
July 2024

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Recommended Citation

Cantu, Nathan. 2024. "Modern Qoheleth: An Evangelical Appraisal of the Theology of Stanley Hauerwas." *Eleutheria: John W. Rawlings School of Divinity Academic Journal* 8, (1). <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/elevol8iss1>

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Abstract

“Jesus is Lord, and everything else is bullshit.” No other phrase better encapsulates Stanley Hauerwas’ unique blend of polemic, provocation, and piety. Formed in Protestant Liberalism, and fiercely critical of Fundamentalism, Hauerwas is a polarizing figure in evangelicalism. Is Hauerwas an ally of evangelicals, or should he be anathema? This article examines the four primary themes of Hauerwas’s theology—character, narrative, church, and politics—and offers an evangelical appraisal.

Keywords

Ethics, Stanley Hauerwas, Public Theology, Non-Violence, Virtue, Narrative Theology

Cover Page Footnote

Nathan Cantu is a Ph.D. student at Liberty University, and an active-duty chaplain in the United States Air Force. Opinions expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the United States Government.

Modern Qoheleth: An Evangelical Appraisal of the Theology of Stanley Hauerwas

“Jesus is Lord, and everything else is bull****.”¹ No other phrase better encapsulates Stanley Hauerwas’ unique blend of polemic, provocation, and piety. Named “America’s Best Theologian” by TIME magazine in 2001, Hauerwas is a fierce critic of both liberal Christianity and fundamentalism.² In this, evangelical appraisal of Hauerwas has ranged from dismissive (due to his pacifism, politics, and vulgarity), to appreciative (due to his stance on abortion, sexuality, and medicine). Yet, a close read of Hauerwas’s work and a careful evaluation of his theology demonstrates that while Hauerwas is not a fellow evangelical, his work offers timely correctives to the weaknesses of evangelical theology and praxis.

The Theology of Stanley Hauerwas

Stanley Hauerwas was born in Texas in 1940. His father was a bricklayer, and he grew up attending Pleasant Mound Methodist Church, where he was baptized and confirmed.³ He attended Southwestern University as an undergraduate and then completed his graduate and post-graduate studies at Yale.⁴ From 1970-1985 he taught at Notre Dame, then moved to Duke to teach until his retirement in 2013.⁵ At Yale, Hauerwas was heavily influenced by the work of Karl Barth, Hans Frei, and George Lindbeck, leading to Hauerwas becoming a leading voice within the post-liberal and narrative theology movements.

A prolific author, Hauerwas is primarily an essayist. Yet to describe Hauerwas as an essayist is to damn him with faint praise. Hauerwas’s writing is a provocative and combative blend of polemic, social criticism, and wit, with the occasional sprinkling of profanity to maintain the reader’s interest or outrage. With over twenty books, and 250 plus articles and essays, cataloging Hauerwas’ thought is a substantial task, as Hauerwas himself has decried attempts to systematize his theology.⁶ Thus, any attempt to examine Hauerwas must first begin by winnowing sources and developing a canon within the Hauerwasian canon. As such, the following writings by Hauerwas provide the most fertile ground for examining his theology.

¹ Hauerwas’ statement, while well known (the first result for the phrase on Google links to his website) is not attested in any one particular work or interview.

² Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Theologian: Christian Contrarian” *TIME*, September 17, 2001.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child: A Theologian’s Memoir* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 1. Hereafter cited as *HC*.

⁴ Hauerwas, *HC*, 69.

⁵ Samuel Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 1.

⁶ Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny*, 1.

First, *The Peaceable Kingdom* is a rarity for Hauerwas—a fully formed monograph, rather than a collection of occasional essays.⁷ In *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Hauerwas sets out his understanding of the narrative character of Christian ethics and the central role of non-violence to the praxis of the Christian faith. As such, *The Peaceable Kingdom* provides the most robust portrait of Hauerwas's vision of Christian ethics.

Second, *A Community of Character* contains many of Hauerwas's most famous essays, including his use of *Watership Down* to illustrate the nature of narrative in forming communities.⁸ In *A Community of Character*, many of Hauerwas' repeated social themes begin to emerge, including the narrative failures of liberalism, and the Church as *polis*. In many ways, *A Community of Character* is Hauerwas's most significant work as it encapsulates the themes and ideals that animate much of his corpus, with his social critique at its most pointed.

Third and fourth are two collections of essays, *Dispatches from the Front*, and *Approaching the End*.⁹ While *A Community of Character* deals with philosophical critiques of liberalism, *Dispatches from the Front* and *Approaching the End* focus on the practical outworking of Hauerwas's theology—containing reflections on war, Christian engagement with and fidelity in American democracy, and medicine.¹⁰

Fifth and sixth are Hauerwas's two works that deal with Scripture. In *Unleashing Scripture*, Hauerwas presents a provocative thesis on the role of Scripture within the Christian community, and the failures of American Christianity to appropriately read and apply Scripture to the life of the Church.¹¹ In Hauerwas's commentary on Matthew, Hauerwas is forced to wrestle directly with the text of Scripture, providing valuable insight into his methods of exegesis.¹²

Finally, seventh and eighth are *The Work of Theology* and *Hannah's Child*. In *The Work of Theology* Hauerwas specifically reflects on the components of the task of theology, the closest he comes to a straightforward discussion of his theological method.¹³ *Hannah's Child* is Hauerwas's memoir, which contains

⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: UND Press, 1983), 1. Hereafter cited as *TPK*.

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Towards a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: UND Press, 1981), 1. Hereafter cited as *ACC*.

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches From the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Duram, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 1. Hereafter cited as *DFTF*.

¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflection on Church, Politics, and Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 1. Hereafter cited as *ATE*.

¹¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 1. Hereafter cited as *US*.

¹² Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, in *The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI, Brazos Press, 2013), 1.

