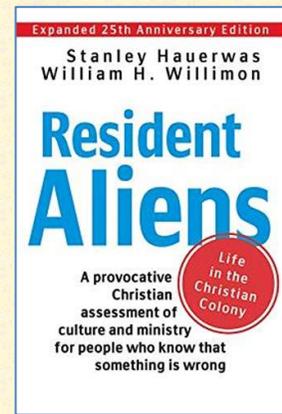


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Resident aliens: life in the Christian colony – a provocative Christian assessment of culture and ministry for people who know that something is wrong

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The book proposes that the church is meant to be the answer – as a countercultural community. Authors teach in the Divinity School Duke University.



Preface

Phil 3.20 our commonwealth is in heaven – or, we are a colony of heaven. Churches are colonies in an alien culture.

1. The modern world – learning to ask the right questions

A new world began some time between 1960 and 1980; and Christendom ended. Theologians have been trying to answer question of how we make the gospel credible to the modern world. In so doing, they have tended to let the modern world determine the questions, and therefore limit the answers. Perhaps the question isn't how to relate the ancient world of the faith to a modern world of disbelief after all. We must question the whole idea that Christianity is a system of belief; it is the *content* of belief that concerns scripture, not eradicating unbelief by means of a believable theological system. The theologian's job is not to make the gospel credible to the modern world, but to make the world credible to the gospel. Christianity is more than a matter of a new understanding; it is an invitation to be part of an alien people who make a difference because they can see something that cannot otherwise be seen without Christ. Right living is more the challenge than right thinking; the challenge is not intellectual but political – the creation of a new people who have aligned themselves with the shift that has occurred in the world since Christ. The purpose of theological endeavour is not to describe the world in terms that make sense, but rather to change lives, to be re-formed in light of the stunning assertions of the gospel. The world has changed; need to challenge those church leaders who still think and act as if we are in charge, as if the old arrangements of Christendom were still valid.

2. Christian politics in a new world

Christianity is mostly a question of politics – politics as defined by the gospel. The challenge of Jesus is how to be faithful to a strange community; the church should not be judged by how well or ill its presence in the world is advantageous to the world. Both the 'public' and 'private' church in US have been accommodationist (ie Constantinian) in their social ethic; both assume that the church's primary social task is to underwrite American democracy. Aristotle argues that the purpose of the polis is the creation of people who are better than they would be without the polis. But our polis doesn't do that; its unit is the individual, and it is formed to supply our needs; it is a vast supermarket of desire under the assumption that if we are free enough to assert and to choose whatever we want we can defer eternally the question of what needs are worth having and on what basis right choices are made. What we call 'freedom' becomes the tyranny of our own desires. We are kept detached, strangers to one another as we go about fulfilling our needs and asserting our rights. The individual is given a status which makes incomprehensible the Christian notion of salvation as a political, social phenomenon in the family of God. Our economics matches our politics – capitalism thrives where rights are the main agenda. Church becomes consumer oriented, encouraging individual fulfilment rather than being a crucible to engender individual conversion into the body.

Christian politics has come to mean Christian social activism; US Christians try to create a society in which faith in a living God is rendered irrelevant or private; we want a society in which everyone believes in peace and justice even if they do not believe in God.

Book argues that the political task of Christians is not to transform the world but to be the church. We have no other way of understanding it; peace and justice have no meaning apart from the life and death of Christ.

'The church is not to be judged by how useful we are as a 'supportive institution' and our clergy as members of a 'helping profession'. The church has its own reason for being.. We are not chartered by the Emperor.' 39 'The Church doesn't have a social strategy, the church is a social strategy', 43. No need to worry about being in the world; we can't help that. No need to worry

about serving it; that's not the aim – they did that in Germany under the Nazis. The overriding political task of the church is to be the community of the cross. Debate re morality of US bombing Libya; Christian response oscillated between conservative support or liberal condemnation. But what, say, if we responded by sending 1000 missionaries to Libya? We can't, because we don't have people who are that bold.

3. *Salvation as adventure*

Church exists today as resident aliens, an adventurous colony in a society of unbelief. When we are baptised, we jump on a moving train. It isn't a beginning, it's a joining in. The Bible is an account of a people's journey with God. Jesus took away the baggage the world considers essential, but he laid on other baggage – the cultivation of certain virtues. The journey requires the transformation of the traveller. This won't happen in a society of rights, choices and freedoms, in which individual preference is the highest good; only in another kind of community, one where we have to trust one another, be constant, shrink our 'self'. Life becomes an adventure, because we are part of the purposes of God.

4. *Life in the colony: the church as a basis for Christian ethics*

American Christians have fallen into the bad habit of acting as if the church really does not matter as we go about trying to live like Christians. Eg abortion; there is a Christian 'position' – and the aim is, having identified it, to push for it. We tend to judge our ethical positions not on the basis of what is faithful to our peculiar tradition, but on the basis of how much Christian ethics Caesar can be induced to swallow without choking. So we water them down, push them as universally applicable common sense, and leave Jesus out of it. But Jesus was not crucified for saying or doing what made sense to everyone. People are crucified for following a way that runs counter to the prevailing direction of the culture.

