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ANOTHER WAY OF READING STANLEY HAUERWAS?¹

by David Fergusson

THE writings of Stanley Hauerwas create an excitement which is attributable not merely to an elegant style, arresting illustrations, his generosity and wit. He speaks to those who are conscious of the increasing dissociation of church and culture in the late twentieth century. The old strategy of seeking to articulate a moral consensus for those within and without the church is breaking down.² Christian theology and ethics become distorted by attempting to stand on common ground with those outside the colony. '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.'³ This stress upon the distinctiveness of the Christian community and its narrative provides a stronger basis upon which ministry can be conducted. In a context of social fragmentation and moral disarray greater Christian authenticity becomes possible. Having faded from the social landscape, Christian faith emerges as something radically different and compelling. We should not underestimate the extent to which Hauerwas is calling for a distinctive church. His hints as to what we should actually do in our current situation are often oblique, but he suggests, for example, that the church should not admit to the Lord's Supper those who make a living from building weapons,⁴ that

¹This paper is a condensed version of a longer paper delivered at the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, in March 1997, and has benefited from the comments of those present.

²This is a central theme in Hauerwas' reading of the recent history of theological ethics in America. Cf. 'On Keeping Ethics Theological', *Against the Nations*, (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1992), 23-50.

³*Resident Aliens*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 74.

⁴*Resident Aliens*, *ibid.*, 160.

Christians should publicly declare their income in the fellowship of the church,⁵ that separate Christian schools are what we need,⁶ and that vegetarianism may be an appropriate witness to the eschatological vision of creation.⁷

The position frequently encounters the charge of sectarianism but this can be resisted. His ecclesiology is world-affirming and his writings wrestle with the major moral conundrums of the day. By being the church, Christians have the task of disclosing to the world its true identity. This may sound imperialist to some, but it is not sectarian. Hauerwas' claim is simply that by living genuinely as a distinctive Christian community the church may have more impact in its surrounding society than by advocating consensus solutions to the problems we face. The purpose of a counter-cultural distinctiveness is not isolationism but a proper contribution to the wider social world.⁸

It might be countered that this church advocated by Hauerwas nowhere exists. It is a fantasy community, the conception of which fails to reflect the ways in which the members of the church are also positioned within civil society. It does not correspond to any visible communion within the *oikumene*. Hauerwas' own status as a Methodist who describes himself as a high-church Mennonite under no particular ecclesiastical discipline reflects this dissonance between the church described in his theology and the church as we actually find it.⁹ On one level, this criticism may be side-stepped by arguing that his proposal is prescriptive rather than descriptive. It is a call for the church to be the community that it ought to be rather than a description of any empirical reality. At the same time, Hauerwas has struggled to show that the church he describes is present in the stories of many Christian congregations and lives. It is these which provide the most eloquent testimony and inspiration. 'Good communities are known by

⁵*After Christendom* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1991), 100.

⁶*Ibid.*, 151.

⁷*In Good Company* (Indiana: Notre Dame, 1995), 196–7.

⁸This is argued persuasively by Arne Rasmussen, *The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jürgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas* (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1996).

⁹E.g. *A Community of Character* (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1981) 6.

their saints. By naming these ordinary but theologically and morally impressive people, we discover resources that we did not know we had.¹⁰

The claim that his ecclesiology contains a critical standard by which to challenge the empirical church is necessary if Hauerwas is to meet feminist criticisms that his theology legitimises a patriarchal institution. Thus Gloria Albrecht accuses him of legitimizing the stranglehold on ecclesiastical authority exercised by a white, male elite.¹¹ This attack is one instance of the recurrent criticism that communitarian ethics is characteristically oppressive and authoritarian. This charge can be met but only if a clear distinction is maintained between the church as it is and the church as it is called by God to be. This in turn requires some criterion of theological truth over and against the particular claims of ecclesiastical tradition. It is here that I find myself beginning to differ from Hauerwas on account of his over-concentration upon the distinctiveness of the church. He insists upon the close relationship between christology and ecclesiology to the extent that the truth about Jesus can only be perceived from within a life of discipleship in the community of the church. At times, this becomes an attack on Protestant individualism.¹² The Bible should be taken away from Christians until they have developed better habits of discipleship to facilitate its correct understanding. He even commends the insistence of Vatican II that tradition and Scripture together form one sacred deposit of the Word of God. This resonates with the emphasis throughout his writings that the life of discipleship within the church is the indispensable epistemological condition for confessing Christ.

