
Reviewer: Francis Jr. S. SAMDAO
Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary, Baguio City

Most theology students are familiar with Barth’s Nein (No!) to natural theology. It was his response to his dialogue partner, Emil Brunner. The latter believed that Barth’s theology disregarded human responsibility. Therefore, to argue for an anthropological center in Barth’s theology seems odd, but Hauerwas argues in his book that Barth’s christocentric theology is not detached from anthropology. The latter is rooted in the former because it is impossible to understand our “humanism” apart from our relationship with God revealed in Jesus Christ. Hauerwas expounds on this thesis by drawing on Barth’s work, Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings, 1946-1952 (3).

Aficionados of the work of Stanley Hauerwas are familiar with his locutions, “the first task of the church is not to make the world more just but to make the world the world,” and “in the shadows of a dying Christendom the challenge is how to recover a strong theological voice without that voice betraying the appropriate fragility of all speech—but particularly speech about God.” These statements come from his desire to renew the primacy of ecclesiology in an individualistic and accommodated

---


Corresponding author
Francis Jr. S. SAMDAO: francissamdao@worldea.org
Christianity in America. Hauerwas’s juxtaposition of the church and the world assumes that the church exists not as the twin city of the latter. That means the church is a unique community and alternative to the world’s visions, telos, rites, languages, and character. Such a theme is explicit in chapters 1-6. I will not reiterate them (extreme individualism and the syncretism between the church and patriotism) but restate his central focus: the church is an alternative community rooted in the lordship of Jesus Christ. More importantly, I intend to engage in what I think are “new” themes that are relevant for pastor-theologians in Asia. These are “Wounded: The Church and Pastoral Care” and “The Church in Asia: A Barthian Meditation,” found in chapters 7-8. I also discuss Hauerwas’s “new” sentiment on Reinhold Niebuhr.

Drawing on Barth, Hauerwas believes that pastoral care is more than just about “helping” others and ourselves to become self-fulfilled. Rather, it is about countering our narcissism with the eschatological message that God is doing something to us in Jesus Christ. As such, pastoral care is still christocentric in the sense that it draws people to the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Hauerwas writes, “For Barth pastoral care is an expression of the Christological center of the church’s faith that makes possible the care of Christian and non-Christian alike who have been wounded” (114). Therefore, one should not conclude that Hauerwas negates the church’s ministry of helping and caring for people. Pastoral care is crucial for the church because it reminds Christians that they are not self-made men and women. Ergo, it is imperative that they help one another and also be willing to ask for help. And by helping one another, Christians show how God works in their lives as living witnesses to an indifferent world.

Hauerwas affirms the importance of pastoral care in the life of the church but disagrees with the division between pastoral care and pastoral theology. As an Asian minister who also serves in a seminary, I agree with him since both are necessary for the church to live its vocation as a faithful witness. To put a strict demarcation between pastoral care and theology gives the impression that the former involves the “practical” duties of a minister, such as visiting the sick, ministering to a troubled member, and so forth, while the latter relates to the theoretical and doctrinal aspects of the church. I argue that officiating a baptism or leading a funeral service is
not just pastoral care but embedded in them is pastoral theology. Perhaps the problem is that many of us are still much beholden to Schleiermacher’s division of professional disciplines in theology at the University of Berlin (105).

Regarding Christians in Asia in chapter 8, Hauerwas notes, “For the challenge before you is how to sustain the difference locality makes, that is, what it means to be the Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and other churches in Asia, while remaining in unity with one another. A unity that at the very least is to be found in the Christian unwillingness to kill one another in the name of being Korean, Japanese, or Chinese” (125). This assertion is, I think, important in this book since Jim Gustafson charged Hauerwas as “sectarian, fideistic, tribalist” due to the latter’s assertion that Christianity is not compatible with American loyalty/nationalism. While Hauerwas critiques the Americanism of Christianity in his context, he does not advise Christians in Asia to detach from their existential struggles, but they need to understand that what makes a Christian’s political witness possible is the kingdom of God. While there is a distinction between political ideologies and the kingdom of God, Asian Christians should not withdraw from the messy aspects of life. As such, their witness should derive from the lordship of Christ so that the world may know that there is an alternative to the politics of violence and greed.

