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Robert B. Slocum

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Recommended Citation

Slocum, Robert B., "William Stringfellow and the Christian Witness Against Death" (1995). *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*. 721.

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William Stringfellow and the Christian Witness Against Death

ROBERT B. SLOCUM*

William Stringfellow (1928–1985), an Episcopal layman, was perhaps the most important American theologian of this century. He encountered the social issues of his day with a faith that was clear, articulate, passionate, and biblical. He identified the power of death in the many forms (personal and social) that threaten to diminish humanity through fear, intimidation, bigotry, greed, hate, domination, or anything less than God that would become a “ruling idol” in human hearts. Stringfellow resisted those threats in light of the victory of life over death in Christ. He was unwavering in the face of opposition and controversy, even when his support and assistance to Daniel Berrigan brought the threat of federal prosecution. Stringfellow would not be intimidated, silenced, or deterred from the Christian ethic of witness against death in all its forms. He encountered the forms and powers of death with a theological critique and personal witness that reached far beyond the issues of his time.

Unfortunately, Stringfellow’s theology has been something of a critical enigma, and the significance of his work has not been fully recognized. Walter Wink, a seminary professor of biblical interpretation and a supporter of Stringfellow’s, notes that “He has been largely ignored by academic theologians and, when recognized at all, introduced by the sobriquet, ‘William Stringfellow, the noted lay theologian,’ meaning by that not simply non-ordained, but amateur, untrained, uncredentialed, and illegitimate.”¹ Wink adds that many dismissed Stringfellow as a “popularizer.”² Wink also observes that “Because he wrote for an audience of his peers—and he regarded everyone as his peer—Stringfellow’s books were not laden with footnotes, jargon, dense and convoluted arguments, or discussions about other authors.”³ Stringfellow certainly wrote theology for the widest possible audience. For example, *Instead of Death* was originally written as a “short studybook” for use in the Episcopal Church’s curriculum for high school

* Robert B. Slocum, an Episcopal priest, is rector of the Church of the Holy Communion in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, and a doctoral student in systematic theology at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

¹ Walter Wink, “A Mind Full of Surprises,” *Sojourners*, vol. 14, no. 11 (December 1985): 25.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

youth.⁴ The book is simple, powerful, practical, and uncompromising in its articulation of Stringfellow's theology of life and death. The significance of Stringfellow's theology was enhanced, not diminished, by its clarity and applicability to daily life.

Others viewed Stringfellow's theology with enthusiasm. Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners*, states that William Stringfellow "was, in my opinion, the most significant American theologian of the last few decades."⁵ Wink considers Stringfellow "America's most important theologian".⁶ And Wallis also notes that "When Karl Barth visited the United States in the early 1960s, he called William Stringfellow 'the man America should be listening to'."⁷ In the 1960s, as at other times, America needed to take the threat of death seriously. H. Coleman McGehee, Jr., Episcopal Bishop of Michigan, describes Stringfellow as "one of the most authentic prophets of our place and time," and notes that "Both Karl Barth and Jacques Ellul recognized in Stringfellow a peer in prophecy, one who applied the merciless plumbline of scripture to the jerry-built structures of society."⁸ Stringfellow was an unflinching prophet against the ravages of death in his world.

A Voice to Contradict Death

The context and meaning of Stringfellow's Christian witness against death can be brought into focus by the events that were happening in his life in November 1968. At this time the United States was convulsed by protests against American military involvement in Vietnam and controversy over the civil rights movement. Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit priest and a personal friend of Stringfellow, was arrested with others for burning draft records with napalm in Catonsville, Maryland, and put on trial in Baltimore in November 1968. In November 1968, Stringfellow was living with his close friend Anthony Towne on Block Island (New Shoreham), an island off the coast of Rhode Island. Stringfellow and Towne understood their home as an intentional Christian community, and they eventually named it "Eschaton." It was a place of Christian friendship and hospitality, and they often entertained guests and "pilgrims"—including, from time to time, Daniel Berrigan.

