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Against Hauerwas

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Abstract

This essay questions the theological position developed by Stanley Hauerwas over three decades. It first traces the origins of his thought, and argues that the alliance of radical Reformation ecclesiology with postmodern philosophy leads to an intensely idealistic ecclesiology. Hauerwas's exaltation of particular communal practices is ultimately unreal, as he fails to locate these practices in a particular institution. Due to the unreality of his ecclesiology his attack on Christendom and Constantinianism lacks substance. In the end he undermines his own position by identifying the truth of Christianity with the concrete practices of a distinctive community that he cannot identify.

Keywords

Critique of ecclesiology, Stanley Hauerwas.

Before attacking Hauerwas, it is necessary to salute his rhetorical achievement. Almost uniquely he introduces into academic theology an element of performance, show. His work projects a presence, a character. Like Luther or Barth, he is not just a theologian, he's a self-made myth. He's the baseball-loving, straight-talking, former bricklaying Texan pacifist who has, for thirty years, told the church to stop cavorting with liberalism and *be itself*. It must be a totally distinctive society, or polis, rooted in its version of Aristotelian virtues. It teaches a distinctive practice, like bricklaying or baseball.

It is an engaging performance. Yet I want to argue that this straight-talking rhetoric masks a massive evasion. Hauerwas' work epitomises the core failure of theological postmodernism: the failure to use the word 'church' with sufficient care. Contemporary theology ought to reflect far more critically on the use of this word. For this word is intellectually dangerous. Rather like a beautiful woman (apologies for the gendered analogy), it has the power to make intelligent men forget their critical duties; to enchant them. It is crucial that we interrogate every use of this word; that we ask whether it refers to an actual institution or an ideal. Instead, ambiguity on this question

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is universally tolerated, as if 'church' is meant to be used with pious vagueness, as if this is part of its grammar.

This failure to be firm with the seductive ambiguity of 'church' has a pervasively detrimental effect on theology. The most serious theological question of our time is whether theology exceeds ecclesiology. Can theology legitimately seek to stand outside of any community, any institution, in order to think Christianity through? If the attempt is futile, then authentic theology is that which is done in the service of an institution; its authenticity is a function of the intrinsic authority of a certain institution. This is the either-or of contemporary theology.

My complaint is that contemporary theology tends to fudge this question, to deny the seriousness of this dilemma. It does so by inhabiting a space of *virtual* institutional commitment. It gestures at its own authenticity by making regular, positive references to 'church', but refuses to be institutionally specific. Even when a theologian is clear about his denominational allegiance, he will commonly use the word 'church' in a wider, vaguer sense, so that it refers to an ideal transcending any actual institution. By this means he claims the right to be free of the constraints of his particular institution: he is claiming to speak for 'the church' in a wider sense. He hopes that this will seem piously ecumenical, but it is really an attempt to evade the awkward fact that particular Christian institutions are involved in the exercise of authority. The theologian wants to forget about that kind of unpleasantly specific authority; he wants to access the benign authority of the church *in general*.

What I am suggesting is that academic theology inhabits a dishonest space. It wants the benefits of institutional rootedness without the drawbacks. It wants to assert its legitimacy by means of allying itself with 'the practice of the community', yet it also wants the freedom not to be associated with any particular community, any actual institution. Hauerwas is the arch-culprit.

His thought has hardly changed since the early 1970s. At its heart is the fusion of two basic influences: Aristotle (the subject of his doctoral research) and John Howard Yoder. It is an interesting, and questionable, pairing: the conservative pagan philosopher and the radical pacifist Anabaptist theologian (and pupil of Barth). I want to suggest that these two influences are basically incompatible, and that the urge to unite them causes a confusion that infects his entire corpus.

Both influences are evident in his book of 1974, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection*. Most of these essays are concerned to expound Aristotle's insight that character is the primary category of moral reflection: 'The concept of character implies that moral goodness is primarily a predication of persons and not of acts, and that this goodness of persons is not automatic but must be

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acquired and cultivated.'[1] 'Character', then, is a means of rejecting the abstract rational subject of Enlightenment tradition, and rediscovering the role of community, narrative, embodiment. 'The good' cannot be known in the abstract; it belongs to the narrative that a community tells about itself and enacts in its common life. 'Narrative' was at this time becoming a central philosophical and theological category, largely thanks to the work of MacIntyre.

