Book Review Article

Taking Time for the Trivial[:]
Reflections on Yet Another Book from Hauerwas

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For Lent I gave up writing book reviews. Most readers will assume that such a decision hardly demanded a sacrifice, but they would be sadly mistaken, for I am currently suffering from a malaise common to post-prelim graduate students know as DAH (pronounced “duh”)--Dissertation Avoidance Hysteria. No cure currently exists for DAH, and so those of us who suffer from it must resort to treating the symptoms: frequent headaches, uncontrollable stuttering when queried about either the topic of our dissertations or progress recently made, and unbounded enthusiasm for any and every project that may divert us from our appointed task. And so in order to survive a disease that can easily metastasize and infect every area of one’s life (and which in some cases is terminal), I’ve taken to popping aspirin, practicing silence and eschewing the writing of book reviews.

That is, I did so until I read Stanley Hauerwas’s latest offering.

I should perhaps explain, since the reasons for ending my self-imposed moratorium, even at great risk to my future well-being, might easily be misinterpreted. I decided to write this review not because I believed Hauerwas’s most recent musings were so profound that I simply had to get the word out. Nor did I...
undertake this project merely to be able to add yet another entry to my impressive list of publications appearing in prestigious journals. Rather, I embarked on this mission because Hauerwas taught me an important lesson: that Christians are called to be a people who have (or create) time for the trivial. This insight (to which I will later return) struck me as so revolutionary that I decided to incorporate it into my way of life. Hence, when I was approached by the editor of this journal to offer some reflections on Christian Existence Today, I thought to myself: “How better to embody concretely my new found appreciation for and commitment to the trivial?”

Before I proceed to important matters, perhaps I may appropriately begin with a somewhat trivial aside. As his students know, Hauerwas refers to this collection rather affectionately as Christian Existence Yesterday, since the editor of Labyrinth Press (who will remain anonymous) possessed the manuscript for no trivial amount of time before he was able to bring it out. Of course, Hauerwas was inhibited from asking for a title change, for to have done so would have obscured his allusion to Barth’s short tract, Theological Existence Today. Some cynical readers, undoubtedly, will deny that the two works have anything in common (“I knew Karl Barth. Karl Barth was a friend of mine....”). The one possible exception might be the length of time taken to write each: Barth makes no secret that his work was written over a single weekend.

Concerning more important matters, let me begin by noting that, not surprisingly, many of the issues that arise in this latest collection of essays are those which Hauerwas’s readers have come to expect: virtue, narrative, practical reason, moral formation and peace. But it would be a mistake to assume from this that CET is merely another attempt by Hauerwas to use these notions to launch his latest diatribe against the poverty of American Christian ethics. Rather, like most of us, the more he writes about these matters, the more clarity and precision he attains. Since Hauerwas rightly believes that thinking and writing should normally not be distinguished, those who have read his works to this point have had the opportunity to “see” him think through these issues. Hauerwas readily admits that his “project” remains unfinished (and is therefore inadequately characterized as a “project”), and whatever advances it provides depend on the dialogical character of his discourse. That is, Hauerwas, more than some authors, wants and needs his readers and critics. This willingness to allow others to look over his shoulder stems from his belief that having the right “position” or “answer” is not enough; a person must be clear about how she got there. Otherwise, there is no way of knowing whether one has arrived at “the same” position or not, or whether one has arrived anywhere at all. None of this, of course, is meant to imply that Hauerwas’s latest book finally clarifies everything; however, there are several aspects of his thinking that are presented with a good deal more lucidity, and as such have the potential to help us understand more clearly what Hauerwas is about. Perhaps the biggest payoff of such clarity is that it may make it possible for us to know better how to have a disagreement with him.

Of course, Hauerwas would approve of this, for he is in the business of engendering disagreement. Hence, it is quite fitting that Hauerwas introduces his lat-
Hauerwas acknowledges that part of his reason for beginning with this disagreement with Gustafson is to provide a touchstone for the remainder of the book; that is, readers will be able to test his "defense" of his position in the introduction against the constructive proposals that are displayed throughout the book. But perhaps more importantly, Hauerwas's introduction reminds readers that what is at stake in reading and responding to arguments is not so much "defending" this or that "position"; rather, it is coming to understand that persons are often "captured" by certain habits of mind and life that deeply affect the way they see the world. Thus, Hauerwas shows his readers that to disagree with Gustafson involves not merely denying the latter's charges of sectarianism, tribalism, fideism, irresponsibility and the like, but more basically coming to conceptual clarity about why Gustafson "sees" the problems in these terms to begin with, and subsequently, why one perhaps might want to deny Gustafson's descriptions. In short, Hauerwas's introduction helps the reader understand one of the primary philosophical issues that Hauerwas variously displays throughout his book: arguments, including moral arguments, cannot be separated from the descriptions that not merely accompany them, but make them possible. Hence, moral argument often entails the complex process of persuading an audience that they need not, perhaps even must not, accept the first stage of any argument; indeed, perhaps the only stage necessary to throw into relief what is at issue, is re- description.

