



Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony

Stanley Hauerwas, William H. Willimon

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In this bold and visionary book, two leading Christian thinkers explore the "alien" status of Christians in today's world and offer a compelling new vision of how the Christian church can regain its vitality, battle its malaise, reclaim its capacity to nourish souls, and stand firmly against the illusions, pretensions, and eroding values of today's world. Hauerwas and Willimon call for a radical new understanding of the church. By renouncing the emphasis on personal psychological categories, they offer a vision of the church as a colony, a holy nation, a people, a family standing for sharply focused values in a devalued world.

Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony Details

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From Reader Review Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony for online ebook

Alex says

When I loved this book, I really loved it; and when I hated it, I really hated it; either way I won't stop talking about it. Which means it is probably a commendable read for anyone trying to figure out what it means to be a Christian - or more importantly - what it means to be the church today.

J. Alfred says

Now this is a political theory I can get behind: why should Christians try to use their worldly influence to force a worldly government to force worldly people to act like Christians? Christendom is an injurious myth, and therefore the Christian's job is to be a member of the church, which is the only truly unworldly institution out there.

Geoff Glenister says

I was first introduced to Stanley Hauerwas at the Society of Vineyard Scholars conference in 2015. There was a lot of excitement surrounding him, and so I had quite a big anticipation for his talk. But as I listened to his address, I got the impression that, while he and I would agree on a lot of things and would largely be in harmony with each other, we might be speaking different languages and that he might want to watch the way he uses certain words.

I got the same impression with this book, and as I read it, the way the authors used certain words got more and more annoying for me, becoming so confusing and annoying that it made it harder and harder for me to hear and receive its message. At the same time, the confusing thing is that I think that if I had a chance to hash out my problems with the authors, we'd find we largely agreed with each other...maybe. This confusion is why I feel I have to give this book a lower rating.

I'd like to explain my problems in more detail, but first I want to go back to that speech by Hauerwas at the SVSC. Hauerwas has some fun things to say about denominationalism that I find very appealing and similar to my own feelings - he has written (in "Which Church? What Unity? Or, an Attempt to Say What I May Think about the Future of Christian Unity") that he is "a Congregationalist with Catholic sensibilities" and also that "I have often described my ecclesial identity to be that of a 'high church Mennonite' – to be sure, a descriptor originally designed to confuse my critics." Throughout Hauerwas' speech at the SVSC he repeatedly came back to the subject of non-violence, which is a strong conviction he and I both share. But here's where things get weird for me - he constantly criticized "liberalism". That's weird for me because of my own path. I grew up thinking that the phrase "Conservative Christian" is not problematic at all - the words went together, and you basically couldn't have one without the other, in the culture I grew up in. But later on in life, after being an apologist for the Iraq War, I began to have second thoughts on it. I couldn't make sense of why we were there any more, and in the 2008 election, when McCain kept arguing that we should stay in Iraq and Obama that we had no business being there any more (at least), that's when I started to part ways with "Conservatism". The more I began to listen to the "liberals", the more pacifist I became.

So, as I listened to Hauerwas' speech, I kept hearing the voice of Inigo Montoya: "you keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

I fully recognize the fact that the words "liberal" and "conservative" have been heavily misused in American society - but at the same time, to avoid confusion, Hauerwas should at the very least point out what it is that he means when he uses that word.

At the same time, I wonder if the criticisms that Hauerwas and Willimon level at "liberalism" really are geared towards American "liberalism" and are coming from a background of complete ignorance of what it's like on the other side.

For example, the authors write:

Lack of church accounts for why vast portions of scripture are incomprehensible and nonsensical to many people today. Scripture falls into the hands of detached, academic interpreters, who dismiss some texts as "unrealistic" or "premodern" while reinterpreting all texts as intellectual problems rather than honoring the Bible's own, self-proclaimed political function - namely, to produce people who are capable of recognizing the Bible as scripture.

Here's the thing - coming from my "Conservative Christian" background, the hyper-literalism and unquestioningly "loyal" stance that turns the Bible into an authoritative gavel that shuts down all conversations and justifies genocide, sexism, and all kinds of damage that I am so familiar with makes me cringe when I read the above. Those so-called "detached" academics were a healing balm for me - because they actually read the genocide accounts in Joshua and acknowledged that we have a problem there! So when it *sounds* like Hauerwas and Willimon are encouraging people to stop seeing intellectual problems in the Bible, I don't react favorably because I think we **have to** see these things as problematic.