However, the way in which he seeks to integrate his description of the person and work of Christ with its ecclesial resultant raises a number of difficulties. In outlining the significance of Christ for the Christian life, Hauerwas frequently implies that Jesus is to be understood as the exemplar

¹⁰In *Good Company*, op. cit., 57.

¹¹*The Character of our Communities* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), Chapter 4.

¹²E.g. the criticism of Gerhard Ebeling's treatment of the *sola scriptura* principle in *Unleashing the Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 27.

and initiator of a new social order, the kingdom of God.¹³ The traditional language of the incarnation and atonement is muted by contrast with his insistence upon the importance of the life of Jesus as this is narrated in the synoptic gospels. This clearly arises out of concern with the way in which the exposition of dogma can too easily prescind from the way in which Jesus' mission is loaded with ethical import.¹⁴ Yet the outcome of this concern is that Jesus is generally characterised as the prototype of Christian existence, the founder of the church, and the one in whom God reveals how we are to live. The christological language tends to be that of revelation rather than redemption. The latter seems confined to quality of life realised only in the church.¹⁵

Despite the desire to integrate ethics and dogmatics there is some imprecision in Hauerwas' exposition of dogmatic themes. In particular, it is not clear in what sense the work of Christ can be described as completed in his resurrection and ascension, or in what sense Christ is active in the church by the power of the Spirit. If his work is principally the establishment of a community then its continuing significance must be defined in terms of an act of recollection by which that community is reminded of its constitution. Christ's continuing presence and activity to his disciples are thus a function of memory inspired by the sacramental re-enactment of a story. If, however, one construes the work of Christ as 'a once for all' achievement which is accomplished *extra nos*, then its relationship to the life of the post-Easter community is altered. Christ continues to be present and active in the life of the church and the world, but this presence and activity are dependent upon what is already accomplished in his life, death and resurrection. The church is not the extension of the incarnation, but exists to bear witness and to live faithfully in light of this unrepeatable and unsubstitutable event. Hauerwas points to the significance of the eucharist in our coming to understand

¹³Even though I do not share the liberal rejection of the classical christological formulas, the liberal concern to recover the centrality of Jesus' life strikes me as right.' *A Community of Character*, op. cit., 40.

¹⁴E.g. *The Peaceable Kingdom*, (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1983), 72ff.

¹⁵I am thinking here especially of *The Peaceable Kingdom*, op. cit., chapter 5 and *A Community of Character*, op. cit., chapter 2.

the story of Jesus.¹⁶ Yet the eucharistic prayer is one of praise and thanksgiving which declares what God has already done in creation and redemption. Here there is a commemoration of what God has brought about in the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. The agency of the church derives from this action and continues by the Spirit to be dependent upon it. This relationship is more nearly described by Barthian language of correspondence than by Hauerwas' more linear notion of continuing what has been begun.¹⁷

A further feature of this overdetermination of the distinctiveness of the church is that it becomes difficult to understand both how the will of God may be done outwith the church and how Christians may make common cause with other agencies and individuals. Yet a dogmatics which distinguishes the sovereign Word from the written and spoken witness is in better shape to deal with this. The sovereignty of the Word over scripture and church is compatible with the view that God may enable the church to hear the Word through the effects of forces, agencies and examples *extra muros ecclesiae*. This was the position defended by the later Barth in his argument for secular parables of the Word of God. There is only one Word, Jesus Christ, but there can nonetheless be witnesses to him outwith the church. Any putative witness must be tested by reference to Scripture, tradition and the life of the church, but the conviction that God is the creator and redeemer of the world gives grounds for confidence that such witnesses will be encountered.¹⁸

It is because of the lack of attention to this possibility that Hauerwas over-dramatises the crisis of liberalism and the counter-cultural force of the Christian polity. This is evident in a range of positions adopted. His exaggeration of the differences between Christian and secular marriage and parenting places him at odds with both the Catholic and Protestant traditions which have seen these institutions as wider in scope

¹⁶*Unleashing the Scripture*, op. cit., 60ff.

¹⁷It is perhaps significant that the Lutheran *Formula of Concord*, Article XII, makes a similar criticism of the Anabaptists. I am indebted to George Hunsinger for this reference.