One of the reasons for Stringfellow's move to Block Island was his failing health. He suffered greatly from a disease of the pancreas that

⁴ William Stringfellow, *Instead of Death, New and Expanded Edition* (New York: Seabury, 1976), p. 1.

⁵ Jim Wallis, "A Tribute to William Stringfellow," *Sojourners*, vol. 14, no. 4 (April 1985): 2.

⁶ Wink, p. 25.

⁷ Wallis, p. 2.

⁸ H. Coleman McGehee, Jr., "Empowering Spark," *Sojourners*, vol. 14, no. 11 (December 1985): 26–27.

brought him to the verge of death in 1968. Stringfellow tried to resist the effects of the disease and maintain his active schedule. However, he underwent an extensive and radical surgery in November 1968. Although Stringfellow came away from that operation with a "wildly erratic diabetes," he surprised many by surviving the surgery and the effects of the illness for many years.⁹ Stringfellow describes his medical ordeal in *A Second Birthday*.¹⁰ Anthony Towne, Stringfellow's companion, recalls that shortly before the surgery Stringfellow went to Baltimore for the Berrigan trial: "On the evening of the third day of the trial, what remained of William Stringfellow did, in fact, appear. There were speeches being made to several thousands gathered in a Baltimore church. Stringfellow would utter (whisper) a few words, the last of them an admonition to remember that death has no dominion over us."¹¹

After the surgery, Stringfellow returned to live and recuperate on Block Island. Berrigan was convicted of the federal charges against him, and his legal appeal was unsuccessful. However, Berrigan refused to surrender himself to federal authorities after his appeal was denied. He went into hiding "underground." In August 1970 he fled to Eschaton, where Stringfellow and Towne offered him hospitality. Berrigan was arrested at their home several days later. Prior to Berrigan's arrest, federal agents posed as "bird watchers" to keep Eschaton under surveillance. Stringfellow and Towne were indicted for "harboring and concealing" the fugitive Berrigan, but these charges were later dismissed on procedural grounds. Stringfellow was warned by friends to keep silent while he was subject to being recharged, but he refused. Berrigan later published a book of poems titled *Block Island*, dedicated to Stringfellow.¹² A line from one of Berrigan's poems provided the title for Stringfellow and Towne's *Suspect Tenderness*, which is a collection of writings that concern the Berrigan witness and the incident at Block Island. Stringfellow also reports that an encounter with a federal agent at this time "contributed" to his conviction to write *Conscience & Obedience*.¹³

Stringfellow perceived the power of death at work in his body and in his society. And he fought that power. One friend notes that "Stringfellow fiercely resented the ravages of disease upon his body. He fought them zealously and insisted on maintaining a travel, lecture, and writing schedule

⁹ Melvin E. Schoonover, "Present and Powerful in Life and Death: William Stringfellow's Quest for Truth," *Sojourners*, vol. 14, no. 11 (December 1985): 14.

¹⁰ William Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970).

¹¹ Anthony Towne, "On Sheltering Criminal Priests," in William Stringfellow and Anthony Towne, *Suspect Tenderness The Ethics of the Berrigan Witness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 18.

¹² Daniel Berrigan, *Block Island* (Greensboro, N.C.: Unicorn Press, 1985).

¹³ William Stringfellow, *Conscience & Obedience* (Waco, TX: Word, 1977), p. 16.

that defied their power—successfully for most of the time.”¹⁴ Stringfellow explains that “I resist the power of death and that which, in the somewhat pathetic state of my health, manifestly foreshadows death—like amputation of a leg or two.”¹⁵ Concerning the federal charges against him for the Block Island episode, Stringfellow felt he was “being threatened with death” by the American legal system.¹⁶ When Stringfellow spoke to the crowd on the third day of Berrigan’s trial in Baltimore, Berrigan noted that “William Stringfellow’s life had been on the line for a very long time.”¹⁷ Stringfellow understood “death” and the threat of death with a broad meaning, which will be discussed in this article. Stringfellow believed that the powers of death (in whatever form) must have no dominion over us.