And at this time Wittgenstein was coming to be used in a similar way, to challenge the false universalism of the Enlightenment. Yale school 'post-liberalism' was fruitfully mixing Wittgenstein's sociolinguistic model with Barth's anti-liberalism. As Hauerwas recounts, 'What I learned from Aristotle was reinforced by reading Wittgenstein.'[2] He saw that both thinkers might enable a new approach to ecclesiology. But Aristotle was the dominant influence: his model of virtue allowed the church to understand itself as a character-forming society. It is an alternative polis; a distinctive culture that forms a distinctive type of person. The duty of the church is not to relate its vision to secular historical goals but to nurture the social practices that sustain its own social vision.

Seen in isolation, this way of thinking is distinctly conservative. It seems to function as a defence of tradition: the actual traditional practices of a community are superior to the claims of some form of universal reason. There seem to be strong echoes of Burke, for example. It seems to be a way of defending the ancient habits of an institution against the claims of innovators.

Early in his career, this ethical conservatism did indeed dominate Hauerwas' thought; he was strongly influenced by H. Richard Niebuhr, and sympathetic to Reinhold Niebuhr's political realism. But he was provoked by the Vietnam War into criticising the Niebuhrs. In the late sixties he increasingly felt 'that any constructive Christian social ethic would have to find a way to recover a church with an integrity of its own rather than simply an institution designed to make "democracies" work better. . .Gradually I saw that my attempt to develop an ethic of virtue might have sectarian implications I had not anticipated.'[3]

It was at this point that he came under the influence of John Howard Yoder. In Yoder the Radical Reformation feels fresh; there is a bracing air of chiliastic sincerity. At first glance his thought resembles that of a liberation theologian. *The Politics of Jesus* insists that the new

[1] Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Indiana: Fides, 1974), p. 49.

[2] Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 224.

[3] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: a Primer in Christian Ethics* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. xxiii.

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order of the Kingdom is not an otherworldly or inner one but fully political. Yet there is also an emphasis on the absolute difference of the social ideal that Jesus brings: the Kingdom cannot be reconciled with this world (there is a strong echo of Barth's early work). This new order is fully real, fully historical, yet it is also apocalyptic. It is necessarily at odds with all forms of worldly power. It fully relies on the miracle of God to sustain it. But this eschatological reality is not merely imaginary: it is manifest in the concrete life of the church. The job of the church is to reveal God's new order, the Kingdom.

Hauerwas expounds this vision in 'On Yoder', in *Vision and Virtue*. The church is not a political agent in the normal sense; it 'cannot attempt to become another power group among others in society that seeks to dominate in the name of the good.'[4] It must not support this or that political cause: 'In a sense the church is most relevant to society when it is self-regarding, for the criterion of such a concern for its own life must be the gospel of Jesus Christ.'[5] It follows that 'the most vital form of Christian social ethics must actually be a concern about the kind of community that Christians form among themselves.' The job of the church is not to bring about the Kingdom of God, he again insists:

> Rather the church's job is to be a people who witness in their lives that in fact the kingdom has come and is a reality. The church is not directly God's agent for the realisation of the kingdom, but rather it is God's harbinger of the kingdom by being the fellowship of the faithful in which the reality of the kingdom is manifest.[6]

This is a decent summary of Hauerwas's entire ecclesiology. The church is the place where the Kingdom of God has already come - yet in a *necessarily limited* form. The church's task is not to overtake all of society, but to concentrate on being a separate, special form of life - an island, an enclave. This preliminary pocket of the Kingdom is how God reveals himself to the world. It must therefore be *really* different. In a sense, the reality of God depends on the absolute qualitative difference of this form of life.

This ecclesiological position might be described as restrained chiliasm. It is chiliastic in its insistence that the Kingdom has come, in the form of a new political reality. But at the same time there is a firm denial that this new political reality has the capacity to generalise, to overtake the world. Like mainstream Protestant thought, Hauerwas locates the general eschaton beyond history. *Unlike* mainstream Protestant thought, he boldly identifies the visible church with a preliminary eschaton: it is separate from the world, a miraculously real foretaste of the Kingdom. This church-world separation is far

[4] Stanley Hauerwas 1974, p.214.
[5] Ibid., p.216.
[6] bid., p.221.

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stronger than is found in Luther or Barth, who insist upon the visible church's collusion in the fallen world. It is of course less magisterial, more sectarian.