¹³ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 1. Hereafter cited as *TWOT*.

significant reflection on the intellectual influences that molded and shaped his theological approach.¹⁴

As Hauerwas has repeatedly resisted systematization, categorizing his work into discrete components or positions is an exercise in frustration. However, repeated themes appear in his writings that allow the broad contours of his theology to emerge. Four chief themes shape Hauerwas's theology: character, narrative, church, and politics.

Questions of Who We Are: Hauerwas and Character

Hauerwas's early writings wrestle with questions of character (leading to his early description as an "ethicist" which he vociferously rejects in favor of the label "theologian"). The root of Hauerwas's early writings on ethics is his dissatisfaction with the Rauschenbuschian social ethics of liberal Protestantism, which saw Christianity as a spiritualized and utopian solution to social vices and ills, mixed with equal frustration at the Niebuhrian realism that denied the possibility of productive social transformation forwarded in response.¹⁵ Thus, to Hauerwas, "The task of Christian ethics, both socially and philosophically, was not revision but accommodation."¹⁶

Hauerwas's starting point is a decisive rejection of neo-Kantian ethics that are act-focused and abstracted, seeking universal judgments and principles derived from human reason.¹⁷ Rather, Hauerwas forwards a contingent view of ethics—"ethics always requires an adjective or a qualifier."¹⁸ Thus, *Christian* ethics are not universal, they are bound to a particular people, those who have given their allegiance to Jesus.¹⁹ As such, the aim of Christian ethics is not to enable Christians to apply their beliefs to the decisions they make, it is instead to enable Christians to live faithfully.²⁰ Universal or act-focused ethics illegitimately bifurcate act and agent, for "what we 'ought to do' is abstracted from the question of who we are."²¹ This conviction—that Christian ethics is about character formation, not moral decision-making—drives Hauerwas's embrace of virtue ethics.

As such, Hauerwas views the starting point of ethics as the agent and their perspective—character becomes the form of human agency displayed through

¹⁴ Hauerwas, *HC*, xi.

¹⁵ Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny*, 11.

¹⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological" in *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Notre Dame, IN: UND Press, 1992), 38. Hereafter cited at *ATN*.

¹⁷ Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny*, 13. Hauerwas, *TPK*, 1-5.

¹⁸ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 1.

¹⁹ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 16.

²⁰ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 16. Also "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological," in *ATE*, 41.

²¹ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 23. Also "How to Be an Agent," in *TWOT*, 72.

beliefs and intentions.²² Hence Hauerwas casts Christian ethics as virtue ethics, centering them on the claim that a Christian's being is prior to their actions, and refusing to make decisions the locus of Christian moral reflection.²³ Instead, the concern of Christian moral deliberation must be the character of the Christian, and the aim of Christian ethics is shaping Christian character, which requires "acquiring the linguistic, emotional, and rational skills that give us the strength to make our decisions and our life our own."²⁴

Key to acquiring these skills is habit and training—hence Hauerwas's oft-used metaphor of laying brick for the Christian life.²⁵ Christians do not "happen" into virtue, they must be intentionally trained and schooled in its exercise.²⁶ This is an inherently retrospective exercise, for growing in character requires Christians to evaluate their past actions.²⁷ This self-knowledge allows Christians to "connect the contingencies of our lives in a way that makes sense of what often seems to be just a jumble," which is what enables Christians to find meaning in their lives despite the looming presence of death.²⁸ Just as bricklayers practice their craft and grow in skill, so Christians grow in their character.

Here, Hauerwas is heavily influenced by Alasdair MacIntyre's work in *After Virtue*.²⁹ Like MacIntyre, Hauerwas draws on the work of Aristotle and Aquinas, but recognizes an incoherence within them, as they fail to provide a unified account of the self.³⁰ Similar to MacIntyre, Hauerwas identifies the novel as a key source for training in virtue, for the novel presents virtues not as atomized propositions, but expressed in and constituted by a narrative.³¹ This leads to Hauerwas's key insight: Christians can only become habituated to and trained in virtue within a narrative.³²

²² Hauerwas, *TPK*, 39. Also "Character, Narrative, and Growth in the Christian Life," in *ACC*, 135.

²³ Hauerwas, "The Virtues and Our Communities: Human Nature as History," in *ACC*, 114.

²⁴ Hauerwas, "The Virtues and Our Communities," in *ACC*, 115.

²⁵ Hauerwas, "How to Be an Agent: Why Character Matters," in *TWOT*, 87. Also *HC*, 37.

²⁶ Hauerwas, "On Keeping Theological Ethics Imaginative" in *ATN*, 54. See also his discussion in *TPK* ch 1, as well as his work in *The Character of Virtue*.

²⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, "Character," in *The Character of Virtue: Letters to a Godson* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 192.

²⁸ Hauerwas, "Character" in *The Character of Virtue*, 194.

²⁹ Hauerwas, "How to Be an Agent," in *TWOT*, 74. Also *HC*, 160, and "Constancy and Forgiveness: The Novel as a School for Virtue," in *DFTF*, 31-57.

³⁰ Hauerwas, "Character, Narrative, and Growth in the Christian Life," in *ACC*, 144.

³¹ Hauerwas, "Constancy and Forgiveness: The Novel as a School for Virtue," in *DFTF*, 53. Also "On Honor: By Way of a Comparison of Karl Barth and Trollope," in *DFTF*, 58-79.

³² Hauerwas, *TPK*, 25. "Character, Narrative, and Growth," in *ACC*, 151.

Indeed, for Hauerwas Christian virtue is *incoherent* outside of a larger narrative.³³ “We know who we are only when we can place ourselves—locate our stories—within God’s story.”³⁴ Christian ethics are inherently narrational, for Christians come to know God through a story of His work in history, and thus must learn to let that story determine their actions and understanding of reality.³⁵ Thus Hauerwas’s assertion “The nature of Christian ethics is determined by the fact that Christian convictions take the form of a story, or perhaps better, a set of stories that constitutes a tradition, which in turn creates and forms a community.”³⁶ Hence, we now turn to Hauerwas’s understanding of narrative and community.

