



An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land

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Identifying America as a fallen nation with the parable of Babylon in the Book of Revelation — not with Jerusalem the holy nation, as Americans are naively and vainly wont to do — Dr. Stringfellow issues a trenchant indictment of our society.

Shockingly prophetic, dismaying, and sobering, William Stringfellow's rigorous biblical theology will surely offend the self-righteous. But the citizen of Jerusalem, alien in Babylon, will welcome the bluntness and insight with which he speaks.

An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land Details

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From Reader Review **An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land** for online ebook

Alex Stroshine says

3.5/5. William Stringfellow published this book in 1973, in the aftermath of the "Long Sixties," during the presidency of Richard Nixon, and the morass of the Vietnam War, yet much of it is extremely germane to today as the USA, under the "America First" banner of Donald J. Trump, slouches towards Babylon.

Stringfellow exposes the perversions and distortions wrought by the powers and principalities (who, even in evangelical circles, tend to be downplayed as pivotal beings) Stringfellow chides:

What is most crucial about this situation, biblically speaking, is the failure of moral theology, in the American context, to confront the principalities--the institutions, systems, ideologies, and other political and social powers--as militant, aggressive, and immensely influential creatures in the world as it is. Any ethic of social renewal, any effort in social regeneration--regardless of what it concretely projects for human life in society--is certain to be perpetually frustrated unless account is taken of these realities named principalities and their identities and how they operate vis-a-vis one another in relation to human beings. (p. 17)

Stringfellow, an Episcopal lay theologian, urges Christians to take up the charismatic gifts so as to embody the radical life of faith, which may seem strange until we recall that the charismatic renewal BEGAN in the mainline with figures like Dennis Bennett, an Episcopal priest.

When considering the office of the presidency, Stringfellow states:

"It is more accurate, more truthful, to perceive the President as a victim and captive of the principalities and powers...In fact, the captive status of the person occupying the office has by now reached such proportions that the Presidency has become a pseudo-monarchy functioning as an elaborate facade for an incipient technocratic totalitarianism." (p. 142)

The above excerpt highlights the punchy style of Stringfellow's writing. He is rather repetitive at times and his examples (Vietnam, Kent State shootings) are ebbing into the neglected past but at the same time, readers today can draw connections to Iraq, to Black Lives Matter, to the outpouring of support for refugees fleeing the bloodied dunes of the Middle East. Indeed, Stringfellow strikes me as a bit of what is now called a "social justice warrior" as he is very concerned for the injustices that have been committed against African Americans and First Nations (but these sentiments were also pervasive in the 1960s), albeit he also has a prophetic realism to him, exemplified in his rejection of pacifism and his acknowledgement that ALL of Creation, not just human beings, suffer violence due to the Fall, p. 127-28. In the end, Stringfellow utterly rejects an American exceptionalism, an "America First" ideology and declares that "The audacity of human beings who are Americans, in the present national circumstances, to utter that NO [to an American hope] is, paradoxically, the signal of a lively hope, a hope transcending America's bondage to death. It is a hope wrought in realism about this nation: a hope which confronts the fallenness of the American principality; a hope which confesses the nation's death idolatry; a hope emancipated from moral naivete about any supposed unique destiny for the nation; a hope freed from vainglorious delusions that America is a holy nation" (p. 155); instead, true hope is found in the Giver of Life.

Randy says

Wow! Stringfellow...what an incredibly prophetic, still-relevant book.

"How to live humanly in the Fall" is the ethical issue that Stringfellow takes up. He exposes and confronts as lucidly as anyone I've read the identity and idolatrous nature of principalities and powers in our culture... those whom we are warned that our struggle is with..those that seek to steal, kill, and destroy the life and freedom Jesus longs to impart.

The book was written in 1974 so some of his examples (Watergate, Vietnam) are dated, but the prevailing character & behavior of principalities and powers hasn't changed & thus the admonition and need to remain careful and discerning.

Stringfellow says, "moral theology has failed to confront the principalities-institutions, systems, ideologies, & other political and social powers-as militant, aggressive, and immensely influential creatures in this world as it is. We are familiar with the vital signs- the commerce of war, ecological corruption, racism, urban chaos, practiced deception in government, intimidation, abuse of law, intransigence to change, recourse to violence by agents of conformity and advocates of repression...yet we remain gullible and ingenuous in the face of their usurpation of human life and domination of human beings"

Good read.

Leroy Seat says

This is an excellent book, which I have just read for maybe just the second time since the 1970s. It is perhaps the best book there is for describing and opposing the "principalities and powers" written about in the Bible.

Stringfellow asserts that the principalities and powers include "all authorities, corporations, institutions, traditions, processes, structures, bureaucracies, ideologies, systems, sciences, and the like" (p. 27). He further identifies them on page 78.

Here are some other significant statements Stringfellow makes:

"There is no unilateral, private, insulated, lonely, or eccentric Christian life. There is only the Christian as the member of the whole body; the Christian vocation for every single Christian is inherently ecumenical; the exclusive context of biblical ethics is biblical politics; even when a Christian acts apparently alone he does so as a surrogate for the Church; baptism signifies the public commitment of a person to humanity" (p. 61).

Stringfellow asserts that "death is the only possible victor in any war" and that "from a human point of view there are no glorious wars--no wars which humanize, no wars of salvation, no just wars" (p. 126).