For Hauerwas the church must *actually* be different - outwardly, practically, visibly. The underwriting of this difference is the renunciation of violence. His pacifism is his attempt to draw a firm line between church and world. The church's difference is not just spiritual or invisible, because it rejects the essence of human power. This is seen as 'proof' that it is an eschatological reality, whose survival is a divine miracle. As he recalls thirty years later: 'Yoder convinced me that if there is anything to this Christian "stuff", it must surely involve the conviction that the Son would rather die on the cross than have the world to be redeemed by violence... Christian nonviolence is not a strategy to rid the world of violence, but rather the way Christians must live in a world of violence.'[7]

The ecclesiology that Hauerwas learns from Yoder, then, is a form of utopian sectarianism. The church is called to be a separate society that opposes the ways of the world, and realises small-scale political perfection. The obvious problem with this is that there is no empirical reality which corresponds to such an account of church. And of course Hauerwas is somewhat uneasily aware of this problem. He himself is a Methodist, but he does not dare claim that this proto-Kingdom can be identified with this denomination.

Lacking a referent, how is his utopian sectarian ecclesiology sustainable? Here we must refer to his belief in the doctrine of sanctification, which Jeffrey Stout has recently suggested is the key to his thought.[8] Sanctification names the belief that Christians are in the process of becoming perfect, fit citizens of the Kingdom of God. Similarly, the church is becoming its ideal self. Moral perfection is, by grace, possible. The doctrine describes a massive leap of faith: this hitherto imperfect community might now become perfect. Despite all the evidence of its past performance it might nevertheless live up to its calling, once we truthfully re-proclaim that calling. Hauerwas' ecclesiology is defined by this defiant rhetoric of sanctification, this very peculiar speech-act in which Christian perfection is declared to be possible from *now*.

The Peaceable Kingdom (1983) offers further evidence of this strange marriage of Aristotle and Yoder. Through Jesus, 'we live in a new age which makes possible a new way of life'[9]; the Christian is 'a participant in God's community of peace and justice'[10]; the church

[7] Stanley Hauerwas 2004, p.203.
[8] Ibid., p.215.
[9] Stanley Hauerwas 1983, p.85.
[10] Ibid., p.94.

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is 'a sanctified people.'[11] At one point he asks a rhetorical question: 'How could the world ever recognize the arbitrariness of the divisions between people if it did not have a contrasting model in the unity of the church?'[12] In the margin by this sentence I have written: 'a joke?' But I fear it is not.

Sometimes he injects a 'realistic' note. For example he does not want 'to imply that the church is any less a human community than other forms of association. Just as in other institutions, the church draws on and requires patterns of authority that derive from human needs for status, belonging, and direction. The question is not whether the church is a natural institution, as it surely is, but how it shapes that "nature" in accordance with its fundamental convictions.'[13] Soon he makes a similar point. He admits that the church 'is not just a "community" but an institution that has budgets, buildings, parking lots, potluck dinners, heated debates about who should be the next pastor, and so on.'[14] And it is precisely this empirical reality, he now claims, rather than some ideal essence of church, that 'comprises the sanctified ones formed by and forming the continuing story of Jesus Christ in the world.'[15]

Let us be very clear about what he is doing here. He is talking about the church in idealised terms, as God's perfect society, and denying that he is engaged in such idealism. He is not commending the 'invisible church', he insists, but the actual church: this perfect society is what the church is called to be *in actuality*; the church must be its ideal self, and by grace it can be and is. One cannot really argue against such a position; for it is not so much an argument as a rhetorical performance, a pious speech-act. What he is really saying is something like: 'It is pious to pretend that the flawed reality of church is "really" the Kingdom of God. Let's pretend.'

I believe that this sort of fantasy ecclesiology is not conducive to theological clarity. Instead of honestly grappling with the problems of ecclesiology, Hauerwas wants to be a preacher of corporate sanctification - one who encourages the flawed church to see itself as totally holy. What is strange about Hauerwas is that he is a revivalist preacher who disguises himself as a serious theologian, drawing on the latest philosophical wisdom. And here we must return to his Aristoteleanism. He uses postmodern social philosophy to lend weight to his fantastic ecclesiology.

Like MacIntyre, he has learned from Aristotle and Wittgenstein that all meaning and value is rooted in traditional social practices.

[11] Ibid., p.97.
[12] Ibid., p.100.
[13] Ibid., p.102.
[14] Ibid., p.107.
[15] Ibid.

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But unlike MacIntyre, he applies this to a radical ecclesiology: it must mean that ecclesial practices are pure and holy. For how would we know that God is perfectly good, unless this idea arose from practices that were perfectly good? It must be the case that Christian culture is sufficiently holy to express God. If God is real, his reality must correspond to social forms that are in effect divine.

