

The demanding call and the difficult question: Stanley Hauerwas and Rowan Williams in conversation

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Abstract

This article suggests that both Stanley Hauerwas and Rowan Williams write for a Church that lives under the judgement of God. For Hauerwas this entails presenting the Church with a demanding call, and for Williams it means presenting it with a difficult question. I argue that their discourse is thus intentionally lopsided, but as such neither voice is sustainable on its own. By considering the notion of ‘the stranger’ I then explore how such a call and question are worked out, and argue for the necessity of holding them together.

Keywords

ecclesiology, Stanley Hauerwas, judgement, the stranger, theological ethics, Rowan Williams

For those familiar with the work of Stanley Hauerwas and Rowan Williams it may seem odd to put them into dialogue, for at least at first glance, they do not appear to have much in common.

Hauerwas, who is more widely known in the United States, has had a profound effect on the shape of Christian ethics over the last 40 years. Against the backdrop of Christian realism, which argued that Jesus’ ethics of love could never become the basis of society (and that we therefore needed a certain political pragmatism), Hauerwas fought to ‘demonstrate the link between the truth of what we say we believe and the shape of the lives we live’.¹ In a context where ethical discourse was concerned with the abstract and autonomous individual in specific circumstances,

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Hauerwas re-established narrative, virtue, character and communal practices as central to Christian ethics. In doing so, he realized that Christian ethical discourse must be primarily concerned with talking about the Church, for the Church is the community of character which lives in the story of God. Since Hauerwas has sought to change the very agenda of Christian ethics, his work is both polemical and combative; ironically, given his pacifism, it itches for a fight.

In contrast, Rowan Williams, as a previous Archbishop of Canterbury, is steeped in the ambiguous world of an established church. He has not sought to direct the discourse in one particular field, as Hauerwas has, but rather written across a bewildering array of theological themes attempting to open up new ways of seeing and make the familiar appear strange. His writing is consistently irenic and hesitant.

Yet despite the vast differences between them, both authors write, unsystematically and occasionally, for a Church which they envisage as living perpetually under God's judgement. This shared focus makes them possible interlocutors; the interest then lies in the wildly divergent ways in which they unpack what living under such judgement might mean.

It is the contention of this article that the Church would benefit from bringing their two voices together. Where Hauerwas confronts the Church with what I will denote as God's 'demanding call', Williams presents the Church with a 'difficult question'. Neither voice is satisfactory on its own: the unambiguous and uncompromising call to discipleship is disrupted by the question which asks what we are called to, and to what extent we can live up to such a call, but such restless questioning must at some point give way to confident and bold action.

I will explore Hauerwas's and Williams's ecclesiological thought and the major criticisms levied against them, suggesting that most critiques fail to take proper account of what either author is trying to do in addressing the Church. However, it is precisely in their lopsided address which emphasizes only God's call or question that we begin to see that their projects are unsustainable on their own. This is exemplified when looking at the very different ways in which the authors consider the 'stranger'. Here we begin to see that it is together that Hauerwas and Williams most effectively widen our ecclesial imagination and help us think through what it is to be the Church.

The demanding call

Hauerwas calls the Church to stand out from the bankruptcy of modern liberalism, which tells people they 'have no story except the story they chose',² by living in the self-involving narrative of the gospel. This narrative enables us to speak truthfully about ourselves, our failure and our sin.³ It is embodied, not by atomistic individuals, but by communities of character (churches). Such communities serve the world, not by seeking to make the world just, but by forming a 'distinct society',⁴ which witnesses to the truth.

The first task of the Church is thus simply to be the Church: to be a 'faithful manifestation of the peaceable kingdom'.⁵ For Hauerwas, it is peace which stands

as the hallmark of these communities of character, for 'war [is] an alternative to the cross'.⁶ Thus confession, hospitality and friendship become crucial corporate practices which form us as the people of peace.

In sum, for Hauerwas, the Church is – and is called to be – the embodiment of the self-involving peaceful narrative of the gospel which stands out from the world. This is the vision of what the Church 'must be to be faithful to the narratives central to Christian convictions'.⁷ There is no compromise, no excuse to be made, but simply the confronting and demanding call.