Stringfellow’s theology was in the spirit of Thomas Merton’s presentation of the struggle with the powers of death within the individual and in society. Like Merton, Stringfellow perceived a deep and powerful connection between Christian spirituality and the Christian vocation to resist death. He could easily have joined with Merton in saying that “Life and death are at war within us.”¹⁸ In *The Politics of Spirituality*, Stringfellow even discusses the “monastic tactics” of intercession and eucharistic praise of the Word of God as “especially suited to political resistance.”¹⁹ He encountered death with prayer. Stringfellow and Merton shared a witness against the powers and disguises of death in the world. He dedicated *An Ethic for Christians & Other Aliens in a Strange Land* to Merton.

The Power and Pervasiveness of Death

In addition to death’s physiological threat to existence and vitality, Stringfellow perceived the threat of death in the allure of anything less than God to command the worship and praise due only to God. Stringfellow notes in *Count it All Joy* that “Death is the obvious meaning of existence, if God is ignored, surviving as death does every other personal or social reality

¹⁴ Schoonover, “Present and Powerful,” p. 14.

¹⁵ William Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), p. 88.

¹⁶ William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, TX: Word, 1973), p. 85.

¹⁷ Towne, “On Sheltering Criminal Priests,” p. 18.

¹⁸ Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), p. 3. Another parallel with Stringfellow is found in Merton’s critique of militarism as a false idol and embodiment of the power of death relative to the Hiroshima bombing in “Original Child Bomb.” Thomas Merton, “Original Child Bomb,” in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 291–302. Merton’s view of the idols of totalitarianism and militarism can also be seen in his essays, “Christianity and Totalitarianism” and “The Root of War Is Fear.” Thomas Merton, “Christianity and Totalitarianism,” in *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1960), pp. 127–148; Thomas Merton, “The Root of War Is Fear,” in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), pp. 112–122.

¹⁹ Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality*, p. 84.

to which is attributed the meaning of existence in this world.”²⁰ He also discusses the power and pervasiveness of death in terms of the Fall, noting in *Dissenter in a Great Society* that “In the Fall, death reigns over men and nations and ideas, and over all that is, as a living, militant, pervasive and, apparently, ultimate power—in other words, as *that* which gives moral significance to everyone and everything else.”²¹ Death then becomes the ultimate idol as it takes the place of God, commanding its own worship and conferring its own ultimate meaning. Stringfellow explains that “Death is the ruling idol which all other idols—race, nationalism, religion, money, sex, and all their counterparts—worship and serve, and to which men in their turn give honor and sacrifice through their idolatries.”²²

This idolatrous process of making a substitute for God is visible when people seek to act as God. In *Instead of Death*, Stringfellow notes that “Sin is the denunciation of the freedom of God to judge humans as it pleases him to judge them. Sin is the displacement of God’s will with one’s own will. Sin is the radical confusion as to whether God or the human being is morally sovereign in history.”²³ When a person or cause arrogates this capacity for ultimate judgment, Stringfellow explains, the outcome is “acute estrangement” and alienation from God and from life itself, leaving the person “consigned to death, committed to the service of death, unable to save themselves from death.”²⁴

Ironically, human overreaching causes a loss of identity instead of an expansion of personal authority and freedom. Stringfellow urges that death is the “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 very much worse—one’s very own self.”²⁵ Death, Stringfellow concludes, “means a total loss of identity.”²⁶ And the solution that death offers for this predicament is idolatry in its many forms.

The power of death is also evident in the institutions and abuses that seek to overturn God and dehumanize the people of God’s creation. In *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, Stringfellow points to the “social forms of death” in American subcultures, “noticeably those of elderly citizens, of ghettoized blacks, of prison inmates, and of servicemen and Vietnam veterans,” in which “the banishment or abandonment of hu-

²⁰ William Stringfellow, *Count It All Joy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1967), p. 52.

²¹ William Stringfellow, *Dissenter in a Great Society* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 136–137.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 137.

