of the leaders he wrote, "They largely dominate and direct a vast, unfortunate, misled constituency – generally assembled as the 'Moral Majority' – who have become ripe for such exploitation because of their long experience of economic, cultural, and political rejection in America."[48] This "vast, unfortunate, [and] misled constituency" was moreover impatient. They were, Stringfellow claimed, "no longer willing to abide waiting for recognition and for their share of everything until the Kingdom comes."[49] This impatience thus enabled the leaders who are "very skillful and ambitious hucksters" to exploit the "hapless multitude."[50]

Stringfellow believed that the controversy over prayer in the public schools represented a cynical means of distracting attention from much more substantive issues and promoting the Christian nation agenda. Stringfellow implied that during his 1984 presidential campaign Ronald Reagan pushed "the snarled school prayer issue to the forefront" in order to distract the public "from his failures in foreign policy, his dispatching of marines to their doom, the multifarious mundane corruptions of his highest-level appointees, and his callous rejection of the poor and dispossessed and aged

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[47]Ibid.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid.

and handicapped and ill and unemployed and unemployable."[51] By the same token, Stringfellow asserted, "those seeking to found or restore 'a Christian nation' in America" pursued their aims "under cover of the school prayer debate."[52]

Beyond being used as a distraction, Stringfellow suggested, the school prayer debate was "mostly sham and not substance." The debate was more rhetorical than substantive. He observed, "The literal public debate in the school prayer issue has a strong resemblance to an exchange of cursings [sic] instead of an informed dialogue about policy alternatives."[53] As an example of the vacuity and absurdity of the rhetoric Stringfellow noted "the repeated one-liner, used by advocates of prayer in the schools, including Ronald Reagan, to the effect that the Supreme Court in its Constitutional ban to school prayer had 'expelled God from school.'"[54] Stringfellow exposed this statement as "patently absurd" by noting that it referred to a theological and anthropological impossibility.

Theologically, Stringfellow argued, while such a statement may reflect an insult to God, more specifically it did not "in the first place, speak of the living God at all but of some notion or conception of 'God' – a puny one, at that."[55] The statement that God had been "expelled from school" could not refer to the living God, Stringfellow declared, because, "from a biblical point of view, there is nothing whatever that the Supreme Court or any school board or any principalities or any persons – including any President of the

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[51]Ibid., 57. Stringfellow's mention of the dispatch of marines to their doom is reference to the tragic bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1983.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Ibid., 58.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Ibid.

United States – can say or do that can determine the character or action of the Word of God in common history – and nothing, issuing from any such source, that can obviate, diminish, alter, modify, prejudice, detract from, or otherwise change the pervasive presence of the Word of God in this world."[56] In other words, the living God, the true God, the One whom Stringfellow referred to as the Word of God, could not be expelled from any place by any one.

"By the same token," Stringfellow observed, "the access of a human being, including students and teachers, to the Word of God is in no way curtailed or lessened or estopped or rendered any more difficult by the decision made by the Supreme Court."[57] Just as God cannot actually be expelled from school, human access to the divine through prayer cannot be in fact be prevented by anyone. In that light Stringfellow suggested that "those who complain that 'God' has been lately expelled from school" are apparently incapable of true prayer. Instead, he wrote, "One ends up with some plaintive exercises – nonprayers or antiprayers addressed to some nongod or antigod."[58] Sarcastically Stringfellow proposed, "Better that the children spend a few moments at the opening of the school day meditating on the meaning of the Constitutional amendments that comprise the Bill of Rights: Let them be spared the foolish indignity of making believe they are praying to a make-believe deity conjured up in a White House press handout."[59]

In sum, Stringfellow saw the Christian nation thesis as a falsehood and a threat. He took issue with it on the grounds that it was biblically false. The sole Christian nation

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[56]Ibid.

[57]Ibid., 59.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Ibid., 59-60.

was the church in its various expressions. No nation of the world could make such a claim with verity. Not only was the notion of a Christian nation patently false from a biblical perspective, it also represented a nefarious goal for certain groups within American society. These groups, Stringfellow believed, were militant, aggressive, and persistent. They played upon the frustrations and the piety of their constituency, exploiting them as they pursue their agenda of Christianizing the nation.

False Hermeneutic

According to Stringfellow those who promoted such notions as the Christian nation or sought to relieve their anxiety for justification by identifying America as a divinely called and chosen country were guilty of a false hermeneutic. Their problem, he suggested, was that they were wont to "construe the Bible Americanly."[60] Consequently, they are guilty of interpreting "the Bible for the convenience of America."[61] This, Stringfellow believed, "[represented] a radical violence to both the character and content of the biblical message."[62] Such a hermeneutic produces the theological version of American exceptionalism, which is a direct affront to the substance of the biblical witness. Interpreting "the Bible Americanly," Stringfellow wrote, "fosters a fatal vanity that America is a divinely favored nation and makes of it the credo of a civil religion which is directly threatened by, and hence, which is anxious and hostile toward the

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[60]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 13. Stanley Hauerwas makes a similar point. For Hauerwas the appropriate narrative framework for the church is the church, not the nation. See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1993) and idem, "A Christian Critique of Christian America," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, eds. John Berkmand and Michael Cartwright (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001).

[61]Ibid.

[62]Ibid., 13-14.

biblical Word."[63] Stringfellow suggested that at its heart the false hermeneutic was a misappropriation of the biblical narrative in order to apply it to America's narrative. He wrote, "It arrogantly misappropriates political images from the Bible and applies them to America, so that America is conceived as Zion: as *the* righteous nation, as a people of superior political morality, as a country and society chosen and especially esteemed by God."[64] Stringfellow severely criticized this misappropriation by declaring that "it is profane, as well as grandiose, to manipulate the Bible in order to apologize for America."[65] For Stringfellow the correct alternative to this profanity was to "understand America biblically."[66]

By the Waters of Babylon

Stringfellow obviously believed that his theological critiques of the cultural and political scene in America reflected an attempt to understand the nation biblically. The most comprehensive and coherent example of this interpretation is central to his book *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*. In that work he wrote, "In short, to behold America biblically requires comprehension of the powers and principalities as they appear and as they abound in this world, even, alas, in America."[67] As was discussed in chapter three, Stringfellow juxtaposed the metaphors of Jerusalem

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[63]Ibid., 14.

[64]Ibid.

[65]Ibid.

[66]Ibid., 13.

[67]Ibid., 19.

and Babylon found in the book of Revelation.[68] In that discussion I alluded to Stringfellow's association of Babylon with any and all nations, including and perhaps especially the United States of America. Likewise, I discussed how he applied the metaphor of Jerusalem to the church in its multiple expressions. Stringfellow believed that there were "two societies . . . prominent in the biblical witness": Babylon and Jerusalem. These societies are diametrically opposed to one another: "Babylon is the city of death, Jerusalem is the city of salvation; Babylon, the dominion of alienation, babel, slavery, war Jerusalem, the community of reconciliation, sanity, freedom, peace; Babylon, the harlot, Jerusalem, the bride of God; Babylon, the realm of demons and foul spirits, Jerusalem, the dwelling place in which all creatures are fulfilled; Babylon, an abomination to the Lord, Jerusalem the holy nation; Babylon, doomed, Jerusalem, redeemed."[69]

According to Stringfellow, Americans have failed to accurately associate their nation with Babylon, this quintessential fallen power. Instead there is a pervasive impulse to associate America with Jerusalem. This results in part from a "naïveté about the Fall."[70] Such naïveté has produced a notion of the Fall that Stringfellow considered "too mean, too trivial, too narrow, [and] too gullible."[71] Consequently, he believed that "especially within the churches there is a discounting of how the reality of fallenness . . . afflicts the whole of Creation, not human beings alone but also the principalities, the

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[68]See Chapter Three, pp. 35-39

[69]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 34.