What we are witnessing is a confusion of discourses. As a preacher of sanctification, his discourse is essentially one of exhortation: 'the church should be a pure community'. And now he introduces what he has gleaned from Aristotle and Wittgenstein, and insists that the church *actually is* a pure community; it really consists of perfection-forging practices. Because all ethical achievement is a result of social formation, and Christians are called to be perfect, their institutional apparatus must already be perfect. It must follow that Christian culture can school us to perfection, just as Athenian culture can school young men to martial virtue.

Hauerwas' fusion of Aristotelean character-ethics and an ecclesiology rooted in sanctification is not a fruitful synthesis, it is an unholy muddle, a massive category confusion. It has done more than anything else in recent decades to muddy the waters of ecclesial reflection.

If the application of the Aristotelean model to ecclesiology worked, it would be possible to point to an actual Christian community and say, 'Look, here is divine perfection in ethical form; it has been created by particular practices.' But of course there is no such community that produces ethically perfect beings. So the claim that traditional Christian practices produce a qualitatively different sort of ethical life is one that cannot be substantiated; it remains reliant on a leap of faith.

In the introduction to *The Peaceable Kingdom* he briefly reflects on his 'ecclesial stance'. He wonders whether he writes as a Catholic or as a Protestant. 'The answer is that I simply do not know. I do not believe that theology when rightly done is either Catholic or Protestant. . .I hope my theology is catholic inasmuch as it is true to those Protestants and Roman Catholics who constitute the church catholic'.[16] This ecumenical claim will be repeated many times in the next two decades. I find its tone of humble piety objectionable: in reality he is claiming the right to speak for an account of 'church' so wide that he cannot be held accountable to any particular instance of it. Though he remains technically a Methodist, he refuses to be limited by this. He refuses to identify the ethically perfect community with this denomination, or any other: the church he really believes in is 'the church catholic', which is conveniently abstract.

Against the Nations (1985) is primarily a critique of American theological liberalism. Christianity has lost its fibre of particularity;

[16] Ibid., p.xxvi.

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it has assumed that the national culture in general is Christian, and this has led to the debasement of 'Christian'. This diagnosis is of course very close to Kierkegaard's. Yet the prescription is different. What defines authentic Christianity is not subjective experience but the concrete novelty of Christian community.

In one chapter he discusses Pannenberg's eschatologically-based theology. It remains infected by liberalism, says Hauerwas; it envisages the Kingdom of God as a progressive movement towards utopia. This overlooks the primacy of the Christian community:

> The kingdom of God is the hope of the people whom God has called out among all nations. The question of ecclesiology, therefore, precedes strategy for social action. Without the kingdom ideal, the church loses its identity-forming hope; without the church, the kingdom ideal loses its concrete character. Once abstracted from the community it presumes the kingdom ideal can be used to underwrite any conception of the just society.[17]

In other words, it is wrong to talk of the 'Kingdom of God' as something that is meaningful outside of the particular language of this community. One will be creating a liberal illusion. This passage suggests that, like his mentor Yoder, he *is* motivated by 'the kingdom ideal'; on one level he is not so far removed from political and liberation theologians. His whole career is based in the desire that the kingdom ideal should not be unrealistic and utopian. This is what he wants ecclesiology to do: to make this ideal *concrete*. But there is a danger in desiring an ideal to be concrete: you might end up idealising a bit of concrete.

In the early 1990s his theology becomes bolder, more polemical. In *After Christendom?* (1991) he comes out more strongly against liberal ideology, especially its American form. He is exorcising his early attraction to the Niebuhrs, to the idea that a liberal society is a legitimate expression of Christianity. This idea has corrupted theology; it has cast doubt on the necessity of a coherent alternative Christian society. We must re-learn that 'salvation is a political alternative that the world cannot know apart from the existence of a concrete people called church.'[18]

> It is my thesis that questions of the truth or falsity of Christian convictions cannot even be addressed until Christians recover the church as a political community necessary for our salvation. . .Our beliefs, or better our convictions, only make sense as they are embodied in a political community we call church. . . [O]ur very understanding of God

[17] Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Reality of the Kingdom: an Ecclesial Space for Peace', with Mark Sherwindt, in Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), p.112–13.

[18] Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom?: How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p.35.

