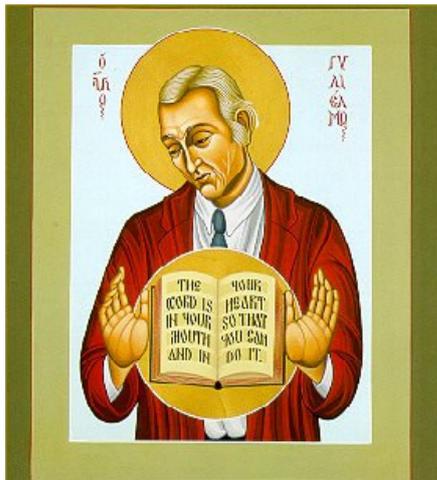


Not vice versa. Reading the powers biblically: Stringfellow, hermeneutics, and the principalities

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Proximate to the discernment of signs is the discernment of spirits. This gift enables the people of God to 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, The discernment of spirits refers to the talent to recognize the Word of God in this world in principalities and persons despite the distortion of fallenness or transcending the

moral reality of death permeating everything.

This is the gift which exposes and rebukes idolatry. This is the gift which confounds and undoes blasphemy Similar to the discernment of signs, the discernment of spirits is inherently political while in practice it has specifically to do with pastoral care, with healing, with the nurture of human life and with the fulfillment of all life.¹

On Wednesday evening before Pentecost 1938 William Stringfellow sat, an anxious eleven-year-old waiting through the lections and hymns. He once confided that on account of his musical ineptitude he regularly refrained from singing but thereby focused all the more on the language and theology of the hymnal, first learning there the esoteric names of the principalities and powers and of their vocation to praise God. His own recounting of that day includes disillusionment that there was no secret to be revealed concerning the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit (actually not a bad day's work for a confirmation liturgy)². In any event, at the time appointed he stepped forward. As the original humans, Adam and Eve, presided from above in stained glass, Stringfellow soberly answered the bishop's queries. Yes, he renewed the baptismal promises first undertaken on his behalf and in his stead, among other things renouncing the devil and all his works.

Some forty years later, as a rainstorm broke, he led a group of friends at his home on Block Island in a liturgical exorcism to banish from the place of his household the presence of death after his dearest friend and companion, the

poet Anthony Towne, had died³. For that liturgy he employed a rite, published by the Bishop of Exeter⁴, which Stringfellow had acquired and first utilized to exorcise publicly President Richard Nixon on the eve of his second inauguration.

Let no one consider these liturgical events either spooky or weird. Stringfellow enjoyed regarding them with deadly seriousness as inherently political while in practice having specifically to do with pastoral care and healing.

For present purposes it is noteworthy that his copy of that exorcism booklet is altered by his own hand consistently substituting "death" or "the power of death" (which he accounted a "living moral reality") where the prayers name "the devil" or "the enemy." These are synonyms I believe he would transpose back into his own confirmation and baptismal vows. Baptism always has about it an element of exorcism and for William Stringfellow it specifically celebrates and affirms freedom from the power of death and all its works-indeed from the principalities and powers of this world.

Apart from Anglican hymnology, the young Stringfellow's first real dose of powers theology came at the World Conference of Christian Youth in Oslo, Norway, which he attended as a college sophomore in 1947. Under the theme of the "Lordship of Christ" there was plenty of room for the triumphalism which characterized the expansive postwar American ecumenism in which Stringfellow was a participant.

However, the speakers at that conference bore their good news out from the shadow of death. They spoke out of Christian resistance movements under Nazi occupation. They were chastened and sober. Among them were Martin Niemöller of Germany, Bishop Belgrav of Norway, and Madeleine Barot of France.⁵ Mme. Barot, for example, was particularly lucid in identifying the "chaos of order" in which humanity had fallen slave to its own systems, to its own production and discovery, and to its own propaganda for which she saw the Babel story as emblematic.⁶ In *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, Stringfellow mentions that conference as the beginning of a conversation with those very people from whom he acknowledges learning two things: firstly that in the overwhelming circumstance of Nazi possession and occupation, resistance (however symbolic, haphazard, and apparently futile) became the only way to live humanly, retaining sanity and conscience, and secondly that recourse to the Bible in itself became a primary, practical, and essential tactic of resistance.⁷ This confluence, a kind of sequence or circle really-Bible study, comprehension or discernment of the powers, and resistance for the sake of humanity-is hardly incidental. This marked a conversation seminal to his life and thinking.

