

What the modern prophets are saying

The Hauerwas Papers

Resident Aliens (1989)

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon

Abingdon Press, Nashville

The backdrop for this book is the Fall of Christendom - the end of the compact between church and state which began with the Roman Emperor Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 and ended, or rather fizzled out in the advanced Western world in the 1960s and 70s. During those long centuries, the Christian church and the state shared worldly power and authority throughout the Christian world. But the post-World War II boom which brought television to all, and motor transport to many, was not unconnected to the loss of interest in attending church on a Sunday morning in order to appear respectable.

The church, or at any rate the Protestant church, was no longer in a position to apply moral pressure to attend its functions. How then, was it to relate to an increasingly secular world which, by around 1980 included a generation which had no collective experience of churchgoing and was totally out of touch with Christian teaching?

Hauerwas and Willimon, both of whom are in the business of the training of seminarists in the US, are deeply unimpressed by the weak efforts of the church establishment to face up to the fundamental problems of this new situation: a church which has become a resident alien community within a wholly secular context.

In point of fact, though the reality of the mass exodus was quite recent, the church had experienced increasing difficulty in justifying itself particularly during the previous two centuries when the march of science and the belief that humans had no need of a God gathered momentum.

Our authors consider the options circulating at the time of writing their book

Some leading theologians in the mid-twentieth century saw the problem as a need to recast the message of the Bible in contemporary language which people could understand. Hauerwas and Willimon call this 'the theology of translation'.

The theology of translation assumes there is some kernel of real Christianity, some abstract essence that can be preserved even while changing some of the old, Near Eastern labels. Yet such a view distorts the nature of Christianity. In Jesus we meet not a presentation of basic ideas about God, world and humanity, but an invitation to join up, to become part of a movement, a people. By the very act of our modern theological attempts at translation, we have unconsciously distorted the gospel and transformed it into something it never claimed to be - ideas abstracted from Jesus, rather than Jesus with his people. (p.21)

The authors now point to a popular analysis of the church consisting of two types:

The 'private church where those conservative evangelicals who thought that the business of the church was to stick to saving souls and to concern itself with the purely private world of religion. The 'public' church...felt that Christians were obliged to go public with their social agenda, working within given social structures to make a better society. (p.31)

However,

We challenge the public-church view of church politics...We believe both the...so-called private and public church are basically accommodationalist (that is Constantinian) in their social ethic. Both assume, wrongly, that the American church's primary social task is to underwrite American democracy. (p.32)

(Our contemporary) society is formed to supply our needs, no matter what the contents of those needs...our society becomes a vast supermarket of desire...we are kept detached, strangers to one another as we go about fulfilling our needs and asserting our rights...The church becomes one more consumer-oriented organisation, existing to encourage individual fulfilment...(pp.32/33)

Next, the authors criticise a poster issued by the National Council of Churches proclaiming a 'Peace with Justice Week'.

American Christians, in the name of justice, try to create a society in which faith in the living God is rendered irrelevant or private...Activist Christians who talk much about justice promote a notion of justice that envisions a society in which faith in God is rendered quite unnecessary, since everybody already believes in peace and justice even when everybody does not believe in God. (p.37)

We argue that the political task of Christians is to be the church rather than to transform the world. One reason why it is not enough to say that our first task is to make the world better is that we Christians have no other means of accurately understanding the world and rightly interpreting the world except by way of the church. Big words like 'peace' and 'justice', slogans that the church adopts under the presumption that, even if people do not know what 'Jesus Christ is Lord' means, they will know what peace and justice means, are words awaiting content. The church really does not know what these words mean apart from the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. (p.38)

Later, following the words of John Howard Yoder, the authors add this:

The confessing church can participate in secular movements against war, against hunger and against other forms of inhumanity, but it sees this as part of its necessary proclamatory action. The church knows that its most credible form of witness, and the most effective thing it can do for the outside world, is the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith. (p.47)

The church as a powerhouse

Later on, Hauerwas and Willimon embark on a commentary on The Sermon on the Mount.

What if (the Sermon) is not new and more stringent rules for us to observe but rather a picture of the way God is? Of course, we are for ever getting confused into thinking that scripture is mainly about what we are supposed to do, rather than as a picture of who God is. (p.85)

Our authors also draw from their reflections on the Sermon a vision of the church as a community of transformed people...

...who have adopted us, supported us, disciplined us and enabled us to be transformed. The most interesting, creative, political solutions we Christians have to offer our troubled society are not new laws, advice to Congress or increased funding for social programs - although we may find ourselves supporting such national efforts. The most creative social strategy we have to offer is the church. Here we show the world a manner of life the world can never achieve through social coercion or government action. We serve the world by showing it something that it is not, namely a place where God is forming a family out of strangers. (p.83)

Our strength, as Christian witnesses, does not come from us individually, but as a self-encouraging, self-enhancing community, the church.

Getting from here to there

In their final chapters, our authors look at the clergy and their training.

One of us is a pastor and both are responsible for the training of women and men for parish ministry. We were concerned about what we saw in parish clergy...cynicism, self-doubt and loneliness seem to be part of the pastor's job description. All our talk about what a great adventure it is to be in the church seems to crumble when placed alongside the lives of many pastors we know. (p.112)

What is wrong?

In Chapter 1, we argued that the world had shifted. The death of Christendom forces each congregation to self-examination. What does it mean to live in a culture of unbelief...What does it mean for the pastor to have as his or her job-description, not the sustenance of a service club within a generally Christian culture, but the survival of a *colony* within an *alien society*? (pp.114/115)

The critique soon focuses on the training of seminarists.

Our seminaries still arrange their curricula as if the world had not changed. In imitation of the secular university system...our seminaries offer future pastors a mix of a little of this and a little of that; psychology here, organisational management there, a little Bible, a little ethics...Our curriculum is structured to produce people who can help the church continue 'to serve the world' by putting a vaguely Christian tint upon the world's way to salvation. (p.115)

So what do our authors propose? They head their proposals with a quotation from Ephesians, Chapter 6:

Be strong in the Lord...Put on the whole armour of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of the present darkness...Therefore take the whole armour of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

Quoting direct from scripture as a means of exhortation has been done to death. But Hauerwas and Willimon offer illuminating comments:

The writer of Ephesians...told his congregation that, if you plan to follow Jesus, *get ready for a real fight*. (p.150)

And later:

The writer of Ephesians says that you had better not go out unarmed. It is tough out there. The world lives by different slogans, different visions, speaks a different language than that of the church. So we must gather (together) to speak the truth in love (Eph.4:15) that we might grow up in faith. Weak, childish, immature faith is no match for the world. being a Christian is too difficult a way to walk alone. (p.153)

So we must gather, on a regular basis, for worship. To speak about God in a world that lives as if there is no God. We must speak to one another as beloved brothers and sisters in a world which encourages us to live as strangers. We must pray to God to give us what we cannot have by our own efforts in a world which teaches us that we are self-sufficient and all-powerful. (p.154)

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September 2018**