¹⁸*Church Dogmatics* IV/3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961) 38ff.

than the church, and have detected good practice in non-Christians as well as Christians. His remark that 'from the world's perspective the birth of a child represents but another drain on our material and psychological resources'¹⁹ is, to say the least, hyperbolic. His argument against abortion shows how a Christian perspective sets the issues in a new light, yet if he is not to criticise methods of contraception *pari passu*, he still needs to engage in well-worn debates about when a human life begins, the moral status of the embryo, and criteria for personhood. His pacifism provides a perspective from which we can perceive the way in which violence is endemic to our way of life, but to describe an argument against nuclear weapons based on concern for the future of life on this planet as 'idolatrous' is to depict secular arguments in the worst possible light. While not only unfair on much that is sane and decent outwith the church, this characterisation of an alternative position hinders the task of making common cause. He disjoins also to an unnecessary degree the liberal discourse of 'innate human dignity' with the Christian recognition of the claim of God upon each human person.²⁰ The 'secular' insight into the dignity of the human being differs from the Christian claim that human beings are created in the image of God, redeemed by Christ and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Yet the latter claim is capable of recognising that there is some wisdom in the former. In the light of Christian convictions about the status of the world as created, it should not be surprising if there are secular affirmations of the dignity of the human person.

Jeffrey Stout has pointed out that the moral disagreements in liberal societies tend to take place on the basis of a moral consensus on other issues.²¹ There is a range of moral principles which are platitudinous and precisely because of that fact do not receive the attention of philosophers and theologians. It is wrong to torture the innocent for pleasure; it is wrong to abuse sexually little children; disagreements between the major religions should not be settled violently;

¹⁹A *Community of Character*, op. cit., 228.

²⁰Ibid., 106.

²¹*Ethics After Babel* (Clarke, Cambridge, 1988), 214.

slavery is evil. Anyone who queried these platitudes would be regarded as a dangerous moral deviant rather than someone whose opinion is to be respected within the pluralism of the body politic. It may thus be possible to find common ground with those outwith the church even in the absence of any common theory which can be assented to by all parties. As Michael Walzer has argued, different thick moralities typically display accounts of thin moralities.²² These are minimal standards and practices which should be demanded of all people and societies. They are a function of thicker and culturally determined moral understandings, but the convergence of these on minimal common ground provides some basis for the maintenance of pluralist societies. It ought to be possible to provide a theological description of this phenomenon in terms of a (thick) understanding of our created nature, without returning to earlier theories of natural law and the orders of creation. Most Christian people in liberal societies do not belong only to the community of the church. They belong to other communities through their work, leisure, political and cultural interests, and there they make common cause in a variety of ways with others who do not share their religious convictions. Some theological description of how this is possible and how they should comport themselves is owed them.

Hauerwas himself wishes to acknowledge that the kingdom is not co-existent with the church,²³ and what is required, therefore, is a reading of the church's constitutive narratives which displays the implications of this. The church enacts and witnesses to the eschatological kingdom before a fallen and hostile world, yet since God has not abandoned the

²²E.g. *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1994).

²³Cf. The strangely undeveloped comment: 'What allows us to look expectantly for agreement among those who do not worship God is not that we have a common morality based on autonomous knowledge of autonomous nature, but that God's kingdom is wider than the church.' *Christian Existence Today*, (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1988), 17. Similar observations elsewhere are generally not integrated into his overall argument. 'Unity comes not from the assumption that all people share the same nature, but that we share the same Lord. Though certainly the fact that we have a common creator provides a basis for some common experience and appeals.' *A Community of Character*, op. cit., 106.

world we may expect signs of that same kingdom in strange and surprising places. The community, as Barth says, is not Atlas bearing the burden of the whole world on its shoulders. Even within the world which opposes it, God will ensure that there will be raised up witnesses to that cause. 'This is the message which the community has to learn through these true words of a very different origin and character. In this respect, too, it would be foolish and ungrateful if it closed its ears to them.'²⁴

There emerges here an ambivalent account of the relationship between church and civil society, but it is one for which we find Scriptural warrant. The early Christians were taught that their highest loyalty was to Christ and therefore to the church rather than the state or any other institution. This required a new orientation of their lives and often brought conflict, tension and even martyrdom. Yet the virtues of the Christian life, despite the way in which they were now re-situated, sometimes overlapped with those advocated in the Graeco-Roman world. Christian writers could defend their practice by arguing that it reflected and often surpassed the highest standards acknowledged elsewhere. The state could be the enemy but it could also exercise a legitimate authority and where possible Christians were urged to live peaceably with others. Thus a path was marked out between withdrawal and assimilation by those whose citizenship was ultimately in the church but who were called to serve God in other places and communities.

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²⁴Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, op. cit., 115–6.

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