So Hauerwas carefully sketches out in his introduction, and then further suggest s in his later chapters, why he rejects Gustafson's characterization of his position. Hauerwas begins by admitting that if his "position" is a temptation, he hopes people will succumb to it; however, he rejects Gustafson's notion that giving in to such a temptation necessarily opens one to the charge of "sectarianism." Hauerwas rightly notes that such a charge begs the very epistemological and sociological questions that are at issue, while appearing to stand above them. Other words, the charge of sectarianism often serves as a cipher for little more than "you are wrong not to take responsibility for the world in the way that I do." In other words, such a charge serves to mask the fact that how the Church understands and exercises its responsibility to the world is precisely the point at issue, and one on which Hauerwas has written at length. That Hauerwas is weary of having those arguments summarily dismissed as "sectarian" is evident in his pithy rebuttal to those who have leveled such charges: "Show me where I..."
am wrong about God, Jesus, the limits of liberalism, the nature of the virtues, or the doctrine of the church—but do not shortcut that task by calling me a sectarian” (p. 8).

Similarly, Hauerwas argues that Gustafson’s charge of “irresponsibility” wrongly presupposes that Christians must take up an “all or nothing” attitude toward a “given” society. That Hauerwas rejects such a view is attested to by one of the themes that runs throughout this collection (and many of his other writings): That part of what the Church is called to be is a people of virtue capable of making judgments about what it can and cannot affirm about the society in which it finds itself. “The issue,” Hauerwas asserts, “is how the church can provide the interpretative categories to help Christians better understand the positive and negative aspects of their societies and guide their subsequent selective participation” (p. 11). Such interpretative categories, in turn, are only “available” if the community sustains certain practices that are capable of throwing into relief those aspects of a society which they cannot affirm. For example, Hauerwas believes that Christian communities must denounce the state’s willingness to resort to violence, but they can only do so to the extent that they embody that virtue which is essential for their life and witness to the world, the virtue of peacemaking.

Although Hauerwas has written much on this in the past, his brief essay “Peacemaking: The Virtue of the Church” contains perhaps his most clear and succinct thinking on why this virtue must remain integral for all communities who purport to follow Jesus. This essay, which consists of his extended reflections on Matthew 18:15-22, helpfully displays the relationship between the virtue of peacemaking and a theological understanding of who Christians believe themselves to be as members of communities that attempt to follow Jesus. Understanding such a relationship requires seeing the connection between a community’s call to live as forgiven people and the fact that to the extent to which it commits itself to the truth, such a community will necessarily engender conflict. Hauerwas recognizes that the difficult question is how to conjoin in one community those two seemingly irreconcilable practices: on the one hand, that each Christian community is called to be that place where forgiveness is always available; and on the other hand, that each community, in calling its members to accountability to the truth of Jesus Christ, is called to make judgments that often exacerbate conflict. That these two practices appear irreconcilable is itself, Hauerwas suggests, indicative of the problem. Part of the problem stems from the fact that our notion of “peace” is seldom theologically informed; that is, our notion of peace is often indistinguishable from that truncated view of peace as the complete absence of conflict, that “false peace of the world which is too often built more on power than truth” (p. 95). Such a notion hinders us from recognizing that genuine peacemaking cannot be separated from the practice of speaking the truth; however, such truth-speaking is directed not first of all to the world, but to ourselves. Such a posture has the potential to transform the nature of confrontation both within and without the community, for it reminds us that “we confront one another not as forgivers, not as those who use forgiveness as
power, but first and foremost as people who have learned the truth about ourselves—namely, that we are all people who need to be and have been forgiven” (pp. 93-94).

