

Public Theology: The Homosexuality of William Stringfellow

Editor's Note: William Stringfellow was a significant lay theologian who influenced the world of theology in the 1960s. The fact that he was a gay man has not been widely known, and provides another instance where the general public has not been aware of the vast contribution of gay and lesbian persons to theology and the church. The following was written in the blog of [Jason Goroncy](#).

Since I started posting on William Stringfellow, I've received a significant number of emails asking if I might comment on Stringfellow's homosexuality, and how, if anything, such might undermine or affirm his authority to speak to the Church on other issues. My initial reaction to these requests was largely one of dismissal, partly because I do not think that the blogosphere is the best place to have this discussion, and partly because this question should not dominate any of our thinking about what Stringfellow (or anyone else for that matter) has to offer us. I still believe both of these factors are true. That said, I have decided that some things can be said, and even that some things may be of help for our thinking about, and reading of, Stringfellow's work.

There are a minimal number of references in Stringfellow's own work to the question of homosexuality. That Stringfellow says abundantly more about Jesus Christ than he does about himself is, I think, significant in itself. One place where Stringfellow does speak to the question of homosexuality is in his essay 'Loneliness, Dread and Holiness', published in *The Christian Century* on 10 October 1962. Significantly, the essay is a reflection on 2 Corinthians 12:8–9a, 'Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"'.

In that essay, Stringfellow begins by recalling the loneliness which is 'as intimate and as common to men as death', and 'the void [which] may be mere boredom', and then proceeds to note all the places that exploit and profit from that transient loneliness and boredom 'promising that time will be consumed for those who pay the price' – whether it be a dance studio, a club, a bar, with 'prostitutes or homosexuals or whatever one wants' – even if it means relieving the loneliness in lust. 'These are', he writes,

'establishments often populated by those who realize that loneliness is more than the burden of time and who are beguiled by another fiction: that loneliness can be conquered by erotic infatuation. Here are folk, whether men or women, whether looking for the same or the other sex, for whom seduction becomes a way of life, who insist on the importance of what meets the eye – physique, clothes, the appearance of youth. Here are the lonely whose search for a partner is so

dangerous, so stimulating and so exhausting that the search itself provides an apparent escape from loneliness. But when a partner is found for an hour or a night or a transient affair, the search immediately resumes, becomes compulsive. And while erotic companionship seems more appealing – and more human – than resignation to boredom, while touching another may be more intimate and more honest than watching another, no one may really find his own identity in another, least of all in the body of another. Perhaps this is the most absurd fiction of them all: the notion that is present, primitively, in erotic partnerships but also very often in other relationships – between parents and children, in friendship, in marriage – that one's own identity must be sought and can be found in another person'.

Later in the essay, Stringfellow exposes his own cards: namely, that the issue is not primarily about sexuality but is about our hope in Christ who alone fills the vacuum of the human heart. There is no attempt here to justify, nor to call that which many name evil good. There is only one man's witness to him who in subjecting to death takes the dread out of loneliness and who calls us to love, to abandon our idols and to worship God above all else, and to enjoy God's love not just for ourselves but for all, 'including those who do not yet enjoy God's love for themselves or for anyone or anything else'. This posture of enjoyment of God is, Stringfellow insists, 'the estate of holiness'. 'Holiness', he writes, 'does not mean that you are any better than anyone else. Holiness is not about goodness; holiness is not common pietism. Holiness is not about pleasing God, even less about appeasing God. Holiness is about enjoying God. Holiness is the integrity of greeting, confessing, honoring and trusting God's presence in all events and in any event, no matter what, no matter when, no matter where'.

The question of Stringfellow's sexuality has been taken up by Marshall Ron Johnston in his fascinating PhD thesis entitled 'Bombast, Blasphemy, and the Bastard Gospel: William Stringfellow and American Exceptionalism' (Baylor University, 2007). In his thesis, Johnston notes that 'while it is true that fundamentalists and many evangelicals would have rejected Stringfellow's thought outright in light of his homosexuality, he seemed to have managed to keep that fact of his life private, identifying himself in many forums as "celibate by vocation"'.

Johnston recalls Stringfellow's thorough engagement in his two passions – religion and politics. He writes that Stringfellow's interest in issues of faith were transformed from one of intellectual absorption to one of existential centrality, and that Stringfellow credited this transformation to the awareness that while religion must be intellectually respectable, it 'must also provide the core and motivation of one's whole life'. While Stringfellow does refer to an 'unusually close relationship with another fellow' (i.e. Anthony Towne, whom he would later refer to as 'my sweet companion for seventeen years'. *A Simplicity of Faith*, 115. This was, in Anthony Dancer's words, the 'closest

Stringfellow ever came to becoming uncloseted'), he also confesses their decision that their friendship would not endure if it were self-centered, but only if it were God-centered.

