

A COMMUNITY OF CHARACTER

toward a constructive christian social ethic

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HAUERWAS

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Stanley Hauerwas, a leading theological ethicist, shows how discussions of Christology and the authority of scripture involve questions about what kind of community the church must be to rightly tell the stories of God. He challenges the dominant assumption of contemporary Christian social ethics that there is a special relation between Christianity and some form of liberal democratic social system.

A Community Of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic Details

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From Reader Review A Community Of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic for online ebook

Michelle Murray says

I used this book for research for my capstone project - it is good but a bit dated

Stephen says

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Excellent approach to developing an ethical community. Loved the focus on history and tradition framed as story.

J.R. Woodward says

Hauerwas states his thesis well in the introduction when he says, “Though this book touches on many issues it is dominated by one concern: to reassert the social significance of the church as a distinct society with an integrity peculiar to itself. My wish is that this book might help Christians rediscover that their most important social task is nothing less than to be a community capable of hearing the story of God we find in the scripture and living in a manner that is faithful to that story.”(1)

Hauerwas develops his thesis in three interdependent parts. In the first part, he not only demonstrates the necessity of narrative in the formation of any community or polity, but also describes the kind of narrative in which Christian communities are to be shaped. He states that our narrative finds its center in the story of Jesus, not the state, and that our understanding of the authority of the canon is crucial. He says, canon “is not an accomplishment but a task... (68) and the issue is not just one of interpretation but of what kind of people can remember the past and yet know how to go on in a changed world” (67). In part two, he helps the reader understand the necessary interrelation of narrative and character and how the virtues are “finally dependent on our character for direction, not vice versa” (143). Hauerwas makes it extremely clear that if the theoretical arguments posed in the first two parts are to be taken seriously, it must be reflected in a praxis that is faithful to God, and so he makes his theology practical by applying his theory to the areas of family, sex and abortion.

While reading Hauerwas is a task - it takes an enormous amount of concentration to follow his complex arguments and there isn't always a clear sense of direction - it is a task that I found worthy of my time and energy.

Through reading Hauerwas, I have been able to see more clearly how the presuppositions that we hold, knowingly or unknowingly, are based on the dominant narrative by which we live. I was reminded again how much I have been shaped by the American story. I was also reminded of how our understanding of character and narrative deeply influence our ability to develop the virtues necessary to live a life that is faithful to God's story. As Hauerwas so aptly puts it, “The kind of character the Christian seeks to develop is a correlative of a narrative that trains the self to be sufficient to negotiate existence without illusion or

deception" (132).

Mark says

Great book. Very challenging!

Russell says

i will go a long way with Hauerwas, esp regarding the importance he gives to Aristotelian/ virtue ethics, but for all the words in this book, i don't feel like i ever got an argument for the link between narrative and character formation...

Andrew Tyson says

Hauerwas explains the story formed nature of our beliefs. He shares how "losing the story" can be so detrimental to our moral frameworks. He also touches on common misconceptions that Christians fall into because of the influence of modern American liberalism. It made me ask, "how comprehensive and well thought out are my presuppositions?" Highly recommended!

Dwight Davis says

A fantastic book. Hauerwas lays out his conceptual framework of the church as a narrative/storied community in the first few essays and moves to demonstrating how that story shapes Christian public ethics regarding marriage and abortion in the last half of the book. Overall, the essays are compelling and well-argued. I especially appreciate the critiques of individualism that run throughout the work.

My only critique is the repeated phrase, "I cannot do x argument justice," which occurs multiple times in each essay. Despite the fact that Hauerwas is definitely not a lazy scholar, repeating such a phrase eventually just feels like he is avoiding doing some of the leg work needed to fully articulate his ideas.

Jason Evans says

When I ran construction crews, I once hired a young man fresh out of prison. He came to the U.S. as an infant. While serving his nine-year sentence, he had an encounter with Jesus. Raised Buddhist, he knew little of Christianity. He asked a prison ministry to send him a Bible. For five years this was all he read.

One day, he informed me that he was being deported. I was devastated to lose him. Astonished I asked, "What will you do!? How will you survive?!"

He looked at me puzzled, “What do you mean?”

“What do you mean, ‘What do I mean?!’” I said, “You’re being sent to a land where you don’t know the language or people, with a criminal record!”

He scrunched his forehead up looking at me surprised, “Jason, if God took care of Moses, he’ll take care of me.”

I think this young man got what Stanley Hauerwas is aiming for in *A Community of Character*. He looked at the world through the lens of Scripture. Every experience was first calculated through his understanding of the Story of Scripture. Hauerwas’ vision for the church is not so different. He hopes that the church will process each experience as my friend did, “What do we know of this circumstance through our own History?”

My friend could’ve hidden. As so many do, he could have bought a Social Security number, moved and gone by another name and lived as many undocumented residents do. A little risky, but potentially much more comfortable than going back to an unknown homeland. But the narrative drove him towards the adventure... with hope. When we process Scripture in our communities as knowledge and lose an imagination for how we are to live into it, we grow safe. Nurturing a narrative role of Scripture sweeps us into a story that requires risk and loss yet brings hope and excitement to our experiences.

If you haven’t read Stanley Hauerwas you should. His writing has had a significant impact on the missional church conversation in general and certainly me in particular. He is an ecclesiology-eclectic Christian theologian. His influences pull from several streams. He frequently credits impact on his work by philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Alasdair MacIntyre as well as theologians such as Karl Barth and John Howard Yoder. As he states in the introduction of this book, he is a Methodist that appreciates high church worship yet finds Anabaptism to be one of the most faithful Christian forms. He is a professor of theology and ethics at Duke Divinity School, having previously taught at University of Notre Dame.

