

The Defiant Ringmaster: Lessons in Christian Leadership from William Stringfellow

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It is unusual, in my experience, for students to leave the London School of Economics (LSE) less ambitious and career-oriented than when they arrived. But this was clearly the experience of a young American who spent a year of graduate study at the School from 1949 to 1950. William Stringfellow went on to lead an extraordinary and inspirational life as a practicing lawyer and political activist, all the while speaking and writing as a theologian who was praised by Karl Barth in 1962 as the man America “should listen to.”¹ His year at the LSE appears to have been a critical turning point, to which he would refer back almost as his moment of conversion. This paper will explore the nature of that transition in Stringfellow’s understanding of himself and his leadership aspirations. We will then see how this is reflected in later writings about the leadership of both the church and the secular world to glean three lessons in church leadership that may be of relevance to today’s debates on this issue.

When he arrived in London, William Stringfellow was an industrious high achiever who was already a leader. He was on the council of the Student Christian Movement in America and president of the United Student Christian Council, which he represented at the World Conference of Christian Youth in Oslo in 1947. He also attended the inaugural assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948, aged twenty. In his reference to the LSE, the dean of Bates College (where he had completed undergraduate studies) wrote, “I continue to be amazed that Mr. Stringfellow is able to be a straight A student and do so many other things, and do them well, while at the

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¹ Stringfellow joined a panel of eight questioning Karl Barth in April 1962 at the Rockefeller Memorial Chapel in the University of Chicago.

same time he is now and then away from the campus on his church youth movements for days at a time.”²

Stringfellow came to the LSE to study the impact of Christianity on British political life. This was near the end of the postwar Labour Government, when the influence of Christian Socialism, through Archbishop Temple and others, was having its greatest impact on British society. “I have become aware,” wrote Stringfellow in his LSE application statement, “of the impact which Christians have had upon contemporary British political life. . . . The influence of William Temple and of the Malvern Conference is also a special concern I hold.”³ While he already had the intention of going on to study law,⁴ his own aspiration to a political career was clearly being explored at this time.

Yet he took the decision in the course of this year to abandon such ambitions, expressed in the gospel language of “dying to self.” He would write in *A Simplicity of Faith* in 1982, “I was politically ambitious in my student days. But I had died to that during the time that I was a research fellow in England at the London School of Economics. It was then that I determined not to pursue politics as a career.”⁵ This was part of a wider rejection of career in favor of the concept of vocation:

[While at the LSE] I had elected then to pursue *no* career. To put it theologically, I died to the idea of career and to the whole typical array of mundane calculations, grandiose goals, and appropriate schemes to reach them. I renounced, simultaneously, the embellishments—like money, power, success—associated with careers in American culture, along with the ethics requisite to obtaining such condiments. I do not say this haughtily; this was an aspect of my conversion to the gospel, so, in fact, I say it humbly.⁶

Given its impact on his later life, I am naturally curious about what happened during this period in London. Frustratingly, the

² Reference letter from Harry W. Rowe, dated March 15, 1949; LSE Student Archive.

³ William Stringfellow’s application to the LSE, dated March 9, 1949; LSE Student Archive. The Malvern Conference galvanized Anglican support for the Welfare State in 1941.

⁴ This is also stated in his application to the LSE.

⁵ William Stringfellow, “The Political Temptation,” in *A Keeper of the Word: Selected Writings of William Stringfellow*, ed. Bill Wylie Kellermann (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 106.

⁶ William Stringfellow, “A Lawyer’s Work,” in Kellermann, ed., *A Keeper of the Word*, 30.

William Stringfellow archive at Cornell University contains little material from this period and the LSE itself has no record of any completed dissertation. In his end-of-year report form Stringfellow writes, "The intention is, upon my return to the United States, to complete this assignment in manuscript form so that it may be published for use by groups of Christian Students in the United States." Although the ideas may have fed into subsequent writing, there is no record of any publications until 1955 and it seems likely this project was abandoned during his period of military service. No graduate degree was awarded: another aspect of dying to ambition perhaps, although this was not unusual for the time.