Hauerwas also helpfully illuminates the Christian virtue of hope in his essay (written with Thomas Shaffer) entitled “Hope Faces Power: Thomas More and the King of England.” This essay serves as a powerful example of a point that Hauerwas never fails to emphasize: Theological/moral judgments cannot be made in the abstract, but require that a people make discriminations in concrete situations. That such is the case is one reason Hauerwas spends so much energy exploring the relationships between character, virtue and the story of a particular people. But what Hauerwas does in this and several other essays throughout this collection is to display these relationships with an illuminating concreteness that stems from his ability to weave together theological/moral reflection and personal narrative. That is, by telling More’s story in a particular way, Hauerwas had greatly enriched our theological/moral imaginations by helping us see how inseparable were More’s life and his theological/moral commitments.

These above-mentioned essays are but two examples of how themes which have held a prominent place in Hauerwas’s thinking—peacemaking and hope—continue to be fleshed out in this latest collection. What is perhaps most encouraging about this fleshing out is how Hauerwas has gone about doing it. First, I think it is fair to say that in his latest offering Hauerwas has virtually stopped talking about “narrative” as an abstraction and has increasingly moved toward engaging particular narratives, a strategy which has allowed him to exhibit powerfully how it is that these narratives are essential to argument. Similarly, Hauerwas tends to say less these days about “virtue” in the abstract and more about specifically Christian virtues—that is, more about how the story of Jesus and those who follow Him makes a difference to how these virtues are construed and embodied in particular communities. Equally promising is that both of the above trends have made it possible, indeed necessary, for Hauerwas to engage more directly with Christian Scripture.

It is tempting to offer further specific comments about other essays in the collection, such as how Hauerwas talks about practical reason in ways that might make it possible to rehabilitate casuistry as a legitimate Christian moral practice; how his recurrent theme of moral formation looks when he reflects on the place of “formal” education, and especially so-called “Christian” education; or how his understanding of “character” plays out when it is directed toward the character those who have a special call to be ministers of the gospel. But I’ll resist such notating, which might mislead some people into thinking that they needn’t read the book, and concentrate the remainder of my reflections on what is perhaps the most provocative and suggestive theme that runs throughout these essays: the theme of time.

Somewhat ironically, that the issue of time flows as a persistent undercurrent throughout these pages is a tribute to the positive influence of Gustafson. In fact, I might go as far as to say that the prominent place which the issue of time in Hauerwas’s thought is unintelligible apart from Gustafson’s reflections on
the relationship of time and community, particularly as Gustafson displays it in several chapters (and in the appendix, which is a summary of Gustafson's dissertation) of *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*. In short, Gustafson argues that time is constitutive of community in that the latter is such only insofar as it is a community of language, of interpretation, of memory and understanding, and of belief and action. Each of these constitutive aspects of all human communities (including the Church) are thoroughly infused by temporality; that is, they are penetrated throughout by the dialectical forces of the past, present and future.

That Hauerwas has learned these lessons well hardly requires substantiation. Regular readers of Hauerwas need only be reminded of the prominent place of concepts such as narrative, description, remembering and conviction, to see how thoroughly Hauerwas has internalized the important place of time in any discussion of community. The central issue for any such discussion is that of continuity and/or identity over time. As Gustafson notes, there are usually important analogies between how one understands the self and time and how one understands community. But Hauerwas, perhaps more than most of the philosophers whom Gustafson deals with, attempts to integrate more fully the dialectical relationship between the self and community, both of which are thoroughly immersed in time. One of the ways Hauerwas keeps the dialectic operative is by insisting that community is prior to the self; that is, it is a mistake to start from a construal of the self and then move to an understanding of community. Hence, with regard to the self and its continuity/identity over time, Hauerwas suggests that no such continuity/identity is possible apart from that self's "character" and its ability to situate itself coherently within a narrative (which may amount to the same thing)—both of which are irreducibly communal. Likewise, Hauerwas's concern for the continuity of self and community over time is the reason for his emphasis on virtue, for "the virtues bind our past with our future by providing us with the continuity of self" (p. 265). With regard to the continuity/identity of the Christian community over time, Hauerwas points first of all not to the "character" of the Church, but to the faithful character of God as most fully revealed in the story of Israel and Jesus of Nazareth, and as remembered, embodied and performed by those who have been called to radical discipleship. Hence, all of the categories that have become the hallmark of Hauerwas's work—character, narrative, memory, virtue—all are attempts to make connections between the self's communal nature and the community's irreducibly temporal character.