Such a vision has come under stringent attack from various quarters. Even putting the accusation of sectarianism aside (which has rightly been dropped by most interpreters), substantial criticisms remain. First, Hauerwas is accused of assuming the Christian narrative presents a fully known account of the truth with obvious (pacifist) implications, which forgets that Christianity is an 'essentially contested concept'.⁸ Second, he is accused of being 'ecclesiocentric'.⁹ As the Christian narrative is community-involving there is a tendency for the focus of his work to be on the Church, where God becomes little more than a preface. Third, communal practices do not seem to be able to form communities of character as he suggests they do.¹⁰ Fourth, his vision of the Church does not seem to accord with reality; the Church of which he speaks simply does not exist. And finally, he appears to downplay God's action within the Church, coming close to denying 'the metaphysical reality of the mystical body of Christ'¹¹ and overemphasizing the importance of our individual and corporate witness.

However, such criticisms carry far less weight if we properly contend with Hauerwas's aims. In the face of opposition from both within and outside the Church, he is presenting the Church with a demanding call. He is fully aware that what he says is not what is being preached in most pulpits but writes precisely to challenge the status quo. His focus is on the Church, but only so that the Church might be a conduit of worship. He speaks of the importance of praxis to challenge the idolization of autonomy and agency. He refuses to write to 'justify the limits of our lives' and instead calls us to 'more than we can be'.¹² He does not speak of the invisible Church, or suggest that our faithful witness is anything less than crucial, lest it become an excuse for not conforming our lives to the gospel. He sees God as presenting the Church with a demanding call from which we cannot hide.

The difficult question

In stark contrast, Williams sees God as presenting the Church with a difficult question. The gospel comes to us as a question, a trauma and a judgement. The Church is the community that 'transmits God's question from generation to generation'.¹³ Its founding experience is 'a traumatic disturbance of existing meaning and forms of social belonging'.¹⁴ The empty tomb stands as the guarantee that Jesus can never become the 'possession of the community',¹⁵ but will always stand as judge over the Church.

Such an endlessly questioning stance means there can only ever be a 'provisionality in judgement'¹⁶ about the faithfulness of our lives and matters of doctrine. There can be no 'final transparency'¹⁷ to ourselves but only a constant struggle of identity as we negotiate meaning in the world of exchange. We are forced to acknowledge the tragic limitations of all our action as we choose between more or less opaque reflections of God. We are relentlessly confronted with God's difficult question as we negotiate what it means to be faithful in the midst of this broken world where our sight is marred at best.

This vision, not least due to its complexity and Williams's often abstruse style, has not received the same level of ongoing critique as Hauerwas's. Indeed, those who have attempted a more thoroughgoing critique may be accused of misreading him.¹⁸ Yet one issue obstinately reappears, namely that Williams's vision is too agonistic, too aware of illusion, deceit and ambiguity, to 'ever relax in the Sabbath rest of God's love'.¹⁹ Again though, such a critique is lessened if we understand Williams as seeking to bring the Church under judgement. The Church is left without excuse for its complacency and pride as every step is disrupted by the God who puts our desires and actions under question.

Living with the call and question

However, even if the critiques of Hauerwas and Williams are softened by grappling with the overarching aims of their work, neither voice is finally sustainable on its own. Hauerwas, in his desire to confront the Church with God's demanding call downplays the ambiguous and the inevitably tragic nature of life in the Church. Williams, in his desire to bring the Church under continual question and judgement, underemphasizes the place of abundance, peace and eschatological rest. While Hauerwas calls the Church to live in the resurrection life, Williams questions the Church under the judgement of the cross, but Good Friday and Easter Sunday must be held together. The Church needs each voice to constantly disrupt and challenge the other.

An example: Relating to the stranger

There are numerous themes, which Hauerwas and Williams both explore, which draw out the contrast between their approaches. One, in which the difference is particularly stark, concerns how they consider what we will call 'the stranger'.