No More Fundamental Way to Talk of God: Hauerwas and Narrative

Hauerwas makes three claims of narrative in *The Peaceable Kingdom*: it displays human contingency, historicity, and is how God salvifically reveals Himself.³⁷ For Hauerwas, the Christian narrative (which he summarizes using Robert Jenson’s description of “God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt”) is not merely an epistemic proposition, it is a determinative claim about the nature of reality.³⁸ Thus, Hauerwas is not merely concerned with the narrative arc of the moral life, he identifies a specifically Christian narrative as being true, which by definition renders other narratives false.

This is the foundation for Hauerwas’s social critique, for he observes counter-narratives (particularly that of neo-liberalism, both philosophical and economic) that either make counterclaims about the nature of reality or worse, have been uncritically adopted by Christians as true.³⁹ Thus, in Hauerwas’s most famous essay “A Story Formed Community: Reflection on *Watership Down*” he opens with “ten theses toward the reform of Christian social ethics” that provide a concise summary of Hauerwas’s entire project, and encapsulate the themes that animate much of his work:

1. The social significance of the Gospel requires the recognition of the narrative structure of Christian convictions for the life of the church.

³³ Hauerwas, “Character, Narrative, and Growth,” in *ACC*, 132. Also “How to Be an Agent” in *TWOT*, 88.

³⁴ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 27.

³⁵ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 25. Also “Jesus: The Story of the Kingdom,” in *ACC*, 45.

³⁶ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 24.

³⁷ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 29.

³⁸ Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume I: The Triune God* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 63. Also Hauerwas, *TPK*, 29.

³⁹ Hauerwas, “The Church and Liberal Democracy: The Moral Limits of a Secular Polity,” in *ACC*, 74.

2. Every social ethic involves a narrative, whether it is concerned with the formulation of basic principles of social organization and/or concrete policy alternatives.
3. The ability to provide an adequate account of our existence is the primary test of the truthfulness of a social ethic.
4. Communities formed by a truthful narrative must provide the skills to transform fate into destiny so that the unexpected, especially as it comes in the form of strangers, can be welcomed as gift.
5. The primary social task of the church is to be itself—that is a people who have been formed by a story that provides them with the skills for negotiating the danger of this existence, trusting in God’s promise of redemption.
6. Christian social ethics can only be done from the perspective of those who do not seek to control national or world history but who are content to live “out of control.”
7. Christian social ethics depends on the development of leadership in the church that can trust and depend on the diversity of gifts in the community.
8. For the church to be, rather than to have, a social ethic means we must recapture the social significance of common behavior, such as acts of kindness, friendship and the formation of families.
9. In our attempt to control our society Christians in America have too readily accepted liberalism as a social strategy appropriate to the Christian story.
10. The church does not exist to provide an ethos for democracy or any other form of social organization, but stands as a political alternative to every nation, witnessing to the kind of social life possible for those that have been formed by the story of Christ.⁴⁰

Theses 1, 3, 4, and 5 encapsulate Hauerwas’s understanding of the role of narrative in Christian ethics. For Hauerwas, Christianity is less a matter of accepting specific propositional truths, it is adopting and living in congruity with the narrative of Scripture, for only that narrative provides “an adequate account of our existence.”⁴¹

Yet, the conflict Hauerwas identifies is expressed in theses 6, 9, and 10—American Christians allow other narratives (particularly liberalism) to make determinative claims about the nature of reality. Liberalism is particularly insidious to Hauerwas, for “The story that liberalism teaches us is that we have no story, and as a result we fail to notice how deeply that story determines our lives.”⁴² This

⁴⁰ Hauerwas, “A Story Formed Community,” in *ACC*, 9-12.

⁴¹ Hauerwas, “A Story Formed Community,” in *ACC*, 10. Also “Jesus: The Story of the Kingdom,” in *ACC*, 50.

⁴² Hauerwas, “The Church and Liberal Democracy,” in *ACC*, 84.

ahistorical consciousness embedded in liberalism is antithetical to the historically contingent account of the Christian faith forward by Hauerwas.

The centrality of narrative to Hauerwas's thinking has far-reaching impacts. Not only does narrative shape Hauerwas's understanding of the Church's outward posture, but it also shapes his understanding of the role of narrative within the life of the faithful. Hauerwas's insistence on the veracity of the Christian narrative, with its constituent historical contingency leads him to reject foundationalism and embrace a post-liberal bent towards theology.⁴³ To Hauerwas, (following in the footsteps of George Lindbeck and Hans Frei) the narrative of Christianity only becomes intelligible within the Church.⁴⁴

Hauerwas locates Scripture within this narrative. For Hauerwas, "the authority of scripture derives its intelligibility from the existence of a community that knows its life depends on faithful remembering of God's care of his creation through the calling of Israel and the life of Jesus."⁴⁵ Thus, the role of Scripture is not to reveal propositional truths about God but to form and sustain a community that can embody the narrative found within Scripture.⁴⁶ As such, Scripture's moral authority and significance come from the community it creates.⁴⁷

Therefore, Hauerwas places the community of the faithful in authority over the text of Scripture. Heavily influenced by Stanley Fish, Hauerwas takes an aggressively postmodern approach to the interpretation of Scripture, locating the meaning of the text not within the text itself, but within the community of interpretation.⁴⁸ For Hauerwas, it is impossible for Scripture to be self-interpreting, for Scripture only derives its meaning from within the community it forms.⁴⁹ This makes the interpretation of Scripture an inherently political process, for Scripture serves to distribute power and authority within the believing community.⁵⁰ As a result, individual interpretations of Scripture are illegitimate, for the locus of theological authority is the community and tradition of interpretation, rather than the singular reader.⁵¹

In Hauerwas's mind, the formation of believers takes place not through the study of Scripture, but through the witness of other faithful believers who have been shaped by the narrative of Christianity.⁵² The interpretive keys to Christianity are

⁴³ Hauerwas, *ATN*, 6.