[70]Ibid., 19.

[71]Ibid.

nations included."[72] In light of this discounting of the pervasiveness of the effects of the Fall, Americans, especially American Christians, needed to hear the message that Stringfellow preached: "The nation is fallen. Americans exist in time, in the era called, Biblically, the Fall. America is a demonic principality, or a complex or constellation or conglomeration of principalities and powers in which death furnishes the meaning, in which death is the reigning idol, enshrined in multifarious forms and guises, enslaving human beings, exacting human sacrifices, capturing and captivating Presidents as well as intimidating and dehumanizing ordinary citizens."[73] This stands in direct contrast to any notion of America as the justified nation or the holy nation or the chosen nation or a Christian nation. "Confounding what, all along, so many Americans have been told or taught or have believed," Stringfellow proclaimed, "America *is* Babylon and Babylon is *not* Jerusalem."[74]

Romans 13

Another hermeneutical mistake that Stringfellow implied led to a false understanding of America's relationship with Christianity and the Christian's relationship to the nation was a misinterpretation of a portion of Romans 13. In the first seven verses of that New Testament chapter the author, traditionally considered to be the apostle Paul, admonishes the Roman Christians:

> Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who

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[72]Ibid.

[73]William Stringfellow, unpublished manuscript, "The Christian in Resistance," an address given at Helen Hills Chapel of Smith College, Northampton, MA, April 23, 1972, 4. Box 15, William Stringfellow Papers, #4438, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University Library.

[74]Ibid.

> resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxis are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, honor to whom honor is due.[75]

This, Stringfellow argued, has often been "interpreted in conformance with supposed necessities to sanction incumbent political regimes, whether of the fourth century or of the twentieth."[76] Interpreting the passage in this manner fails to allow for significant qualification and produces "an ethos which vests the existence of the church in the preservation of the political status quo."[77]

Ambiguity of legitimacy. This flaw of exegesis, Stringfellow argued, reflected a failure to account for the issue of political legitimacy. Taking that into account, another way of interpreting the passage is that "the obedience of Christians to political authority is conditioned upon its so-called legitimacy."[78] In other words, according to that interpretation, the command to be subject to the authorities is not an unqualified absolute for the Christian. It presupposes that the regime in question is legitimate. This posed for Stringfellow a problem because of what he called the "ambiguity of legitimacy."[79]

This ambiguity is demonstrated in attempts to determine the basis for a particular political authority's legitimacy. Stringfellow asked, "But when is political authority

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[75]Romans 13:1-7 RSV.

[76]Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience*, 37.

[77]Ibid., 49.

[78]Ibid., 37.

[79]Ibid.

legitimate? When does a nation have a status which may be affirmed as instituted or ordained of God? Or when does a state have a function which can be considered as servanthood to God? And when are those who rule – emperors or presidents – parliaments or police due honor not alone because of fear, because they wield the sword, because they command means to intimidate, dominate, coerce human beings, but as a matter of conscience?"[80]

Indeed the issue of legitimacy, Stringfellow noted, was the justification for the founding of the United States of America. Consequently in America, Stringfellow acknowledged, "these have never been abstract questions either for those who profess the gospel or for those who do not."[81] "The founding premises of the nation," he wrote, define legitimacy in government both with respect to rule deemed so obnoxious to human life in society that it was to be resisted and overthrown, in the Declaration of Independence, and, thereafter, in the limitations upon political authority and the institutionalization of public accountability published in the Constitution."[82] Stringfellow suggested that political legitimacy consistently arose as an issue throughout American history, and he believed that events surrounding Watergate and the war in Vietnam again brought the legitimacy of the current regime into question. He wrote, "Hence, when the Bill of Impeachment was uttered against Richard Nixon, the *New York Times* stated that the nation could 'look forward with confidence to the further working out its

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[80]Ibid., 37-38.

[81]Ibid., 38.

[82]Ibid.

constitutional processes for restoration of legitimacy in the highest executive office.'"[83] Stringfellow questioned whether such legitimacy was indeed encouraged in the restoration process by the pardon of President Nixon: "If legitimacy of political authority was, thus, at stake, it must necessarily be asked whether the aborting of the Nixon impeachment by the pardon dispensed by Gerald Ford after Ford had been appointed to succession by Nixon leaves the nation deprived of 'the restoration of legitimacy in the highest executive office.'"[84]

Protesters of the war in Vietnam embodied the question of legitimacy in that, according to Stringfellow, they "upheld the position that the criminal policy and unconstitutional conduct of the war exposed incumbent political authority (first the Johnson administration and then that of Nixon) as illegitimate."[85] This denial of the regime's legitimacy, Stringfellow noted, prompted the public witness and consequent fugitive status of his friends the Berrigan brothers. "For the Berrigans," he wrote, "as well as other Christians, there could be no obedience to illegitimate power."[86] Stringfellow moreover affirmed the witness of the Berrigans, claiming that it should not be remembered as the resistance of "cowards or weirdos, far out radicals or malcontents, traitors or rebels."[87] On the contrary, he argued, their witness reflects the attempt to "uphold a quite traditional view of political legitimacy" with the intent that "political

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[83]Ibid. The quote is from "The Great Task Begun," *New York Times*, August 4, 1974, sec. E, p. 16.

[84]Ibid.

[85]Ibid.

[86]Ibid., 39.

[87]Ibid.

authority could be conscientiously honored in the nation."[88] In other words, Stringfellow implied, the Berrigans and others like them were merely reflecting the traditional view of political legitimacy that has characterized the nation since its founding. In terms of American exceptionalism this position contains a bit of irony.

In a rare example of research in which he actually attributes his sources, Stringfellow examined some historical arguments that Christians have used to determine legitimacy "so as to set forth the parameters of political obedience for Christians."[89] Quoting Grotius and Calvin, Stringfellow noted that a classic requirement for political legitimacy to be recognized was that the government in question was *just*. While this may at first seem an adequate criterion, upon further examination, Stringfellow observed, it does not actually solve the problem of the ambiguity of political legitimacy. "To relate legitimacy to just government seems straightforward enough," Stringfellow wrote, "until it is realized that the ambiguity associated with determining legitimacy has been transmitted to the word 'just.'"[90] Stringfellow noted that "in spite of the rationalist pretenses that pure or abstract and immutable definitions of political justice can be divined," in practice the issue of just rule is determined "situationally or existentially."[91]

As examples of this situational and existential determination of justice Stringfellow quoted from the sermons of certain American clergy during the time leading to the Revolutionary War. Stringfellow notes that the particular clergy who were obviously in

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[88]Ibid.

[89]Ibid.

[90]Ibid., 40. The question of the ambiguity and relativity of the term justice is central to Alisdair MacIntyre's important work, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

[91]Ibid.

favor of the revolution proclaimed specific definitions of justice and hence legitimacy in light of the political situation of the times. Their examples, however, only bring out a further ambiguity characterizing the issue of political legitimacy. Such sermons, Stringfellow noted, rationalized the revolutionary cause "by imputing illegitimacy – as distinct from unlawfulness – to the rule of George III."[92] While this rationalization was based upon a specific theological position that limited political authority on the basis of self-evident rights divinely endowed, "it was by no measure accepted as obvious or self-validating, and many Americans continued to submit to the rule of George III as legitimate, as well as lawful, just as, of course, most of the British people did."[93] For many colonists, as well as for most Britons, George III was seen as the lawful king and the legitimate authority.

