

New Citizenship

Philippians 3:17-20 & 2 Corinthians 5:17-20

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William Stringfellow was a renowned American lay theologian during the 1960s and 1970s. He managed to obtain several scholarships and entered Bates College in Lewiston, Maine at the age of fifteen. He later earned a scholarship to the London School of Economics and served in the Second Armored Division of the United States Army. Stringfellow then attended Harvard Law School. After his graduation, he moved to a slum tenement in Harlem, New York City to work among poor African-Americans and Hispanics.

As a Christian, he viewed his vocation as a commitment, bestowed upon him in baptism, to a lifelong struggle against the "powers and principalities." Now there is a phrase that means something to us----these powers and principalities were the ideas, movements, and practices that fostered hate, oppression, and pulled humanity away from God. Stringfellow proclaimed that being a faithful follower of Jesus means to declare oneself free from all spiritual forces of death and destruction and to submit oneself single-heartedly to the power of life. In contrast to most younger liberal Protestant theologians of his time, Stringfellow insisted

on the preeminence of Scripture for Christians as they undertook such precarious and inherently dangerous work.

A lawyer by profession, Stringfellow's chief legal interests pertained to constitutional law and due process. He dealt with both every day in Harlem as he represented victimized tenants, accused persons who would otherwise have inadequate counsel in the courts, and impoverished African-Americans who were largely excluded from public services like hospitals and government offices in the 50's and 60's.

In 1963 he was invited to give a lecture at the conference on Religion and Race being held in Chicago. The sponsors for the event were a who's who of the civil rights moment. It was anticipated that Stringfellow known as an "in the trenches" layman from the Methodist church would lead a spirited attack on the powers of religion in regard to their non-action in support for Dr. King and other civil rights workers. He would lament the churches slow rate of change and challenge the government to do more. It was widely known that the most racist hour in America was Sunday morning at 11:00.

Permit me a digression for a moment. One of the sweetest opportunities we ministers have is to throw the curve ball. To speak to a gathered crowd about a subject they are not prepared for. In other words, at a gathering of senior adults to challenge them to accept the modernization of the world and quit lamenting about change. To a gathering of conservatives to champion the social gospel, and remind the people that judgment will be attached to how we treat the least of these. To a gathering of the poor, to offer a challenge to stop waiting on others

and do something. We are not saying the expected words---but the shocking words. Preachers enjoy this immensely.

It was a Thursday night and the crowd had gathered expecting to hear Stringfellow appeal to the brotherhood of man and calling for justice to flow like a stream. Stringfellow took his place at the podium and after the usual pleasantries announced, “The only issue at this conference is baptism.” What could he mean? How can a problem as large and as complicated as race relations be solved by baptism? Stringfellow explained it this way.

More often than not, even though baptism is done in the presence of a gathered congregation, it has come to be regarded as a primarily personal, family, or religious observance rather than as the notorious, public, and political action baptism is reported to be in the New Testament. In the apostolic community, thus, baptism signified the new citizenship in Christ that supersedes the old citizenship under Caesar.ⁱ

Baptism is a statement. An announcement. A branding if that helps. Listen to the author of Philippians—

“Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The earliest believers mistakenly believed the return of Christ was right around the corner. Nevertheless, the church understood correctly that to be in Christ---to be baptized was to be a citizen of God’s kingdom. Baptism was a rejection of Caesar----and the ways of Caesar.

The [Didache](#) or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, an anonymous book of 16 short chapters, is probably the earliest known written instructions, outside of the Bible, for administering baptism. The first version of it was written c. 60–80 AD. ^[64]

Its instructions on baptism are as follows:

Now about baptism: this is how to baptize. Give public instruction on all these points, and then baptize in running water, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... If you do not have running water, baptize in some other. If you cannot in cold, then in warm. If you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Before the baptism, moreover, the one who baptizes and the one being baptized must fast, and any others who can. And you must tell the one being baptized to fast for one or two days beforehand.ⁱⁱ

“Public Instructions.” Stringfellow was on to something. Baptism was not something done in a closet----a family ritual. It was done outside—running water (a stream or river) it was a political announcement I am following Jesus.

¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses

*against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.*²⁰ *So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us;*

The mood during the [baptismal] service is not to be “Thank God, our brother [our sister] has found the fire escape,” but “Glory be! Kingdom come! It’s happening! The race is finally on its way to getting human; our brother [sister] just decided to let God make a man [woman] out of him [her]!”ⁱⁱⁱ

Baptismal waters change us and commission us. To be baptized is not to look at Christ and say---I will add you to my life. To be baptized is to say---I give you my life. To be baptized is not to confess to friends and family you are saved---to be baptized is to announce to the world you are living by another set of values.

To be a citizen under Caesar is believe his kingdom is the answer. Whether it is America, China, Iran, or Indonesia the nation is not the answer to the most important questions. Pick your “-ism” Capitalism, Socialism, Communism, Vegetarianism they are not the solution either. The citizens of Caesar kingdom the ones not baptized into the radical kingdom of love and righteousness believe the solution is “fix the economy,” “eliminate terrorist,” or “save the river.” If these things were done to our liking—the next day we would have a new list. Caesar’s kingdom has had years to get it right and things are getting worse.

Caesar’s kingdom is about me. When I say fix the economy I mean fix the economy so I make more money when I say fix the river I mean clean up my river where I can fish I don’t care what you do to that river in Wyoming.

In Christopher Lasch’s book *The Cult of Narcissism*, he outlines the destructive nature of our culture of self. Narcissus (NAR-SIS-US) is the boy-god of the Greeks

who falls in love with his own image in a reflecting pool. The boy withers away and eventually turns into a flower. Lasch likens us to Narcissus. We have fallen in love with ourselves and we are only driven to build our kingdom. Our Kingdom is Caesar's kingdom. Self-esteem, self-interest self-image, self-improvement, and self-directed IRA's, are all symbols that we have fallen in love with ourselves. We even have a magazine named *Self*.

Do not mistake Caesars kingdom for political parties or a way of governing. The Kingdom of Caesar bears many names and many incarnations but behind the curtain and the mask, Caesar is always the person in the mirror---the self.

Selfishness may come naturally, but so does balding and hearing loss. Just because it is natural does not mean it is good. Prior to baptism ---It may be about you and it is always about me, but it is rarely about others. From the White House to our house, from Wall Street to Main Street no one is pointing us beyond our own checkbook and our own family---beyond the self.

This is why John the Baptist and Jesus are such a thorn in the flesh, they DO. "Repent," John shouts. Then Jesus adds, "The Kingdom of God has come near, repent" (1:15).

John and Jesus both speak of repentance while they speak with a similar voice they speak in different keys. John was preaching a "baptism of repentance" (metanoia) in the fourth verse, "for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus was "proclaiming the good news of God, and saying the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent (metanoiete), and believe the good news" (1:15). It appears John is saying, "turn" while Jesus is saying, "turn inside out."^{iv}

The way of selfishness does not lead to life. To continue to belong to the cult of Narcissism is to pursue our interest. Yet it is also to run headlong into destruction, self-destruction. This is why John calls on us to “repent.” John is offering a warning; it is like seeing a sign that reads, “Bridge out.” John is trying to save us the misery of regret and self-destruction. Jesus and John call us to “repent.” This is not to feel sorry for what we have done or to feel sorry because we have been caught. It means to turn. To undergo a change of heart, soul, and direction. Turn away from madness, cruelty, selfishness, greed, shallowness, and judgment. Turn toward compassion, love, hope, justice, and faith. Turn inside out, or right side up. To leave Caesars kingdom and to join the Jesus kingdom.

ⁱ *Authority in Baptism: The Vocation of Jesus and the Ministry of the Laity*, as published in Bill Wylie Kellermann, *A Keeper of the Word: Selected Writing of William Stringfellow*.

ⁱⁱ *Didache*, 7, translation Cyril C. Richardson.

ⁱⁱⁱ Vernard Eller, *In Place of Sacraments: A study of baptism and the Lord's Supper*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p.55.

^{iv} Susan Auchincloss, *Best Sermons 5*, ed. James Cox (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), p. 40.