In his biography of Stringfellow, Anthony Dancer presumes the primary impact of William Temple's thought during this time in London.⁷ But, aside from a strong Anglican emphasis on worship, I see little evidence of this in later writings and suspect the influences of more radical thinkers in this period. His report form shows that he attended three of the last LSE lecture courses by the great socialist thinker Harold Lasky shortly before his death from influenza in 1950: two courses on the history of political ideas and an introduction to the study of Marxism. Lasky's critiques of the dominance of capital and militarism are clearly detectable in Stringfellow's thought and he uses some Marxist terminology, such as the distinctively Marxist understanding of "ideology" as a distorted configuration of reality. It should be said, though, that Stringfellow employs this terminology primarily to say that the gospel itself must never be supplanted for an ideology, including Communism.

Also of greater influence than Temple may have been the list of individuals whom Stringfellow says he met in the course of that year. These included parliamentarians Henry Brook, who would later become conservative Home Secretary, and Reginald Sorenson, Labour MP, Unitarian minister, and committed pacifist. But there were also those engaged in more radical grassroots Christian politics. These included Father St John Groser, an Anglo-Catholic priest and champion in the 1920s of the left-wing Catholic Crusade movement in East London;⁸ and Alec Vidler, then Canon of St. George's Chapel, Windsor, and later Dean of King's College, Cambridge, who was also

⁷ Anthony Dancer, *An Alien in a Strange Land: Theology in the Life of William Stringfellow* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2011), 48.

⁸ As vicar of St George-in-the-East, Groser famously had his nose broken by a police baton in the Battle of Cable Street in which Oswald Mosley's fascist Blackshirts clashed with their opponents.

of left-wing Anglo-Catholic persuasion, beginning his ministry in two urban slum parishes in the North of England.

Another factor about which we can only speculate is whether an emerging awareness of his homosexuality contributed to Stringfellow's rejection of careerism and political office. Letters in the Cornell Archive express feelings of same-sex attraction as early as 1947⁹ and, to whatever degree he acted on them, he would have been well aware of the impossibility of a non-celibate (probably even celibate) gay man standing for public office at this time. Homosexuality invoked a pervasive culture of shame and stigma in both church and society and sodomy was punishable by lengthy prison sentences or hard labor in all American states until 1962. I suspect that his sexuality was also a factor in his decision not to get ordained, and Dancer plausibly suggests that his move into the legal profession was connected to an understanding of the law as an instrument of oppression of gay people. By the early 1960s he was certainly actively involved in legal counsel for gay people and in 1965 he addressed a group of gay Christians in Christ Church Cathedral, Hartford, Connecticut, advising them what to do if they got arrested. It seems likely that Stringfellow's sexuality was not only a factor in his rejection of political leadership, but also a driver behind his central theological theme of identification with the outcast and marginalized.

Much is left to speculation, but there are clearly a range of possible factors in Stringfellow's conversion from career to vocation, with its broader implications for the kind of leader he wanted to be and the kind of leadership he expected from others. We might characterize it in Old Testament terms as something of a shift from "king" to "prophet," and we are familiar with those characterizations within the church: bishops who manage and administrate, and maverick clergy who keep the radicalism of the gospel alive. But the challenge that kings can always put to prophets is: "What would you do, then, in this complex political world of compromises and responsibilities?" And many of the targets of the excoriating leadership critiques that Stringfellow would unleash over the years might well have wanted to put that question to him. But it is not a question he dodges entirely. Stringfellow remains interested in what good leadership should be in particular situations. Time and again he ascribes failures in the life of the church to a leadership characterized by a kind of careerism

⁹ See Dancer, *An Alien in a Strange Land*, 194.

and calls for a vocationally reinvigorated leadership, that is to say, one that simply listens more attentively to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

The most famous example is perhaps his open letter to the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church after the General Convention in Denver 1979. He wrote:

For these years of your incumbency as presiding bishop, I have hoped, as have so many others, that you would sometime evince a strong and definite conviction concerning the mission of the church in this world and, particularly, that of the Episcopal Church in contemporary U.S. society. None has been forthcoming. Instead, you have again and again manifested an absence of conviction, a failure of candor, a spirit of confusion, a double-mindedness, a tendency to tailor utterance to the circumstances of the moment.¹⁰

In contrast, Stringfellow is perhaps an unlikely supporter (given his form of biblical orthodoxy) of the controversial Bishop Jim Pike. A twice-divorced alcoholic, Pike was under constant suspicion of heresy for his questioning of creedal tenets of faith. Nonetheless, Pike was avidly engaged in social issues, including racial desegregation and gay rights, and he was not unsuccessful according to many of the criteria by which we are inclined to judge bishops today. As Stringfellow remarked at Pike's memorial service:

In his incumbency [as Bishop of California], despite a plethora of other endeavours, [Bishop Pike] attracted more converts, performed more baptisms, confirmed more communicants, deployed more clergy, raised more pledges, started more missions, oversaw more church construction than any other Episcopal bishop, and, as a bonus, he finished building Grace Cathedral.¹¹

So what characterizes this vocational leadership for Stringfellow? What lessons can we consolidate from him about church leadership?

The first lesson would be to urge us to *be wary of what we think we can learn about leadership from the world*. Stringfellow's rejection

¹⁰ William Stringfellow, "An Open Letter to the Presiding Bishop," in Kellermann, ed., *A Keeper of the Word*, 281.

¹¹ William Stringfellow, "Jim Pike," in Kellermann, ed., *A Keeper of the Word*, 373–374.

of careerism is part of his major theological motif of the “principalities and powers” developed from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Principalities are worldly institutions characterized, primarily, by the serving of their own interests and ensuring their own survival. Leadership, he argues, does not shape institutions so much as institutions shape leadership. (Again, there is some Marxist theory in this.) In a short essay entitled “Acolytes of the Demonic Powers,” Stringfellow characterizes most leaders as their institution’s primary victims:

In truth, the conspicuous moral fact about our generals, our industrialists, our scientists, our commercial and political leaders is that they are the most obvious and pathetic prisoners in American society. There is unleashed among the principalities in this society a ruthless, self-proliferating, all-consuming institutional process that assaults, dispirits, defeats, and destroys human life even among, and *primarily* among, those persons in positions of institutional leadership. They are left with titles but without effectual authority; with the trappings of power but without control over the institutions they head; in nominal command but bereft of dominion. These same principalities, as has been mentioned, threaten and defy and enslave human beings of other status in diverse ways, but the most poignant victim of the demonic in America today is the so-called leader.¹²

Here Stringfellow, perhaps echoing Lasky, adopts the late Marxist extension of alienation from the proletariat to the professional class. Capitalist institutions have become so consuming and distorting of virtue that all their members have become alienated from their true selves. The church is, therefore, only able to produce better leaders insofar as it constitutes a different kind of institution. But where Stringfellow differs from many calls today for the church to be countercultural in this regard is that he is in no way hankering after some spiritualized otherworldliness—a “George Herbert versus J. P. Morgan” kind of critique. For Stringfellow, the church is still a worldly political organization. It is a principality but it is called to be the “exemplary principality.”

This wariness of a spiritual avoidance of the issue is reflected in Stringfellow’s second lesson: *church leadership is for all Christians, not just clergy*. Clericalism is a collusion with the principalities and

¹² William Stringfellow, “Acolytes of the Demonic Powers,” in Kellermann, ed., *A Keeper of the Word*, 274.

powers precisely because it reduces the church's capacity as the redeemed principality by presenting the clergy as "the face of the church in the world; they have become a superficial, symbolic, ceremonial laity."¹³ Stringfellow actually has a strong view of ordained ministry and his critique of clerical leadership is not merely the one popularly implied today that clergy (bishops in particular) should not be doing so much "secular" work like managing people and raising money when laypeople can do such things. He does not see the clergy as sacred and the laity as secular. The question for him is how the whole institution of the church and each individual's vocation within it can be converted to the selflessness of the gospel and away from the tribal self-preservation of the principalities and powers. In that sense, Stringfellow's boundaries between the leadership roles of clergy and laity are deliberately unclear. In different ways we exercise leadership in a church that exists for the service of the world, and the laity are also called to lead in secular spheres in which their leadership must be distinctively Christian too. Stringfellow undoubtedly saw his legal practice as a form of church leadership.