Johnston contends that Stringfellow never openly declared his homosexuality, and recounts Andrew McThenia's observation that 'the taking up of joint residency with Anthony Towne was Stringfellow's "first and only 'public' acknowledgement" of his sexual orientation'. Of course, those who have read Stringfellow's *Instead of Death* will recall his description of himself as vocationally committed to celibacy (p. 10). As for Stringfellow's relationship with Towne, in a memorial address entitled 'The Felicity of Anthony Towne', Stringfellow stated that Towne's 'vocation – as that may be distinguished from his occupation – was, in principle, monastic, as is my own' (*A Simplicity of Faith*, 52). Parenthetically, he added, 'That is the explanation of our relationship' (*A Simplicity of Faith*, 52).

Johnston (on pp. 57ff.) later recalls that while Stringfellow was never public about his own homosexuality, he was not reticent about identifying with those devoted to homosexual advocacy. Stringfellow served for several years as the general counsel for the George W. Henry Foundation, an organisation established to help homosexuals and others who were, in the words of the time, 'by reason of their sexual deviation ... in trouble with themselves, the law, or society'. This association apparently afforded Stringfellow opportunities to speak about homosexual advocacy to various groups. For example, in 1965 he delivered an address at Christ Church Cathedral in Hartford, Connecticut, entitled 'The Humanity of Sex'. In that address, Stringfellow offered a brief comment on the theology and ethics of homosexuality before turning most of his attention to various legal issues surrounding the gay lifestyle. He framed his address in the context of a Christian's identification with the marginalised in American society. In his introductory remarks Stringfellow noted that 'according to the ethics of American society', homosexuals 'are not respectable'. Identifying himself as 'a Christian, not a moralist', Stringfellow referred to Christ's care for the outcasts as one reason for interest in their legal situation. He stated, 'If homosexuals in this society are orphans or prisoners, for a Christian that is itself enough reason to be concerned with them'. Beyond his interest as a Christian, Stringfellow was also concerned with the legal situation of the homosexual from the constitutional perspective of equal treatment. He noted that he was 'bred in' a legal tradition 'which believes that if anyone is not represented or cannot secure representation before the law, whatever his cause and whatever the popularity or social approval of his cause, the whole society is imperiled'. Later, in the same address, Stringfellow suggested an association between legal cases involving homosexuals and civil rights cases associated with the 'present racial crisis'. So, Johnston continues, for Stringfellow the justification for an interest in the issue of

homosexuality and the advocacy for homosexuals was based upon a sense of Christian responsibility to identify with the outcast and upon a sense of legal responsibility to provide equal treatment under the United States Constitution.

Johnston proceeds to suggest that Stringfellow's ethic of homosexuality is best understood in light of his overall theological framework. Certainly, Stringfellow assumed a certain 'givenness' to homosexuality that was associated with his overall view of the diversity of sexuality, complaining in a 1979 address to the national convention of the group Integrity, Gay Episcopalians and their Friends, that '[the] matter of sexual proclivity and the prominence of the sexual identity of a person, are both highly overrated'. Consequently, he continued, 'the issue is not homosexuality but sexuality in any and all of its species [because] there are as many varieties of sexuality as there be (sic) human beings'.

Here's Johnston:

In light of that understanding of sexuality, Stringfellow explained that at Christian conversion 'all that a particular person is, sexuality along with all else, suffers the death in Christ which inaugurates the new (or renewed) life in Christ'. This new life does not mean the sublimation of sexuality in any of its forms. Instead, according to Stringfellow, conversion means that Christians 'have exceptional freedom to be who [they] are, and, thus, to welcome and affirm [their] sexuality as a gift, absolved from guilt or embarrassment or shame'. Stringfellow's understanding of Christian conversion is important here, because it was essentially anthropocentric. In the address at Christ Church in Hartford in 1965, he had explained it: 'To become and to be Christian is to become utterly vulnerable to God's own affirmation of one's existence . . . and, as it were, to participate in God's affirmation of one's self and of all things'. Based upon such a perspective of homosexuality and Christianity, Stringfellow asked rhetorically, 'Can a homosexual be a Christian?' He answered with further questions: 'Can a rich man be a Christian? Can an infant be a Christian? Or one who is sick, or insane, or indolent, or one possessed of power or status or respectability? Can anybody be a Christian?' He considered such questions 'theologically absurd', since '[nothing] . . . familiar to the human experience, including all the varieties of sexuality deprives any man of God's love'. Consequently, Stringfellow answered, 'Can a homosexual be a Christian? Yes: if his sexuality is not an idol'.