⁴⁴ Hauerwas, "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological," in *ATN*, 42.

⁴⁵ Hauerwas, "The Moral Authority of Scripture: The Politics and Ethics of Remembering," in *ACC*, 53.

⁴⁶ Hauerwas, "The Moral Authority of Scripture," in *ACC*, 59.

⁴⁷ Hauerwas, "The Moral Authority of Scripture," in *ACC*, 68.

⁴⁸ Hauerwas, "Stanley Fish, the Pope, and the Bible," in *US*, 20.

⁴⁹ Hauerwas, "Stanley Fish, the Pope, and the Bible," in *US*, 23.

⁵⁰ Hauerwas, "Stanley Fish, the Pope, and the Bible," in *US*, 23.

⁵¹ Hauerwas, "The Bible and America," in *US*, 31.

⁵² Hauerwas, *TPK*, 70.

“the lives of the saints” and the gathered worship of the Church, particularly the Eucharist.⁵³ Thus, Hauerwas takes key Christian ethical traditions (particularly nonviolence) as presuppositions that must be read into the text, remarking “I maintain that the Sermon on the Mount presupposes the existence of a community constituted by the practice of nonviolence, and it is unintelligible divorced from such a community. Or, put as contentiously as I can, you cannot rightly read the Sermon on the Mount unless you are a pacifist.”⁵⁴

Hauerwas’s understanding of Scripture as a community-forming narrative leads him to forego careful exegesis, preferring instead to refer to large sections of scripture in abstract—“the story of Jesus,” “the gospels,” “the Christian story.”⁵⁵ This also leads him to form a canon within the canon, drawing many of his theological propositions from the Synoptic Gospels and the occasional Pauline letter.⁵⁶ This lack of exegetical emphasis leads Hauerwas to take an intertextual approach to Scripture. Rather than approaching a single text, he locates the text within a web of other narratives, both Biblical and traditional, and draws interpretation from the conversation.⁵⁷ Yet for Hauerwas, this is beneficial, as the aim is not to let Scripture speak for itself, but to allow Scripture to speak through the community of interpretation to the present moment. Thus, we move next to Hauerwas’s understanding of the community of the faithful.

A People Determined to Worship God in All Things: Hauerwas and the Church

According to Hauerwas, the emphasis of Christianity is not on the text, but the Church.⁵⁸ The epistemic center of Christianity is the Church, for the Church is a “storied society” clearly differentiated from the world, but capable of providing a history *for* the world.⁵⁹ For Hauerwas, Christian ethics is inseparable from the Christian narrative, which is inseparable from the Church. The nature of Christian narrative and ethical convictions necessitates a communal differentiation and distinction from “the world.”⁶⁰ This makes the Church inherently political, for the

⁵³ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 70 and “The Insufficiency of Scripture: Why Discipleship is Required,” in *US*, 60.

⁵⁴ Hauerwas, “A Sermon on the Sermon on the Mount,” in *US*, 64.

⁵⁵ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 73. See also Hauerwas’s approach to exegesis in “Jesus: The Story of the Kingdom,” in *ACC*, 46-49.

⁵⁶ Richard B. Hayes, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1996), 260.

⁵⁷ This is best displayed in the twelve sermons by Hauerwas included in *US*, and his commentary on Matthew.

⁵⁸ Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny*, 74.

⁵⁹ Hauerwas, “The Church in a Divided World: The Interpretive Power of the Christian Story,” in *ACC*, 91.

⁶⁰ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 60.

narrative which forms the Church contains claims of authority and social organization.⁶¹ This leads to Hauerwas's oft-repeated statement that "the Church does not *have* a social ethic, the Church *is* a social ethic."⁶²

As such, the mission of the Church is to live in prophetic contrast to the world around it. Though living in congruity with the Christian narrative, the Church demonstrates an alternate way of life. As Hauerwas describes in *The Peaceable Kingdom*:

Therefore the first social task of the Church—the people capable of remembering and telling the story of God we find in Jesus—is to be the church and thus help the world understand itself as world. That world, to be sure, is God's world, God's good creation, which is all the more distorted by sin because it still is bounded by God's goodness. For the church to be the church, therefore, is not anti-world, but rather an attempt to show what the world is meant to be as God's good creation.⁶³

As such, the Church cannot be subsumed into the liberal or national project of the culture it dwells within (contra the liberalism of Reinhold Niebuhr), for its ultimate authority is Jesus, not the state it finds itself located within.⁶⁴ Thus, the social concerns of the Church are not the social concerns of the culture, but the social concerns of the Kingdom of God.⁶⁵

The chief social concern of the Church for Hauerwas is peace, and the primary means by which the Church demonstrates prophetic contrast with the world around it is through non-violence. "To be like Jesus is to join him in the journey through which we are trained to be a people capable of claiming citizenship in God's kingdom of nonviolent love."⁶⁶ As such, Hauerwas, drawing heavily on the work of John Howard Yoder, makes non-violence the distinctive mark of the Church.⁶⁷

Hauerwas understands the life of Jesus as the central event of the Christian narrative.⁶⁸ In Jesus's death, Jesus recapitulates the story of Israel, making the central call of the Kingdom of God the call to imitate Jesus' life.⁶⁹ In His life, Jesus offered radical hospitality to the sinner and the stranger and rejected the narratives

⁶¹ Hauerwas, "The Church in a Divided World," in *ACC*, 108.

⁶² Hauerwas, "A Story Formed Community," in *ACC*, 11. Also *TPK*, 99.

⁶³ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 100.

⁶⁴ Hauerwas, "The Church and Liberal Democracy," in *ACC*, 84. See also "The Democratic Policing of Christianity," in *DFTF*, 91-106.

⁶⁵ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 113.

⁶⁶ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 76.

⁶⁷ Hauerwas, *HC*, 119.