Stringfellow begins *An Ethic* by asserting that in the book, "[t]he 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".⁸ Notice what is being said here. Today, this might be said to acknowledge his contextual reading site and confess his own social location in imperial America, but more is suggested.

Imperial America, its spirit and ethos, is held to assert itself as an active and aggressive agency in biblical interpretation, claiming the text as its own. Not only are the powers a question of hermeneutics; for William Stringfellow, hermeneutics are a question of the powers.

It is almost as though American empire, sensing its exposure in the biblical Word, engages a preemptive literary strike, claiming, possessing and interpreting the Bible in its own guise, for its own convenience, justifying itself as the divinely favored nation. Stringfellow calls this violence-and it is a violence virtually synonymous with the Native American genocide or the racism of American chattel slavery or the nuclear arsenal or the pyrotechnics of the Gulf War and the slow continuing siege of Iraq.

No doubt those on British soil will recognize the ways in which the Bible is read Englishly or United Kingdomly-also suitably awkward terms. That was surely most prominent and exaggerated at the height of the colonial empire when imperial expansion and the Kingdom of God were most conspicuously confused, but it may also be as current as the civil liturgies of recent election campaigns.

That is to say, this powerly intervention is not a new or uniquely American process. In fact, for most of its history, the gods of this world have blinded the Church to its own scriptures with respect to the "principalities and powers." in the hermeneutical history these terms have been excised, suppressed and obscured. One analysis ties the effectual disappearance and demise of the powers in Protestant theology to Luther and Calvin at the very beginning of the Reformation.⁹ Stringfellow, however, locates that dissipation at an earlier juncture, with the "Constantinian Arrangement" of the fourth century.

Beginning with that time, Christians had "forgotten or forsaken a worldview or, more precisely, doctrines of creation and fallen creation, similar to Paul's, in which political authority encompasses and conjoins the angelic powers and incumbent rulers."¹⁰ Walter Wink, the New Testament scholar whose stunning trilogy on the powers was seeded by Stringfellow's work and who has thereby become the primary and practical American spokesperson on the theology of the principalities, concurs. The Church soon found itself the darling of Constantine. Called on to legitimate the empire, the church abandoned much of its social critique. The Powers were soon divorced from political affairs and made airy spirits who preyed only on individuals. The state was thus freed of one of the most powerful brakes against idolatry.... ¹¹

Rome was effectively preempting its own exposure by and vulnerability in the Word of God. The New Testament was being read Romanly as it were, the substance of the powers written into the oblivion of spiritual individualism.

When Stringfellow first began to speak and write on the powers in the early sixties, he went on the road stumping in colleges and universities. He identified the powers with institutions, images, and ideologies as creatures before God having an independent life and integrity of their own, whose vocation is to praise God and serve human life. In the estate of the fall, however, they are seen to be demonic powers. Their vocation is lost and

distorted, in fact inverted: instead of praising God and serving human life they pretend to the place of God and enslave human life. This exposition, which became chapter three of *Free in Obedience* (1964), met a strange mix of fascination and rebuff. He loved to tell the story of an early presentation, in fact two of them, given in Boston. Scheduled for similar talks the same day at Harvard Business School and at the Divinity School, he debated with himself about excising, from the business school version, any explicit biblical reference or language, but decided in the end to let it stand intact. The business school students, it turned out, engaged him thoroughly, bending his ear long past the hour appointed, with numerous examples from their own experience of dominance and possession with respect to corporations and the commercial powers. Their experiences verified his own observations.