Consequently, Stringfellow observed, a further ambiguity involving political legitimacy is revealed in the relationship of legitimacy to lawfulness. He wrote, "What do we have here? We find one historic regime which can be and which was, in fact, simultaneously deemed legitimate and lawful, and illegitimate but lawful, and legitimate but unlawful, and illegitimate and unlawful, according to which faction in which country to which the regime pertains beholds it."[94] Continuing to make his point, Stringfellow also noted that further ambiguity surrounded the revolution itself: "On the one hand, the rebellion would be unlawful, yet, as the American polemists argued, it was legitimate; presumably George III found it both unlawful and illegitimate; some American Tories

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[92]Ibid., 42.

[93]Ibid., 43.

[94]Ibid.

thought the colonists' grievances lawful, but the revolutionary war illegitimate."[95] Stringfellow further acknowledged the ambiguity of legitimacy associated with the subsequent establishment of the American government: "If, however, the revolution be assessed as legitimate, wherein did it also become lawful – When [sic] the war was won? When other nations accorded recognition? When the Constitution was ratified? After the war of 1812?"[96]

Beyond the questions of legitimacy associated with the meaning of justice and the issue of lawfulness vis-à-vis legitimacy, Stringfellow noted that determining the practical criteria for political legitimacy was also fraught with ambiguity. He observed that in America legitimacy hinged upon the franchise.[97] Of course this produced further questions concerning who is enfranchised. He wrote, "It is an appealing idea, though questions linger as to whether a regime must then be counted illegitimate if suffrage is either precluded in practice or ineffectual as a means of political change."[98] Stringfellow explained this by noting the de jure disenfranchisement of women throughout the history of the United States until the passage of the nineteenth amendment to the Constitution and the de facto disenfranchisement experienced by many minority groups up to his time. These questions, he observed, "dilute the straightforward sound of this test of legitimacy."[99] This dilution, he suggested, is reinforced by what he saw as "the ruling initiative of extra-constitutional institutions like the Pentagon or the internal police or the

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[95]Ibid.

[96]Ibid.

[97]Ibid.

[98]Ibid., 44.

[99]Ibid.

Central Intelligence Agency which usually operate outside the rule of law, often in defiance of the elected government and its policies, and, seemingly, beyond accountability to citizens."[100] In addition to governmental powers that are immune to the results of the franchise, Stringfellow suggested that the emergence of "multinational and transnational conglomerates controlling the most basic resources requisite to life" weakens the case for political legitimacy to be associated with the right to vote, since these conglomerates are essentially exempt from the demands of electorates.[101]

Based upon the above argument Stringfellow concluded that "the interpretation of obedience to political authority as turning upon the assessment of legitimacy – for all that it is represented as an objective test–extremely relative, heavily ambiguous, an artificial and unnecessary imposition upon the biblical texts, and unedifying where the concern and intent is witness to Christ as Lord."[102] Hence, Stringfellow argued, the Christian or anyone else cannot unconscientiously obey the authorities just because they happen to be in power, nor can one apply a simple definition or formula to discern the political legitimacy of a particular regime and base obedience upon that determination. Because of the ambiguity and relativity associated with political legitimacy, he wrote, "that should caution both politicians and preachers against simplistic readings of the biblical passages pertinent to questions of conscience and obedience in the political realm."[103] What people in general and Christians in particular must do, he suggests, is realize the fallenness of all nations and the dominance of the principalities and powers in and

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[100]Ibid.

[101]Ibid.

[102]Ibid., 45.

[103]Ibid., 47.

through the authority of government and vigilantly exercise conscience in selectively submitting to the powers that be.

This rather extended discussion of the ambiguity of legitimacy is significant for the study at hand because it exposes an implicit challenge in Stringfellow's thought to both the political and the theological elements of American exceptionalism. Politically, Stringfellow demonstrates the questionable and relative nature of what have been held to be verities of the American Creed. Implied in his argument about political legitimacy is a challenge to the ideological foundation for the Declaration of Independence, as well as many of the values informing the Constitution. Furthermore, quoting passages of the Bible to justify the current regime, as many of the Christian America theorists are wont to do, does not solve the problem of ambiguity because from a biblical perspective one could argue that the revolution was illegitimate as well as unlawful from the start and thus the current ruling authorities are not biblically sanctioned.[104] Stringfellow addressed this misuse of the biblical passage by certain Christians in detail. This will be discussed below.

Constantinian Arrangement. Stringfellow suggested that a misinterpretation or, more specifically, misuse of the Romans 13 passage justified the Constantinian Arrangement. Referring to the fourth-century emperor who declared Christianity "religio licito," whose declaration led to a situation in which "a comity between church and nation was sponsored which, in various elaborations, still prevails in the twentieth

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[104]The ambiguity of political legitimacy with respect to the revolution has been noted by others. See, for example, Eric Willenz, "Revolutionary War: Challenge to Just War," *Worldview* 11 (October 1968): 6-10; Mark Noll, "Was the Revolutionary War Justified?" *Christianity Today*, February 8, 1999, 70; and John Thomas Scott, "On God's Side: The Problem of Submission in American Revolutionary Rhetoric," *Fides et Historia* 34, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2002): 111-122.

century."[105] This arrangement, Stringfellow argued, has produced "an ethos which vests the existence of the church in the preservation of the political status quo."[106] It has in turn "caused radical confusions in the relations of church and nation, church and state, church and regime" that as a result "encouraged and countenanced stupid allegiance to political authority as if that were service to the church and, *a fortiori*, to God."[107] According to Stringfellow the Constantinian Arrangement led to a blind ecclesiological and theological support and of the governing authorities that could be considered celebratory. In doing so, the church, Stringfellow argued, has compromised the gospel, substituting nationalistic religion for biblical truth. The Constantinian Arrangement has produced "such a religioning of the gospel that its biblical integrity is corrupted and such an acculturation of the church that it becomes practically indistinguishable from the worldly principalities so that both gospel and church become adjuncts or conveyances of civil religion, and of a mock-sanctified status of political authority."[108] As a result, Stringfellow observed, Christians have rarely exercised a prophetic role with respect to the nation and the state, reflexively assuming the legitimacy of the incumbent regime. "In consequence," he wrote, "contemporary Christians inherit the heaviest possible presumption of legitimacy favoring incumbent political rulers and regimes and with that a supposed preemptive duty of obedience to them which has been challenged only spasmodically."[109]

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[105]Ibid., 48.

[106]Ibid., 49.

[107]Ibid.

[108]Ibid.

[109]Ibid.

Stringfellow concluded that the Constantinian Arrangement contradicted the original intent of the apostolic witness: "I construe the Constantinian comity as the historic reversal of the precedent established in the apostolic church regarding relations with political authority."[110] This comity, he suggested, fostered a *quid pro quo* relationship of selected religious sects with the state. Within this context the political authorities established policies which "safeguarded the practice of religion and religious premises and prerogatives of religious leaders so long as these were politically innocuous and did not disrupt or resist political authority."[111] In contrast to this arrangement, Stringfellow argued that the biblical precedent describing the witness of the apostles did not permit the church to settle for this comity because of the nature of the church and the responsibilities of its mission. He wrote, "It is the persuasion of Paul, and the acceptance of his apostolic authority, together with the vision which St. Peter suffers concerning the ecumenical scope of the mission of the church in this world, which establish that the church is no mere sect, among many sects, and that the church cannot afford the accommodation with political authority which the sectarian comity conveyed."[112] Consequently, one of the primary struggles for the church has involved whether or not it can free itself from the Constantinian Arrangement and reclaim its original witness.