Throughout the book, they *constantly* criticize "liberalism", and it really started to grate on me. Meanwhile I kept thinking "but I think that if they maybe defined what they meant by this term, we'd find more agreement." And then I came to this passage:

People often ask us, Is what you are saying liberal or conservative? The question is frankly political. "Whose side are you on— the progressive, open liberal or the closed, reactionary conservative?" We admit that we are quite openly political, but not as that term is usually understood. The conservative-liberal polarity is not much help in diagnosing the situation of the church since, as presently constructed, we can see little difference between the originating positions of liberals or conservatives. Both assume that the main political significance of the church lies in assisting the secular state in its presumption to make a better world for its citizens. Which position, conservative or liberal, is most helpful in that task?

They move on to state:

What we want to say is, We are neither liberal nor conservative. We are hopeful.

They go on to talk about how they are none of these things, and how all sides get it wrong, and they are "truthful" and "hopeful". I get where they are coming from - but the problem I see is that this attitude isn't

realistic. To clarify: what is called “liberal politics” in America is not perfect, by any means. But to equate it with what is called “conservative politics” in America is simply not realistic - “conservatives” are completely and absolutely antithetical to Jesus in that they constantly preach a hateful attitude towards the poor (blaming all problems on them and calling them “lazy”, when the reality is that statistically those who use food stamps are harder workers than the average American, working the equivalent of two full time jobs), they are warmongers who constantly push for more money to go towards war while they cut benefits to the poor, and they constantly preach an idolization of the rich (giving tax breaks to the wealthiest while raising taxes on the poor and middle class and cutting all benefits to them). To criticize “liberal” the way the authors do constantly and then claim to be neither “liberal” nor “conservative” is just not honest of them, and it is also not hopeful - if they were truly hopeful they would give recognition to the things either side actually occasionally gets right. A constant criticism without any affirmation is not hopeful - it is crippling and results in despair.

They go on from this to talk about how Seminary does not empower future pastors, but disempowers them, and we need to start empowering people. Specifically, they criticize the way that seminaries focus - in their opinion - too heavily on historical critical method. Here’s the thing - I grew up in the reality denying, cultish, circle the wagons, tribal, us vs. them version of Evangelicalism that really needs to get its ass kicked by historical criticism so it can stop living in complete denial. So I don’t share their opinion. I think that much of the American church - especially in the “Bible Belt” - really needs to go through the acid bath of historical criticism BEFORE they can begin to reconstruct. So I don’t share the author’s opinion - bring on the historical criticism, I say.

So I’m really kind of disappointed to have to give this a bad review, because like I said - I think that if the authors bothered to define their terms, we’d find a lot of agreement. Also, when I heard Hauerwas at the SVSC, I *really liked him*. But I felt like they were so vague and ambiguous that the result was so confusing to me that I didn’t know where they stood, even though I kind of do know where Hauerwas stands and think we’d agree. I think it’s possible that the authors have spent so long in the world of academia that they don’t know what’s actually going on in “the real world” and what these terms mean “out there.” The moral of the story is: **define your terminology**.

I also want to make it clear that I think this book suffers from a lack of clear, precise points backed up by solid *evidence*. As I’ve been saying throughout this review, I found the authors’ language to be so ambiguous and confusing that I didn’t know where they stood. Let me try to illustrate both my points about the ambiguity of language like “liberal” and my point about making a clear point with evidence:

I’ll never forget a conversation I had with a few people where we were discussing politics (and it was getting a bit heated) and a mutual friend from Germany joined in and shocked us all. He pointed out, as soon as he joined in, that what we meant by “liberal” and “conservative” was absolutely nothing like what Germans mean by these words. To illustrate, he pointed out that Germans would look at our lax gun laws that allow anyone to get whatever they want and in whatever quantity without even so much as a background check, and they would call that *extremely liberal*, and they would refer to preserving their strict gun control laws as *conservative* (meanwhile in America - who is pushing for strict gun control laws? The “liberals”.). Also, Germans would look at the fact that we’ve got billionaires controlling our politics by donating huge chunks of money to politicians so that they can manipulate the system, and they would call our lack of laws to prevent these things *extremely liberal*, while their policy of limiting the amount anyone can donate and mostly funding political campaigns through public money they would refer to as *conservative*. I love this story because it illustrates so well how confusing the language of “liberal” and “conservative” has become, and how we’ve got to commit to being *very careful* about how we use these words. In my own view, everyone is liberal about something and towards certain groups of people, and everyone is conservative

about something and towards certain groups of people - and *we ought to be*, because an unhealthy balance towards either side of the spectrum causes damage.

So I've said all that, and it sounds really negative. But here's the thing - I liked this book. It was an effective muse for me that got me thinking about some things and got my creative juices flowing. And when I saw Hauerwas at the conference, I really liked him. So while I say these things about the book that sound really negative, I realize that I am probably not the book's intended audience. I am quite possibly being very ironic when I criticize the use of the word "liberal" because it's very possible that the authors used that word intentionally in a subversive way, in order to challenge both a conservative audience that would have been reading this book, and a liberal audience that needs to be more bold. For me - a former "Conservative Christian" who is now considered by many of his friends to be a "flaming liberal" - this type of language didn't work very well.

Longfellow says

As a layperson with limited knowledge of theological context, based on what I've heard *Resident Aliens* was a fairly important work of theology when it was published in 1989.

The most surprising thing to me was the ease and speed with which I was able to finish this book. It is neither pretentious in its word choice nor in its construction of sentences, something I've come to expect from theology, philosophy, and literary criticism. I realize nuances are important when explaining ideas in these fields, but *Resident Aliens* manages these explanations without frustrating a non-theologically trained audience.

A few themes stuck out to me, which are more impressions than a direct translation.

1) Liberal theology (e.g. Tillich, Neibhur) is mistaken in its attempt to justify the Church to the world and in its attempt to find ways to meet the world where it stands. The Church has something unique to offer, and it doesn't require capitulation to do so. In our efforts to be the Church to the world, we have too often aligned our message of good things--justice, service, etc.--with the world's message of how good can and should be accomplished. This is old habit; the Constantinian period of the church (the church receiving the support of government and vice versa) lasted, after all, for centuries. But when we find ourselves in the majority, there is good reason to be skeptical, even when regarding apparently good moral stances.

2) One of the ways the Church should contrast with the culture in which it finds itself is in the prioritizing of its values. For example, individualism is sacred in most of the western world, and particularly in the US. The true Church rejects this as a positive value. Within its community, any individual's problem is *our* problem.

3) The community of the Church should offer a visible contrast to the ways the world approaches problems: paralyzing xenophobia, dealing with conflict, helping those in need, serving all, making friends of strangers. The actions of church and world may at times appear to differ little, but the reasons for performing them may differ greatly. We may seek social justice, for example, not because it is fair, but because we live in God's world, God's kingdom, not to "make things right" but simply to live out our lives in the ways Jesus exemplified. We love everyone not because they are good or because everyone should feel noticed but because this is the world of God that Jesus described, one in which mourners are comforted, the poor in spirit receive the kingdom of heaven, and even enemies are loved.

As a book of theology, of course, the content in *Resident Aliens* is often theoretical, an expression of something less than a concrete image of what the Church should be. The application of these ideas is left for discerning clergy to determine for the most part, though a number of illustrations help create images of these ideals in a number of spots. In the end, it's easy to say, Yes! This is what the Church should be, how the Church should look, but it is much more difficult to be one of the communities who paints the picture.

Kyle says

Who doesn't love a repeated swift kick in the backside?

As a loud and clear call for the Church to start acting like the Church, this book was a gem. There is a reason, it is becoming a modern ecclesial classic. Although many of the socio-political references are dated (Reagan, Iran/Contra, yuppies, etc.) the attitudes behind the critiques are not. Some of the pokes at mainline denominations are even funnier (and thus more sad) because the criticisms are still true (i.e. one mainline denomination's "peace with justice" week comes to mind). Reading it cursorily one might think that Willimon and Hauerwas are against politics, peace, and justice. They're not. They're simply fed up with a Church who takes their cues from a sinful American culture instead of allowing the Church to be the Church who takes their lead from the God who has revealed Himself in the Holy Scriptures.