Later at the seminary, however, with the identical speech, he was ridiculed and written off. Ruling authorities, principalities, world rulers of the present darkness! Come now! These were but the incidental vestige of a quaint and archaic language, an esoteric parlance now obsolete, with no real meaning in history or human life. ¹²

At the seminary not only did the consequences of the Constantinian comity reign, it was aided and abetted by yet another "power," in this case the tyranny of the historical critical method. In Stringfellow's enumeration of the principalities he came to include not simply all institutions and all images, but also all ideologies and all methods. Historical criticism may be recognized as both. After imperial accommodation drove the majority of New Testament references to the powers off into longstanding spiritual abstraction, historical criticism, with its cosmological commitment to scientific rationalism and materialism, wrote them off the New Testament map altogether. Walter Wink has said an astonishing thing in precisely this regard. Commenting on the inability of several previous scholars working on the powers to confess their practical significance for a twentieth-century Christian ethic, he notes: They were themselves caught in the principality of New Testament criticism, which had become as dogmatic and stultified as the religious orthodoxy it had been invented to overthrow. Not surprisingly, as a New Testament scholar, I found it necessary to perform a public exorcism of myself, hermeneutically, by writing *The Bible in Human Transformation* ¹³

A hermeneutical exorcism! Wink's scholarly little tract ¹⁴ declared historical criticism bankrupt. It named the myth of objectivism which fabricated an impassable gulf between text and reader, precluding commitment and engagement in either personal or social transformation. It exposed the idolatry of technique to which biblical studies had fallen prey. It identified the cult of expertise which severed scripture study from believing and worshipping communities. It didn't earn him any favor with the scholarly guild, but it did free him literally to write this remarkable trilogy on the powers.

Though there are several others, I would mention just one further way that Stringfellow seemed to regard the principalities as an agency aggressively intruding on Bible study. He contended that the single most important credential required for comprehending scripture was to give oneself in

vulnerability to listening to the Word. Yet in the present situation we are assaulted by a profusion of what he termed "babel": verbal inflation and inversion, the distortions of doublespeak and overtalk, spin doctoring, soundbytes, coded phrases, jargon, rhetorical wantonness, redundancy, exaggeration, incoherence, the chaos of voices, the violence of the repetitious lie.¹⁵ He argued that this verbal overload and incapacitation has become virtually the main method of political rule. To have ears to hear, to listen conscientiously to the Bible is itself, as he learned from participants in the confessing movements of World War 11, to resist the assault of the powers.¹⁶

A striking omission from that list in Ethic of European Christian resistance mentors is Karl Barth. I'm not quite sure what to make of that. Jacques Ellul is listed as a subsequent conversant and there would be similar warrant for the inclusion of Barth as well.

It was virtually the gathering storm of World War 11, a historical crisis, which urgently broke the hermeneutical impasse with respect to the powers. As Bonhoeffer wrote in 1932: "How can one close one's eyes at the fact that the demons themselves have taken over rule of the world, that it is the powers of darkness who have here made an awful conspiracy. . . ?"¹⁷ Barth, of course, was an active participant in the confessing struggle-and he was a biblical spokesperson in the reclamation of powers theology. After Stringfellow's public questions to him concerning the powers at the 1962 University of Chicago panel, Barth whispered to him, "It's all in Church and State. It's all there."¹⁸ Though Stringfellow is falsely accused of being a Barthian, friends do attest that he read a volume of Barth's dogmatics and he certainly read Church and State¹⁹ wherein, among other things, Barth confirms and concedes the conjoining of rulers and the angelic powers in the state. In the main, however, Barth's primary role in Stringfellow's developing theology was simply to encourage and embolden his active pursuit of the powers. Karl Barth did it in two ways: first, by simply confirming Bill's articulation of the inquiry. Simply on the basis of his questions Barth replied, "I like to hear you speak as you do" and "I think we agree"-which then prompted him to turn and urge that audience, in an underscored aside, "Listen to this man."²⁰

The other encouragement (and this is by no means incidental) was to conceive of the principalities as a broader category than the state alone. Barth, in his reply to Stringfellow in Chicago, specifically mentioned ideology, sport, fashion, religion, and sex as examples.

In the United States, of course, it was a different set of historical crises which broke open the powers biblically for reconsideration: not so much the context of National Socialism and World War 11, but the racial crisis forced by the African American freedom struggle and the war in southeast Asia. The year following his public conversation with Karl Barth, Stringfellow was back in Chicago in 1963 as a speaker at the first National Conference on Religion and Race where he created a small uproar. Chaired by Benjamin Mays and headlined among others by Martin Luther King, Sargent Shriver, and Abraham Heschel, the conference was the first major ecumenical and interfaith foray into the racial struggle. Stringfellow's remarks were a response to a major

address by Dr. Heschel, the late Jewish scholar and theologian, which was itself remarkable for naming racism as idolatry, for identifying the exodus as a lead image in the struggle, and for outlining a prophetic response on the basis of the Hebrew scriptures. Stringfellow's responding comments were controversial in part because he excoriated the gathering as "too little, too late, and too lily white" (a phrase he would come regularly to employ in prodding the Church), because he observed that the initiative in the struggle no longer resided with white folk, but had passed from white to black, and because he named voices (like Malcolm X and James Baldwin) who would not be heard at the gathering. However, his most remarkable observations were these:

From the point of view of either biblical religion, the monstrous American heresy is in thinking that the whole drama of history takes place between God and humanity. But the truth, biblically and theologically and empirically is quite otherwise: the drama of this history takes place amongst God and humanity and the principalities and powers, the great institutions and ideologies active in the world. It is the corruption and shallowness of humanism which beguiles Jew or Christian into believing that human beings are masters of institution or ideology. Or to put it differently, racism is not an evil in human hearts or minds, racism is a principality, a demonic power, a representative image, an embodiment of death, over which human beings have little or no control, but which works its awful influence in their lives. 21

I can think of few such statements at once so precise and prescient. Since that day the legal apparatus of American apartheid has been all but dismantled. Yet no force or structure or spirit has proven more relentless and resilient than racism in our country@ It is empirically a demon which rises up transmogrified in ever more beguiling forms and predatory guises. Many, including Dr. Heschel, heard in the dreadful realism of Stringfellow's statement an invocation to despair. In fact, when Heschel reappeared at the podium he turned about directly to face him and said, "Mr. Stringfellow, if my ancestors had followed your advice, we would still be making bricks for the Pharaoh."2' Stringfellow, however, had not ended there. He continued:

This [racism] is the power with which Jesus Christ was confronted and which, at great and sufficient cost, he overcame. In other words, the issue here is not equality among human beings. 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 humankind wrought by God in the life and work of Christ. Baptism is the sacrament of that unity of all humanity in God .23

Apart from the commotion prompted among Jewish participants by this claim (to which Heschel, who may have listened more carefully, had not replied), this is an utterly remarkable confession of faith. White supremacy, a modern

principality, was named as confronting Christ. And racism, as a demonic power beyond desperate human control, is declared overcome and defeated in Christ. Moreover, the emblem of that freedom from bondage is the unity, not of all Christians, but the unity of all humankind witnessed in baptism. Stringfellow couldn't be clearer that this radical hope of reconciliation was predicated on the cross and upon tears yet to come, but it is a true hope and a true freedom rooted both in his realism about the power and in his sacramental understanding of ethics.

Let me underscore that baptism is being named as a frontal assault upon the rule of the powers. That is true in the reconciled humanity to which it points. That is true in the allegiance to Christ which it asserts, obviating and mitigating every other claim or allegiance. And that is true in the freedom from death, literally the freedom to die, which it explicitly affirms.

For more on this latter, let us consider the other context which prompted a reawakened comprehension of the powers on the American scene: the war in southeast Asia. In Stringfellow's view the war represented a grotesque example of the demonic, of death virtually as social purpose. It demonstrated the variety of concrete ways in which the military powers (particularly the Pentagon and the technocratic state) had passed out of human control, propagating the war largely by extra-constitutional authorities beyond the accountability of democratic constraint. Military technology was a driving force with a necessary logic all its own, from the think tanks of corporate research and development to the battlefield testing of firepower against human flesh. At the height of the war in 1968 Stringfellow attended the trial of the Catonsville Nine. Dan and Phil Berrigan, among others, had burned draft files with homemade napalm in a liturgical act of protest against the war in Vietnam. Stringfellow would later refer to this as a 11 politically informed exorcism."24 Concurrent with the trial there was a festival of hope: music, poetry, and words of encouragement to continued resistance were offered in the sanctuary of a Baltimore church. Stringfellow, who was about to undergo risky life-threatening surgery to stem the deterioration of his health, could barely walk from pain. Summoned to the pulpit for a word, he offered an admonition, a benediction, an utterance of the gospel:

*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.*²⁵

This was no idle or superfluous dispensation. The anti-war and freedom movements had been about to come together when Martin King was killed. Malcolm X and a number of Black Panthers had been assassinated. Official guns would shortly be turned on college students at both Kent State and Jackson State Universities. The freedom to die, really the freedom of the resurrection, the freedom which baptism signals, that freedom to which

Stringfellow testified, was the very freedom on which continuing resistance to the powers needed to be grounded. If today such movements are held in check more by the seductions of the market than by the more blatant power of death, that is a shadow which nevertheless lingers yet over our land, holding its sway.