So how is this leadership to be distinctive? The third lesson is *the priority of pastoral care*. By this phrase, Stringfellow does not mean pseudo-psychotherapeutic chats about well-being. To him the pastoral office is radical and inherently political:

In brief, the apostolic ministry begins in pastoral concern for each member of the whole church and reaches into the very interstices of the body of the church. Simultaneously, it addresses the worldly regimes of the principalities and powers, as well as all people everywhere, at once exposing every need and vouching for the redemptive vigilance of the Word of God in the world.¹⁴

He articulates this understanding of pastoral care in a particularly strong attack on Pope John Paul II, whose concern for the institutional strength of the Catholic Church led him to neglect pastoral care for the victims of militarism in Latin America or the potential victims of a nuclear escalation of the Cold War. Pastoral care is what draws the church into inevitable controversy in the public sphere. Stringfellow uses the arrest of Peter and John after their care for the beggar

¹³ William Stringfellow, "No Priesthood: No Laity," in Kellermann, ed., *A Keeper of the Word*, 163.

¹⁴ William Stringfellow, "The Politics of Pastoral Care: An Ecumenical Meditation concerning the Incumbent Pope," in Kellermann, ed., *A Keeper of the Word*, 286.

outside the Temple in Acts 3 to illustrate that it is “when bishops are most conscientious pastorally [that] they are apt to be most cogent politically.”¹⁵ The priority of pastoral care boils down to the simple truth that in order for the church to be the redeemed principality it must exist for the service of others. To do that, the church must be free from the essential character of principalities, which is a “primary and controlling concern about [its] own survival.”¹⁶ Good leaders will be those whose energy is expended in care, service, and pursuit of justice, rather than a managed effort toward the growth and health of the institution. That requires courage and the overcoming of fear, which, in Stringfellow’s terms, is always an overcoming of the fear of death.

It is this defiance of death that appears to make the circus such an attractive image to Stringfellow. He and his partner Anthony Towne spent the summer of 1966 travelling with the circus and it became, for them, the most fruitful vision of the eschatological age. Notably, the circus welcomes a diversity of humanity, including the very strange. It is an arena of wonder and joy. Many of its acts include the taming of the great beasts, symbolic for Stringfellow of the principalities and powers. Most importantly, its acts involve the defiance of death. And so the circus, writes Stringfellow, “in its open ridicule of death in these and other ways—unwittingly, I suppose—shows the rest of us that the only enemy in life is death and that this enemy confronts everyone, whatever their circumstances, all the time.”¹⁷

The circus is presided over by the ringmaster, an eccentric figure whose own responsibilities and authority are considerable but who is essentially there to make room for the other performers and to guide the crowd through the spectacle. He does not take himself too seriously, yet the acts over which he presides concern life and death. Stringfellow rejected a conventional career while studying at the LSE. But he himself found his vocation as a significant if controversial Christian leader of the twentieth century, inspiring faith and activism in thousands and contributing to the flourishing of the church. He was a defiant ringmaster, from whose vision of a self-giving leadership that challenges the principalities we could yet have much to learn.

¹⁵ Stringfellow, “The Politics of Pastoral Care,” 287.

¹⁶ William Stringfellow, “An Ecclesial Event,” in Kellermann, ed., *A Keeper of the Word*, 147.

¹⁷ William Stringfellow, “The Circus,” in Kellermann, ed., *A Keeper of the Word*, 286.