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> is correlative to moral sources, or as I would prefer, practices. For Christians, without the church there is no possibility of salvation and even less of morality and politics.[19]

Salvation is a matter of incorporation into this distinctive set of traditional practices. Again, everything depends on the claim that these practices can create a qualitatively different ethical life, one possessed by the eschaton. In the church, God's counter-politics is really present. 'The church must be understood as an alternative politics.'[20]

In this book his refusal of denominational particularity becomes even more marked. For he begins to emphasise his sympathy with Catholic tradition, particularly Augustine's account of the church as an alternative polis of peace. His technical allegiance to Methodism fits into this, he claims: 'Methodism only makes sense as an evangelical movement in the church Catholic.'[21] So he is now repositioning himself not as a sectarian Protestant but as a fringe Catholic. But does not Catholicism imply an accommodation with worldly power such as Hauerwas has always claimed to despise? It now seems that things are less clear-cut. He quotes a commentator on his work:

> Hauerwas is quite consistent once you see that he does want to create a Christian society (polis, societas) - a community and way of life shaped fully by Christian convictions. He rejects Constantinianism because 'the world' cannot be this society and we only distract ourselves from building a truly Christian society by trying to make our nation into that society, rather than be content with living as a community-in-exile... [He seeks] to be a 'Catholic' Methodist in roughly the same way that some Episcopalians are Anglo-Catholic.[22]

Hauerwas comments: 'That is exactly the ecclesial position that I hope *After Christendom?* exemplifies.' But surely this ecclesial position is fundamentally confused. It wants the church to be an alternative society, whose practices constitute a counter-politics, and it locates salvation in incorporation in this other society. It also claims to be opposed to any accommodation between this other society and political power. It is a fantasy. In reality, this politically distinctive church will be an institution within the general body politic, and if it is numerous it will be established, whether officially or not. He cannot have it both ways: if the church is an actual political society, it cannot hope to be politically innocent. Conventional Catholics do at least admit that the visible church is flawed, that it is caught up in questionable alliances with secular power, in the whole legacy of Constantinianism. Hauerwas wants to apply the purity of the gathered church to Catholic tradition. Yet Catholic tradition is

[19] Ibid., p.26.
[20] Ibid., p.6.
[21] Ibid., p.8.
[22] Ibid., p.7-8.

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magisterial, Constantinian; it acknowledges the necessity of political compromise.

His position on Christendom and Constantinianism is contradictory. He claims to be its sworn enemy, the theologian who dares to denounce the church's habitual subservience to political power. But he also proposes a sort of neo-Christendom, rooted in a pure church: a strong Christian culture that is a political reality. If Christianity were to become a new political reality, a distinctive and comprehensive culture, what grounds are there for thinking that it would be purer than past models? He fails to address this obvious question.

After Christendom? develops a rhetoric of ecclesial machismo - a rhetoric that is questionable in the light of his denominational semi-detachment. He argues that the church must be a direct authority over the Christian's life, as if obedient submission to the subculture of church is the essence of Christian faith. At present, he complains, the church 'cannot conceive what it would mean to be a disciplined community.'[23] The churches offer friendliness and pastoral care, but this is insufficient: we need to 'recover a sense of the church as a community of discipline.'[24] 'If salvation is genuinely social, then there can be no place for a distinction that invites us to assume, for example, that we have ownership over our bodies and possessions in a way that is not under the discipline of the whole church.'[25] To put this right, he suggests that churches should require each member to declare what he or she earns. He gives another example of what he claims to favour. It is drawn from a television documentary in which a member of a fundamentalist congregation was ordered by the pastor to forgive his adulterous wife, to accept the decision of the congregation that she should be pardoned.[26] Hauerwas commends this example of the church's authority overriding liberal assumptions. But as he does not himself belong to such a fundamentalist church, his commendation is unreal, and in fact rather creepy. He likes the idea of *other people* submitting to the theological judgment of the local pastor.

In Good Company (1995) contains some surprisingly frank reflection on his own ecclesial situation: he admits to lacking 'a clear ecclesial stance', to being 'ecclesially homeless'.[27] This is the fault of the Methodist Church in America, which has succumbed to the virtual paganism of American Evangelicalism. It is ignorant of the church's need to define itself by nurturing distinctively Christian prac-

[23] Ibid., p.93.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., p.99.
[26] Ibid., p.110.
[27] Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: the Church as Polis* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p.10.