The Catonsville Nine, as it proved, were convicted, but several of them declined to submit readily to sentence. Daniel Berrigan went underground, speaking, writing, and playfully eluding the federal authorities for several months. He was a walking festival of hope. When Dan was finally captured by the FBI it was at the Block Island home of William Stringfellow and Anthony Towne. In consequence the two were indicted for harboring a fugitive. Though the indictment, clearly a political charge, was eventually quashed, this was a momentous event in Stringfellow's life. It was the first time he had personally suffered so bluntly the aggressions of the principalities. Given his state of health, it was indeed a bodily assault threatening death. But it was also his first experience of being victimized by the legal principalities which he had fought so vigorously on behalf of others, in East Harlem for example. In many respects the event seeded the energy of *An Ethic*. As it happened, Bill and Dan had sat at the dining room table discussing the biblical bases of that book (the Babylon texts of Revelation) while in all likelihood the FBI listened in by high-powered directional microphone. Then came the indictment, a provocation further illuminating the texts, clarifying the mind. If the principalities and powers had known what they were doing, they would have let it slide. That book effected their complete exposure (becoming something of a theological handbook for the American resistance movement). Stringfellow claimed yet again the grace and freedom he commended. Legally and politically he was unintimidated, standing instead by his friendship with Berrigan.

Another influence on *An Ethic* which must be mentioned, perhaps at some length, is Jacques Ellul, the French social historian and theologian. The *Meaning of the City*²⁶ had only just been published in English. Stringfellow wrote to Ellul concerning the indictment against himself and Towne:

it is difficult to put succinctly in a letter all that has happened and its background, growing out of the past several years in which this society has so much constricted and in which opposition to the regime has provoked a repression more serious and extensive than most people realize.... There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that charges were brought against us because we have openly expressed our opposition to the barbarism in Indochina and the threatening totalitarianism in America. One might even say that we are attacked by the government because we are Christians, although I would not want to put it that way without a more complete designation of what that means.²⁷

Given the times, Stringfellow went on to press again his longstanding (and eternally pending) invitation that Ellul come to the States, though now with a more strenuous political urgency.

Such a trip had been arranged more than once. The two of them pursued for some thirty years a personal correspondence, though Stringfellow attributes to the Holy Spirit the coincidence that they would find themselves writing on similar biblical texts or with common reference to particular powers, since their letters never discussed what each would be working on next.

Consider these excerpts from an earlier letter of Ellul to Stringfellow:

Bien Cher: I have just finished your book . . . with great emotion-the description you give of the current development of the USA is almost unbelievable. In Europe, no one pays attention at all to this reality... I often ask myself which is easier-on the one hand, to live, like me, in a country radically non-Christian, where the invocation of the Gospel means nothing to "the person on the street"-or, on the other hand, like you to speak in an officially Christian country, to have the facility that the message of the Gospel is normally well received, but where it's a matter of breaking through the misunderstandings, the hypocrisies, and giving the Gospel its revolutionary power. I was terribly pleased with your last chapter. You and I are trying to transmit an insupportable truth-and I sense in your pages the same urgency, the same passion that I feel in myself. I don't know how to tell you how near I am to you, how much it consoles me to know that there is, over there, a person chosen by God to carry on this combat which sometimes seems desperate to me. 28

Stringfellow's first brush with Jacques Ellul was actually a near miss. Ellul, just then emerging from participation in the French resistance movement, addressed a post-Oslo conference of the WSCF in 1947. Stringfellow, however, went off instead to a meeting of Anglican youth at Canterbury. So while Ellul was warning the worldwide student movement against elaborating organization and systems, Stringfellow was enjoying audiences with the Archbishop and Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth (later the Queen Mother), and, several for that matter, with the famous "Red Dean of Canterbury." Ellul's talk, however, essentially chapter two from *The Presence of the Kingdom*, was published in an issue of *The Student World* in which Stringfellow took considerable interest, "On politics."²⁹

