

Author Likens America's

By William R. MacKaye



By Joe Helberger—The Washington Post

William Stringfellow: inveterate Bible reader.

"I CAN HARDLY distinguish between reading the Bible and reading the newspapers, because the data is the same and the issues are the same," William Stringfellow observed in the course of a long conversation here one recent morning.

That comment might seem at first hearing remarkably incongruous, but it points exactly to how Episcopal layman Stringfellow uses the Bible and finds its contents a perennially fresh source of guidance and inspiration.

Stringfellow, by academic training a lawyer, is frequently described as a "lay theologian" on the basis of his seven volumes of spiritual reflections on his own experiences and the events of his times.

That label, while defensible, is perhaps a little misleading, for Stringfellow has no formal training in theology and in fact reads very little theology. What he reads — reflectively, regularly, analytically—is the Bible. It is a habit he formed 25 years ago when he was a 20-year-old recruit with NATO forces and a Bible was the only thing he could find around to read.

"I BEGAN reading it for want of anything else to read," he said. "Its passages always seemed familiar to me, though. I found myself saying repeatedly to myself, 'I've been here before.'"

Ills to Whore of Babylon

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What Bible-reading leads Stringfellow to is currently accessible in his most recent (and, as is customary, thorny) book, "An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land" (Word Books, \$5.95).

"An Ethic," which Stringfellow himself labels as a polemic, a term he also applied to at least one earlier book, is an effort to see the current relevance of one of the New Testament's most difficult books, the Revelation of St. John the Divine, also known as the Apocalypse.

Stringfellow was particularly struck by Revelation's 13th chapter, which speaks of a dreadful disgusting beast that came to power. As the Revised Standard Version reports it, the beast "was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it . . . Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints."

THAT, SAYS Stringfellow, looking at the nation around him, is our present situation. America, at least contemporary America, our

America, is not to be seen as Jerusalem the golden, as we are so often tempted to see it. No, indeed. America is today's Rome, the empire, Ba-

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bylon the whore, whose overthrow and destruction is announced in Revelation 18.

Developing this analogy in our conversation, Stringfellow accounted the scandals that have beset the Nixon administration as part of the picture, but only part. Contemporary presidents, in his view, are less the perpetrators of the demonic powers that hold the nation in thrall than victims of it along with the rest of it.

"Two major blunders based upon false perceptions or delusions have repeatedly been indulged by Christians, as well as other citizens, who have sought to resist official violence and to refute babel," Stringfellow writes at one point.

"One is the presumption of rationality in the nation's leaders. That presumption is often coupled with the su-

perstition that incumbency in high office, notably in the White House, somehow enhances the faculties of sanity and conscience, whereas the evidence is that occupancy of the Presidency, or similar heights, is a pathetically dehumanizing ordeal, harmful to both sanity and conscience.

"This has become acutely obvious in the past decade during which the idolatry of death as the nation's moral purpose has been so grotesquely magnified in the Indochina war."

"IF ONE SEES one's own land and people as plunged into wickedness as Stringfellow does, what is to be done about it?"

"In the midst of babel, speak the truth," Stringfellow says in his book.

"The main assault is an assault on our minds," Stringfellow amplified, in the double-talk that emerges from officialdom public and private these days to cover up evil. "You have to keep working to maintain your head."

In his own way the frail, emaciated lawyer, who nearly died a few years back from a mysterious disease of the digestive system, has become something of a Chris-

tian revolutionary. It was at his Block Island, R.I., home, "Ešchaton" ("End of Time"), that the fugitive Rev. Daniel Berrigan was found hiding by FBI agents in 1970.

The nation that he and Berrigan were resisting, says Stringfellow, stands for death, and men must say "no" to it. And he continues: "'No' to death, incarnate in the nation or in any other appearance, means 'yes' to the gift of life."

Md. Blue Law Target of Chain

BALTIMORE, Dec. 13 (AP)—A supermarket chain is going to court to try and overturn the Maryland law prohibiting most large retail operations from opening on Sundays.

Attorneys for Food Fair said yesterday they would seek an injunction to prevent the Baltimore police department from enforcing the old but seldom-used blue laws.

According to the company's lawyers, the laws are unconstitutional since they have not been enforced with regularity in recent years.