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tices. So he has had to squat on the fringes of other traditions where this rootedness in practice is stronger. He calls himself 'an ecclesial cannibal'.[28] And now he reveals, rather disarmingly, just how questionably based his entire theology is:

> My theological position makes no sense unless a church actually exists that is capable of embodying the practices of perfection. In effect, since my own Methodist church is seldom capable of being such a community. . .I live off communities that for varieties of reasons find themselves stuck with strong practices and convictions that they cannot leave behind and remain who they claim to be. . . I am often accused of romanticising both Catholicism and Anabaptism, and no doubt that is a danger. But the reason I am so attracted to those traditions is that they have managed to keep some practices in place that provide resources for resistance against the loss of Christian presence in modernity. . . . Like any good Methodist I get to assume the stance of picking and choosing parts of traditions I like without having to bear the burden of the parts (or, as the English say, 'those bits') I do not like. I am like those who hold themselves accountable only to those whom they like and therefore never have to accept the discipline of being corrected by anyone whom they do not like or with whom they are in disagreement.[29]

Is he not admitting that his theological position makes no sense? For he cannot point to a church that 'is capable of embodying the practices of perfection.' Instead, he remains detached from all churches, in order to construct a sort of collage, a virtual church that is made up of the particular practices that strike him as authentic. But real church is not like this. It is an institution that claims authority for its entire collection of practices. A real church condemns this attitude of freedom and detachment.

He seems to admit that his theological position is idealistic, unreal. For he cannot find a concrete ecclesial reality that would justify his ecclesiology. 'My ambiguous ecclesial stance has at least taught me to drop all pretensions of superiority', he now claims.[30] But this is hardly true: he certainly pretends to be superior to liberals. What is objectionable is that Hauerwas refuses to admit that he is a liberal individual, detached from ecclesiastical particularity, insisting on the right to pick and mix from various churches.

His entire persona as an ecclesial authoritarian is simply phoney, if he himself chooses not to submit to an ecclesial authority. In an interview of 1998 he returns to the idea of church discipline. 'The moment a church tries to discipline any member, that person can just take off and go down the street to another church. Put very simply, what's killing Christianity is democracy. It's a degraded form

[28] bid., p.67.
[29] Ibid., p.67-8.
[30] Ibid.

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of democracy, whose habits we bring into the church and then assume that we don't need to be under orders.'[31] In the light of his own situation this is mere posturing.

There is a similar example of bogus tough-talking in his latest collection, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Non-violence* (2004). The preface offers an update on his awkward ecclesial position: he now worships at an Episcopal church. So he is a sort of unofficial Anglican. Towards the end of the book he insists that theologians are humble servants of the church. 'We betray the very gospel we are to serve if we have "positions" that become substitutes for what the church is about. Put in Catholic terms... , the bishop remains the theological heart of the church. That is why theologians are subordinate to the bishop and should be disciplined by the bishop if our work threatens the unity and holiness of the church.'[32] In a footnote he adds: 'This sentence of course betrays one of the besetting problems of my work - namely my ambiguous ecclesial position.' What is one to say? Why does this man feel inclined to lecture other people on the need to submit to bishops, when he himself does not?

Conclusion

Hauerwas is determined to believe in a pure church, one that is not tainted by Constantinianism, or any newer form of political collusion. It must understand itself as absolutely different from any other form of human life. It must embody God's counter-politics. This cannot be a mere aspiration, a characteristic of the 'invisible church'. For he has learned from Aristotle and Wittgenstein that ideas must be rooted in actual communal practices. If the Kingdom of God has really broken into human history, it must take the form of an actual character-forming community.

Can he find such a church? No he cannot. But this he cannot quite admit. For, as he puts it, 'My theological position makes no sense unless a church actually exists that is capable of embodying the practices of perfection.' So he must keep talking *as if* his impossible ideal of church is already real, as if it is a hard-core reality, no more abstract than the local baseball team.

His ecclesial evasion leads to a deeply disingenuous theological rhetoric. He imitates a person who has a firm ecclesial position, who is subject to the authority of a particular community. As he himself insists, this particularity is essential to the coherence of his theological

[31] 'What Would Pope Stanley Say?: a Conversation with Stanley Hauerwas', interview by Rodney Clapp, *Books and Culture, Christianity Today,* Nov/ Dec 1998 (online), p.4.
[32] Hauerwas 2004, p.233.

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position. But there is no particular institutional commitment, which means that there is no coherence. He surely knows this. He can hardly be unaware that his vision does not cohere. Beneath the tough-talk and the clowning he is a tragic figure, piously upholding a fiction, hoping that a cheery feisty rhetoric will cover the cracks.

His success, his star-quality, is testament to a deep malaise in academic theology. It would rather not think honestly about church. When a charismatic ecclesial idealist comes along, there is such a desperate desire to believe in his vision that it is not properly scrutinised.

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