Their first direct contact came about in connection with a major conference on theology and law which Stringfellow organized in 1958. It marked the beginning of the perennially frustrated stateside invitation. The conference, however, hugely successful, was built, pre-publication, around the English translation of Ellul's *The Theological Foundation of Law*. That volume, a

radical Christian critique of natural law which comported with Stringfellow's own position, is pertinent to the topic of principalities in a number of ways, though a noteworthy one is that he there identifies institutions theologically with the principalities, powers, thrones, and dominions of the creation hymn found in Col. 1:15 .30 That view is an anomaly in Ellul's writing, since he more generally rejects the view that the powers are creatures willed by the God of Jesus Christ which have been somehow deflected from their true and valid purpose. This is, however, precisely Stringfellow's view (and Wink's who followed him) and that view may have been nourished by Theological Foundation.

For Stringfellow the principalities are indeed creatures, which is to say they have a life and integrity of their own. ³¹ He references them to the Genesis story and the granting of human dominion (not domination, he would stress). This is to say further that each power has a particular vocation to praise God and serve human life. Now this matter of "vocation" can prove to be a very useful heuristic principle in analyzing a given principality. (Walter Wink himself develops this for practical use. ³²) it becomes actually quite a radical question to ask, as pastors and community activists have recently in Detroit with respect to a newspaper strike: What is the vocation of a newspaper? How does it praise God by serving human life? Or, as we also have been inquiring lately in Detroit: What is the vocation of a city? What is it called in the Word of God to be? Or, here's a radical one beyond unquestioned presumptions: What is the vocation of a bank? These are interrogations which Christians are authorized by baptism to make. They are queries of practical discernment with enormous political import. They entail "the talent to recognize the Word of God in this world in principalities and persons . . .". Incidentally, this charismatic gift of discernment is substantially what Christians may bring to any struggle for social transformation, where they are often working side by side in improvisational alliance with secular folks who have a lucid social analysis but who are effectively blind to half of social reality.

The creatureliness of the powers for Stringfellow underscores that they are not actually under human control, whatever naive misapprehension people hold in this regard. It emphasizes the vocational question, which also signifies their standing before the judgement of God. Stringfellow acknowledges that the exact origin of this creatureliness in the powers has about it a certain mystery. Human beings are obviously privy to the genesis of given institutions, but something more than human initiative comes into play.

in point of fact, though Ellul denies their creaturehood, his view is not all that different. Concerning the nature of the powers, he situates himself somewhere between two positions, sometimes emphasizing one aspect, sometimes the other: 1) that they are less precise powers than traditional demons, but still possessing "an existence, reality, and as one might say, objectivity of their own" and 2) that they are simple human dispositions, human factors which are constituted as powers by virtue of being exalted as such. For example, he treats the city as a purely human creation, virtually an act of rebellion first by Cain against God. And yet on the basis of an etymological argument he observes that the word for city means also the Watching Angel, the

Vengeance and Terror. "We must admit that the city is not just a collection of houses with ramparts, but also a spiritual power. I am not saying it is a being. But like an angel, it is a power on a spiritual plane."³⁴ OK, not a creature with a vocation, but a mystery to which humanity has attributed some privity and initiative.

In 1967, when the English translation of *The Presence of the Kingdom* (his postwar theological manifesto clearly charting the future course of his whole life's work) was republished, Ellul asked Stringfellow to provide an American introduction. Stringfellow wrote:

Few books by American authors purporting to deal with theological ethics discern the presence and power of death in this world, in this day, even in America, as an essential clue, to nations and institutions as well as individuals, of their radical alienation from one another and from themselves, that is to say, of their fallenness. 35

On this matter of fallenness Stringfellow and Ellul couldn't have agreed more. As far as the former was concerned American Christians were hopelessly (the word is used advisedly) naive concerning the depth and ubiquity of the fall. Fallen creation included for him the distortion, confusion, and (as noted) inversion of vocation in the principalities, It means they are become, every one, demonic powers-dehumanizing, enslaving, and dominating human life. It means they place their own survival above service to human life. it means, among other things, they usurp the place of God.