Charlie says

The first several chapters present the authors' neo-anabaptist social ethic. The last few are more focused toward ministers. This is somewhat of a "movement" book. If you buy hard into the vision the authors are selling, it's great. For outsiders, there are few takeaways.

John says

Hauerwas and Willimon do a nice job articulating a vision for the church that transcends political loyalties, refusing to confuse loyalty to a political party with loyalty to Jesus Christ. In many ways, the book is an exhortation for Christians to create culture that embodies the eschatological kingdom. This entails a strong emphasis on the defining story for Christians, that of Jesus, His sacrifice, His resurrection, and His return. The community (the church)defined by this story is a community that seeks to advance ideals that reflect what we believe to be true about the future eternal kingdom. While the book does well laying out this broad vision, there was some fuzziness around the edges that I would have liked to see sharpened, particularly in the discussion about the church as a new polis or culture, and its relationship to the current culture. The takedown of Niebuhr's faulty presupposition was provocative, but I find myself wondering how their positive vision of the church relates to the culture(s) of the world as it is now. Overall, though, I appreciated this stimulating work. I've reproduced a few quotes I liked:

"It is Jesus' story that gives content to our faith, judges any institutional embodiment of our faith, and teaches us to be suspicious of any political slogan that does not need God to make itself credible."

"The church is the one political entity in our culture that is global, transnational, transcultural. Tribalism is not the church determined to serve God rather than Caesar. Tribalism is the United States of America, which

sets up artificial boundaries and defends them with murderous intensity. And the tribalism of nations occurs most viciously in the absence of a church able to say and to show, in its life together, that God, not nations, rules the world."

"We would like a church that again asserts that God, not nations, rules the world, that the boundaries of God's kingdom transcend those of Caesar, and that the main political task of the church is the formation of people who see clearly the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay the price."

"The Christian claim is not that we as individuals should be based in a community because life is better lived together than alone. The Christian claim is that life is better lived in the church because the church, according to our story, just happens to be true. The church is the only community formed around the truth, which is Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life."

Paul Batz says

This is a surprisingly quick book to read from Hauerwas and Willimon. It is easily accessible (though certain examples are slightly outdated) but also deeply challenging. Essentially, the authors call the church to be the church. They are highly critical of the Constantinian approach which has prevented the church from being anything more a service to and a reinforcement of the empire/nation and its own agenda. Instead, Hauerwas and Willimon propose a vision of the church that sees itself as a peculiar colony, set apart in its ways from the existing powers that be.

The authors use a variety of examples to express their positions which was helpful.

I particularly appreciated their section called "Empowerment for Ministry," which touches on the state of higher theology education (161-67). They helpfully criticize the historical-critical method and argue that seminarians are being equipped to argue and discuss with one another within the context of the academy as opposed to being equipped to serve faithfully in the church. I am sure I'll read this book again in the future as I think about ministry and peculiar role of the church must play in God's world.

C. Harvey says

Inspiring. I kept thinking, how could I be a catalyst for change in a large urban Lutheran church. The examples in this book are inadequate. Makes me wonder if what is being advocated is only possible in very small congregations of like minded believers with some strong awareness of how spiritual pride can so easily corrupt the best intentions.

Crimson Sparrow says

One of the most powerful and pertinent messages this book offers is its depiction of a church narrative enslaved to the doctrines of democracy and consumerism. It paints both liberals and conservatives as two sides of the same coin, both looking to the government and her articulation of freedom, human rights, power,

peace, and prosperity as method and mode of salvation. They cite Yoder's paradigm: The "activist" church desires to transform the world in a way that makes God and Christ unimportant and unnecessary, and the "conversionist" church is selfishly consumed with an individualistic saving of souls. Both are subjugated to the almighty nation-state and consumed by its heretical perspectives.