Near the end of the book Stringfellow writes these words of admonition to his Christian readers: "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, exorcise, cleanse the possessed, raise those who are dead in mind and conscience" (pp. 142-3).

Jeremy says

A fantastic book. I expect that Stringfellow will become one of my guides on the way.

Rob says

One of the most life-changing books in my life. Deeply influenced me, radically altering my worldview with a biblical one.

James says

Very insightful book into how 'the powers' are at work within society. Stringfellow writes in the context of civil rights and opposition to the Vietnam war but his social insight remains applicable in the contemporary context. Stringfellow uses the metaphor of Babylon (as used in the book of Revelations) to discuss how the Powers working in society are aligned against humanity and God. He also uses the metaphor of Jerusalem breaking through and speaking life and hope into society.

Some thought provoking social insight and a great read of Revelations against a contemporary setting. This is good stuff.

amber says

Like being unplugged from the Matrix.

Michael Miller says

I wanted to like this book. The Christian as sojourner and alien is a topic dear to my heart. However, the book is so concerned with then-contemporary issues (Vietnam in particular) that it loses some of its power to mold our times and is hard to translate in a useful way for the 21st century. Its time-bound truths have more the feel of a quaint curiosity from bygone days. Worse, the prose is at times unreadable. I was reminded a what Denis Dutton said of Judith Butler, "To ask what this means is to miss the point. [Her writing] beats readers into submission and instructs them that they are in the presence of a great and deep mind. Actual communication has nothing to do with it." In Stringfellow's case, a great and deep Christian mind. The stringing together of ethical jargon and Christian verbiage do not make for a useful guide to ethics. There is some genuine insight here, it's just buried under obtuse prose. In the end we are left with the feeling that "the powers are everywhere, and they're very bad." Now what?

Jeff says

How to begin to live a fully human life in the midst of a fallen nation and world. This is a remarkably relevant book in spite of its first being published in 1973. A penetrating analysis towards understanding America biblically and not, in the words of the author, "to construe the Bible Americanly." Stringfellow believes that to understand America in this way necessitates an understanding of the "powers and principalities." This book is by no means an easy read. By today's standards, which seek to pigeonhole everyone in one way or another, Stringfellow is of a different and engaging spirit altogether. I can't say for sure but it would seem this treatment of the principalities and powers laid at least some of the groundwork for Walter Wink's later thinking.

Jessie says

Most clear-thinking theologian I've read (despite his Harvard-esque style); to be a Christian = being human for Stringfellow; he's a non-literalist, serious student of the Bible. A taste of his exegesis: the charismatic gifts of the church can include burning yr draft card.

Quinn says

Shockingly blunt appraisal of America and its reality within a Christian worldview from 1973 which is even more apt today. Every Christian should read to open the mind to more possibilities of our ethical response to others.

Eric says

A consistent and challenging vision of the principalities and power, demons and (the) Satan, through the lens of Revelation's vision of the conflict between humans/death and God as the battle between two cities, Babylon and Jerusalem, and how most of the supernatural language in the bible is about politics and what we might all institutional evil. A relentlessly materialistic reading of supernatural language in the Bible. I do wonder how his reading of the principalities and powers as embodied, fallen, death systems relates to an understanding of God as an ontologically distinct being? Is God an embodied life system? Good questions, certainly looking forward to Richard Beck's book Reviving Old Scratch, as Beck's work led me to Stringfellow in the first place.

Luke says

It's rare I read a book on one sitting. This is one of them. Stringfellow, a lawyer and Episcopalian lay theologian, is such a provocative and engaging writer that you'll be enraptured even if you despise his controversial argument here.

Stringfellow argues that in scripture Babylon is a type for all nations. It is among the powers and principalities to be defeated by Christ at the eachaton. Babylon feeds on a violence in which we are all complicit. Christians are aliens in Babylon, belonging to Jerusalem. How are we to sing praise in the foreign land of Babylon? Stringfellow's answer is from Revelation: that heaven rejoices in Babylon's destruction. The kicker is that Stringfellow aims all this at America, the violence of Vietnam/Cambodia, and the internal violence of racism and poverty. America, the preeminent potentate of Babylon in our age, will be defeated and to great rejoicing.

Obviously this hard pill to take, perhaps an excess of rhetoric, but Stringfellow does well in using Revelation to diagnose the violence at the heart of state power as characteristic of the Fall. He's writing in the midst of Vietnam, the wake of Race Riots, and the beginnings of Watergate, but the book doesn't feel aged one bit. It feels just as relevant in 2018 then in 1973.

I have quibbles with the politics of retreat/complacency implicit here (which I may be wrong about) but I Highly recommend.

Josh says

This book is challenging, but not, I think, because its arguments are dated (dealing with the political and social situations of the early 70s); rather, I think its challenging because its arguments are uncomfortably relevant. The Fall is still the Fall, and we are still called to determine how to live humanly in it, be it 1970, 1940, 1530, or now. It's unsettling because it unmask something that I think I might prefer to keep hidden. Everything is subject to fallenness...everything. There is a lurking malevolence, a service to death, that I would prefer to ignore. But now I can't.

Caleb Roberts says

I had a few quibbles over some of his distinctions, but I'm inclined to give them a pass given the popular nature of the book. Overall, a timely and riveting reflection on the "powers and principalities" that enslave us all. It would be well-read as an accompaniment to Augustine's City of God.