²³ Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, pp. 19–20.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

man beings to loneliness, isolation, ostracism, impoverishment, unemployment, separation" become "so dehumanizing that the victims suffer few illusions about their consignment to death or to these moral equivalents of death by American society."²⁷ Such injustice is not merely a social wrong that should be reformed—although it is wrong, and it *should* be reformed! Stringfellow's theology goes beyond social reform and political dissent. He defines abuses against God's sovereignty and the welfare of humanity as *blasphemy*. In *Conscience & Obedience*, Stringfellow notes that "the biblical witness not only stands against tyranny and oppression as such but comprehends tyranny and oppression as blasphemy, that is, as the repudiation and defamation of the Lordship of Christ in common history by the ruling powers and political principalities."²⁸

Institutions that dehumanize and abuse become "principalities" of death, and seek to make a hideous substitution for the right moral order and dominion of God. And people may become enthralled by those principalities. In *Count It All Joy*, Stringfellow urges that "Death commands legions of acolytes, many willful in their allegiance, but many, also, who are witless or unwary and who do not recognize death when actually confronting it."²⁹ He warns that there are those who "succumb to death's temptations for, so to speak, the most idealistic or earnest motives."³⁰ Stringfellow understands these principalities of death in terms of the devil. He notes that "ascertaining the objective existence in this world of the power of death" does not require belief "in an anthropomorphic idea of a devil with horns and a tail and a red complexion."³¹ Stringfellow adds that "One does not have to be a literalist about the classical images of the devil" to know that "in this world with all of its principalities and powers, the ascendant reality, apart from the reality of God himself, is death."³² Stringfellow also urges that the power of death is appropriately given "the name of the Devil" because of its "exceeding great power" and "presumption of sovereignty over *all* of life."³³

Stringfellow warned that "The understanding of principalities and powers is lost nowadays in the churches, though, I observe, not so much so outside the churches."³⁴ On a visit to Harvard in the early 1960s, Stringfellow found that students in the Business School "displayed an awareness, intelligence, and insight with respect to what principalities are and what are the issues between principalities and human beings."³⁵ However, on the

²⁷ Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians*, p. 69.

²⁸ Stringfellow, *Conscience & Obedience*, p. 70.

²⁹ Stringfellow, *Count It All Joy*, p. 91.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ William Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience* (New York: Seabury, 1964), p. 69.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Stringfellow, *Count It All Joy*, p. 89.

³⁴ Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, p. 50.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

same visit he found that students in the Divinity School mostly felt that terms such as "principalities and powers" were "archaic imagery having no reference to contemporary realities."³⁶ For his part, Stringfellow is clear about the "common denominator" of all "demonic claims against human life": *dehumanization*.³⁷ He urges that "each and every stratagem and resort of the principalities seeks the death of the specific faculties of rational and moral comprehension which specially distinguish human beings from all other creatures."³⁸ This is death through total loss of identity. Stringfellow adds that "demonic aggression always aims at the immobilization or surrender or destruction of the mind and at the neutralization of abandonment or demoralization of the conscience. In the Fall, the purpose and effort of every principality is the dehumanization of human life, *categorically*."³⁹

The power of death takes many specific forms, and it is evident in many particular ways. Stringfellow notes that "Men are veritably besieged, on all sides, at every moment simultaneously by these claims and strivings of the various powers, each seeking to dominate, usurp, or take a person's time, attention, abilities, effort; each grasping at life itself; each demanding idolatrous service and loyalty."⁴⁰ In many cases, the power of death is active in various levels or aspects of a particular situation. For example, with respect to racism, Stringfellow hopes that Christians will recognize the "monstrous contradiction" and corruption of racism.⁴¹ But he expects more from the "Christian conscience about racism." In *Dissenter in a Great Society*, Stringfellow urges that "For the Christian, it is not just that racism is morally wrong for this society but, rather, that in any of its vulgar or sophisticated forms it is a sign of death at work. Racism is one of the ways in which men and institutions suffer that separation from one another which represents their own loss of identity in the Fall."⁴² Stringfellow realizes that the advocates against social evil are not immune from the power and deceptions of death. He notes that death "is occupied in the civil rights movement luring some to behold integration as an idol".⁴³

With respect to the war in Vietnam, Stringfellow and Towne wrote to the Berrigan brothers in federal prison that "in America now, the war itself, the reality of fear, the temptation to silence, the contempt for reason, the paralysis of conscience—all of these, and more—are in truth ways in which death itself is enshrined as the moral purpose of society, as an idol."⁴⁴

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians*, p. 97.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 90.

