

SUNDAY ASYLUM

the **HOUSE** studio

BEING THE CHURCH IN
OCCUPIED TERRITORY
STANLEY HAUERWAS
WITH JASON BARNHART

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 07

BELIEVE vs. MAKE BELIEVE 13

CONFLICT vs. COMFORT 29

DESPAIR vs. HOPE 45

CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP vs. WORSHIP 63

THE SYSTEM vs. THE KINGDOM 79

BONUS MATERIAL 95

INTRODUCTION

I had been a Christian for only about two years when I began my freshman year at Ashland University. I felt the call to ministry and knew from day one that I was going to be a Religion major. As college students normally do, I formed friendships, met the faculty of my department, and began the next chapter of my life.

One of my professors was Dr. Kyle Fedler. Kyle was so influential in my life that I cannot share my story without mentioning his name. He challenged me while also unearthing my pride, arrogance, and spiritual superiority. He exposed me to a tragic lack of understanding of this thing we call church.

When I arrived at Ashland, I was a classic evangelical who knew I was saved but had no larger picture or understanding of the church other than it being a place I went on Sundays. Like so many other Christians, I believed God was safe, that he promised us safety. I believed faith was logical certainty and believing the right things. The lived out part of Christianity was separated from the conceptual, intellectual side of Christianity. My head was light years away from my heart.

Perhaps most importantly during my time learning from him,

Kyle introduced me to the writings of two men who forever changed my life and altered my view of Christianity. The first was John Howard Yoder, a theologian from the Mennonite/Anabaptist perspective. (But to limit Yoder to the Mennonites would be to unfairly pigeonhole the man; he did, after all, teach at the University of Notre Dame, a Catholic school, and his writings were directed many times at evangelicalism in America.) His writings on the alternative community of the church have so shaped my understanding of the church's mission that I don't need to think about "how Yoder would understand the church." His theology just simply flows out of the man I have become and am becoming.

Yoder had a profound influence on the next theologian who altered, really wrecked (in a good way), my life. That man was Stanley Hauerwas. Both Yoder and Hauerwas have always amazed me because they hold out ridiculous hope for this idea called church. Their writings (through Kyle) altered my thinking on Christianity and the church. I began to hope and believe that the church was more than *song, sermon, song*. I began to believe that God wanted to do extraordinary things through the church's witness and had, in fact, already been doing that for millennia (it's called church history).

Church became for me a risky, demanding, frustrating, necessary component of the Christian life. In fact, if I can let you in on a little secret, I don't think we can be Christians

without it. The church is the tangible reminder that Christ has a body, that Christ has a mission, and that the two are connected in some bizarre, mystical, adventurous sort of way.

Hauerwas authored a book with William Willimon¹ called *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. In it they detail what I believe to be the mission of the church and to what I've sought to give my life. They write:

The Gospels make wonderfully clear that the disciples had not the foggiest idea of what they had gotten into when they followed Jesus. With a simple "Follow me," Jesus invited ordinary people to come out and be part of an adventure, a journey that kept surprising them at every turn in the road. It is no coincidence that the Gospel writers chose to frame the gospel in terms of a journey.

The church exists today as resident aliens, an adventurous colony in a society of unbelief. As a society of unbelief, Western culture is devoid of a sense of journey, of adventure, because it lacks belief in much more than the cultivation of an ever-shrinking horizon of self-preservation and self-expression."²

¹ William Willimon is Presiding Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the Methodist Church and Visiting Research Professor at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.

² Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1989), 49.

The church exists for adventure, journey, surprise, risk, hope, alternative—as an alien people in the world. We do things differently, live differently, treat people differently, and obey a different code that is foreign and foolish to most of the world. There is something in the witness of the church that speaks to a void in the dominant culture. The church embodies what Jesus said in John 10:10: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

Sunday Asylum is born out of this quest for adventure and risk—*Sunday* symbolizing the day we gather and tell the story again to one another, *Asylum* because the true story at the heart of Christianity is just crazy and we need to get together in a safe place and do a reality check (kingdom/church style) about this mission to which we're called.