Law and order? A final misreading and misuse of Romans 13 that Stringfellow discussed deals with the necessary order that political authority allegedly secures. "This," he wrote, "is the position and argument that obedience to political authority,

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[110]Ibid., 50.

[111]Ibid.

[112]Ibid., 51.

practically identified as an incumbent administration, is requisite for Christians for the sake of the order which political authority imposes, supervises, and maintains."[113] In other words, Christian obedience to the incumbent regime prevents anarchy. Stringfellow suggested that this was merely an adaptation of the Constantinian Arrangement, the same comity but in a different guise. He noted a common justification for such obedience in the following terms: "because a supposed absence of anarchy, which political authority obtains, enables the church to implement its mission."[114] This then describes a "basic reciprocity, by which the church submits to political authority in its realm while political authority supports or protects the church in its sphere."[115] This notion, Stringfellow observed, produced the constitutional separation of church and state, which "despite its ostensible religious neutrality," he argued, "is more accurately admitted to involve the same kind of reciprocity, save that instead of according legal establishment to a particular church it renders a de facto pluralistic establishment of many churches and sects."[116]

To Stringfellow then it was a "short step" from justifying obedience to the political authority because of the sphere of security it provides for the church to accomplish its mission to the idea that the primary purpose of the church is "to furnish societal stability or to instill complaisance and to teach compliance for the political regime."[117] In fact this point, he suggested, was proven in another context in the middle of the twentieth century:

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[113]Ibid., 55.

[114]Ibid., 58.

[115]Ibid.

[116]Ibid.

[117]Ibid.

"It was – to mention another instance at point – this version of the anti-anarchy argument which elicited so much sympathy among ecclesiastics and church people for the Nazi cause when it came to power in Germany."[118]

Stringfellow also challenged the notion of political order from an empirical basis, thus identifying another ambiguity. "It must be, on occasion," he allowed, "evident in an empirical sense that political authority does in fact achieve functional order." However, he observed, "if there is any singular feature among the diversities of governments in the course of many centuries it is that the so-called order which political authority obtains has reference to the enforced preservation of a status quo or to the entrenchment of incumbent regimes or rulers."[119] In that light Stringfellow made the charge that "within such 'order' – quite as commonly – disorder reigns."[120]

Stringfellow argued that disorder reigned in America. In doing so he simultaneously provided empirical and theological arguments against American exceptionalism. Empirically, he iterated several observations regarding the American government and its policies. Theologically, he implied that order cannot ultimately be maintained by fallen principalities.

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[118]Ibid. Along those lines, Stringfellow wrote a provocative piece entitled, "Does America Need a Barmen Declaration?" (*Christianity and Crisis*, December 24, 1973, 274-276) in which he concludes in the tentative affirmative. NOTE: The Barmen Declaration was a 1934 statement by the Confessing Synod of the German Evangelical Church that declared its rejection of a number of the positions that had made the official church in Germany an organ of the state. See Karl Barth, *The German Church Conflict*, trans. by P. T. A. Parker (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1965); Robert F. Koch, "The Theological Responses of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Church-State Relations in Germany, 1933-1945" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1988); and Robert T. Osborn, *The Barmen Declaration as a Paradigm for the Theology of the American Church* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991)

[119]Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience*, 60.

[120]Ibid.

One example of his empirical evidence for disorder is his discussion of the effectiveness of the police. With typically dramatic flair Stringfellow wrote, "Lawless authority, which in the American experience, has always furnished the effectual rule over blacks and Indians, and some others, is now exposed as endemic in the paramilitarization and covert deployment of the police power throughout society."[121] The police, however, are ineffective in accomplishing the goal that their increased power is supposed to achieve. "Yet," he wrote, "there exists no substantial proof of police effectuality in prosaic law enforcement, in the control of conventional (i. e., unofficial) crime among any classes of the population and in either urban or suburban jurisdictions."[122] In Stringfellow's view the order that was supposedly being secured was obscured by the disorder that he implied was in fact caused by the policies and practices of the authorities who were touting their responsibility to prevent anarchy.[123] In sum, he wrote, "If the achievement of order be counted the virtue of government and, in turn, the condition precedent for Christian obedience to political authority, I am impelled by the overwhelming evidence of the absence of order now in America, to conclude the prerequisite fails."[124]

Theologically Stringfellow argued that the chaotic circumstances were empirical evidence of not only the ambiguity of the notion of order, but also the biblical witness to the doctrine of the Fall. "The disorder in America," he asserted, "now represents none other than a particular version of the essential disarray of fallen creation. The empirical

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[121]Ibid.

[122]Ibid., 61.

[123]Ibid.

[124]Ibid., 62.

description of the American situation is in truth, a specific recital of the biblical story of the fall."[125]

Revelation 13

In his work, *Conscience and Obedience*, Stringfellow juxtaposed Romans 13 to Revelation 13, claiming that the misinterpretation of Romans 13 and hence a misunderstanding of the Christian's role with respect to political authority stems in part from a failure to accurately account for Revelation 13. "Romans 13:1-7," Stringfellow observed, "has been examined separately and, meanwhile, Revelation 13 has been ignored or suppressed or deemed esoteric."[126] He noted that this indicated how the interpretation of both passages had been conditioned by history: "Romans has been interpreted in conformance with supposed necessities to sanction incumbent political regimes, whether of the fourth century or of the twentieth; Revelation has been dismissed as pertinent just to a certain first century regime or else has been construed as apocalyptic fantasy without historic reference to any regime."[127] As has been discussed, Stringfellow rejected the traditional interpretation of Romans 13. Likewise, he denied credibility to traditional views of Revelation 13.

An element of his view of Revelation 13 that is important for this study is his understanding of the notions of blasphemy and of the Antichrist, particularly as they pertained to the United States. For the purpose at hand the most significant portion of Revelation 13 is the first seven verses:

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[125]Ibid.

[126]Ibid., 37.

[127]Ibid.

> And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed and the whole world followed the beast with wonder. Men worshiped the dragon, for he he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it.?' And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words; and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months; it opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation.[128]

In this passage Stringfellow found a parable for America, as well as any other nation in history.

Stringfellow observed that "in the turbulent and ambiguous history of Christendom, especially under the auspices of the Constantinian Arrangement," an "elaborate sophistry" has been brought to bear to construct "pernicious doctrines, categorically alien to biblical faith, propounding 'just wars' or premising 'Christian nations.'"[129] In America, Stringfellow argued, "current versions of these pernicious doctrines have been regorged both in vulgar bicentennial rites and in solemn shibboleths concerning national security and the sacred destiny of America."[130] Continuing with his critique of obvious elements of American exceptionalism, Stringfellow added, "The implication of such notions, so offensive to biblical faith, is the imputation that, somehow the salvation of the world depends upon *the asserted moral superiority of America among the nations* [italics

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[128]Revelation 13:1-7 RSV.

[129]Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience*, 67-68.

[130]Ibid., 68.

mine] or, indeed, upon its identification as Zion."[131] Consequently, Stringfellow argued, the "priority of so-called national security" has been used to justify all manner of "war and genocide, and the deployment of overkill nuclear capability along with covert operations, recruitment of missionaries as secret agents, assassination plots, and official conspiracies intervening in other nations."[132]

Blasphemy. Such justifications and their attendant actions on the part of the nation and its leaders, Stringfellow believed, were examples of what is biblically referred to as blasphemy. Referring to the substance of Revelation 13, Stringfellow wrote, "at the verge of the Apocalypse, wherein the nations are portrayed as horrendous predatory beasts, the significant term employed by the author to set forth offense of political authority before the Word of God is *blasphemy*."[133] While noting that "blasphemy or 'bombast and blasphemy'" may in current usage connotate merely "heavy cursing or obscene utterance," Stringfellow argued that biblically the term means much more.[134] In the biblical witness, especially in the book of Revelation, he declared, blasphemy "denotes wanton and contemptuous usurpation of the very vocation of God, vilification of the Word of God and persecution of life as life originates in the Word of God, preemptive attempt against the sovereignty of the Word of God in this world, brute aggression against human life which confesses of appeals to the Word of God."[135] Stringfellow therefore suggested that America is guilty of all of these transgressions. The

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[131]Ibid.