In light of the anthropocentric description of conversion, Stringfellow's view of idolatry logically follows. An idol is something that hinders a person 'from accepting himself in a way which means loving the whole world just as it is and thereby following Christ'. Thus, in Stringfellow's view homosexuality, which is

inherently morally neutral, is paradoxically acceptable for a Christian as long as the homosexual accepts him or herself in Christ, acknowledging and receiving God's love ...

Anthony Dancer, in his dissertation on Stringfellow, devotes a section to the nexus of the latter's homosexuality, his work, and his thought. Dancer notes that as a homosexual Stringfellow certainly had a personal point of identification with the marginalized, which 'put him in touch with reading the gospel from "below"'. I would agree with Dancer's assessment and add further clarifying comments ... Stringfellow, as a gay man, remained for his lifetime outside of the traditional family structures that have in many cases characterized the so-called 'American dream'. Arguably, as an outsider he was more capable of observing the various hypocrisies of 'family values' as they have been promoted by various conservative groups. By the same token, however, his critique of the notion of American exceptionalism, a concept which depends in part on the centrality of family values, could likely be dismissed as the rantings of an angry man, excluded from much of the promise of American society. Perhaps, paradoxically, both are the case. Ultimately, his exclusion from the essentials of the American dream helped fuel his critique, substantively and motivationally, of America's claims to moral superiority.

One of the emails that I received recently came from someone who is 'working in a very conservative theological context', but is also 'very happy to learn from Stringfellow'. This person suggested that 'there is something about Stringfellow's insights as a lay theologian of the highest order (along with Ellul) that ... transcends the "suitability for teaching office" question – although', he adds, 'I do take those concerns seriously'. He continues: 'From my last decade or so working and living in community – as an Anglican non-layperson – in the inner-city Sydney areas of Darlinghurst, Kings Cross and Glebe, I've found that Stringfellow is more than qualified to speak into such contexts. More so than many others who might "tick all the right boxes". Not that I mean to glorify brokenness or make it "the" qualification that trumps all others ... But Stringfellow's struggle alongside the forgotten ones, personal illness and grief (and I suspect being gay) combine to afford him insight and practical wisdom that is a pearl of great price in the types of contexts I'm used to and somewhat rare in the scholarly circles I am now "playing house" with'. I think there is much wisdom here.

I also think that Mike Higton, summarising Rowan Williams' essay 'The Body's Grace', has outlined a very helpful beginning point for this conversation to take place. It certainly seems to me to be consonant with Stringfellow's own approach. Higton writes:

1. The gospel, the good news spoken by God to the world in Jesus Christ – is God's

command. To put it the other way around, the command of God is not extraneous to the gospel, as if God, while saving us in Christ by the Spirit, said, 'Oh, and there's another, unrelated thing I wanted to talk to you about'.

2. The connection between gospel and command is intelligible. That is, it is possible for us by attending to the Gospel to understand how and why we are commanded and such understanding is the fundamental task of Christian ethics.
3. The gospel so understood provides the criterion by which we discover what truly is a binding command upon us. Faced, for instance, with a range of biblical commands about slavery, women, usury, polygamy, and sexual relationships, the fundamental theological question is not, 'Which of these is culturally conditioned?' but 'How, if at all, do these matters relate to the gospel?' Theological ethics is a matter, we might say, of taking every thought captive to Christ.
4. Because this attention to the gospel is the fundamental task of Christian ethics, any approach that simply stops with the apparent demands we find in Scripture, without asking whether and how they connect to the gospel, fails to take the command of God seriously.
5. If there is some intelligible connection between the gospel and sexual relationships, there would be a binding Christian sexual ethic (a command of God regarding sexual behaviour) even if there were no passages in Scripture that explicitly treated sexual matters.

In his book *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, James Torrance recounts an experience that a colleague of his, Roland Walls (who was a member of the Community of the Transfiguration in Roslin village, a few miles out of Edinburgh) had. One day, James noticed in his garden a piece of sculpture he had not seen before. Roland told him about it. A young sculptor, brought up among the Exclusive Brethren, one day confessed to the fellowship that he was gay. As a result, he was asked to leave the Assembly. In his distress, he found his way to the Roslin Community, where Roland found him on his knees in prayer in the chapel. The young man poured out his story and unburdened his heart. At the end of their conversation, Roland simply put his arms around him and gave him a hug! That hug symbolised everything for the man. He knew he was loved, accepted, forgiven. He went back, found a block of sandstone and carved out a figure of the two Adams. They are kneeling, embracing one another. Christ lays his head on the right shoulder of fallen Adam, and fallen Adam lays his head on the right shoulder of Christ the second Adam. The only way in which one can distinguish between the two Adams is by the nail prints in the hands of Christ. That sculptor saw himself in fallen Adam, and in that symbolic hug he saw himself accepted in Christ, the second Adam. There one sees the Pauline theology of an Irenaeus – that what was lost in Adam has been restored in Christ. That is the biblical concept of 'the one and the many' – that we, the many, can see ourselves accepted by grace in Christ,

the one Mediator, who fulfils God's purpose – to gather together all things in Christ, the head – the doctrine of 'recapitulation'.