Welcome to the adventure that is *Sunday Asylum!*

BELIEVE vs. MAKE BELIEVE

Video Transcript—Stanley Hauerwas

I think evangelicalism, which comes very much out of certain reformed theological developments, tends to be very rationalistic. You *believe* stuff. And of course, I think you need to believe stuff, but I'm just not that interested in belief. I mean, I'm a very orthodox Christian, I hope, and I affirm Nicaea and Chalcedon. I believe Scripture is the word of God and so on.

And I want to believe whatever the church tells me to believe. But I think belief as *the* indicator of what makes one a Christian tends to separate the

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

work of the language of the faith from its work. What is it doing? And I'm much more interested in trying to locate the context in which the language does the work that it never occurs to me to say, well do I believe that?

I mean, I think of it as laying brick. Bricklayers, people love to watch bricklayers because they can't quite figure out how it's being done. When a bricklayer cuts the mud off the board and spreads it done the course, people oftentimes don't notice that they will then take their trowel and frog the mud. Froggin' the mud makes a trench down the mud they just spread. It not only puts the mud out toward the edge of the brick, where you'll get a joint, but when you frog the mud, that creates a vacuum. A good bricklayer almost never touches the brick with their trowel because they just let the vacuum pull the brick down to being true to the line.

That's the way I wanna think about theological speech. Most people wouldn't know what you're talking about when you talk about froggin' the mud. So you talk about what it means to worship Jesus as the second person of the trinity in the context in which you're froggin' mud. I mean it's doing work. And that's the way I tend to think about it. Namely, it's not isolatable beliefs, it's doing work.

Should we learn how to lay bricks again? Have we forgotten how to be human?

Absolutely. I think you tend to forget what it means to be human all the time. And it is a training. Training is very much at the heart of Christianity for me. It's an ongoing process of learning, of being trained to do work that is inseparable from the training, so in the process of the training you become transformed in ways that you hardly notice you're being transformed in order to be able to do the work that needs to be done.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What does Hauerwas mean when he says, “I want to believe whatever the church tells me to?” Is it simply buying everything the church says without evaluating the information? Why or why not?

Do you agree that the “work of the language of the faith” has been separated from the work of the faith? What has this looked like in the church?

How do you respond to Hauerwas saying, “I’m just not that interested in belief?” What do you think he means?

What does it mean to forget we are human? Do you agree that we sometimes forget what it means to be human? How? How can we begin to remember what it means to be human?

Belief as *the* indicator of what makes one a Christian tends to separate the work of the language of the faith from its work.

STANLEY HAUERWAS

Faith in God, then, is not at all the same as the kind of logical certainty that we attain in Euclidean geometry. God is not the conclusion to a process of reasoning, the solution to a mathematical problem. To believe in God is not to accept the possibility of his existence because it has been “proved” to us by some theoretical argument, but it is to put our trust in One whom we know and love. Faith is not the supposition that something might be true, but the assurance that someone is there.³

BISHOP KALLISTOS WARE

³ Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 1979), 14.

I remember my years in seminary fondly. Seminary was a time of great challenge and growth for me. As I reflect back on those years, I realize that one particular area of growth for me came through exposure to different perspectives—not just from

faculty but also from my colleagues. In a single classroom one could encounter fifteen different “brands” of Christianity. Because of these different perspectives there always

COMMENTARY

seemed to be some disagreement and misunderstanding. The everlasting question I had was, “How can two people read the same thing and come to completely different conclusions?” (Bear in mind I’m not talking about orthodoxy versus heresy here but differing ideas of application.)

One day it dawned on me. The tension in the room was in regards to differences in lived theology. The academic theology of textbooks remained the same, but the application of the information gathered was very different. Although we all loved studying the church, a Caucasian, middle-class Presbyterian saw church differently than an African-American, upper-class Baptist did. We both affirmed the importance of the church, but the fleshing out of such an idea was incredibly diverse.

And at the same time, even though the incarnation (the fleshing out) of those ideas looked different, there was still an eerie

similarity to all the viewpoints. It wasn't that everyone applied the ideas in the same way. The similarity came in that every student felt the ideas *needed to be applied*. So even in great diversity, we still felt and experienced unity.