The authors are advocating community not for sake of community, but because the church is community formed round the truth, which is Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life. Christian community isn't about togetherness, relief from loneliness; it's about the way of Jesus with those he calls. It is about disciplining our wants and needs in congruence with a true story, which gives us the resources to lead truthful lives. Togetherness happens, but only as a by-product of the main project of trying to be faithful to Jesus. For Christians, the church is the most significant ethical unit. The church enables us to be better people than we would be if left to our own devices.

The Beatitudes are not a strategy for achieving a better society, they are a vision of the inbreaking of a new one. Imaginative examples of life in the kingdom of God. They aren't maxims for positive thinking or new rules for getting along well. They are a picture of the way God is. Sermon on Mt is the inauguration manifesto of how the world looks now that God in Christ has taken matters in hand – it is eschatology, but one which has already started. Discipleship, in the light of this eschatology, becomes extended training in letting go of the ways we try to preserve and give significance in the world. We don't work for peace because it is nicer to have it, but because it has already been achieved by Jesus on the cross. 'For us, the world has ended. We may have thought that Jesus came to make nice people even nicer, that Jesus hoped to make a democratic Caesar just a bit more democratic, to make the world a bit better place for the poor. The Sermon, however, collides with such accommodationist thinking. It drives us back to a completely new conception of what it means for people to live with one another. That completely new conception is the church.' 92

5. *Ordinary people : Christian ethics*

Dorothy, Downs adult helping in Sunday school for years.

The world needs the church because, without the church, the world does not know who it is. The only way for the world to know that it is being redeemed is for the church to point to the Redeemer by being a redeemed people. The church must enable the world to strike hard against something which is an alternative to what the world offers. An accommodationist church gives the world less and less in which to disbelieve. Learning to be moral is like learning to speak a language. You learn it by listening to others speak and then imitating them. The church is a community of language; morals are the language, not the rules. Confirmation class – a course covering the right beliefs, or a system of mentoring?

6. *Parish ministry as adventure: learning to enjoy truth telling*

All Christians are ordained by baptism for ministry. There is nothing the clergy can do that is not the responsibility of every Christian. Deadly concept that they are the only real ministers, and that the laity exist to serve and feed them. Clergy are polite and friendly, but they are not helping us get from one place to another. Problem of seminaries, which still arrange their curricula

as if we were in Christendom – a bit of psychology, management, Bible, ethics; pastors must be conversant in all aspects of modern American culture. Aim to produce pastors who can help the church serve the world by putting a vaguely Christian tint on the world's ways of salvation. Pastors emerge as agents of modernity, experts in the art of congregational adaptation to the cultural status quo. The new pastors are trained to help the individual be a bit less miserable within the social status quo. For them, Christian ministry is little more than institutional conformity.

Pastor who wanted to open day-care centre in the church; social activist and evangelistic at the same time. Church member objected – just help people to carry on with a lifestyle which believes they need to earn more money, at expense of family relationships; ie accommodate to the culture, not stand against it. Real need elsewhere. She right. Unless she gets her way, the pastor becomes nothing more than court chaplain, presiding over ceremonies of the culture, a pleasing fixture for rites of passage like weddings and funerals. Or sells himself for the approval of an upwardly mobile, bored middle class who want relief from the anxiety brought on by their materialism.

Lack of church is what makes so much of the scriptures unintelligible.

First crisis to hit the young church was Ananias and Sapphira; crisis over possessions. They were being a church, an alternative community, in a certain way; and to deceive and deviate really mattered. Question to ask is not, that's a bit much, but rather what sort of community would we need to be to enable this sort of church (a truthful one) to exist?

Tom wanting to leave Sue, alcoholic. Pastor gives in to the impossibility of living with Sue, says OK. Member of church demands, what are we doing to enable Tom to keep going in this situation? We err when we see everyone as individual, and their problems as theirs and not ours.

What do pastors do? Orient the church towards God. Their primary task is not to help us with our aches and pains, but to help us gather the resources we need to live as a colony of resident aliens within a hostile environment which corrupts us.

7. Power and truth: virtues that make ministry possible

We need a theological rationale for ministry which is so cosmic, eschatological and countercultural that we are able to keep at Christian ministry in a world which is determined to live as if God were dead. Ephesians 6 and putting on the armour of God. Paganism is in the air we breathe and the water we drink; it captivates us, converts our young, subverts the church. Contemporary pastors are chained because so much current thinking about the church and its ministry is meant to disempower rather than to empower people. Starts in seminary; we give courses that disempower, not the skills to claim their ministries with joy and excitement. OT study is limited to historical-critical skills. What does this have to do with ministry? And mostly what pastors learn (the hidden agenda) is that they will never make academics. Theologians write for other theologians, not for those in ministry. If pastors are significant only because of what needs to happen in the church, then theologians are significant only because of who pastors need to be. But it doesn't often come out like that.

One of us is tempted to think that there is not much wrong with the church that could not be cured by God calling about 100 really insensitive, uncaring and offensive people into the ministry! Church is dying a slow death at the hands of pastors who are nice, who make themselves miserable by wanting to help people.

Jonathan Edwards: Why should we be afraid to let persons that are in an infinitely miserable condition know the truth, or to bring them into the light for fear it should terrify them? it is light that must convert them, if ever they are converted. The more we bring sinners into the light while they are miserable and the light is terrible to them, the more likely it is that by and by the light will be joyful to them. 168