Irenaeus used the metaphor of 'the two hands of God' in his criticism of Marcion. God our Father has 'two hands' – the Word and the Spirit – by whom he created and redeemed the world. Marcion had taught that the Creator God of the Old Testament was different from the Redeemer God of the New Testament. No, according to Irenaeus, the God who created this world (and Adam) has redeemed this world (with Adam) by the same Word and the same Spirit. The one by whom and for whom all things were created has taken our humanity upon himself in order to redeem us, i.e. 'to bring many sons and daughters to glory'. It is by these 'two hands' that God gives himself to us in love to bring us to intimate communion. We can extend that metaphor further. Think of a hug! When we hug somebody whom we love there is a double movement. We give ourselves to the beloved, and in the same act by putting our arms around the other, we draw that person close to our heart! That is a parable of the double movement of grace, the God-humanward and the human-Godward movement, that takes place in the hypostatic union and in which we participate through the ministry of the Spirit. In Christ, the Word made flesh, and in the Holy Spirit – his 'two hands' – God our Father in grace gives himself to us as God. But in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, and in the Spirit we are led to the Father by the intercessions of Christ and the intercessions of the Spirit. We are lifted up by 'the everlasting arms'. As in the mediatorial ministry of Christ, the Spirit is the interceding Spirit, through whom Jesus Christ our ascended High Priest presents us to the Father.

One of the reasons that I found Ray Anderson's posts on Homosexuality and the Church so encouraging is because Anderson is at least wanting to allow the gospel and its shape to determine our ethics, rather than some vague commitment to natural theology or to so-called Christian moralism. Regardless of whether one agrees or otherwise with his conclusions, this is the right ordering. He also takes sin seriously enough, and the tragic condition of human fallenness seriously enough, and the gift of Holy Scripture seriously enough, that he is not prepared to simply dismiss those texts in the Bible which speak to this issue.

In response to a recent comment on my blog, I wrote that 'if I was at some stage to try and articulate a theologically-robust reflection on the issues of sexuality, sin and ministry, I think that I would try to explore the relationship between these issues twofold: (i) in light of an ethic determined by eschatology, i.e. by the coming of God in Jesus Christ, and (ii) in light of the Church's two sacraments – namely the Baptism by which we are put to death and inaugurated into a new humanity, and the Table at which sinners feast in anticipation of the great banquet which is to come. Clearly, it is

christology that must determine a Christian response to these questions. If the word one of us is given to speak during this time-between-the-times comes via something of a contradiction in one's own personhood, then this, it seems to me, does not abrogate the message. Clearly I have no problem with learning from Stringfellow'. I do not think that one's sexual orientations disqualify or qualify one from being heard, nor from being ordained.

NT scholar Richard Hays devotes a chapter to homosexuality in his excellent book *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. While that particular chapter is in some ways among the least satisfying in the book, his response to the question 'Should persons of homosexual orientation be ordained?' is worth recalling here in the context of thinking about Stringfellow's own life and witness. He writes:

'I save this question deliberately for last, where it belongs. It is unfortunate that the battle line has been drawn in the denominations at the question of ordination of homosexuals. The ensuing struggle has had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing a double standard for clergy and lay morality; it would be far better to articulate a single set of moral norms that apply to all Jesus' followers. Strictures against homosexuality belong in the church's moral catechesis, not in its ordination requirements. It is arbitrary to single out homosexuality as a special sin that precludes ordination. (Certainly, the New Testament does not do this.) The church has no analogous special rules to exclude from ordination the greedy or the self-righteous. Such matters are left to the discernment of the bodies charged with examining candidates for ordination; these bodies must determine whether the individual candidate has the gifts and graces requisite for ministry. In any event, a person of homosexual orientation seeking to live a life of disciplined abstinence would clearly be an appropriate candidate for ordination' (p. 403).

There is, of course, much more to be said, not least on the relationship between Christians who are non-celibate homosexuals and the Church's teaching ministry. But this post is about Stringfellow, and what I've written will have to do for now.