All brands of Western Christianity have their own peculiar characteristics. The Enlightenment has attempted to get us to buy into this idea that the divine world is separate from the material, earthly world. Our business in the here and now is to get busy living out our own life and our own story.

American Christianity has been heavily influenced by this ideology. From many of the country's Founding Fathers to the present, American Christianity has been much more comfortable with a deistic approach to God (namely that God created the world and stepped back from it) than with a theistic God (a God who is actively involved and engaged with his created world). For much of American Christian expression, Jesus has been all about making good, moral people whose only means of religious transcendence (experiencing something beyond themselves) is a reduced, therapeutic understanding of prayer—"God, I want" or "God, help me."

Therefore, a classic American theological attribute is separating theology (what we believe) from ethics (how we behave). Theology becomes a textbook journey, and lived theology becomes a behavior of maniacs. It seems that Western

Christianity, which is extremely rationalistic and individualistic, has been the victor. So we get a lot of good, moral believers who have no understanding of larger issues of justice in the world. Faith is a concept, and discipleship is a long list of memorization rather than the creation of a peculiar people on mission for a peculiar God.

Something has gone desperately wrong.

This is what Hauerwas is speaking to in this video. The work of the language of the faith, the orthodox theological truths, has been separated from the actual work itself. We fall victim to the lie that what we believe doesn't necessarily shape how we behave. The heart of true theology, however, is that our God is not a concept but a person. The gospel is Jesus Christ himself. In Jesus we see the union of orthodoxy and behavior. The central Christian message is that God came in the flesh. Our central theological concept is at the same time a central theological action. In Jesus, belief and action are tied together. Read these words from John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (1:1). The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (1:14).

In the incarnation (God in the flesh) we see a God who takes great theological action, but we also see a God who takes on the flesh to show us what it means to be fully human; Jesus is said to be fully God and fully human—the Word took on flesh and dwelled among us. This is at the heart of Christianity. God does not speak against the material world and elevate some enlightened spiritual world. In Jesus, God fully affirmed that the material world matters. As a result then, the follower of Jesus is the embodiment of the spoken Word of God on mission for God.

For the Christian, Hauerwas would say, discipleship is the ongoing process of being trained and transformed by community into greater Christlikeness. If we separate the language of the faith from the work, we miss this valuable truth. Thus, when we separate belief from work, we create a dualistic world in which what we believe is different from how we behave.

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul states a very bold truth when he writes:

With all wisdom and understanding, [God] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. (Eph. 1:8b-10)

The Greco-Roman world of Paul, out of which much of Western thought has been shaped, also sought to separate language from work. The mystery is that Jesus is available to all, even Gentiles. In Jesus, Paul is saying, heaven and earth have come together. They are unified; they are made one. No matter how far the Enlightenment and our modernized world seek to separate the two, they cannot override this overarching truth. And our language of the faith, because of this divine act, cannot be separated from the work of the faith.

When the world looks at followers of Jesus, they should see a masterpiece of what it means to be a people fully alive, fully present, and fully confident in their Lord. We are the result of God's activity. We are a people of life in a world of death. Just as God spoke the world into existence and the creation happened, so also followers of Jesus live their theology in such a way that their witness (language and work) creates an alternative reality to the ways of the world in which they find themselves.

Followers of Jesus recognize their citizenship is with and in the kingdom of God. And what Hauerwas is attempting to get across to his audience is that the church cannot separate language and work because the language makes sense only in the context of a believing community manifesting (read "working" in) an alternative reality.

So sitting in that seminary classroom, I've come to realize, was a modern day parable of this important truth. Theology and ethics separate is foolishness. Practical theology is also kind of a misnomer. All theology is practical and longs to be applied. The particular speech acts of Christians manifest an alternative reality that doesn't just take souls to heaven—it looks at people and shows them how to be fully human again.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Do you see a difference between “academic theology” and “lived theology?” If so, how?

Respond to the statement, “all theology is practical and longs to be applied.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

What might a Christian life look like that “doesn't just take souls to heaven” but “looks at people and shows them how to be fully human again?” How does this kind of Christianity change our responsibility to those around us?