For Williams, the stranger questions us and causes us to rethink who we are and what we do. Any genuine encounter with another person entails friction; there is always 'an adversarial moment in the construction of the self'.²⁰ We are called to let the stranger impact and shape the way we see ourselves, the world and God.

Although the encounter with *any* other brings us under question, Williams gives particular consideration to the encounter with the 'the stranger in the church' – the one with whom we profoundly disagree about what it means to follow Christ. At the 1998 Lambeth Conference, around the heated exchanges on Resolution

I.10 (on sexuality), Williams delivered a lecture on how to disagree well. He suggests that a godly act in the Church must be offered and received as a gift to the body. Taking nuclear weapons as his example, Williams (who staunchly opposes them) argues that it is his responsibility to ask what he 'might recognise as a gift, as a showing of Christ'²¹ in those who argue in favour of them. We are to seek in the other person the 'grammar of obedience'²² that desires to follow Christ. All positions are thus put under question, highlighting the brokenness of the body whose vision is marred and action ambiguous.

The same thinking lay behind Williams's use of the listening process *indaba*²³ during the 2008 Lambeth Conference. Tensions surrounding homosexuality in the Anglican Communion had increased dramatically in the previous ten years and fruitful conversation was rarely taking place. No resolutions were to be made; the hope instead was that those on all sides could listen and respond generously. The conference was heralded as a major success, not least due to Williams's presidency; he embodied the theology of which he had spoken ten years earlier.²⁴ The challenge was for those on all sides of the debate to find a gift in the view of others; the crux was 'enabling the stranger to be heard'.²⁵

For Williams then, the Church is to live in the often agonistic space whereby each of us is continually brought under question by the voice of the stranger. This means paying attention to the stranger's voice found outside the Church, letting it question and unsettle our judgements, as well as listening to those who have left the Church having been burnt. It means creating space for the voice of the stranger within the Church; building a culture which does not run from conflict and thrives in the midst of diversity. We are to stay in the difficult conversation with openness to the voice of the other, behind which lies the questioning voice of God.

For Hauerwas, the stranger is not so much the one who brings us into question, but rather the one who confronts us with the demands of God's call. This call is to welcome strangers as friends, and most particularly to welcome those who are often shunned and excluded from society. Hence Hauerwas has spent much time writing about those with learning disabilities and the work of L'Arche.²⁶ To live as a community of peace means welcoming the stranger without fear in the knowledge that peace and not competition is the foundation of the new creation. It means seeing even those with whom our country wars as possible friends, and building communities that are dedicated to peace.

Welcoming the stranger also means taking seriously the voice of the Christian with whom we disagree, but for Hauerwas the stranger's voice is a provocation. He is not coy about the fact that his academic life began as he came to the conclusion that Frankena's *Ethics* needed to be put out of business.²⁷ He speaks of the 'gift, and gifts, of James Gustafson'²⁸ against whom he clarified much of his thought. The stranger's voice provokes Hauerwas to tell the story of God's demanding call again and again. For him and unlike Williams, there is no sense in which the conversation itself is the crux of discipleship; rather, the stranger's voice is the catalyst which pushes the Church to live God's demanding call.

Both Hauerwas's and Williams's conceptions of the role of the stranger are insufficient on their own. Hauerwas fails to contend with the impact the individual other has in forming each person. The community of character does not simply offer welcome to the stranger, rather each of us is shaped and brought into question as we encounter the other, individually and uniquely. The stranger does not just present a call to the community, but a question to each individual person. At the same time, Williams's radically questioning stance, which is always seeking to hold the Church in a difficult conversational space, has been seen by some as leading him to consistently give in to the 'bully'. Those with the loudest voices trump those who are trying to find God's quiet voice in the other. Perhaps there are times when the ceaseless question needs to make way for the clear call; when the agonistic and difficult space for conversation must make way for the confrontational and prophetic challenge.