⁴¹ Stringfellow, *Dissenter in a Great Society*, p. 138.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 138–139.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 140.

⁴⁴ Stringfellow and Towne, *Suspect Tenderness*, p. 177.

Similarly, in *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, Stringfellow notes that in America "there has been no more blunt, no more terrible apparition of the moral reality of death domineering the nation than the war in Indochina."⁴⁵ However, Stringfellow warns that "this Indochina war did not sponsor the moral power of death in American society."⁴⁶ On the contrary, Stringfellow urges that the war "expresses, grotesquely, the moral presence of death which has always been in America, as in other principalities. And the end of the war promises no end, no diminishment even, to *that* presence."⁴⁷ Stringfellow was a political dissenter and advocate for social justice, but he was also a theologian with keen skill for identifying the many threats and faces of death.

Stringfellow was more than a voice for social reform. He believed that abuses such as militarism, bigotry, and governmental intimidation were symptoms of a deeper problem in the United States and elsewhere—the pervasiveness of the powers of death, and the human tendency to worship and be corrupted by those powers. Speaking theologically, he understood this situation as the Fall. The Fall means that "all of creation exists in bondage to death, without any power to prevail against death."⁴⁸ He was clear that it would take more than an end to desegregation and the war in Viet Nam to reverse the Fall. In many ways, Stringfellow pointed to the victory of life over death as the only real victory.

The Wilderness Experience: Help for the Helpless

Stringfellow points to a paradox concerning the human encounter with death: the person is helpless in the face of death, but there is help available in the condition of human helplessness. The temptation in the face of death is to *avoid* helplessness, but that results in human grasping for security or power or diversion in a way that does not help. Such grasping amounts to seeking the protection of an idol, which is reverence for death as the ultimate source of human meaning and the ultimate arbiter of human affairs. In this way, the person who grasps to avoid helplessness will predictably be drawn deeper into bondage to the power of death. Instead, the person facing death must first admit and embrace the condition of helplessness. This will involve a letting go of idols, and it can be a moment of conversion.

Stringfellow explains in *Instead of Death* that "Conversion is the event during which a person finds himself radically and absolutely helpless. In becoming a Christian, a person sees that he is naked, exposed, and trans-

⁴⁵ Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians*, p. 70.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Stringfellow, *Dissenter in a Great Society*, p. 136.

parent in every respect—he is completely vulnerable.”⁴⁹ In that moment of emptiness, the person can be most fully open to God. He notes in *Count It All Joy* that

To ask God in faith for the knowledge of Him that embraces the profound knowledge of self in relation to the rest of creation is to enter upon an estate of utter helplessness. *Utter* helplessness: it is an experience in which all is given up, in which all effort and activity of whatever sort ceases, not only in which all answers are unknown, but unattempted, and also in which all questions are inarticulated and abandoned.⁵⁰

In the moment of utter helplessness, all schemes and idols and diversions and power plays and efforts to grasp control must be let go. Stringfellow adds that this moment of helplessness is “the time in the wilderness.”⁵¹

The Gospel story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness is a cornerstone for Stringfellow’s theology. He discusses Jesus’ “wilderness interlude” in *Free in Obedience, Instead of Death*, and *Count It All Joy*.⁵² Stringfellow explains in *Count It All Joy*: “That the *only* temptation at all, for any man, at any time, is to succumb to the idolatry of death is disclosed and enacted decisively in the episode of Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11; cf. Mark 1:2–13; Luke 4:1–13).”⁵³ The wilderness is the place of emptiness and helplessness, but the wilderness is also the place of *victory*. Stringfellow notes in *Free in Obedience* that “To be in the wilderness is to be alone with the reality of one’s own death, to be confronted with the reign of death in all the world. In the wilderness the power of death tempts Christ with the offer of worldly dominion, but Christ is victorious over all the claims and temptations of death.”⁵⁴

