A reply: Resident Aliens at 25

by Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon

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In 1989, Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon sparked a lively debate about church, ministry, and Christian identity with their book Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony. *Twenty-five years later, we asked several pastors and theologians to offer their perspective on the book and its impact. (Read all responses.)*

Probably it's a good thing that we didn't try to write a book designed to have lasting value. Everyone knows how dull academics can be when we try to qualify every statement, engage all possible objections, and show off our latest reading. (And every preacher knows that the most interesting homiletics is, in one way or another, polemics.)

Still, it would be disingenuous to act as if we were unhappy about the attention given to *Resident Aliens* by an amazing array of churches and Christians. Because of this book we have made new friends in faraway places and discovered the richness and diversity of the church.

Some critics, upon first reading of our book, asked, "Where in the world is the church you want?" Where is the church that lives as if it really is God's unexpected answer to what's wrong with the world? The church that, in the end, wins through suffering witness and love? The church that shares an open table and tries breathlessly to keep up with the movements of the risen Christ? The church that dares to be incomprehensible to the world because it believes Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection are true? That church is more ubiquitous than we knew.

We are thankful for the positive and the negative attention to our book because in spite of our modest intentions the book has been used by the Holy Spirit as a catalyst for a discussion that North American Christians badly needed. Above all we are thankful for those pastors who read the book and exclaimed, "I'm not crazy for wanting something more," or even better, "I almost forgot that my little congregation is at the center of a grand adventure over which we have no control."

The 1950s were a triumph of boring white middle-class Christianity. We began the book with that time and place because it's what we know; we were there. Yet as several of the responses indicate, that church which we were trying to encourage to be more faithful was a church deeply implicated, indeed generative of, a host of sin. If that sinfulness was understated in our book, we repent. But then we are white middle-class kind of guys, Methodists who love to get judged, to repent, to be forgiven, converted, and born again. *Resident Aliens* wanted strongly to assert that the 1950s are not coming back. Our time, this time, is a great time to be a disciple of a Savior like Jesus Christ because he has taken time from us and made time for us.

Although we had many illustrations derived from growing up Christian in a segregated South, we didn't think of the black church as our primary audience; we assumed that the black church didn't need us to tell it how to be resident aliens. Indeed, the black church of the 1960s was instrumental in demonstrating to each of us that the church could be a place of critical theological analysis of the principalities and powers, of courageous, everyday resistance to the wiles of Satan, and a place where ordinary Christians received the resources to fight the powers. We may have failed to make that clear partly because we thought it presumptive for white guys to pretend we knew what it meant to be black. We assumed that the mainline, liberal, (still) predominantly Caucasian church badly needed to hear the *Resident Aliens* message. We knew from firsthand experience that the black church had long known how to be resident aliens in a racist world.

We predicted that the church will come to resemble more closely the synagogue, and the last two decades have proved us right. While it's true that we are deeply indebted to John Howard Yoder, particularly his *Politics of Jesus*, for sending us down the *Resident Aliens* road, we are more indebted to the church that produced people whose children marched on Birmingham. If it happened then, it could happen today; if God produced a church there, God could do it again here.

We really like the response that the North American church's dispossession is a dispossession for the sake of the world. It isn't so much that mainline Protestantism has been disenfranchised by contemporary American culture; it's that dispossession from the dominant culture is the effect that Jesus Christ has upon anyone who attempts to obey him.

Terms like *resident aliens* and *colony* are only a couple of the offensive terms that early Christians used to describe the peculiar situation in which they found themselves due to Christ's determination to rob Caesar of his power. Being Christian means learning to use Christian language appropriately. We believe that when Christians facilely adopt language like *rights* or *democracy* or *progressive* or even *liberation* to describe the mission of the church, we attenuate the Christian moral imagination and tame the constant metanoia required of those who think Jesus Christ is Lord—and Caesar (even a democratically elected one) isn't.

What Christ seems to have in mind for us is more abrasive than mere social ethics, more transformative than mere piecemeal transformation of the economy, more demanding even than a struggle to "mitigate privilege and grow in solidarity with nondominant persons."

We gather from many of the responses that some of our readers still don't want to talk Christology with us. Perhaps they are rightly suspicious that our theological and ecclesial claims are a cover for our social/gender/economic/racial location. While we grant that every theology implies a sociology, we thought *Resident Aliens* was an assertion that Jesus Christ is still the most interesting thing that the church has to say or to do in the world, the truth about us and God. God's peculiar answer to what's wrong with the world is a crucified Jew who lived briefly, died violently, rose unexpectedly, and even now makes life more difficult and out of our control—but so much more interesting than flaccid sociological analysis. We actually believe that racial, class, and gender formations are not as determinative of who we are as what, in baptism, Christ makes of us.

If *Resident Aliens* is a work of ecclesiology, it is a doctrine of the church tied closely to Christology. The church has trouble in the world because of Jesus. For God so loved the world that the Son was sent to the world, but the world has received him not. We wouldn't know that self-sacrificial, nonviolent love is the point of it all without him.

To those who take offense that we spoke of the church's vocation in terms of being "aliens" and a "colony," we simply say that it was Paul's terminology before it was ours. The question is not simply how we can change the world to make life a bit less miserable for the marginalized but rather how the church humbly can learn to be more faithful from those who were forced by the world (and sometimes by the church) to be aliens.

We suspect there is among some readers in the now dramatically diminished Protestant mainline the lingering hope that if we just get our politics a bit more to the left, a bit more “progressive” as some define progress, still hoping for some culturally acceptable social utility for the church, some transformationist impact to make America a better place, we will have a future.

We agree that finding ourselves as resident aliens amid various forms of Augustine’s earthly city demands an array of responses from the church, based upon the particular cultural context and the claims of the gospel. We find it difficult to understand how someone might think we had taken a “fundamentally dismissive stance with respect to political society.” Those who suggest that we are recommending a retreat or dreaded sectarian isolationism seem to us as if they are willfully misreading both the book and us. The exact opposite is the case.

We both have had lots to say about politics in the earthly city, and we are both very political people, for good and ill. Besides, we are members of a university faculty and have held various positions in local churches; everyone knows how bloody politics can be in the church and the academy.

Therefore we like the notion that Christians are called to “calculated ambivalence and cultivated aloofness tempered by ad hoc evaluations about selective collaborations for the common good.” We reject the idea, implied by some of our readers, that North American Christians can let the world define what counts as politics and meaningful social change. Throughout the book we tried to reiterate that it’s not just a question of whether to be resident aliens, but how.

Again we say: when Christians are asked to say something political, we say *church*. The reason we say *church* is that the church for all its limits is where we have some hope of being a people who do not lie to one another.

If *Resident Aliens* has a bottom line, it is that the hidden violence intrinsic to our manipulative relations with one another that are so often identified as “love” can only be named and transformed by a people capable of telling one another the truth. Of all people, Christians should be capable of truth-telling, trained as we are Sunday after Sunday to confess we were there when they crucified the One who is truth itself.

A couple of the respondents are right: now is the time to stress *residency* as much as we once stressed christologically imposed alienation. We rejoice in the evidence

that our little book was used by God for the production of a few Christians who refused either to be silenced or to translate our claims into more acceptable sociological platitudes. We are humbled that after reading *Resident Aliens* some once-disheartened churchpeople put the book down and gained new enthusiasm for the odd way that Christ takes up residency among us, people who are able to say to various disbelieving, deadly presumptuous empires, “we are not going anywhere.”