But it may well be that Hauerwas has pushed the importance of time even further than did Gustafson, or at least in directions which the latter never seriously considered. This is particularly the case with Hauerwas's emphasis on the "eschatological" character of Christian communities, a category about which he remained somewhat oblique in his earlier writings, but about which he is now beginning to demonstrate some lucidity. This emphasis surfaces, for example, in his insistence that salvation involves the "creation of a timeful people" (p. 50 whose existence on behalf of the world creates "a space and time in which we might have a foretaste of the Kingdom" (p. 106).

The notion that salvation involves the creation of a timeful people is critic;
for Hauerwas for several reasons. First, it avoids the problem with many “classical” theories of the atonement, which, by framing the discussion of salvation by means of the abstract category of “atonement,” makes it possible, if not necessary, to speak of salvation apart from the community which such salvation creates. Such theories tend toward gnosticism in that they suggest that salvation involves little more than God’s “work” and our knowledge of it. But Hauerwas insists that salvation is not simply a matter of knowledge, of knowing that we are a people who are “saved”; rather, salvation involves being saved “to” something (a new people) which is inseparable from, indeed simply is, salvation itself.

Second, by emphasizing salvation as the creation of an eschatological community, Hauerwas suggests that it may not be possible to know what salvation means apart from such a community; that is, it may be that salvation is so closely tied to what it means to be such an eschatological community—a community whose very life together is an important, albeit an insufficient, expression of the presence of the Kingdom—that one should not, perhaps cannot, frame the issue of salvation apart from participation in such a community. Said in a different way, Hauerwas reminds us that salvation must reach to the very core of what it means to be human, which, without appearing to “essentialize” what we mean by the “human,” can be affirmed to be irreducibly temporal; that is, all that we “are” (or hope to be) is inextricably connected with the fact that we belong to communities of language, of interpretation, of memory and understanding, and of belief and action, all of which are thoroughly infused with temporality. So whatever else salvation may be, Hauerwas is right to suggest that God cannot truly “save” us while ignoring the fact that we need to be redeemed from the tyrannies of time that enslave us. We need a “new” time. But any “time” that will really be “new” must necessarily involve the “redemption” of our language, interpretations, memories, beliefs, actions, and the like. (This, I take it, is part of what Hauerwas means to imply by the title of one of his essays: “The Church as God’s New Language.”) Because this is the case, Hauerwas is right to insist that such a new, eschatological “time” cannot come to us apart from a community that is involved in the very temporally-infused activities noted above. Thus, we cannot be saved from the tyranny of time apart from the creation of a “timeful” people, a people who institute a new, eschatological relationship to time.

Finally, by emphasizing the “timeful” and therefore communal nature of salvation, Hauerwas has perhaps done us the greatest service by “historicizing” what salvation must be in twentieth-century America. It is not enough simply to say that what it means to be human is irreducibly temporal, for how humans experience time in a given culture is all important. While I cannot do justice here to the complex structures of time instituted within modern capitalist societies, it is enough to be reminded of how such societies encourage a calculating and economizing attitude toward time. The fact that we speak of time as nothing we can spend, save, waste, use and buy is only one indication of how these societies transform time into another, if not the most valuable, commodity. That Christians have been redeemed is another way of saying that they have been brought into a community that embodies the truth that time is ultimately a
gift. A people whose lives are marked by this gratuitousness can “afford” to take time for the trivial, for they have been freed from the tyranny of thinking that their ultimate destiny and happiness is tied to how they “spend” their time. This freedom makes it possible for a “new” time to appear, a time for caring for those who do not promise to make the world a better place, a time for being with those who do not promise to contribute to our status, a time for entering into the gratuitous and joyful worship of a God who does not promise that things will always work out “right.”

Of course, to the extent that Christian communities fail to embody such redemption, that is, to the extent that they fail to embody such freedom from the tyranny of economized time, their redemption/sanctification remains seriously incomplete. But to the extent that they engage in practices which challenge this reigning view of time, we may confidently assert that there the kingdom is breaking in, there the eschatological is being realized.