The structure of the fall in Ellul's work bears prominently on the common observation that he wrote on two parallel tracks. He would do sociological or historical analyses of political authority, say, or propaganda, or technology, and would match them with works of biblical theology, taking on 11 Kings, or Revelation, or a sweeping thematic study of the City in Scripture. For example, take the volume which arrived at Stringfellow's door, just as he had completed a first draft of *An Ethic*. Ellul's book, *The Meaning of the City* (so radically pessimistic about human works and radically hopeful about God's grace in history), is in fact the theological counterpoint to *The Technological Society*, which is every bit as pessimistic about the tyranny of technique aggressively penetrating every aspect of human society. In this parallel process Ellul made a rigorous methodological commitment to keeping his sociological analysis free of religious reference. He clearly desired the scathing sociological works to stand on their own as analysis, but he also wanted Christian readers to live with the dialectical tension of the two tracks. For many secular academics, his biblical theology was utterly unknown or dismissed as little more than some quirky hobby. Many are nonplussed, dumbfounded would be more precise, to discover that he was a Christian, let alone that faith was the beginning and end of his work.

Now Stringfellow takes the opposite literary tack. In writing on the principalities he moves seamlessly between social analysis and scripture or theology. It is all one for him. That method was rooted, for him, in a radically incarnational

theology which refuses any otherworldliness. By his lights, the genius of the biblical witness is that "the Bible deals with the very sanctification of the actual history of nations and of human being in this world as it is while that history is being lived.³⁶ It was theology which led Stringfellow to refuse the bifurcated approach. This is to say that if one took *The Technological Society* and *The Meaning of the City* and compressed them together under the weight of racial crisis and warmaking in America, the dialectical sparks would fly upwards and a book very like *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* would appear.

Marva Dawn has shown pretty clearly that the concept of the powers is a point of departure for Jacques Ellul's social analysis and, in fact, the very tie between the two tracks.³⁷ What Ellul demonstrates empirically is that particular powers prove to have a life of their own operating with an independence actually beyond human decisionmaking and control. The virtual autonomy of technology in shaping the course of its own development is a prime example. When he slips into appearing to grant it a mythic kind of will, he steps back with a sociological qualification:

It is obvious-and this comment holds for all the rest of this discussion that when I say technology "does not admit," "wants," etc., I am not personifying in any way. I am simply using an accepted rhetorical shortcut. In reality, it is the technicians on all levels who make these judgments and have this attitude; but they are so imbued, so impregnated with the technological ideology, so integrated into the system, that their vital judgments and attitudes are its direct expression. One can refer them to the system itself.³⁸

His sociological synonym for the fall is "the logic of necessity," a kind of analytical equivalent for "the law of sin and death." It is the web in which all, all are caught. Ellul employs it to gather up, as Dawn put it, everything that "is unavoidable, the compulsion or constraint caused by circumstances or social conditions which make certain actions obligatory or inevitable."³⁹ His genius is in uncovering what might be called the stoicheia, the building blocks or rudiments of that necessity with respect to technique, these are the means choosing the means. With respect to political power or violence, it is the same. Having identified the laws or mechanisms by which violence operates, he concludes, "The order of violence is like the order of digestion or falling bodies or gravitation." Then who can fight against it? For Ellul and Stringfellow both, we are caught in a horrifying bondage-which they describe with such unflinching honesty that we are led to the brink of despair.

And yet.

Nevertheless, dear friends, beyond all imagining, they both proclaim a freedom from that bondage. Freedom from the logic of necessity is a kind of ethical Christian charism for Ellul. Stringfellow names it plainly: *freedom from the power of death*.

Actually and ironically, it is that freedom which I believe enabled Stringfellow to look the Beast in the face without flinching, turning aside, or going weak in the knees. He lived and wrote in the freedom of the resurrection, the freedom to die. He wrote as it were in the estate of justification-free to stand at any given moment before the judgement of God. Stringfellow commended thereby an ethic, without principle or program, which was sacramental, improvisational, incarnational and eschatological-an ethic of resurrection. It was, as it were, an ethic rooted in his own baptism: renouncing Satan and all his works, which is to say, placing himself under the Lordship of Christ alone. William Stringfellow was simply convinced "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

