

On the margins with 'America's best theologian'

Raymond A. Schroth | Aug. 11, 2010

HANNAH'S CHILD: A THEOLOGICAL MEMOIR

By Stanley Hauerwas

Published by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., \$24.99

Stanley Hauerwas is a hard man to pin down. In essays, lectures and sermons he has lots of things to say, but, he says in his memoir, he doesn't know what he'll say until he starts writing.

Born and raised in Texas, with a doctorate from Yale, his intellectual quest has led him through faculty positions at Augustana College in Illinois, the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, and finally, in 1983, to the Divinity School at Duke University in Durham, N.C. In worship, he is basically a Methodist-Episcopalian, with a history of Lutheranism and Mennonite pacifism, plus a 14-year dose of Notre Dame Catholicism.

His strength and weakness, he says, is his interest in everything. Defying those who would box him in, his writings and lectures -- including the Gifford Lectures at St. Andrew's in Scotland -- plus collected sermons, have focused on the traditional virtues, the church as community, sexual and medical ethics, abortion, pacifism, and friendship. He has no "system" of thought. The son of a bricklayer, Hauerwas says, "I am a theologian who still works like a bricklayer." Composing essays is like laying bricks one at a time, when each brick's placement depends on how you laid the previous brick.



Hauerwas is Hannah's Child, because his mother prayed like the Old Testament Hannah

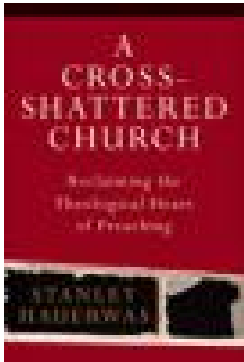
for a child. The memoir is his attempt, at 70, to say who he is, perhaps to justify the surprising moment when *TIME* magazine, in its 2001 "America's best," series, named him "America's best theologian." The profile, by his friend Jean Bethke Elshtain, called him "theology's foremost intellectual provocateur," sending "depth charges" from the margin of the theological mainstream. Hauerwas is a complex personality who calls on Christians to be a "sign of contradiction" in a "world obsessed by power."

Both friends eventually felt the sting of Hauerwas' "explosive" personality. Elshtain supported the Bush administration's response to Sept. 11, 2001. To Hauerwas, patriotism is not a Christian virtue. Friends must be united by their convictions, Hauerwas says; their friendship ended.

Hannah's Child is a two-story narrative. There's the upstairs account of his intellectual development --

appreciations of mentors like Mennonite John Yoder, who introduced him to pacifism; and the fellow theologians and students who became disciples and friends. The downstairs story unveils a private 10-year ordeal -- his marriage to Anne Harley, whose bipolar rages included an imaginative fancy that she would marry Notre Dame priest-theologian James Burtchaell. Hauerwas' love for his son, Adam, grows as they protect one another from the consequences of his mother's illness.

During his 14 years at Notre Dame, he becomes a quasi Catholic and regularly receives the Eucharist at a student Mass.



A CROSS-SHATTERED CHURCH: RECLAIMING THE THEOLOGICAL HEART OF
PREACHING

By Stanley Hauerwas

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Friendships loom large, particularly with the kindly Holy Cross Fr. David Burrell, as comrades support him during Anne's mental illness and death, and he stands by Yoder, who is punished by his church for sexual improprieties. He sometimes wonders whether his hunger for friendship may be pathological. But I was struck by how, with all the people he mentions, he clashed with only two. And he is sometimes slow to perceive a situation -- for example, his wife's illness or a friend's homosexuality -- that others have noticed.

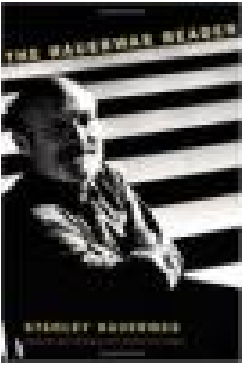
He takes up running. His reputation grows. But the theologian fights turf battles with departmental chairs and deans at Notre Dame and Duke.

At Notre Dame he clashed with the new theology chairman, Fr. Richard McBrien, who, in Hauerwas' judgment, wanted to make the theology department more "denominationally Catholic," to compete with Marquette University and Boston College.

At 46 he moved to Duke and married Paula Gilbert, 34, a college administrator and ordained a Methodist minister who presides at the Eucharist, which was becoming central to Hauerwas' faith. His relationship with Gilbert, his second wife, helps him redefine friendship as not just a two-person relationship but an interdependent network where the friends of friends are connected to one another.

Typical of Hauerwas, when the new young pastor of their local church replaced the Holy Week liturgies with a dance ritual on Wednesday they switched to another parish.

What keeps Hauerwas on the "margins," outside the theological mainstream? To Boston College ethicist Jesuit Fr. David Hollenbach, Hauerwas' gift has been to demonstrate the Gospel's radical and pacifist dimensions, but his weakness is a sectarian eschatology (that is, eschatology as the church's understanding of how it exists in time and how it relates to the contemporary world) that sees the Gospel as against the cultural life, not as transforming it. In short, Hauerwas believes it is better for the church to be a small faithful community that can validly represent Christ's presence than a large, accommodating institution that has compromised its message.



THE HAUERWAS READER

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In a 1981 essay on the Holocaust in *CrossCurrents*, he writes, "The most decisive failure of Catholic ecclesiology is the idea that the primary task of the church is to survive." The "success" of the mission, says Hauerwas, should be measured by whether survival or nonsurvival serves the ends of the kingdom. Hauerwas contends that Catholic defenders of Pope Pius XII argue that the pope was relatively silent during the Holocaust because he was primarily concerned with keeping the church alive -- no matter the cost in non-Catholic lives -- because the church was essential for human salvation. In this decision, says Hauerwas, the church sacrificed its mission.

Hauerwas' position against abortion is divorced from the issue of using political pressure to change the law, as seen in "Abortion" in *The Hauerwas Reader*. The church must be the church and oppose abortion with its own strengths. Avoid the words "choice" and "termination of pregnancy," which slide over the reality of abortion. The issue is not "when life begins." Christians, he says, do not believe that life is absolutely sacred; early martyrs took their children with them to death rather than have them raised pagan.

Abortion is really about the ethics of sex and power, particularly the reckless power of male promiscuity. We do not have absolute rights over our bodies, Hauerwas argues -- our bodies belong to the community, and so it is the obligation of the community to welcome every birth and care for every child even if the child's parents won't.

On the Catholic church's scandal, Hauerwas has high regard for the "gift of celibacy," but it can promote a terrible loneliness and "should not be necessary for all called to the priesthood." Celibacy has not caused the pedophile problem, but the clerical culture has become the church's bulwark of self-protection, and so the church has failed to see the disaster in its own ranks.

[Jesuit Fr Raymond A. Schroth's new biography of Jesuit Congressman Robert F. Drinan will be published by Fordham University Press in November.]

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