

The world - and Word - according to William Stringfellow

John Dear | Nov. 12, 2013 On the Road to Peace

In the early 1990s, while in graduate theology school, one of my professors invited us to write about a theologian we had never studied. I picked William Stringfellow, the legendary lay theologian, Episcopalian and social critic. He had been a friend of many of my friends and though I once had a chance to make a retreat with him, we never met. A few years after his death in 1985 at age 56, I began staying regularly in a cottage on his property on Block Island, R.I. That cottage became a second home.

So that semester, I read every published work by Stringfellow. "My concern is to understand America biblically," he wrote at the start of *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*. "The effort is to comprehend the nation, to grasp what is happening right now to the nation and to consider the destiny of the nation within the scope and style of the ethics of the ethical metaphors distinctive to the biblical witness in history. The task is to treat the nation within the tradition of biblical politics, to understand America biblically -- not the other way around, not (to put it in an appropriately awkward way) to construe the Bible Americanly."

With those opening sentences, I was hooked. Stringfellow's been part of my regular spiritual diet ever since. He tried to keep the Word of God and apply the Word of God to our national and global predicament; that is, to Death and the powers and principalities.

This week, Orbis Books' Modern Spiritual Masters Series published their latest installment, [William Stringfellow: Essential Writings \[1\]](#) (selected and edited by Bill Wylie-Kellermann). Instead of reading all his books like I did, this collection offers the best of Stringfellow's keen biblical insights on the nation-state, the powers and principalities, idols, the fall, blasphemy, and death. His writings still sound sharp, fresh, and original and are still helpful and needed.

"Death, with a capital D, is itself, for Stringfellow, a living moral reality," Wylie-Kellermann writes in his masterful introduction. "He draws intuitively on St. Paul, for whom death (along with law and sin) is in a matrix of enslaved existence. Stringfellow sees it as the power behind the powers. Death is a kind of synonym for the spirituality of idolatry, domination, and empire ... He regarded death as a moral power within the nation and thereby as its 'social purpose.' ... He named the nation-state as the 'pre-emeinent principality.' "

"Death reigns *and* we are freed from its bondage." That's Stringfellow's message.

Stringfellow unpacked the Bible for its political implications throughout his life. In 1962, for example, when Stringfellow was a young lawyer serving the needy in East Harlem, N.Y., he was invited to join a panel of theologians to respond to the great Swiss biblical theologian Karl Barth during his U.S. visit. Young Stringfellow's questions stood out. He asked Barth about the Confessing Church under Nazi Germany; Romans 13 and the question of being subject to the state; the quiescence of the churches; and the meaning of "the principalities and powers." Barth was impressed. Afterward, Barth pointed to Stringfellow and told the audience, "Listen to this man."

Over the years, Stringfellow wrote a series of original theology texts, such as [My People Is the Enemy \[2\]](#), [An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land \[3\]](#)

, [*Dissenter in a Great Society* \[4\]](#), [*The Politics of Spirituality* \[5\]](#), [*Instead of Death* \[6\]](#) and [*A Simplicity of Faith* \[7\]](#). (All his books are now available again from www.wipfandstock.com [8].)

Stringfellow had a powerful influence on Daniel Berrigan, Jim Wallis and Walter Wink, to name a few. In 1967, because of serious health issues, Stringfellow moved to Block Island. It was there in August 1970 that our friend Daniel Berrigan was arrested at Stringfellow's house while underground for refusing to turn himself in after sentencing for the Catonsville Nine action.

Earlier, in Baltimore in the fall of 1968 at an evening church gathering during the trial of the Catonsville Nine, Stringfellow gave these brief but memorable words:

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, and 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.

That's the kind of message that rings throughout this invigorating collection. Stringfellow leveled a prophetic critique against a range of institutions but most of all, the modern war-making state. His great theme was the Constantinian compromise, the accommodation of Christianity to the values of the empire and the preservation of the status quo. For him, Christianity had to start all over again in nonviolent resistance to the state and its consignment of death.

What are the principalities and powers? What is their significance in the creation and in the fall? What is their relationship to human sin? How are these powers related to the presence and power of death in history? What is the meaning of the confrontation between Christ and the principalities? Does a Christian have any freedom from their dominion? There can be no serious, realistic, or biblical comprehension of the witness of the church in the world unless such questions as these are raised and pondered.

These are Stringfellow's questions, and we need to grapple with them, too, if we want to reclaim a more authentic Christian discipleship and witness. For Stringfellow, living according to the Word of God was key. He writes:

I am called in the Word of God -- as is everyone else -- to the vocation of being human, nothing more and nothing less ... To be a Christian means to be called to be an exemplary human being. And to be a Christian *categorically* does not mean being religious. Indeed, all religious versions of the gospel are profanities.

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, define 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, exorcise, cleanse the possessed, raise those who are dead in mind and conscience.

"For thousands of us, William Stringfellow became the honored keeper and guardian of the Word of God, that is to say, a Christian who could be trusted to keep his word, which was God's Word made his own," Daniel Berrigan said in his memorable 1985 eulogy, which concludes this collection. "To keep that close, to speak it afresh, to make it new. And that Word he kept and guarded and cherished now keeps him. This is the way with the Word, which we name Christ. The covenant keeps us who keep the covenant."

William Stringfellow is certainly a modern spiritual master, a great theologian and true prophet. His clear political, biblical critique helps me understand the mind of Christ and the Sermon on the Mount way of nonviolent resistance to evil as well as clarifies my response to the horrors of today's world.

I hope many will read *William Stringfellow: Essential Writings* and discover new theological and prophetic insights for Christian life in this time of empire, surveillance, drones, war and injustice. Death reigns, Stringfellow announces, but we are freed from its bondage, which means we are resurrection people who go forth to make peace, resist war and serve life. That's a message we need to hear again.

[John Dear's new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, is now available at paceebene.org [9] and Amazon.com [10]. To join his work with [Campaign Nonviolence](http://CampaignNonviolence.org) [11], contact the Franciscan-based peace group [Pace e Bene](http://PaceeBene.org) [12]. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [13] and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [14], *Put Down Your Sword* [15] and *A Persistent Peace* [16], are available from Amazon.com. For more information, [go to John's website](http://JohnDear.org) [17].]

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[14] [http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-](http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1)

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