In *Instead of Death*, Stringfellow states that “To be in the wilderness represents a concrete encounter with death. . . . But the wilderness is also a place into which Christ himself has come and in which Christ has already been victorious over the claims and temptations of death.”⁵⁵ And Jesus’ victory in the wilderness can be both example and cause for our own victory in the face of death. Relative to St. Paul, Stringfellow explains that “Paul entered the wilderness in his conversion and beheld the triumph of Christ in the wilderness; Paul went into the wilderness and was there protected from death by Christ.”⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, p. 108.

⁵⁰ Stringfellow, *Count It All Joy*, pp. 47–48.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵² Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, p. 35; Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, pp. 109–110; Stringfellow, *Count It All Joy*, pp. 86–88.

⁵³ Stringfellow, *Count It All Joy*, p. 86.

⁵⁴ Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, p. 35.

⁵⁵ Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, pp. 109–110.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Christ's victory is the effective help for the helpless in the face of death. And, notwithstanding Christ's victory, the person remains in one sense helpless in the face of death. The wilderness is still the wilderness, and death is still death. Indeed, the person must remain helpless (free of grasping, free of idols) to receive God's gift of help. The person must remain vulnerable. In *Conscience & Obedience*, Stringfellow notes that "one who knows justification to be a gift of the Word of God is spared no aggression of the power of death but concedes no tribute to the power of death while awaiting the vindication of the Word of God in the coming of Jesus Christ in judgment."⁵⁷ In *Count It All Joy*, Stringfellow urges that "The gift of faith involves enduring the full assault of the power of death in one's own life in relationship to the claim of death over all of life and, in the same event, suffering the power of God overcoming death in one's own existence in relation to the rest of creation."⁵⁸ Out of this encounter with death, and victory in Christ comes "emancipation from the power of death."⁵⁹ Explaining his title in *Count It All Joy*, Stringfellow notes that Christians who share the vocation to "enjoy their emancipation from the power of death wrought by God's vitality in this world" can "count all trials as joys for, though every trial be an assault of the power of death, in every trial is God's defeat of death verified and manifested."⁶⁰ There is help for the helpless in the wilderness. There is victory in the face of death, and emancipation from its power.

Ethics for an Eschatological Christian Community

Stringfellow's guidance for Christian living in the world has an underlying conviction: encounters with the power of death are inevitable, but Christ has won the victory over death. There is nothing we need to "do" to protect ourselves or overcome the power of death because God has already triumphed. Ironically, attempts to evade death or "single-handedly" overcome it can draw us deeper into death's bondage. Grasping for power in the face of death can substitute idols for God, and turn us from receptive trust in God's gift. Stringfellow explains in *Free in Obedience* that the Christian "is confident that the Word of God has already gone before him. Therefore he can live and act, whatever the circumstances, without fear of or bondage to either his own death or the works of death in the world."⁶¹

What we do in the face of death, and what we refrain from doing, are shaped by our eschatological hope. In *The Politics of Spirituality*, Stringfel-

⁵⁷ Stringfellow, *Conscience & Obedience*, p. 112.

⁵⁸ Stringfellow, *Count It All Joy*, p. 52.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 93, 52.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 93. This is the basis for the title, *Count It All Joy*.

⁶¹ Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, p. 128.

low notes that the "occasion for praising the Word of God, in every way, in all things, is already with us. There is actually nothing else that needs to be done, and so whatever we do is transfigured into a sacrament of that praise."⁶² Praise for God is at the heart of our response in faith. And our trusting receptiveness for God is enough, because "The only thing that really matters is to live in Christ instead of death."⁶³ We can experience the power of Jesus' victory over death in our lives today, and we anticipate the fulfillment of that victory in our lives and in the world. It is Jesus' resurrection, and not anything we do for ourselves, that is ultimately decisive.