⁶⁸ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 74. Also *HC*, 59.

⁶⁹ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 80. Also "Jesus: The Story of the Kingdom," in *ACC*, 45.

of militant nationalism.⁷⁰ In short, Jesus lived secure in the knowledge that God was in control of history, and resurrection was vindication of His confidence.⁷¹ Thus, to Hauerwas, the call of the Kingdom is for Christians to give up the illusion that they can live in control of history, and the prime manifestation of that desire for control is a willingness to use violence to achieve personal ends.⁷² “Violence derives from the self-deceptive story that we are in control—that we are our own creators—and that only we can bestow meaning on our lives, since there is no one else to do so.”⁷³ If the Church is a community shaped by the narrative that God is decisively in control of history, then the primary way it can demonstrate its prophetic contrast from the world is by repudiating the use of violence. Or as Hauerwas puts it in *The Work of Theology*, “To live in light of the resurrection is to refuse to use the powers that crucified Jesus in the name of achieving justice.”⁷⁴

As such, Hauerwas’s prime concern for the Church becomes its integrity and congruity with the story of Jesus. For the Church to “be the Church” it must accurately reflect the story of Jesus into the world through its communal refusal to engage in violence and its willingness to welcome the stranger.⁷⁵ The training in virtue found in the communal life of the Church produces followers of Jesus who—steeped in the story of Jesus—can welcome others “as a gift rather than a threat.”⁷⁶ In this, the primary evidence of the veracity of the Christian narrative is not its intellectual consistency or logical coherency, but is instead “the character of the people it produces.”⁷⁷

How this community of character navigates the challenges of living in a violent world while remaining faithful to the Christian story of peace is the question at the heart of Hauerwas’s practical social critique. In his social critique, Hauerwas takes great pains to demonstrate how the narrative of Christianity not only causes Christians to take positions opposite to the culture they inhabit but to ask entirely different questions. Thus, we now turn to an examination of the practical outworking of Hauerwas’s understanding of the Church as it seeks to “make the world the world.”

To Be the Church: Hauerwas and Politics

If “the task of the Church is not to make the world just, but to make the world the world,” by living in congruence with the narrative of the Kingdom, then

⁷⁰ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 86.

⁷¹ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 89.

⁷² Hauerwas, *TPK*, 94.

⁷³ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 94.

⁷⁴ Hauerwas, “How to Write a Theological Sentence,” in *TWOT*, 139.

⁷⁵ Hauerwas, “Jesus,” in *ACC*, 50. Also “Character, Narrative, and Growth,” in *ACC*, 148.

⁷⁶ Hauerwas, “Jesus,” in *ACC*, 51.

⁷⁷ Hauerwas, “Jesus,” in *ACC*, 51.

the mode the Church does this is through performance.⁷⁸ For Hauerwas, as a “storied people,” the Church engages with the secular world by living out the Christian narrative via particular acts imbued with eschatological significance.⁷⁹ In performing these acts, Christians seek to persuade—not coerce—the world into embracing the Christian narrative.⁸⁰ This leads Hauerwas to decisively reject any attempt by Christians to accrue social or cultural power, for to do so always requires a level of idolatrous accommodation which creates a form of Christianity that does not threaten the power of the powerful.⁸¹ Instead, Hauerwas adopts an ironic bent towards Christian engagement with the secular.⁸² Christians satirize the rhythms and narratives of secular society from within, providing commentary on the foibles of the world by their actions.⁸³

To do this, Christians must first recover the concrete practices of worship—gathering, confessing, hearing the preaching of the word, responding in the Eucharist and baptism, and being sent out into the world.⁸⁴ This liturgical shaping, along with Hauerwas’s identified themes of love for the stranger and nonviolence, lead to his repeated engagement with the topics of marriage and family, war, and medicine.

Hauerwas on Marriage and Family

One of the key ways Christians satirize secularism is through family and children. Like their secular counterparts, Christians marry and have children, yet radically different motives animate their actions.⁸⁵ As Hauerwas’s famous dictum recounts, “We always marry the wrong person.”⁸⁶ Christians do not marry for love, intimacy, or self-fulfillment, but they marry to tell the story of the Kingdom—to learn how to love the stranger and have their character transformed.⁸⁷ This transforms marriage and family into “heroic institutions” that can only be accomplished by those who have the necessary virtues and character to sustain them—which makes them political in nature.⁸⁸ Yet, the miracle of the Church is

⁷⁸ Hauerwas, *ATE*, xi.

⁷⁹ Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, “Witness,” in *ATE*, 59.

⁸⁰ Hauerwas, “The Church Matters On Faith and Politics,” in *ATE*, 82.

⁸¹ Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014), 27.

⁸² Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny*, 167.

⁸³ Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny*, 171.

⁸⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, “The Liturgical Shape of the Christian Life: Teaching Christian Ethics as Worship,” in *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: UNP, 1995), 163.

⁸⁵ Hauerwas, “The Family: Theological and Ethical Reflections,” in *ACC*, 171.

⁸⁶ Hauerwas, “The Family,” in *ACC*, 172.

⁸⁷ Hauerwas, “The Family,” in *ACC*, 172. Also “Character, Narrative, and Growth,” in *ACC*, 148.