They offer instead the narrative of a Christian colony - in the world but not of the world - following Jesus the way the disciples did, worshiping God as only they can. They describe salvation as an "adventure that is nothing less than God's purpose for the whole world" and the church as a community "training us to fashion our lives in accordance with what is true rather than what is false" (p. 52). In this depiction, elders apprentice new followers as all members remember and articulate the invasion of God into the world, "taking the disconnected elements of our lives and pulling them together into a coherent story that means something" (p. 53). As revolutionary community members, Christians bump up against one another and the world speaking this coherent meaning in direct opposition to individualistic and "worldly" wisdom.

However, the authors flail at times in their attempts to maintain the tension that is their thesis, a narrative that is neither conservative nor liberal but altogether political in an altogether different way. Their examples are poignant and helpful, but they are followed by more and more two-dimensional, straw-man arguments that venture into the very abstract conceptualizations they said they wanted to avoid. They denounce things like the helping profession, personal boundaries, and most theological and higher education, for example, as if there is no Christ there, no double-edged truth in the narratives of other disciplines confronting the idolatrous church the way the church should be confronting the world.

I disagree that it is only the church who can worship, only the church who can see and speak truth, only the church who ultimately witnesses to God. The notion runs contrary to their own depiction of the intrusion of God into the world as a fundamentally relational being that created the very world with which these authors seem so intrinsically at war. It seems to elevate the church, particularly their own vague, culturally formed and influenced articulation of the church, to god-like status - which seems dangerous considering their critique of that same church!

No, God has used "the world" to critique and correct his people over and over again. But this humility seems missing from the authors' narrative.

Bethany says

A refreshing vision of what the church should be, I recommend for any Christian to read, especially any Christian in America.

Roland Clark says

In 1951 an American theologian by the name of H. Richard Niebuhr wrote a book called *Christ and Culture*, which quickly became the definitive guide to how Christians should relate to the world. Christians generally approach the world in one of five different ways, Niebuhr said, the best of which was 'Christ Transforming Culture'. Hauerwas and Williamson summarize Niebuhr's approach as being one in which the Church 'neither capitulated to culture nor irresponsibly detached itself from the culture. The transforms church busied itself with making America a better place in which to live, transforming society into something of which Jesus

might approve'. Niebuhr's approach carried the day, that is, until Hauerwas and Willimon produced the first edition of *Resident Aliens* in 1989. As Hauerwas points out in the Afterword to the 25th Anniversary edition, this deceptively simple little book shifted Niebuhr's paradigm from one about creation and redemption, and made it about the Church and the world. Whether you agree with them or not, their approach produced a breathtaking seachange in terms of how Christians relate to secular culture, and to politics in particular.

Read my full review here: [https://wordsbecamebooks.com/2017/02/...](https://wordsbecamebooks.com/2017/02/)

Jim Dressner says

This profound book teeters on the brink of being amazing, but occasionally falls just a little short.

The "resident alien" metaphor (the church's allegiance is not first to the state, so she is a "colony" of resident aliens) is apt, insightful, and freeing. The church need not make sense to its culture nor be a partner to the state in creating a "Christendom", but rather is free to live in a way that points to God's work of redeeming and reclaiming the world.

The first half of the book deals with the conceptual foundations of this understanding. It was good, but I'll admit that in some of the deeper areas I was treading water just to keep my head up. The authors seem to do a better job at critiquing various flawed paradigms than fully developing their new/true paradigm.

The second part gets into discussion of how church leaders and laity could live out this "colony of resident aliens" idea, and the authors gave some fascinating examples. Here is one; a member of a church education committee voices her questions about a proposed day-care program:

"That's not true, and you know it's not true. It is not hard for anyone in this church, for anyone in the neighborhood to put food on the table. Now there are people in this town for whom food on the table is quite a challenge, but I haven't heard any talk about them. They wouldn't be using this day-care center. They wouldn't have a way to get their children here. This day-care center wouldn't be for them. If we're talking about ministry to their needs, then I'm in favor of the idea. No, what we're talking about is ministry to those for whom it has become harder every day to have two cars, a VCR, a place at the lake, or a motor home. That's why we're all working hard and leaving our children. I just hate to see the church buy into and encourage that value system. I hate to see the church telling these young couples that somehow their marriage will be better or their family life more fulfilling if they can only get another car, or a VCR, or some other piece of junk. Why doesn't the church be the last place courageous enough to say, 'That's a lie. Things don't make a marriage or a family.' This day-care center will encourage some of the worst aspects of our already warped values."