[132]Ibid., 68-69.

[133]Ibid., 69.

[134]Ibid.

[135]Ibid.

nation thus blasphemes when it arrogates to itself the role of savior to the world which in truth is a usurpation of the vocation of God.

In light of his understanding of blasphemy Stringfellow concludes with a return to his treatment of the question of political legitimacy. Biblically speaking, he argued, the term that most accurately and comprehensively describes the nation is blasphemy: "Not illegitimacy, not anarchy, not injustice, but blasphemy, so the blasphemy recapitulates and relates these other terms."[136] Stringfellow then concluded, "So where there is illegitimacy in political authority or the disorder of coerced order, or injustice of any degree afflicted upon anyone, there is blasphemy. And when nations conceive their own sanctification and pronounce wars just, there is the bombast and blasphemy of the Antichrist."[137] In short, then, what I call American exceptionalism is for Stringfellow the "bombast and blasphemy of the Antichrist." It is to the latter that the discussion now turns.

The Antichrist in America. Stringfellow wrote, "Among Americans, especially church folk, there is probably a greater need to demythologize the Antichrist than to demythologize Christ."[138] Noting that Americans, if they considered the concept at all, have tended to refer to the Antichrist in terms of "other places, and other times, to other nations, ideologies, religions, and personages," Stringfellow wrote, "Seldom is any such association mentioned in the American context."[139] This is a mistake, he suggested,

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[136]Ibid., 70.

[137]Ibid.

[138]Stringfellow, *An Ethic*, 111.

[139]Ibid.

because biblically the Antichrist "designates the power of death incarnate institutionally or in some other principality or, sometimes, in a person associated with and possessed by demonic power."[140] In that light, for Stringfellow the term Antichrist could refer to a nation as well as a person. In the American context, he suggested, the word refers to the nation, and it is particularly evident in an "American vanity" that virtually deifies the State.[141]

Stringfellow asserts that in Revelation 13 "the domination of the power of death politically is so degenerate, wanton, brutal, violent, and antihuman that the narrator speaks in horrific bestial imagery."[142] That image, he suggests with a reference to the original literary context of the book of Revelation, is "apropos in contemporary America, as well as for first century Imperial Rome."[143] The appropriateness of the imagery for America logically follows from his theological understanding of the nature of all nations. He wrote, "I say this nation, America, like all its predecessors as nations and all other principalities, is ruled by the power of death, and that this truth is as discernible here and now as it was in Ancient Rome."[144] Consequently, he suggested that the violence perpetrated by the nation and justified by exceptionalism is appropriately described as the normal activity of Antichrist: "The Antichrist is the incarnation of death in a nation, institution, or office, or other principality, and/or an image or person associated

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[140]Ibid., 112.

[141]Ibid., 114.

[142]Ibid., 113.

[143]Ibid.

[144]Ibid.

therewith."[145] This incarnation of death promotes, propagates, and prosecutes the "degradation of human life" as well as the "denigration of worship" by encouraging the "idolatry of death as embodied in the State," which is "manifest blasphemy against God."[146]

"In consequence," Stringfellow contended, "a biblical person is always wary of claims which the State makes for allegiance, obedience, and service under the rubric called patriotism."[147] These claims are in truth, he argued, demands for idolatry of the Antichrist. Regardless of the benignity within which the demands are couched, he declared, "in any country, the rhetoric and rituals of conformity and obedience to a regime or ruler latently concern idolatry of the Antichrist."[148] This idolatry, he suggested, reveals that the State as Antichrist is "a grotesque parody of Jesus Christ and of his Church in the vocation of the holy nation."[149] In that case, he argued, "what is transpiring is that the nation – Rome or Nazi Germany or America – lusts to be the holy nation."[150]

For Stringfellow America, then, is the Antichrist. It perpetrates death through the extension of its power abroad and the aggrandizement of its authority at home. It moreover justifies its actions through blasphemous claims of moral superiority and a sacred vocation to promote its values throughout the world. In Stringfellow's view

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[145]Ibid.

[146]Ibid.

[147]Ibid.

[148]Ibid.

[149]Ibid., 114.

[150]Ibid.

American exceptionalism represents the bombast and blasphemy of the Antichrist and suggests a bastard message of good news to the world:

> The American vanity as a nation has, since the origins of America, been Babylonian – boasting through Presidents, often through Pharisees within the churches, through folk religion, and in other ways, that America is Jerusalem. This is neither an innocuous nor benign claim; it is the essence of the doctrine of Antichrist.[151]

Chaplains and Civil Religion

In the manuscript of an address entitled "The Military Chaplaincy from the Perspective of the Church" one can see some practical implications of Stringfellow's tragic view of the nation, of American exceptionalism, and its ceremonial expression, civil religion.[152] In the address he discusses the rationale for a chaplaincy, noting that the chaplaincy as an organ of the military provides what amount to priests for the civil religion. He also suggests a way for the church to directly impact the military and its personnel without being beholden to it.

An "Agitating Presence"

Introducing his address, Stringfellow notes that church ministry "does not acquire peculiar theological rationale by reason of the particular persons or constituency, profession or class which that ministry seeks to serve."[153] Based upon that observation Stringfellow argued that there is no theological justification for the military qua military. "There is," he wrote, "therefore, no distinctive theological premise for a ministry to the military, any more than there be for a ministry to the university, or to vagrants, or to the

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[151]Ibid.

[152]William Stringfellow, "The Military Chaplaincy from the Perspective of the Church," unpublished manuscript, June 16, 1975.

[153]Ibid., 1.

affluent, or to the ill, or to prison inmates, or to adolescents, or to any institution or similar principality and then human beings associated with it."[154] To this Stringfellow added the point "that the ministry of the Church is never concerned with persons only or with persons as if they existed in a void, but the ministry is always concerned with human beings in their multifarious relationships with themselves and with the principalities."[155] In other words, ministry deals with persons but must always concern itself with the implications of the relationship of the persons to the various powers and principalities in the midst of the fallen creation.

For Stringfellow the ministry of the church is predicated upon the recognition that "the Church signifies the transcendence of fallenness, the restoration of coherence and relationship, the event of love, the resurrection from death, the hope for the redemption of the whole of creation."[156] Therefore, he declared, hinting at what he understood to be the role of a military chaplaincy, "the ministry of the Church is to manifest the grace or fidelity of God to His creation in the midst of fallen creation by the Church's patient and *agitating presence dispersed throughout the world* [italics mine]."[157]

Institutional and Personal

Stringfellow believed that any type of chaplaincy should take into account the institution as well as the personnel. Based upon his experience in the military, Stringfellow observed, "[Too] often . . . the Church has attempted a ministry only to

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[154]Ibid.

[155]Ibid.

[156]Ibid.