I read this chapter two days before the national election in the Philippines, and Hauerwas reminds me of Barth, who urges Christians not to put their hopes on any political regimes, not because we are without politics but because our politics as believers of the risen Lord are rooted in the name of Jesus Christ. I like what Hauerwas offers to Asian Christians, “to create institutions that make possible the passing on of the faith…the trick is how to develop such institutions without the church becoming at home in the world Christians assume they have created to make them safe” (131). As such, it is vital to remember that what makes the Christian life possible is not the ability to control society, but rather, it stems from the life and death of Jesus Christ who chose to ride on a donkey while critical of the corrupt leaders in the society.

---

I appreciate Hauerwas’s humble recognition of two important facts: he is not writing as one with authority over Asians, and he acknowledges the mistakes (such as cultural imperialism) the Western missionaries had made in Asia: “it is remarkable that Asian Christians did not let the bad behavior of missionaries stop them from becoming Christians. The missionaries came from Christendom churches, but they discovered through witness to the gospel that Christianity could thrive as a free church. Habits are hard to break, which makes me worry whether it is possible for the church in Asia to avoid the mistakes of those from whom they received the gospel, that is, those who represented a Christianity that could not be separated from its nationalistic home” (122-123). It is easy to presume that Hauerwas has no interest in one’s nationality and ethnicity because we are resident aliens and the church has its own center of gravity. However, chapter 8 shows how he values one’s ethnicity and encourages Christians in Asia that, despite the differences, their Lord makes it possible for them not to kill one another in the name of cultural and national pride.

I do not want to miss one important thing in this volume that I believe would help Hauerwasians and even the critics of Hauerwas. It is not a secret that Hauerwas has written about or at least refers to Reinhold Niebuhr many times in his work. Readers of Hauerwas’s work would know that he often criticizes Niebuhr. For example, in his Gifford Lectures in 2001, he detests the assumption of Niebuhr that the first and primary task of theology is to deal with human existence. He believes that Niebuhr “sought to naturalize theological claims in a manner that would make them acceptable to the scientific and political presuppositions of his day.” In chapters 4 and 5 of *Fully Alive*, he writes to counter the impression that his feelings about Niebuhr are entirely negative. He says that he learned a lot from Niebuhr’s profound insights into the human condition. He also dismisses the worries of others that he does not count Niebuhr as a Christian. He states, “That is certainly not what I think. Niebuhr was an extraordinary Christian to whom we owe much” (55-56). The Barthian in

---


Hauerwas made him reject most of Niebuhr’s insights, but it does not mean that the latter’s theology does not matter to the former.

The subtitle of this book, “The Apocalyptic Humanism of Karl Barth,” gives the impression that it contains an exposition of Barth’s apocalyptic humanism, but it does not. It does not engage Barth’s work thoroughly; rather, it is more of Barthian meditations on various topics. That is, while Barth detests the high humanism of the liberal theology of his time, which put humanity at the center of theology, he endeavors to show the difference God makes to our “humanity” (what it means to be human) in the person of Jesus Christ. For Hauerwas, that is a renewed humanism. It is also “apocalyptic” in the sense that Barth had spent his life not only “through an apocalyptic time but also because he saw the world as forever changed by a Galilean peasant” (1).

Overall, this book is quite relevant to Asian Christians. It reminds Asians of the importance of being part of the church, encourages them to reflect on the implications of the confession that “Jesus is Lord,” and challenges them to live as witnesses in their specific cultures with various pressing concerns.

About Reviewer
Francis Jr. S. SAMDAO (ThD candidate, Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary) is a teaching fellow at Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary, Baguio City.