

# Sojourners

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## 'I'd Rather Fight Than Assimilate'

Putting on the 'Whole Armor of God'

A few months ago, I was a reluctant participant in a parish workshop whose stated aim was to make us feel good about ourselves. The leader warned that he'd start by asking each of us to make one positive statement about ourselves. First, though, we celebrated a Eucharist. The gospel reading—taken from that day's lectionary—was Luke's story of the pharisee who made a lot of positive statements about himself, and the tax collector who simply begged, "Have mercy upon me, a sinner." Jesus' conclusion: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

The leader noted the coincidence—if it was one—but only to say that we too often use that story as a stick to beat ourselves up. The challenge he evaded—to wrestle with the contradictions between the message of scripture and the assumptions of our liberal, psychological, individualistic culture—is gleefully taken up by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon in *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*.

There's something to offend just about everybody in this book. And that's obviously the way its authors want it. It takes a combative pair to rest their case, as these two divinity school professors do, on the story of Ananias and Sapphira and Paul's advice in Ephesians to "put on the whole armor of God."

Hauerwas and Willimon's main premise is that the end of the Constantinian era is the best thing that's happened to Christianity since the resurrection. The fact that we now live in a secular culture, largely hostile to the claims of the gospel, is, they say, very good news indeed. And what they offer in their book is a picture of what life in the new, post-Constantinian church could be.

Before they can paint that picture, though, they need to tear apart assumptions most of us hold even without knowing it. Modern liberal Christianity has spent so much time apologizing to the world for its odd presumptions that those of us who occasionally argue the truth of Christianity wind up feeling like sectarian cultists.

More often, we justify a perspective that—in the authors' view—has no justification except Jesus Christ with a host of secular assumptions. We equate the kingdom of God with self-acceptance and the healing of codependency. We argue against nuclear arms on the basis that blowing up the world is the worst thing we can do, and forget that we have already done the worst we can do by crucifying God's son. We proclaim "Peace with Justice" and never stop to wonder whether a world that doesn't know Jesus can possibly understand what those words mean.

We have been suckered, the authors argue, into trying to transform the gospel instead of ourselves; to tone down its scandalous message so that it won't offend those who are not disciples; to preach "Christian values" as something altogether apart from the Christian gospel; to live as though God did not matter. What we've got for our trouble is Christian communities that value fellowship and good feeling above truth, Christian churches that put American flags next to the cross, and Christian environmentalists who equate pollution with the crucifixion. In leaning over to speak to the fallen world, they say, we have fallen in.

HOW DO WE GET out? By rediscovering what the New Testament means by church—a community of people who have accepted God's invitation. The church saves us, they argue, "by placing us within an adventure that is nothing less than God's purpose for the whole world, and communally training us to fashion our lives in accordance with what is true rather than what is false."

Hauerwas and Willimon take seriously the argument that salvation is impossible outside the church, tearing into the Nieburi thesis that the ethic of the

Sermon on the Mount is meant for individuals only. Only in a community, they insist, do ordinary, fallible, sinful folk like us have any chance at all of being able to follow Jesus' teaching. "The Sermon on the Mount does not encourage heroic individualism," they say. "It defeats it with its demands that we be perfect even as God is perfect, that we deal with others as God has dealt with us."

The political task of Christians isn't to transform the world, it's to be the church—to create "a place, clearly visible to the world, in which people are faithful to their promises, love their enemies, tell the truth, honor the poor, suffer for righteousness, and thereby testify to the amazing community-creating power of God." In other words, a confessing church.

How do we do that? By telling truth; by telling God's story, which is truth.

*We are called to base our lives and actions on something which, to Kant, seemed woefully contingent—a Jew from Nazareth. Our claim is not that this tradition will make sense to anyone or will enable the world to run more smoothly. Our claim is that it just happens to be true. This really is the way God is.*

Only through that true story can we ourselves be truthful. Peter's confrontation of Ananias and Sapphira sprang from a conviction that most of us give lip service to but are afraid to act on: that the gospel has the power "to convert even ordinary, selfish, materialistic people like us into something resembling saints."

*Resident Aliens* begs to be read in groups, argued aloud, read just the one-liners are worth the price: Christians "judge their ethical positions...on the basis of how much Christian ethics Caesar can be induced to swallow without choking"; without God, "all we have left is sentiment, the saccharine residue of theism in demise."

The book is stronger on the 10 percent of genius that's inspiration than on the 90 percent that's perspiration. Hauerwas and Willimon tell a lot of stories to illustrate their vision of church, but they leap lightly over many of the hows of getting from here to there. As encouragement on the journey, though, *Resident Aliens* couldn't be bettered.

—Ann Monroe