NOTES

1. William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1973), p. 139; reprinted in Bill Wylie-Kellermann, ed., *A Keeper of the Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 302-303.
2. William Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 16-18; reprinted in Bill Wylie-Kellermann, ed., *A Keeper of the Word*, pp. 23-24.
3. William Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), pp 54-58.
4. Dom Robert Petitpierre, O.S.B., ed., *Exorcism: The Report of a Commission Convened by the Bishop of Exeter* (London: SPCK, 1972).
5. Their speeches are found in Paul Griswald Macy, ed., *The Report of the Second World Conference of Christian Youth* (Geneva: WCC, 1948). Other speakers included Reinhold Niebuhr, W A. Vissert Hoefft, Stephen Neill, and D. T. Niles.
6. "Confronting Moral Chaos," *Ibid.*, pp. 153-165.
7. *An Ethic*, pp. 117-120; reprinted in *Keeper*, pp. 173-174.
8. *Air Ethic*, p. 13; reprinted in *Keeper*, p. 175. Acknowledging both its imprecision and chauvinism, I will continue here to use Stringfellow's term "American."
9. See W A. Vissert Hooft, *The Kingship of Christ* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), pp. 15-31. He argues that the significance of the victorious cosmic Christ was lost in their attenuated struggle with apocalyptic sects of the time.
10. William Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience* (Waco, TX Word Books, 1977), p. 48.
11. Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 113. The other volumes in his powers trilogy are *Unmasking the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) and *Engaging the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992).
12. William Stringfellow, *Free In Obedience* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1964), pp. 51-52; reprinted in *Keeper*, p. 192.
13. Walter Wink, "Stringfellow on the Powers," in Andrew MeThenia, ed., *Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), p. 25.
14. Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973).
15. His sequel to it outlining a new paradigm was *Transforming Bible Study* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1980).
16. *An Ethic*, pp. 97-107; reprinted in *Keeper*, pp. 214-222. 16 "Listening Against Babel," *Keeper*, pp. 182-183.
17. Quoted in Marva Dawn, *The Concept of "the Principalities and Powers" in the Works of Jacques Ellul* (Ph.D dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1992), p. 12.
18. "The reference is to Karl Barth, *Church and State*, G. Ronald Howe trans. (London: SCM, 1939).
19. His copy of that text is marked and annotated. He cites it in *Conscience and Obedience*, p. 36.
20. From master tape recording of the event held by Word Record and Music Group, Nashville, TN. It is interesting that in the published transcript of that conversation, the University of Chicago Divinity School expunged both of those comments from the official record.

21. See "Introduction to Theology," *Criterion*, 11, 1, Winter 1963, p. 22. In the foreword to *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), the lectures which Barth gave at the University of Chicago and Princeton University, he refers to "the conscientious and thoughtful New York attorney William Stringfellow who caught my attention more than any other person" (p. ix).
22. " Transcript of his talk, published as "Care Enough to Weep," *The Witness*, February 21, 1963, p. 14. I have edited for sexist language.
23. As recalled vividly by Richard Taylor, a member of the audience. Interviewed by Bill Wylie-Kellermann, 11/26/96.
24. "Care Enough to Weep," pp. 14-15.
25. *An Ethic for Christians*, p. 150. ' Second Birthday, p. 33.
26. Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1970).
27. WS to JE 2/23/71, Box 15, Stringfellow archives #4438, Cornell University.
28. JE to WS 11/16/66, Box 9, Stringfellow archives #4438, Cornell University; translated by Robert Rhodes, Notre Dame University.
29. Jacques Ellul, "The Christian as Revolutionary" *The Student World*, Vol. XLI, No. 3, Third Quarter 1948, pp. 221-226.
30. Jacques Ellul, *The Theological Foundation of Law* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1960).
31. See *Free*, pp. 52-53; *Ethic*, 78-80; *Conscience*, 27-32.
32. *Naming* pp 115-118, for example
33. Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1976) pp 151-152
34. Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), p. 9.
35. William Stringfellow, "Introduction," Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1967), p. 3.
36. *An Ethic*, p. 47.
37. Marva Dawn, *The Concept of "the Principalities and Powers" in the Works of Jacques Ellul*, op. cit.; *Sources and Trajectories* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997); "Powers and Principalities: Yoder Point to Ellul," *Faith and Freedom*, Vol. 5, No. 1-2, June 1996, pp. 54-59.
38. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System* (New York: Continuum, 1980), fn 2., p. 335.
39. *The Concept*-, op. cit., p. 173.

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