On the topic of pastor burnout, the authors acknowledge the usual advice of taking time off, saying no, delegating, etc., but choose to emphasize the bigger context:

What pastors, as well as the laity they serve, need is a theological rationale for ministry which is so cosmic, so eschatological and therefore counter-cultural, that they are enabled to keep at Christian ministry in a world determined to live as if God were dead. Anything less misreads both the scandal of the gospel and the corruption of our culture.

While some of the references are dated (written in 1989!), the questions and concerns are largely valid and much of the authors' advice has yet to be adopted by the North American church.

Jeremy Manuel says

Resident Aliens by Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon is a book I remember reading in seminary. I remember not enjoying the book very much during those days, so I must admit that I wasn't looking forward to revisiting it. However, once I re-read the book I was able to appreciate it much more than I remember appreciating it during seminary. It doesn't mean that this is my favorite book by any means, but well we'll get to that.

In some ways, I have a hard time encapsulating what the message of Resident Aliens is. It is a book that is about the church, primarily about how the church is called to be a unique colony within the culture and not simply another group lobbying for the support of the culture, be it government or popular opinion. Many of the examples are dated, this book was written in 1989, but the message of the book is still relevant today.

For example, it talks about abortion. The authors then talk about how for many Christians the first thoughts are trying to figure out what laws need to be enacted by the government about abortion and how to go about convincing the government to take this Christian position. The problem with this, according to the authors, is that we're ultimately relying on the government to define what is moral and ethical instead of the church. To Hauerwas and Willimon this seems to present that we believe the nations rule the world much more than we believe God rules the world.

Now while I think that what the book talks about is still relevant today and that they do have insightful things to say, something about this book bothered me throughout. Part of it was that it isn't the most well organized book. Maybe this is the result of dual authorship, but it just seems that they are a bit all over the place. They talk about the problems of democracy, individualism, the idea of Christians trying to transform culture, not having good reasons for having or not having children, seminary education and while these things are not bad, they tend to lack anything cohesive other than the idea of the Christian church as a colony.

This idea of Christian colony is something that I felt they talked about, but didn't develop the most. The best presentation of it was in the giving of what one of their churches does for confirmation. Even then I felt that they deconstructed popular ideas like transforming culture or being involved with government, and talked about how Christianity and Christian ethics are not common sense and are rather peculiar, but didn't really show how that would work on the ground. They usually just relied on saying that the church needs to be the church, which just didn't seem enough for me.

I guess overall, I felt that Resident Aliens had some good points, but the message was just so all over the place that I had a hard time thinking about what this would actually look like. Does the fact that we are to be the church mean we shouldn't be involved in government? They didn't seem to say this, but then how does the church engage in politics in way that holds God as the ultimate lord? If Christian ethics are so very peculiar then how do we account for the areas of overlap within our own culture? These and other questions popped up throughout the book, it is good for a book to make you ask questions, but I felt that many of the questions were about what they were presenting, because it wasn't always clear.

The message being all over the place also made certain chapters go smoother than others. Honestly, I felt that as the book came to a close the chapters took a dive. This was primarily when they stopped focused a lot on

the church and switched to focusing primarily on the pastor. The next to last chapter was by far the worst in my mind. Too much focus on a lady named Gladys, too narrow of a focus on the story of Ananias and Sapphira in regards to how to act as a pastor, and a good amount of critique on seminary education just would up looking like a jumbled mess to me.

As I've said the book is all over the place, they have some good insights peppered throughout, but I'm not sure I'd re-read this book again. They have quotes that I'd use or ideas that I agree with, but I have a hard time knowing whether to recommend it or not. I somewhat enjoyed it, and read through it rather fast, but at the same time felt there were many shortcoming of the book too. Resident Aliens does challenge you on how you live your faith, it deconstructs a lot of how we may approach our Christian life, but I feel it puts little down as a foundation beyond the vague notion of a Christian colony.

Weston Durrwachter says

This was a fantastic book, just as I initially thought it would be. Hauerwas is a great writer and provides some great thoughts on living and doing ministry in a post-Christian world. This is one of those books that I would put in a "Every book Christians must read" list. I plan to return to it regularly throughout my life and ministry.