Hauerwas has many more provocative things to say about time, such as its intimate relationship to peace, and its ability to create the “space” necessary to resist the totalitarian powers that would drain our lives of their meaning. But perhaps I have pointed to enough to suggest how potentially integrating such an understanding of time might be. In short, we can thank Hauerwas for helping us to see how we might move away from thinking of the distinction between Church and world primarily in spatial categories. By suggesting that much of what is important about this crucial distinction is missed when we fail to construe it in temporal categories—as the distinction between two aeons, as Yoder puts it—Hauerwas has given us much to consider, not the least of which is one more reason to doubt those who accuse him of sectarianism. Such charges, which are usually coupled with accusations of “withdrawal,” are so closely bound to spatial metaphors that they fail to account for the temporal dimension. In other words, if the first thing one wants to say about the distinctiveness of the church is not that it inhabits a different “space,” but that its life is ordered by a new time, then it becomes difficult to see what sense the charge of “withdrawal” makes. If such a shift in emphasis is one of Hauerwas’s goals, then he has made some important headway; however, given such an objective, Hauerwas might have been wise to choose a subtitle that didn’t appear to trade on the very spatial metaphors he wishes to minimize. Furthermore, he might consider giving us more help in seeing how the spatial and temporal are connected. One place where he has begun to do this well concerns his understanding of hospitality: because Christians live with a different relationship to time, they have the freedom to welcome the stranger into their “space.” We can only hope to see more connections along these lines in the future.

Since it seems unlikely that Hauerwas will quit writing books anytime soon, perhaps it may be worth taking a few moments to suggest, rather presumptuously I suppose, what else we might hope Hauerwas will do in the coming years. As noted above, Hauerwas seems to be at his best when he combines two different elements: closely reasoned argument and narrative depiction. For example Hauerwas is both provocative and stimulating when he takes up a suggestive re
mark by someone like Yoder, spells out the "philosophical" arguments entailed by Yoder's remark in a more deliberate manner than Yoder either needs or cares to do, and interweaves such "abstract" work with a story that provides material for theological imagination. Hauerwas has different ways in which he does this, sometimes using a story to introduce the issues at stake (such as his discussion with a philosopher about school prayer), sometimes using a narrative to frame the whole argument (such as his essay on Thomas More), other times using the stories more as exemplifications of the more abstract arguments he has adduced (such as his use of Olin Teague as an example of practical reasoning within a concrete community). What makes these examples so impressive is not so much that Hauerwas knows how to do both things at once (although he does and many of us probably don't), but that they help us see that both are argument; that is, that these are merely two necessary moments in any discussion that seeks to be illuminative. So, in any future work, we can only hope that Hauerwas continues to make the most of this gift.

As far as enigmas that remain in his work, one general area may be alluded to. In the introduction to this collection, Hauerwas suggests that Christians should withdraw their support from civic republicanism only when that form of government or society resorts to violence to maintain order and external society (p. 15). This is a theme that Hauerwas has sounded before. While readers may find themselves in agreement with Hauerwas in principle, it remains for him to help readers see what resources are available to help "form" people in such a way that making such discriminations is possible. Hauerwas would be the first to admit that making discriminations about what counts for violence is no easy matter (and certainly cannot be made in the abstract), but it seems that it is precisely at this very difficult juncture that we are left on our own. Furthermore, Hauerwas has not yet explored the implications for his understanding of violence and peace once it is recognized that much of the violence which enslaves us and others is what has been called "symbolic violence." What makes such violence so pernicious is that it exerts its power without resorting to physical coercion. What practices and strategies might Christians engage in to create the space possible to live without such violence?

Similarly, Hauerwas may have to help his readers even more in coming to see what kind of community will be necessary for this kind of formation to take place. For example, while some readers will no doubt resonate with Hauerwas's contention that "at times and in some circumstances Christians will find it impossible to participate in government, in aspects of the economy, or in the educational system" (p. 15), others may find the whole notion of "participation" here so vague that their imaginations are stymied when they attempt to consider how they might do otherwise. Admittedly, that many of us may find ourselves incapable of such imaginative forays is perhaps less a function of Hauerwas's shortcomings and more a reflection of our own captivity to particular habits of mind and life, yet such an admission hardly gets Hauerwas off the hook; it simply means that he may have to keep arguing what he's been arguing for a long time before anyone can really hear what he's saying, or more importantly perhaps, be-
fore anyone will know what to do or be if they discern that what he’s been saying is true.

Now, Hauerwas both would and would not want us to take all of this (or ourselves) so seriously. After all, reading books, writing reviews, conversing with our friends, sharing a meal, jogging at noon--these are perhaps trivial matters, and yet they are of tremendous ethical importance, particularly to the extent that they create the time (and peace) necessary for us to live as a redeemed people, which may entail nothing less than having the freedom to go on joyfully doing things like the above even when it seems like we should be directing all our energies to more urgent matters. Of course, bringing all of this to your attention probably only serves as a reminder; after all, I would expect that readers who have endured this article are no doubt already consummate connoisseurs of the trivial.