In his introduction to *A Community of Character*, Hauerwas states that his thesis is “to reassert the social significance of the church as a distinct society with an integrity peculiar to itself.” In other words, Hauerwas argues that Christian ethics begin not through our cultural lense, but Christ. Through Christ, we understand our relationship to each other as the Church, God, and Scripture. Through this lense we see how we are to engage the world.

I admit that Hauerwas has made a significant impact on my thinking but it is interesting that he often makes clear that he chose to be a theologian, not a pastor. Yet his writing deals with how theology is worked out within the church. He touches on subjects that are often the most difficult to lead on. It’s easier for him to say some of this from the towers of the academy than pastor people in this way in the real world. But as I read this book I was reminded that I increasingly view a great part the Christian leaders role to be the story-tellers of the Grand Story as well as the histories of our own communities. This reminds me that I love the way Jerry at First Pres’ has ended sermons sometimes, “The is your Story. Live it.”

Brett says

Though I agree with much, Stanley is just not that good of a writer. It is unnecessarily difficult to read. He takes aim at liberal democracy (not the democracy of democrats, but the democracy of our great experiment)

as a philosophical system which not only cannot produce people of virtue, but actually undermines it. It is a philosophy with no story, which has freedom as its highest good. Such a philosophy gives no resource or reason to live virtuously. The church therefore, must learn to tell and order their lives around the true story of God's kingdom in Christ.

Nick Klagge says

This book covers a lot of the same ground as "Truthfulness and Tragedy", Hauerwas's slightly earlier book of essays that I read late last year and loved. If I had read this book first, I'm sure I would have given it five stars as well. The most fun essay to read was the extended reflection on the role of narrative "scripture" in "Watership Down", which I managed to read between "Truthfulness and Tragedy" and this volume. It was also interesting to re-expose myself to Hauerwas's arguments after having read MacIntyre's "After Virtue", and to see how strong his influence on Hauerwas's thought is.

Jeff says

This book is comprised of twelve essays written around the theme of the narrative character of Christian ethics. My main takeaway is that the development of character happens in community and that just sticking to principles for principles sake is not sufficiently formative to aid us in living in an ever-changing world. Rather, we must inhabit a narrative to develop the skill and wisdom necessary to live faithfully. Hauerwas tells a personal story in chapter seven that just floored me and upon which I've been dwelling for several days. Not an easy read but you won't find this level of thought or insight in very many places.

Larry Yurk says

Hauerwas, professor of ethics at Duke Divinity School, will challenge you down to your socks. For Hauerwas, the basic question of Christian ethics is, "What kind of people ought we to be?" Applied to issues such as abortion, the reader comes away from the book with a deeper and more sensible perspective than she ever thought possible. Hauerwas says that the basic issue confronting us about abortion is not the question, "At what point does life begin?" He says that, if we allow ourselves to fight the battle on that front, we have already given in to the enemy. On this, we can always disagree. Instead, he says that the question Christians should be asking is, "What kind of people ought we to be?" Hauerwas goes back to the first Christian communities in which Christians took exposed children. This was a common pagan practice in the First Century. Unwanted children were thrown away. They would generally either be eaten by wild animals or picked up by the owners of brothels and raised for a life of prostitution. Christians took these children and raise them as their own. They were a people who were always ready to receive children, no matter what the circumstance. For Hauerwas, the primary reason this was true was because they had hope, and he believes that the reason people do not want children, or have abortions is because of a lack of hope. It is a amazing book on the ethics of what it means to be a community of faith, hope, and love.

Kenneth says

Saw Stanley Hauerwas lecture in an Episcopal church. He is the embodiment of a certain type of Protestant in the American Style with a tremendous stage presence.

The lecture was on the way in which Americans are Americans more so than Christians.

The radical demands of the Christian religion often take second seat to the demands of American culture.

Hauerwas is a political radical who advocates a Christian version of Socialism with a high level of philosophical complexity. I enjoyed reading this book even when I disagree with some fundamental points.

Hauerwas has taught at Duke for much of his career while also other schools such as Notre Dame. He seems to see a natural alliance with Catholic theologians who likewise see the contradictions with Christianity inherent in American culture.

This book covers a depth of issues ranging from the more practical side of social policy to the more abstract elements of theological foundations.

An interesting man who appears to be from my experience the type of professor that I have enjoyed studying with while in graduate school.

The director of my master's thesis recommended this book to me for my research several years back. His doctoral dissertation was written on Hauerwas so he knew his teaching well. I have not spent nearly so much time on learning the ins and outs of Hauerwas' thought.

Hauerwas will likely be remembered for being one of the more significant protestant theologians with regards to social issues (along the lines of Reinhold Niebuhr perhaps) in the later half of the twentieth-century.

Nathanael Booth says

Hauerwas argues that narrative is central to human ethical thought, and that the kind of stories Christians tell about themselves and their God are crucial to understanding the kind of ethics to which they hold. Hauerwas is, as always, insightful as he draws out the implications of the Christian story for the kind of community it needs to be. Fully a third of the book is pretty dryly theoretical, dealing with virtue ethics etc—interesting in its own way, and important for developing a practical understanding of Christian ethics, but pretty tough going all the same—but the rest is remarkable as Hauerwas calls for the Christian community to more fully embrace its founding narrative and its subsequent role as a prophetic voice to its surrounding culture (whatever form that culture takes). His words on history and tradition are also helpful, and coincide with much that I have lately been thinking about the role of history in the Christian faith (namely, that we are an historical faith and so bound to tradition whether we admit it or no). In all, an interesting book with parallels to Fish and Chesterton.