Stringfellow notes that the victory of life over death is shared by God through the Church, especially in the sacrament of Baptism. He explains that "Baptism is the sacrament of the extraordinary unity among humanity wrought by God in overcoming the power and reign of death; in overcoming all that alienates, segregates, divides and destroys men in their relationships to each other, within their own persons, and in their relationship with the rest of creation."⁶⁴ The victory of life is shared corporately in the Church, the community of the baptized. And the individual Christian's vocation is shaped by and rooted in membership of the faith community. Stringfellow urges in *Instead of Death* that "the vocation of the baptized person is a simple thing: it is to live from day to day, whatever the day brings, in this extraordinary unity, in this reconciliation with all men and all things, in this knowledge that death has no more power, in this truth of the resurrection."⁶⁵

Christ's victory of life also authorizes and empowers an active and sometimes public resistance by the Christian to the powers of death in the world. Stringfellow notes in *Free in Obedience* that the Christian "is enabled and authorized by the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church and to himself in baptism to expose all that death has done and can do, rejoicing in the freedom of God which liberates all men, all principalities, all things from bondage to death."⁶⁶ And the freedom of emancipation from the power of death enables Christian generosity for service, sacrifice, and witness. Stringfellow states that "the Christian is free to give his own life to the world, to anybody at all, even to one who does not know about or acknowledge the gift, even to one whom the world would regard as unworthy of the gift."⁶⁷

The Christian vocation includes generosity, and active resistance to the power of death. Stringfellow explains in *Dissenter in a Great Society* that the

⁶² Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality*, p. 85.

⁶³ Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, p. 112. This is the basis for the title, *Instead of Death*.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 111-112.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

⁶⁶ Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, p. 128.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

drama of history "is not a conflict between evil and good, as secular ethics supposes, but concerns the power of death in this world and how death is overpowered in this life by the power of the Resurrection."⁶⁸ This victory of life over the powers of death occurs daily, in history, through the lives of Christians who also seek the fulfillment of that victory in the coming of the Kingdom of God. For Stringfellow, the Christian witness against death is rooted in an eschatological hope. He explains that "It is the juxtaposition of death and Resurrection that authorizes the Christian involvement in worldly affairs of all sorts and that verifies the eschatological hope which Christians have for all men and the whole of creation."⁶⁹

At a personal level, Stringfellow explains, resistance to death is *humanizing*. The powers of death threaten the person with loss of identity, and the seductive undermining of moral and rational faculties. The powers of death offer idols in place of hope and trust in God. But resistance to the powers of death is humanizing, and a necessary aspect of Christian life. Stringfellow notes in *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* that it is the crisis of personal confrontation with death "which is the definitively humanizing experience. Engagement in specific and incessant struggle against death's rule renders us human."⁷⁰ Simply stated, "No to death means yes to life."⁷¹

Stringfellow also states that confrontation of death is humanizing, "whatever the apparent outcome".⁷² Political or worldly success is never the ultimate measure of Christian witness against the power of death. For example, Stringfellow points to the "hopeless" situation of those who resisted the Nazis during World War II. He notes that "To calculate their actions—abetting escapes, circulating mimeographed news, hiding fugitives, obtaining money or needed documents, engaging in various forms of noncooperation with the occupying authorities . . . in terms of odds against the Nazi efficiency and power and violence and vindictiveness would seem to render their witness ridiculous."⁷³ But, Stringfellow urges, "the act of resistance to the power of death incarnate in Nazism was the only means of retaining sanity and conscience. In the circumstances of the Nazi tyranny, *resistance became the only human way to live*."⁷⁴

Stringfellow also cites the Barmen Declaration by the Confessing Church in Germany that "publicly rebuked the demonic reality of political authority in the emerging Nazi state".⁷⁵ This Declaration did not stop the

⁶⁸ Stringfellow, *Dissenter in a Great Society*, p. 136.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians*, p. 138.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 156.

⁷² Ibid., p. 138.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 118.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 119.