[157]Ibid., 1-2.

military personnel and has been afraid or otherwise uncertain about its witness vis-à-vis the institutional structures of the military domain." As a result of this neglect, he suggested, the church has failed in its responsibilities to both the individual personnel and the military power. Stringfellow charged, "That has meant confusion in the ministry to persons as well as default in the ministry to principalities."[158]

Warfare and the Word of God

Stringfellow recognized that the issue of violence and the ethics of warfare significantly influenced the questions of the nature, the appropriateness, and the tasks of the military chaplaincy. He emphatically stated, "There is categorically no way to rationalize warfare as the will of God or as compatible with the Word of God."[159] Nevertheless, he argued, one must not assume that by expressing this in the form of pacificism, he or she can avoid culpability for violence. Likewise, he argued one cannot somehow lay greater blame upon the soldier simply because he is directly involved in war. That thinking, he observed, betrayed an ignorance of the pervasiveness of the effects of the Fall. He wrote, "It should be understood that the violence of war is not exclusive. On the contrary, the doctrine of the Fall means that violence displaces relationship throughout creation, that violence, in one form or another is pervasive, and that neither any person nor any principality is unimplicated in violence."[160] The pervasiveness of violence then renders the blaming of military personnel moot. "What distinguishes the military," Stringfellow suggested, "in relation to violence and killing,

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[158]Ibid., 2.

[159]Ibid.

[160]Ibid., 3.

specifically that in warfare, is *proximity* not culpability."[161] The soldier is merely "closer to the action" as it were, not more blameworthy for it. Stringfellow offered an example of his point with the following reference to the My Lai incident during the war in Vietnam: "Thus, Lt. Calley was on the scene at My Lai, but he is not, just because of his immediate proximity to the massacre, rendered more culpable than, say, General Westmoreland, who was distant by reason of chain of command, or, for that matter, hapless taxpayers in America who acquiesced in the war which occasioned the massacre."[162]

Stringfellow was not, by the way, an absolute pacifist. For most of his life he challenged such a position on the empirical basis that sometimes recourse to violence is necessary. In 1966 he wrote, "I am not an ideological pacifist, nor do I believe that a Christian may never be involved in war. I affirm the Christians who fought in the anti-Nazi underground, among many other instances that might be cited. I am only saying that how a particular war is regarded is a matter only disclosed in God's own judgment and Christians are not called upon to second guess that judgment."[163] He also eschewed ideology and thus noted that every decision is fraught with moral ambiguity and cannot be predetermined by ideological restrictions. Consequently, to be a pacifist is to decide *a priori* that one will not engage in violence regardless of the circumstances, thus denying the ambiguous nature of moral decisions and the sole prerogative of God to judge circumstances.

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[161]Ibid.

[162]Ibid.

[163]William Stringfellow in *The Restless Church: A Response to the Comfortable Pew*, edited by William Kilbourn (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott Company, 1966), 15.

He also claimed to refuse the label of pacifist because he observed that many who wear it seem to believe that they are then innocent of violence. He wrote, "Such pacifists so often suppose that the advocacy of non-violence diminishes their culpability for violence. That view fails to comprehend the ubiquity of violence in the Fall and the responsibility of all for it."[164]

Walter Wink believes that later in life Stringfellow moved much closer to the pacifist position, or at least to one of self-conscious non-violence. He writes, "From conversations [with Stringfellow] shortly before his death . . . I drew the conclusion that he had moved to a more principled embrace of nonviolence, not as an abstract absolute but as the unavoidable logic of his own understanding of the dominion and ubiquity of death."[165] Citing a passage from *Suspect Tenderness*, however, Wink observes that perhaps Stringfellow had been clear about this view of nonviolence earlier: "Meanwhile, where the ethics of change condone or practice violence, then revolution – no matter how idealistic, how necessary, or how seemingly glorious – is basically without viable hope even if it were to prevail empirically. . . . In such circumstances, though we are not ideological pacifists – or, for that matter, ideologues of any species, we are persuaded, as are the Berrigans, that recourse to violence, whether to threaten or topple the idol of death in the State, is inherently a worship of the self-same idol."[166] Thus, while he may not have been a pacifist per se, he saw that violence, regardless of the motive and particularly in the American context, ultimately expressed the idolatry of death. So, he wrote,

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[164]Ibid.

[165]Walter Wink, "Stringfellow on the Powers," in *Radical Christian, Exemplary Lawyer*, 30.

[166]William Stringfellow and Anthony Towne, *Suspect Tenderness*, 111.

"nonviolence has become the only way in America, today, to express hope for human life in society, and, transcending that, to anticipate an eschatological hope."[167]

In that light Stringfellow declared that the ministry to the military should not involve the defense of warfare or any of the institutions directly affiliated with its support or its prosecution. He wrote, "In the ministry to the military, the Church must not prostitute the Gospel either by undertaking *any* apologetic for warfare, or for any of its attendant commerce." Likewise, such ministry should not "prostitute the Gospel" by "exaggerating the culpability of the military based upon proximity to the violence and killing in war."[168] This position reflects something that has already been noted. Stringfellow believed in an inherent conflict between the Gospel and the State: "I do not believe that the claims of the Gospel can be rendered compatible with those of the State."[169] He suggested that any attempt at rendering the two compatible reflected the legacy of the Constantinian accommodation, which he considered apostasy. In order to "recover the genius of the Apostolic witness," the American church needed to reject its traditional comity with the governing powers. I have already mentioned his criticism of the policy of tax exemption for churches. In the context of his discussion of the military chaplaincy he reiterates that complaint, claiming that tax exempt status renders the church a "beneficiary of the regime." Such tax exemption, he declared, was "an elementary offense to the Gospel."[170]

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[167]Ibid.

[168]Stringfellow, "The Military Chaplaincy," 4.

[169]Ibid.

[170]Ibid.

Legitimacy Revisited

Based upon the above arguments and assertions Stringfellow believed that any ministry to the military must address the legitimacy of the regime. Repeating what was for him a common theme, he noted "certain political and governmental institutions" that had "developed extraconstitutionally and operate essentially in a lawless, even criminal, manner."[171] Since, he argued, those institutions "function (and rule!) without being accountable to the American constitutional system, they possess no claim for honor or obedience from Christians even under the traditional Constantinian rubric for upholding political authority."[172] It was requisite, therefore, in ministry to military personnel or to those considering such a career to address the nature of the American governmental system: "I believe the Church is derelict in its pastoral care of people if it does not squarely articulate these issues for those who contemplate entering the military or those who are already in the military."[173] Consequently, the nature of the State and its incompatibility with the claims of the Gospel precludes the conscientious Christian from serving in the military. This reflects an interesting contrast to the traditional justification of conscientious objection. Stringfellow acknowledged this contrast, suggesting that the illegitimacy of the regime, "rather than pacifist conviction," is "the chief deterrent to a Christian volunteering for military service or pursuing a professional career in the military."[174]

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[171]Ibid.

[172]Ibid., 5.

[173]Ibid.

[174]Ibid.

Civil Religion

It is understandable then that Stringfellow would suggest that "the Church chaplaincy need not be a corps of the military service in order to have access to military personnel" and would argue that "its status as a corps restricts such access and distorts its witness."[175] In association with this restriction on the church's witness, Stringfellow discussed civil religion, offering his definition and suggesting the traditional relationship of the chaplaincy to it.[176] Stringfellow defined civil religion as "the sanction for the civil regime in the name of God, and, usually, with the public endorsement of the Church."[177] He considered civil religion to be a blasphemy that sanctions a blasphemous power. In that light chaplains who are organic to the military tend to function as priests of the cult of civil religion. "It seems to me obvious," he observed, "that if chaplains are organically affiliated with the military, they will be programmed and deployed as teachers and propagandists for civil religion *instead* of the Gospel."[178] This puts commissioned military chaplains in an "impossible position," he suggested, because they face a dilemma: "They cannot at once uphold both biblical faith, with its heavy censure of blasphemy embodied in the political order of a nation (cf. Revelation 13), and the blasphemy which *civil religion is categorically* [italics mine]." In short, the official military chaplain is under tremendous pressure to endorse the nation and its policies, to

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[175]Ibid.