⁸⁸ Hauerwas, “Sex in Public: Toward a Christian Ethic of Sex,” in *ACC*, 191.

that the same institution that requires heroic individuals to function *creates* heroic individuals over time.⁸⁹

In the same way, children also provide satirical commentary on cultural narratives. For, Christians do not believe they can determine the quality or outcomes of their children's lives.⁹⁰ Furthermore, to have children is to embrace contingency—to be tied to a particular time and story, and embrace being “out of control.”⁹¹ Thus, children are an affirmation of the goodness of God's creation and His control over history. In having children, Christians practice hospitality to the stranger, and welcome them into the story that “God is the hope of the future.”⁹²

Hence, for Hauerwas:

Marriage (as well as the family) stands as one of the central institutions of the political reality of the church, for it is a sign of our faithfulness to God's Kingdom come through the providential ordering of history. By our faithfulness to *one* other, within a community that requires, finally, loyalty to God, we experience and witness to the first fruits of the new creation.⁹³

Hauerwas on War

“I'm a pacifist because I'm a violent son of a bitch.”⁹⁴ If the central feature of the Kingdom is peace, then those who consider themselves members must forswear their use of violence.⁹⁵ Hauerwas's pacifism is not political, or moral, but rather deeply Christological—to follow in Christ's footsteps requires loving one's enemies.⁹⁶ Thus, the challenge for Christians is to live in a world where war has been abolished by the death and resurrection of Jesus.⁹⁷ For Hauerwas, this is not a

⁸⁹ Hauerwas, “Sex in Public,” in *ACC*, 193.

⁹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, “Suffering the Retarded: Should we Prevent Retardation?” in *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Notre Dame, IN: UNP, 1986), 178.

⁹¹ Stanley Hauerwas, “Taking Time for Peace,” in *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 258. Also “Why Abortion is a Religious Issue,” in *ACC*, 210.

⁹² Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*, 59. Also “Abortion: Why the Arguments Fail,” in *ACC*, 227.

⁹³ Hauerwas, “Sex in Public” in *ACC*, 191.

⁹⁴ Colman McCarthy, “I'm a Pacifist Because I'm a Violent Son of A Bitch: A Profile of Stanley Hauerwas,” *The Progressive*, 1 April 2003.

⁹⁵ Hauerwas, “How to Write a Theological Sentence,” in *TWOT*, 139.

⁹⁶ Hauerwas, “How to Write a Theological Sentence,” in *TWOT*, 139. Also “Can a Pacifist Think About War?” in *DFTF*, 122.

⁹⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), xii. Also *HC*, 264-272.

goal, but an ontological reality brought about through the death of Christ, which the Church witnesses as an alternate *polis*.⁹⁸

In this, Hauerwas challenges the presuppositions that undergird much of Christian engagement with state violence. Hauerwas fiercely critiques the American narrative of war as a moral enterprise in defense of democracy as deeply flawed and inherently idolatrous and self-serving.⁹⁹ In dialog with Paul Ramsey and Reinhold Niebuhr, Hauerwas rejects the concept that “justice” is an ordered status quo among nations as insufficiently Christological.¹⁰⁰ If all ethics require an adjectival qualifier, the attempt to reduce war to universal principles is inherently idolatrous and masks the complicity of Christians in violence.¹⁰¹ Therefore, Christians must reject the use of violence in order to testify to the alternate way of living in peace made possible in the Church.¹⁰²

Hauerwas on Medicine

“If we are to be human, we are in the business of learning to die.”¹⁰³ The contingent nature of humanity means death is an inescapable reality. Yet, because Christians are “storied” they respond to death differently, for they have already given up control in their decision to follow Jesus.¹⁰⁴ As such, Christians should not fear death, nor should they shrink away from those who are dying, for in comforting those who are dying, they extend hospitality to the stranger.¹⁰⁵ This radically alters the Christian concept of suffering, making it a journey to be experienced rather than a curse to be avoided, which has consequent impacts on the way the Church understands medicine.¹⁰⁶

For Hauerwas, the Christian view of medicine is not to see it as a means of eliminating suffering, but to instead understand it as a community of care for the sick.¹⁰⁷ The storied nature of the Christian community transforms suffering from “a

⁹⁸ Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference*, xiii.

⁹⁹ Hauerwas, “War and the American Difference: A Theological Assessment,” in *War and the American Difference*, 6. Also *Resident Aliens*, 35.

¹⁰⁰ Hauerwas, “Can A Pacifist Think About War?” in *DFTF*, 127. Also “Whose “Just” War? Which Peace?” in *DFTF*, 136-152.

¹⁰¹ Hauerwas, “Whose “Just” War? Which Peace?” in *DFTF*, 138.

¹⁰² Hauerwas, “A Sermon on the Sermon on the Mount,” in *US*, 72.

¹⁰³ Hauerwas, *ATE*, xvii. See also Hauerwas’s work in *Growing Old In Christ*, which Hauerwas edited and contributed a chapter to.

¹⁰⁴ Hauerwas, “How (Not) to Retire Theologically,” in *TWOT*, 259. Also *TPK*, 87, and “Religious Concepts of Brain Death and Assorted Problems,” in *Suffering Presence*, 87-98.

¹⁰⁵ Hauerwas, “Salvation and Health: Why Medicine Needs the Church,” in *Suffering Presence*, 82.

¹⁰⁶ Hauerwas, “Reflections on Suffering, Death, and Medicine,” in *Suffering Presence*, 33.

¹⁰⁷ Hauerwas, “Salvation and Health,” in *Suffering Presence*, 68. Also “Suffering Presence: 25 Years Later,” in *ATE*, 187.

metaphysical problem requiring a solution to a practical challenge requiring a response.”¹⁰⁸ For Hauerwas, the practical response is embrace of the Christian narrative, participation in the Christian community, and lament.¹⁰⁹ The narrative character of the Christian life also informs Hauerwas’s response to classic questions of medical ethics—euthanasia, suicide, and abortion. All of these directly contradict the Christian narrative and attempt to wrest control of the individual’s life from God.¹¹⁰

Additionally, this shapes Hauerwas’s understanding of the mentally handicapped and disability. Rather than viewing the disabled as a burden, or seeking to end or reduce their suffering, the Church embraces the disabled as yet another stranger to welcome and show love to.¹¹¹ Thus, the Church receives the disabled as gifts, for it rejects the liberal assertion that individual value is bound to economic productivity, and instead sees the disabled as equal participants in the narrative of the Kingdom.¹¹²

An Evangelical Appraisal

“In addition to being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out, and arranged many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. The words of the wise are like goads, and masters of these collections are like driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd.”¹¹³ The author of Ecclesiastes’s description of *Qoheleth*—one whose words are like goads and nails—is also an apt description of Hauerwas. Hauerwas’s provocative writings and deep concern for the integrity and intelligibility of the Church’s witness are a gift to the people of God. Yet, “the writing of many books is endless, and excessive study is wearing to the body.”¹¹⁴ Hauerwas’s exhaustive writings provide ample fodder for evangelicals to grow and reflect, yet other aspects of his theology are incompatible with evangelical commitments.