⁷⁵ Stringfellow, *Conscience & Obedience*, p. 70.

rise of the Nazis, and it led to the execution, imprisonment, or exile of everyone who signed it. Politically, the Declaration was a failure. But it was an "exemplary witness," a confession of the Lordship of Christ, and an "admonishment that the Word of God is active in judgment in this world."⁷⁶ The Declaration was also for its signers an affirmation of trust in God, and an expression of their humanity in the face of the power of death.

For Stringfellow, advocacy against the power of death is a responsibility of the Church and an aspect of the vocation of the baptized. This is a recurrent theme in his theology. In *Instead of Death*, he states that "The biblical lifestyle is *always* a witness of resistance to the *status quo* in politics, economics, and all society. It is a witness of resurrection from death."⁷⁷ And in *Conscience & Obedience*, he urges that "Advocacy is how the church puts into practice its own experience of the victory of the Word of God over the power of death, how the church lives in the efficacy of the resurrection amidst the reign of death in this world, how the church expends its life in freedom from both intimidation and enthrallment of death or any agencies of death. . . ."⁷⁸

The Church's vocation against the powers of death is eschatological, rooted in Christ's victory of life and eagerly anticipating the fulfillment of that victory in the Kingdom of God. Stringfellow explains in *Free in Obedience* that "The Church as Church, the Church living in and by the freedom bestowed in Pentecost, is the foretaste and forerunner—the priest (or representative) and prophet—of the reconciled society. The Church as Church is the image of God's own Kingdom, of the Eschaton."⁷⁹ The Church pioneers the fulfilling of the Kingdom of God in the world, and that vocation directs the Church's witness against the powers of death. Stringfellow states in *Dissenter in a Great Society* that "the vocation of the Church of Christ in the world, in political conflict and social strife, is inherently eschatological. . . . The Church is 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."⁸⁰

The Church is to be an eschatological community: people who share by baptism the victory over death of Christ's resurrection, people who share in anticipating the fulfillment of that victory in all creation and the coming of the Kingdom, people whose eschatological hope for the future leads them to witness against the principalities of death in the world today, people who share the Church's vocation to incarnate and pioneer the fulfilling of the Kingdom of God in creation.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 70–71.

⁷⁷ Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, pp. 100–101.

⁷⁸ Stringfellow, *Conscience & Obedience*, pp. 94–95.

⁷⁹ Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, p. 103.

⁸⁰ Stringfellow, *Dissenter in a Great Society*, p. 142.

A Life Against Death

Stringfellow's theology must be understood in terms of the total witness of his life. He lived in an era of political controversy and radical dissent in the United States. He certainly experienced the controversies to the full. And his experience was a *lived* experience. Stringfellow sought to resist the poverty and destruction in his neighbors' lives through his law practice in one of Harlem's poorest tenement districts. Stringfellow's public and personal support for Daniel Berrigan was pivotal. Stringfellow resisted the power of death in his body in order to address a crowd gathered for Berrigan's trial in Baltimore. He urged that the forces of death must not have dominion, meaning the variety of principalities that would dehumanize and diminish life through needless violence and intimidation of dissent. Stringfellow would not be intimidated to deny hospitality to a friend who was a fugitive of conscience, and he would not be silenced by the possibility of official reprisal.

The Christian witness against death was *the* theme in Stringfellow's theology. He notes that most of his books focus "upon the death/resurrection motif."⁸¹ In his writing and in all his life, Stringfellow identified and unmasked the guises of death in the world. He faced death directly, as he faced the theological and moral questions of his life. Daniel Berrigan remembered Stringfellow in the poem "Death and life of a friend", a portion of which says, "Stringfellow bethought; Death lacking a name—", and later adds, "We must break this thrall/ once for all, became his mind's/ holy obsession and vocation".⁸² Stringfellow believed in the victory of life, and he eagerly anticipated its fulfillment. He called on the Church to claim the victory of life over death, as he called on Christians to participate in that victory by resisting death in their world. Stringfellow was an advocate against death. That was his vocation, and witness.

⁸¹ Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, p. 3.

⁸² Daniel Berrigan, "Death and life of a friend," *Sojourners*, vol. 14, no. 11 (December 1985): 29.