[176]The academic discussion of the nature and necessity of civil religion became a virtual cottage industry for academicians of various disciplines. The discussion originated with Robert Bellah's 1967 "Civil Religion in America," *Daedelus* 96 (Winter 1967): 1-21. He expanded the thesis of the article in the book, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

[177]Stringfellow, "The Military Chaplaincy," 6.

[178]Ibid.

propagate a theological rationale for patriotism, and preside over the liturgical expressions of the civil religion. As a result the chaplain must compromise the prophetic witness of the Church and the Lord which he or she is also supposed to represent.

Because of this dilemma, the compromise that it creates, and the fact that civil religion is deeply entrenched in the American psyche, Stringfellow rejected the notion of official chaplains who function directly under the auspices of the armed forces. He wrote, "Since it appears most unlikely that civil religion will abate in America, if the ministry to the military is to be implemented, the chaplaincy would have to be separated from the military organization and from military appointment and employment, and maintained by the Church, under ecclesiastical discipline, compensated wholly from Church resources, freed from exploitation by the military under the civil religion rubric or otherwise."[179] While admitting the trouble associated with such a scheme, Stringfellow nevertheless declared that it would insure that the Church would be faithful to its witness. "That," he declared, "projects a ministry, including an ad hoc chaplaincy, to the military which is fraught with great difficulty and literal danger, but perhaps it would also safeguard against the unspeakable default which so long has characterized the existing scheme."[180]

Stringfellow's discussion of the issue of military chaplains is helpful in that it represents his view of the relationship of the Christian and the Church to the State writ small, particularly in light of American exceptionalism and its expression in the form of civil religion. The Christian finds himself or herself under the authority of a regime

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[179]Ibid.

[180]Ibid. What Stringfellow suggested appears akin to the embedded reporters during the 2003 war in Iraq. They were, however, under serious restrictions that many have argued limited their objectivity.

which is inherently incompatible with that which is fundamental to the Christian identity, the Gospel, just as the soldier serves in the military branches of that regime. This scenario encourages the Christian to idolize the power that is the nation and to engage in the liturgy of its civil religion. Likewise, the military chaplain effectively serves as the priest of that religion. The true vocation of the Church and the Christian, however, is prophetic. Any relationship that the Christian has to the State must take into account the empirical and theological illegitimacy of the government. In doing so, then, the Christian has the responsibility to expose the State for the idol of death that it is. In short, uncritical service to the nation directly under its auspices abets blasphemy, and expressions of exceptionalism are merely bombast to justify the idolatry of the nation.

Conclusion

Stringfellow critiqued the theology of American exceptionalism from several perspectives. Believing that it stemmed in part from an anxiety over justification, Stringfellow suggested that much of what I call American exceptionalism in its religious form is a reflection of the American individual quest to be justified. Such a quest represents a denial of the gospel by ignoring the exclusivity of God's judgment. Another critique that Stringfellow leveled was against the myth of the Christian nation. In short, because all nations are fallen, no nation, and arguably in his view, especially not the United States, could be considered a Christian nation. Overlapping his empirical critique of the political justification for exceptionalism is Stringfellow's discussion of political legitimacy in the context of the interpretations of Romans 13 and Revelation 13. Any justification of American exceptionalism based upon a notion of the legitimacy of government, whether in terms of justice or order, fails to account for the tragic nature of

any government in light of the Fall: any and all forms of exceptionalism are blasphemous, and this, he noted in various ways, is empirically verified.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Concluding Comments

Essentially, the engagement of the thought of William Stringfellow with the elements of American exceptionalism reflects a clash of narratives. American exceptionalism expresses a narrative framework that celebrates the United States as a bastion of freedom, justice, and prosperity. In a cluster of intertwined stories, America is portrayed as a chosen nation, a Christian nation, and a missionary nation whose responsibility is to promote its glories abroad. On the other hand Stringfellow's narrative describes the fallenness of all powers, which have rejected their true vocation, enslaved humanity, and ultimately serve death, the overarching moral reality in the fallen world. Thus, all nationalistic claims are examples of Babel, language that serves as propaganda to encourage subservience to the national power, which promises freedom from death in its various forms while ultimately serving as a lackey of death.

In the midst of the powers in all of their chaotic, rivalrous complexity exists the Church, the company of the baptized, those identified with the One who has conquered death. The Church, the holy nation, exists as a witness of freedom from death in all of its forms. This witness is expressed in three primary forms: biblical discernment of the fallen identity of the powers and their death-saturated effects, public resistance to the claims of the powers and principalities, and prophetic advocacy for those most victimized by the powers - the poor, the innocent, and the marginalized.

In light of Stringfellow's narrative framework American exceptionalism represents bombastic claims, expresses a form of blasphemy, and embodies the bastardization of the

gospel of Jesus Christ. Stringfellow gave the story of white supremacy a place of prominence in his thought. This countered the political element of American exceptionalism by contradicting its narrative of revolutionary freedom and equality encapsulated in the American Creed, demonstrating its claims to be empty boasts. Likewise, the element of the American exceptionalistic narrative that presumes a vocation of divine chosenness for the nation was shown, in Stringfellow's framework, to be vacuous bombast in light of the biblical narrative and in light of the darker elements of American history such as the aforementioned white supremacy.

In addition to being identified as bombastic claims in Stringfellow's narrative, American exceptionalism is blasphemous. This can be summarized in two areas. First, claims to provide security and promote freedom domestically and abroad represent a usurpation of a role that belongs only to God. Such claims are therefore blasphemous. Second, the claim to be a Christian nation is a blasphemous appellation that inherently slanders the name of Christ and ignores the biblical testimony that the true Christian nation is the Church.

Finally, and most significantly, Stringfellow's narrative portrays American exceptionalism as a bastard gospel, announcing a message that ultimately glorifies only death. In both the economic and theological elements of American exceptionalism, Stringfellow saw evidence of what he viewed as the common American quest for justification. Economically, Stringfellow suggested that the American views of work, acquisition, and consumption were wrongly believed by many to provide moral justification, something only Christ can provide. Theologically, Stringfellow argued against the "myth of the justified nation," which he alternately described as the "myth of

the holy nation." This holy nation thesis was an inherent bastardization of the gospel, since, Stringfellow argued, such a presumption contradicts the unique vocation of the biblical nation of Israel as described in the Old Testament and carried over to that of the Church as described in the New Testament.

While this project is a critical analysis of Stringfellow's thought as it engaged American exceptionalism, my motive for studying Stringfellow was primarily ethical. I hoped that he would provide American Christians with a perspective that assisted them in engaging the political order yet maintaining their integrity as members of the universal Body of Christ and as individuals under a singular Lord. My initial attraction to Stringfellow's thought was his emphasis upon radical engagement with the political order informed by prophetic dissent. I recognized that, generally speaking, such a stance was not unique to Stringfellow. For example, one could accurately describe the thought and work of Martin Luther King, Jr., in similar terms. Of course, despite the fact that he was engaged in various forms of activism and advocacy, legal and otherwise, Stringfellow was primarily a thinker, whereas King, while clearly a tremendous and important thinker, was mainly an activist. However, early on I sensed that Stringfellow's radical lapsarian views regarding those "structures of human existence"[1] that he labels the "principalities and powers" had important ethical implications for Christians, especially evangelical Christians, in America today. In light of the preceding study, I am convinced that my early impressions were correct. Thus, while I recognize that a detailed discussion of the ethical implications of Stringfellow's thought for the current American scene is outside of

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[1]I borrow the term from Stanley Grenz. See his *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994), 296-305.

the scope of this study and indeed likely deserves a monograph of its own, I will make a modest suggestion for the application of Stringfellow's thought to American Christianity.