¹⁰⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *God, Medicine, and Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 51.

¹⁰⁹ Hauerwas, *God, Medicine, and Suffering*, 85.

¹¹⁰ Hauerwas, “Rational Suicide and Reasons for Living,” in *Suffering Presence*, 106. Also “Why Abortion is a Religious Issue,” and “Abortion: Why the Arguments Fail,” in *ACC*, 196-229.

¹¹¹ Hauerwas, “Suffering the Retarded,” in *Suffering Presence*, 178. Also “Disability, an Attempt to Think With,” in *ATE*, 235.

¹¹² Stanley Hauerwas, “To Be Befriended: A Meditation on Friendship and the Disabled,” in *Fully Alive: The Apocalyptic Humanism of Karl Barth* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2022), 154. Also “Character, Narrative, and Growth,” in *ACC*, 148.

¹¹³ Ecclesiastes 12:9-11. NASB.

¹¹⁴ Ecclesiastes 12:12.

Learning to See: Evangelicals and Narrative

The area where most evangelicals will depart from Hauerwas is in his understanding of Scripture. Compared to the high regard for Scripture displayed in most evangelical theological methods, Hauerwas's claim that "I really do not know the 'text' of the Bible well—all my theological formation took place in curriculum shaped by Protestant liberalism" is anathema, bordering on heresy.¹¹⁵ Indeed, the most problematic aspect of Hauerwas's theology is his haphazard and slipshod exegesis. To justify his pacifism, Hauerwas adopts an Anabaptist approach to the Biblical canon that illegitimately bifurcates the witness of the Old and New Testament. Furthermore, Hauerwas is unabashed in his willingness to eisegete, seeing no issue with reading non-violence into the text of the Gospels.¹¹⁶ In this, many of the thematic emphases Hauerwas considers foundational to his theology may be contradicted by a more nuanced and robust reading of the full text of Scripture.¹¹⁷

Additionally, Hauerwas's understanding of Scripture as subordinate to the authority of the community it forms smacks of papism to most evangelicals. While Hauerwas claims to avoid charges of relativism through appeals to the authority of the interpretive community and historical tradition, the lack of a single ecclesial authority in Christendom that can adjudicate questions of interpretation still practically opens the door for individual communities to interpret Scripture per their own presuppositions.¹¹⁸ Thus, Hauerwas's appeal to tradition simply kicks the can of relativism down the road.

Yet, it would be a mistake for evangelicals to regard the entirety of Hauerwas's theology as the fruit of the poison tree due to his views of Scripture. For while the emphasis of Hauerwas's understanding of Scripture is incorrect, the themes are not. While evangelicals should rightly balk at Hauerwas's insistence that Scripture does not contain propositional truth, they should embrace his understanding of the narrative role of Scripture as a both/and, not an either/or. While Scripture does contain propositional divine revelation, God also reveals Himself in narrative form—He is "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," and the one "who brought [Israel] out of the land of Egypt, out of

¹¹⁵ Hauerwas, *US*, 9.

¹¹⁶ Hauerwas, "A Sermon on the Sermon on the Mount," in *US*, 64.

¹¹⁷ This is particularly true for Hauerwas's discussions of non-violence, which completely neglect the Old Testament canon's teachings on war, violence, and communal justice.

¹¹⁸ In many ways, Hauerwas's immersion in the Catholic educational system has led him to attempt to construct an idealized Protestant vision of Catholicism, yet one that does not take into account the very visible issues of text, interpretation, and community displayed within the Roman Catholic Church.

the house of slavery.”¹¹⁹ Hauerwas’s fixation with narrative can aid evangelicals in spotting and critiquing fallacious narratives both within the Church and in culture that stand in the way of the presentation of the gospel. Thus, Hauerwas’s understanding of the narrative character of Scripture can provide fruit for missional reflection for “there is no truer way to talk of God than in a story.”¹²⁰

Participation in an Adventure: Evangelicals and Character

Perhaps the most immediate area of fruitful engagement between evangelicals and Hauerwas is in the area of rationalism and character. While evangelicals emphasize the rationality of the Christian faith, the cognitive focus of evangelicalism can often result in a model of “sanctification by information transfer.”¹²¹ This can lead to evangelicals focusing on salvific belief and neglecting spiritual formation.¹²² As such, Hauerwas’s emphasis on character formation and training in virtue provides a valuable “next step” for evangelicals. Once an individual has embraced the propositional truths bound up in the Christian narrative, how should that change their character?

Additionally, Hauerwas’s practical emphasis on character provides a useful challenge to the evangelical temptation to evaluate communities by standards of doctrinal orthodoxy alone. Hauerwas’s assertion that “all politics should be judged by the character of the people it produces,” provides a substantive challenge to evangelicals tempted to make right thinking the sole standard of Christian growth and maturity. As such, Hauerwas’s concern for the character of Christians should push evangelicals who engage with his project into a greater concern for post-conversation sanctification and formation in their communities.

A Community of Character: Evangelicals and the Church

While Hauerwas’s presuppositions on the nature of Scripture should be rejected by evangelicals, Hauerwas’s criticisms of the role of Scripture within American evangelicalism should force evangelicals to engage in critical self-reflection. Hauerwas’s statement that “some have placed such great emphasis on Jesus’ death and resurrection as the source of salvation that there is almost no recognition of his as the teacher of righteousness” should rightly give evangelicals pause.¹²³ Indeed, Hauerwas correctly pushes back on the evangelical tendency to atomize Scripture and doctrine and allow it to exist in isolation from the rest of

¹¹⁹ Exodus 3:6, 20:2.