Conclusion

Hauerwas and Williams present us with two competing visions of the Church as confronted by God. While the former argues that God gives the Church a demanding call, the latter suggests he presents it with a difficult question. As became clear in the outline of their ecclesiology and the exemplar, neither the call nor question is sufficient on its own; we must respond to both. Yet a simple synthesis will not do. To attempt unison would be to create more excuses for the Church to hide behind, as the call and question would be diluted and dulled by each other. Such a result could not be further from either author's desire. Thus, the call and question must both be held in all of their demanding difficulty, at one and the same time. There is no simple way of doing this; the Church must live under perpetual judgement and in constant imaginative negotiation between the two, never allowing one voice to dominate or exclude the other.

It is thus only together that Hauerwas and Williams effectively widen our ecclesial imagination. In very different ways both authors address a Church living under judgement and seek to bring it to continual renewal and conversion, but this article has argued that it is only when we live dynamically between call and question that we even begin to do justice to what God asks of his Church.

Notes

1. Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir* (London: SCM Press, 2010), p. 69.
2. Stanley Hauerwas, 'No Enemy, No Christianity', in *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), pp. 177–200 (p. 197).
3. See Stanley Hauerwas, 'Seeing Darkness, Hearing Silence: Augustine's Account of Evil', in *Learning to Speak Christian* (London: SCM Press, 2011), pp. 8–32 (p. 21).
4. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Towards a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 1.

5. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 99.
6. Stanley Hauerwas, 'Introduction', in *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on War and National Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p. xvii.
7. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 2.
8. Nicholas M. Healy, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 8.
9. Healy, *Hauerwas*, p. 39.
10. See Duncan B. Forrester, 'The Church and the Concentration Camp: Some Reflections on Moral Community' in *Faithfulness and Fortitude: Conversations with the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), pp. 189–207.
11. See H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr, 'The Belligerent Kingdom, Or: Why Authentic Christianity is even More Politically Incorrect than Hauerwas Acknowledges', in *God, Truth and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas* ed. L Gregory Jones, Reinhard Hütter and C. Rosalee Velloso (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005), pp. 193–211 (p. 211).
12. Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child*, p. 247.
13. Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (London: DLT, 2nd edn, 1990), p. 2.
14. Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 31.
15. Rowan Williams, 'Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne', in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 183–96 (p. 192).
16. Medi Volpe, "'Taking Time" and "Making Sense": Rowan Williams on the Habits of Theological Imagination', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15, no. 3 (2013), pp. 345–60 (p. 353).
17. Rowan Williams, 'Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading in New Testament Ethics', in *On Christian Theology*, pp. 239–64 (p. 241).
18. I am thinking particularly of Theo Hobson, *Anarchy, Church and Utopia: Rowan Williams on the Church* (London: DLT, 2005).
19. Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM Press, 2004), p. 36; original italics. See also Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, p. 96, and Matheson Russell, 'Dispossession and Negotiation: Rowan Williams on Hegel and Political Theology', in *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays*, ed. Matheson Russell (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), pp. 85–114 (p. 107).
20. Williams, 'Interiority and Epiphany', p. 242.
21. Rowan Williams, 'Making Moral Decisions', in *Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics* ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 3–15 (p. 10).
22. Williams, 'Making Moral Decisions', p. 11.
23. A Zulu word referring to a discussion through deep listening.
24. See Andrew Goddard, *Rowan Williams: His Legacy* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2013), pp. 151–87.
25. Rowan Williams, 'Nobody Knows Who I Am Till the Judgement Morning', in *On Christian Theology*, pp. 276–89 (p. 289).
26. These are communities where people with and without learning disabilities live together.
27. Charles Pinches, 'Considering Stanley Hauerwas', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40, no. 2 (2012), pp. 193–201 (p. 197); see also Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, p. xv.

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28. Stanley Hauerwas, 'Going Forward by Looking Back: Agency Reconsidered', in *Sanctify Them*, pp. 93–103 (p. 93).

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David Newton read theology at Cambridge before becoming a secondary school teacher. He finished training for ordination in Summer 2015 at Cranmer Hall, Durham University. While there he undertook his Masters, and this article forms a summary of his dissertation.