One New Book for the Preacher

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RESIDENT ALIEN, by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon. Abingdon Press, 1989. $9.95

I recently ran across a startling claim in a brochure advertising a conference on the family. The assertion was that 95% of all North American families are dysfunctional. What kind of claim is that? It is a claim that implies that everyone is sick (minus the foreordained 5%), and is a claim asserting that there is a method for making the 95% functional. Come to the conference and find out!

It is this kind of thinking that the authors address in this book. In a culture overcome with its own possibilities, the church has a role to fulfill. The authors contend that the purpose of the church is not to transform the world but to witness to the world. While agreeing that the world is pervaded by brokenness, the authors assert that there is no methodology by which that brokenness can be erased. The church is not a place where people can become functional in the world. The church is a place to experience an entirely different orientation toward life, an orientation that will challenge any worldly orientation.

The authors see their task as one of challenging the cozy relationship that currently exists between church and world. To those pastors frustrated by the sense that their churches are country clubs or enclaves of racism, this book will provide a fresh approach. This book understands the church as a colony in an alien world, a colony not so much for conquering the world as one which offers an alternative to the world. The task of the church is to offer a different story to demand loyalty to the story, and to enable its members to live the story in a hostile world.

The strong points of the book are several. First, it seeks to recover the sense that the biblical story sets people apart and demands their hearts. Those answering God's call in Jesus Christ have their primary identity as followers of Jesus and not as members of a class or nation. If the church means anything in the culture, it at least means that. And, if it means that, then there is no place for the barriers of the world in the church - gender, race, class, nation.

Secondly, this book correctly understands that our culture is collapsing. People have been turned into consumers, into special interest groups, and into beings that can't distinguish wants from needs. The result is a labyrinth of desires, anxieties, hostilities, and insecurities that breed loneliness, disintegration and violence. The violence in the Middle East is directly related to our longing to have a cheap and endless supply of energy. The authors see some hope in this collapse because it means an end of the Constantinian synthesis of church and culture. They feel that one of the worst things that can happen to the church is to be blessed by the world.

Thirdly, this book challenges the church to return to its roots: the biblical story. The current soil of our churches has been dug by the world's agenda: political, psychological, technological. The authors urge the church to return to the soil of the biblical story. They force us to face some difficult questions: Do our seminaries have to have curriculum geared to passing national ordination exams and thus demonstrating to the world that our leaders are professionals like doctors and lawyers? Can't seminary curriculum be driven by the need to develop pastors? And, must all church members know their personality types as measured by psychological tests? Can't church members be measured by comparisons to Priscilla and Sarah and Peter and Eutychus and Sapphira and Ananias? The authors acknowledge that the biblical story is an imprecise tool because it is a storybook and not a management manual. The truth of our lives is this, however: as human beings, we are on a journey with the living God; we are not a complicated marketing problem.

This book has much to offer: the frank and disturbing assertion that our Western culture is bankrupt because North American Christians and others have bought the lie that material comfort brings security and meaning; the call for the church to recognize its natural discomfort with all cultures; and the quaint but radical notion that the biblical story demands loyalty and discipline.

Despite its strong points, though, this book remains a superficial examination of the problem. Its anecdotal style is initially engaging but ultimately left me dissatisfied. It is reminiscent of what is wrong with the storytelling method of preaching that is so popular today. The stories help us to pay attention but offer no substance unless they are given life by the biblical text and in turn give life to the biblical text. It is the same with this book - the examples are catchy but wither for a lack of depth and analysis.

Two examples should demonstrate my concern. The authors are intent on bashing the Niebuhr brothers for urging the church to become politically involved. While there is room for criticism, the authors offer no substantive alternative. It is one thing to speak out against racism in the congregation; it is quite another to discern the trails of racism in the quagmire of culture. The church must be involved in both - that claim is part of the biblical story, too. What does the Lord require of us? Correct worship but also more - doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with God. Doing justice *is* political. While the authors correctly attack North American Christianity's fascination with politics, they offer no alternatives in these areas.

This leads to a second criticism. The authors lift up the pre-Constantinian church as an example, but they fail to address the fact that those churches reflected in the biblical story were much more diverse than are current North American churches. The churches of our age tend to be homogenous. The early church wrestled with political issues in a "down-home" way - slaves and masters, rich and poor, Greek and Jew all worshipped and shared life together in the early church. The early church was forced to deal with political issues by the very diversity of its membership. We are lucky if 5% of our churches reflect any kind of diversity, a diversity that usually calls churches to make the kind of stand against the culture that the authors want. For the church to be

the colony that the authors wish, we will have to find a way to enable our congregations to become more diverse. Will we do it by quotas or by consciously seeking members different from us? Would the authors say that this is too political? They offer no help on this issue.

This book is a good beginning. One hopes that in having established an outpost, the authors would now turn to the substantive and complicated issue of what it means to live in an outpost. What does it mean to be a "resident alien?" Does it mean leaning to the side of "resident" as does the Apostle Paul when he advises slaves to be obedient to their masters? Or, does it mean leaning to the "alien" side as Paul does when he urges Philemon to do the right thing and free his slave Onesimus, no longer a slave in the church but rather a son to Paul? The authors offer no help on this political issue that was at the heart of the early church. I hope that they will take the next step and risk offering some light on these kind of issues that impinge on the church and the world in any age.