¹²⁰ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 25.

¹²¹ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 43.

¹²² Hence the perennial discussions in evangelicalism about “evangelism vs. discipleship.”

¹²³ Hauerwas, *TPK*, 72.

Christian praxis. He rightly critiques the Enlightenment proposition that evangelicals can ignore individual contingency and the noetic effects of sin and come to a universal and unbiased interpretation of Scripture.¹²⁴ In Hauerwas's attempt to place Scripture back in conversation with Church tradition, Hauerwas correctly notes that any attempt to use or interpret Scripture as an individual outside the community of faith is by its very nature illegitimate.¹²⁵

Yet, Hauerwas is often frustratingly non-specific about *how* to practice the community he so vociferously advocates for. Hauerwas claims the solution to many of contemporary evangelicalism's ills is the rediscovery of Christian community that is rightly shaped by the narrative of the Kingdom, but he offers few concrete suggestions for how this should manifest. While Hauerwas denies the charge that he is "a sectarian, fideistic, tribalist" the lack of constructive, practical proposals seriously diminishes the strength of his denial, for absent further clarification, the natural outworking of his theology is a withdrawn Church.¹²⁶

This is perhaps the greatest weakness of Hauerwas's program. Hauerwas's vision of the Church is one of his own idiosyncratic fiction—Hauerwas often describes himself as a "high church Mennonite"—which clashes with Hauerwas's attempt to relocate the locus of authority within Church tradition.¹²⁷ Thus rather than offering realistic proposals for concrete reform, Hauerwas instead presents an idealized vision of the Church that animates his polemic.

To Make the World the World: Evangelicals and Politics

Finally, Hauerwas offers valuable correction to evangelical models of cultural engagement. Hauerwas rightly identifies the temptation of theological compromise or idolatry inherent in Christian attempts to accrue social and cultural power.¹²⁸ Hauerwas correctly locates the impetus for Christian engagement in politics as love of neighbor and fidelity to the Kingdom narrative, not moralistic

¹²⁴ Hauerwas, "The Bible in America," in *US*, 29. A better response to the hermeneutical challenges of post-modernism is N. T. Wright's "critical realism" set forth in *The New Testament and the People of God*, yet Wright lacks Hauerwas's polemical and provocative edge. Thus, while evangelicals should be challenged by Hauerwas's description of the problem, they should not adopt his proposed solution.

¹²⁵ In many ways, Hauerwas's critiques anticipate the contemporary exodus of millennial evangelicals from low church and non-denominational communities into confessional and high church denominations (such as the ACNA and PCA) that have a robust structure of ecclesial and traditional authority that bounds the conduct of believers and their interpretation of Scripture.

¹²⁶ Hauerwas, *DFTF*, 18.

¹²⁷ Hauerwas, "Which Church? What Unity? or, An Attempt to Say What I May Think about the Future of Christian Unity," in *ATE*, 99. Also *ACC*, 6.

¹²⁸ Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*, 27.

attempts to “make the world more just,” or worse, idolatrous desires to preserve “freedom.”

Yet, Hauerwas’s politics suffer from the aforementioned Anabaptist bifurcation of the Old and New Testaments. Rarely does Hauerwas engage with the social teachings of Old Testament, instead locating his political theology within the teachings of the Gospels. Furthermore, Hauerwas’s repeated polemic against the “Constantinian” impulse of the Church to attempt to craft a form of Christianity that provides no threat to power runs of risk of making *any* Christian interaction with the state illegitimate, rendering his political theology “sectarian, fideistic, [and] tribalist” in practice.¹²⁹ In addition, Hauerwas’s political theology is grounded in an over-realized eschatology that rejects any possibility of Christian engagement with the secular as idolatrous compromise. This further pushes Hauerwas towards advocating for withdrawal in practice, as engagement with the secular requires toleration of alternate narratives.¹³⁰

Thus, evangelicals would do well to recover the Christological emphasis of Hauerwas’s political engagement for individuals. Hauerwas’s concern for the character of agents manifests in an effective individual political theology that emphasizes the performance of the Kingdom narrative through the practices of peace and hospitality to the stranger in prophetic contrast with the world. Yet, where Hauerwas’s political theology fails is in its understanding of the role of the state in the liminal time between Christ’s ascension and the *Parousia*. Thus, evangelicals would profit from allowing Hauerwas to prod their motivations for pursuing social change, and the means by which they pursue it. Yet for questions of how to allow the Kingdom narrative to shape the common civic life, evangelicals should turn to sources other than Hauerwas.¹³¹

Conclusion

“I did not intend to be ‘Stanley Hauerwas.’”¹³² So Hauerwas opens his memoir as he begins to examine the narrative of his life, and how it has been formed to the narrative of the Kingdom. Similarly, evangelicals should not intend to be Hauerwasians. Yet, just as the author of Ecclesiastes speaks of the Preacher, evangelicals should view Hauerwas as a contemporary *Qoheleth* whose pointed words spark pain but drive the listeners into wisdom and learning. For what

¹²⁹ Hauerwas, *DFTF*, 18.

¹³⁰ While Hauerwas has occasionally claimed to be Augustinian, in contrast to Augustine, Hauerwas lacks an ordering of temporal goods, or an appreciation for temporal goods as *good*.

¹³¹ Oliver O’Donovan provides a much more nuanced political theology in *The Desire of the Nations* that incorporates several of Hauerwas’s objections to contemporary liberalism yet arrives at a much more nuanced (and exegetically robust!) Augustinian conclusion.

¹³² Hauerwas, *HC*, ix.

Hauerwas has learned is quite simple: “I am a Christian. How interesting.”¹³³ May we evangelicals learn the same.

¹³³ Hauerwas, *HC*, 284.

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