Prior to discussing these ethical implications for Christians in America, I must very briefly note a few criticisms I have of Stringfellow's thought. While I have engaged in critical analysis, I have tried to maintain a certain level of scholarly objectivity by taking Stringfellow's thought as he presented it and neither celebrating it nor arguing against it. While absolute objectivity is impossible to attain, the scholar can engage her subject with a certain detachment, all the while recognizing that she brings assumptions, traditions, experiences, and preferences to the process. At this point, then, I will reveal a few of my assumptions and my tradition. With that in mind I will then make some critical observations regarding Stringfellow's thought, both broadly and as it was specifically applied to American exceptionalism.

I am a Baptist pastor whose spiritual background is diverse. I was raise as a Baptist but became involved with the Charismatic movement during my teenage years, while remaining affiliated with Baptist churches. In college I was associated with a well-known evangelical parachurch organization. During that time and for several years afterward I was involved in churches doctrinally characterized by premillennial dispensationalism. My specific church affiliation during this time alternated between independent Bible churches and churches associated to varying degrees with the Charismatic movement. As I entered seminary I returned to my Baptist roots and have remained in vocational ministry in Baptist congregations since then. In light of this doctrinal and ecclesiastical pilgrimage I consider myself to be an evangelical whose church tradition is Baptist. As an evangelical I identify with the evangelistic

conversionism, revivalistic piety, and simple Biblicism common to that tradition. As a Baptist, I identify with the various distinctives of that tradition such as the autonomy of the local church and religious liberty. However, my theology has been influenced by Karl Barth and my ecclesiology and ethics have been influenced by Stanley Hauerwas. Consequently, I see the church as an alternative *polis*, a community that stands over and against the communities of this world, including and especially the political community. Furthermore, I recognize the continuity of the church throughout history in a way that is more ecumenical than many evangelicals and most Baptists with whom I associate. Thus, I acknowledge that my statements of criticism or suggestions for ethical application are proffered while recognizing the influences of church tradition and theological education. Moreover, my ethical suggestions are offered with the evangelical and baptistic church traditions in mind.

In light of the above, then, my criticism of Stringfellow addresses three areas of his thought. First, I question the validity of his notion of the exclusivity of God's judgment. Second, I challenge the absence of a creation ethic in Stringfellow and suggest that his concept of the "Word of God militant in history" could be used by others to favorably interpret American history and thus support exceptionalistic claims. Finally, I comment upon the relationship of homosexuality to the Fall and relate it to Stringfellow's thought.

First, Stringfellow suggested that God's judgment could not be known this side of the Eschaton. Therefore, neither divine favor nor divine disapproval of human actions can be known. If that is the case, one wonders on what basis Stringfellow criticized political policies, racist actions, or American exceptionalism. What was his justification for his own criticism, if God's judgment cannot be known? If only God can judge

whether what we do is in accordance with his will, then what room is there for a critique of anyone's actions? Of course, the answer is that Stringfellow focused on living humanly as opposed to obeying God's will. However, who judges what is living humanly? He would answer that which does not worship death and its acolytes or, more empirically, that which does not embody death, which is manifested in such conditions as alienation, oppression, and violence. Of course, each of these terms begs definition. Which still brings us back to the question of what is the standard by which to evaluate humanness?

Second, despite his nods to the Incarnation and the "militant presence of the Word of God in history," his lapsarian emphasis leaves little room for a creation ethic. Thus, no powers are benevolent. Furthermore, none of them can be redeemed in the midst of post-lapsarian history. If that is the case, then how can the presence of Christ in history be identified? How can Stringfellow's identification of the presence of Christ in history be distinguished from that of those who claim to see God's providential hand in America's history and seek to justify exceptionalistic claims in light of such evidence?

Third, his lapsarianism finds evidence of the Fall in all of the structures of human existence. In fact all of them are irreparably and irredeemably fallen. Unfortunately, he failed to acknowledge the fallenness of sexuality that reveals itself in the truncation of the God-created sexual identities which is manifested in homosexuality. Arguably his emphasis on death as a major product of the Fall, as opposed to the more traditional emphasis upon sin, enabled him to skirt around issues of sexual morality. Thus, he absolved himself from acknowledging the Fallenness reflected in his own sexuality.

In spite of the above brief criticisms, I suggest that Stringfellow's thought can be redeemed and put to use by the Church or, more specifically in my context, *a* church. I offer a modest suggestion for the ethical application of Stringfellow to a local church existing within the context of an American society rife with exceptionalistic claims. Simply put, the church should utilize discernment, engage in resistance, and practice advocacy.

The church that utilizes discernment recognizes the reality of the structures of human existence. It moreover recognizes the inherent fallenness of these structures. This church realizes that the created order involves more than just individuals and that the structures of human existence are more than the aggregate of human being, willing, and doing with respect to a particular task, set of concepts, or collective endeavor. The members of this church see themselves as citizens of an alternate *polis* and a holy nation that is ontologically distinct from the other powers, especially nations and states. With that in mind, they no longer see themselves primarily as Americans. They keep ever before their consciousness the biblical notion of the Fall and interpret governmental action in light of that consciousness. This discernment thus enables them to see life from the perspective of the marginalized, looking for evidence of the effects of death upon those who are the least.

By discerning the powers and their effects, the church can practice informed resistance. These may be simple acts to this society, but they are profound. Perhaps the individual members of this church refuse to pledge allegiance to the American flag. The leadership of the church may eschew celebrating events according to the national calendar. No more would this congregation celebrate the Fourth of July or recognize

veterans on Veterans Day. Displays of civil religion would be rejected corporately and perhaps individually. While this congregation would pray for its military personnel, perhaps during the same prayer service a considerable number of petitions would be proffered for the terrorists, for the enemy leaders, and for the enemy combatants. By such simple acts, the church would be bearing clear witness to the fact that it is a community distinct from the fallen structures and free from their claims.

Finally, the church would engage in advocacy for the marginalized. If the congregation practices many of the above suggestions, it would probably find its numbers quickly reduced and its reputation in the community diminished. In that event, identification with the marginalized would be simple, since in part it would be self-identification. Nevertheless, the church that engages in advocacy would reach out to the poor not primarily to "fix" them, but to live the freedom of the gospel with them, to demonstrate the love of Christ to them by meeting physical needs. Perhaps more significantly, however, this church would advocate for the disabled, the poor, the disenfranchised, the alien, the widow, the marginalized by offering genuine hospitality to them as individuals created in the image of God and for whom Christ died. They would neither perceive them nor treat them as merely clients in need of service. Such patronization destroys dignity and invites death in the form of alienation. Furthermore, the congregation would engage politically on behalf of the marginalized by asking the following question of governmental policies, civic injunctions, legislative actions, administrative systems, and law enforcement practices: How does this effect the least among us? The answer to that question would then determine the precise nature of the church's advocacy for the least among us.

William Stringfellow suggested this ethic of discernment, resistance, and advocacy. While I and others may not be in complete agreement with all of his theology or his ethics, his overall narrative framework deserves to be considered by local congregations and by Christians throughout America. Therefore, Stringfellow's method more than his theology may serve as a paradigm to help American Christians to recognize the church as ontologically distinct from the fallen nation known as the United States. Thus, they may begin to interpret America biblically rather than the other way around and, consequently, begin to live biblically as Christians in America rather than as Christian Americans.

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