

# Can't we just argue? Hauerwas troubles the waters: hauerwas troubles the waters

by [William T. Cavanaugh](#) in the [August 1, 2001](#) issue

Stanley Hauerwas talks about Catholics like Jane Goodall talks about chimpanzees: he spent many years among them as an outsider, came to appreciate their strange practices and rituals, and grew to love them so much that he almost, but not quite, felt like one of them.

It was during his 14 years at Notre Dame that the set of practices called “church” became an important part of Hauerwas’s vocabulary. Hauerwas became fascinated by a group of people who appeared to be so constituted by their relationships to one another. He relished the challenge to his Pietist upbringing posed by a sacramental sensibility that focused on the objective presence of God instead of the subjective holiness of the individual worshiper. During his Notre Dame years, Hauerwas imbibed the Catholic centrality of the Eucharist and became a weekly communicant. Ironically, however, he remained Protestant enough that, when refused the Eucharist by a priest because he was not Catholic, he simply got in another line.

Hauerwas’s move to a Methodist environment at Duke has not resolved the basic ecclesial ambiguity that runs like a geological fault line through his thought. Hauerwas remains deeply and creatively conflicted about his ecclesial identity: “I don’t believe in Methodism, obviously. And yet I believe in my wife Paula’s priesthood, and she’s a Methodist, so I can’t say I don’t believe in Methodism.”

Hauerwas’s emphases on community, virtue, authority and sacrament have marked him as a Catholic thinker and have brought many Catholic graduate students to him, in addition to several students who have converted to Catholicism under his influence. And yet Hauerwas claims that he cannot become Catholic as long as the Catholic Church will not recognize Paula’s priesthood, which he says he has seen with his own eyes. Confounding the issue is the fact that Stanley’s position would

make Paula the only Methodist priest. Methodists do not believe in the ministerial priesthood; Stanley does.

Mennonite theologian Gerald Schlabach has recently said that Hauerwas's project is to call Catholics and Protestants to be more Anabaptist, and to call Anabaptists and Protestants to be more Catholic. The fact that he is not calling anyone to be more Protestant does not mean that he is not still the bearer of a Protestant soul. Protestant hymnody in particular has a special hold on him. He causes the greatest consternation among his own Methodist brethren precisely as a rebellious son causes the most grief within his own family. The very fact of his ecclesial eclecticism shows that the Pietist habits of his youth are still with him; only a Protestant could move in and out of various churches—including the Catholic—with such ease. Nor is he without theological reasons for remaining in the Methodist fold. Hauerwas may not believe in Protestantism as such, but he remains Protestant as long as Protestant churches are necessary to remind the Catholic Church that it is not yet what it is called to be.

A complex dynamic seems to run through Hauerwas's relationships with those who want a piece of him: he has a tendency to create disciples, and yet there are few things that annoy him more. His opening-day lecture to his divinity school classes usually involves some form of the claim, "I don't want you to think for yourselves. I want you to think like me." This is his attempt to disabuse his students of the Enlightenment illusion of individual sovereignty. He believes that theology is a craft learned by putting oneself under the authority of a master of the tradition. And yet Hauerwas hated the first seminar paper I ever did at Duke because it repeatedly saluted the Hauerwas party line without any understanding of what was at stake. He returned it with the exasperated comment "This sounds too much like me!" emblazoned on the final page. Tradition, after all, is not identical repetition but, as defined by Alisdair MacIntyre, is an "ongoing argument" over the goods and practices intrinsic to tradition. Hauerwas loves a good argument. Indeed, to be able to have an argument at all is a significant moral achievement, for it presupposes some common understanding of the goods at issue.

Thus something like the reverse of Rodney King's famous appeal after the L.A. riots is Hauerwas's plea: Can't we all just have an argument? I have known Hauerwas for nearly two decades now, half of which I spent being scared to death of him. What I gradually came to realize is that I was disturbed not by his ferocity but rather by his lack of guile. His frank unwillingness to dissemble in the interests of "just getting

along” came as a terrible shock to a nice Midwesterner who hates the appearance of conflict more than the conflict itself.

Despite his confrontational image, however, Hauerwas does not seek to create discord, but only refuses to just get along if it means covering over conflicts that are already there. Christian pacifism must be an active peacemaking, the first step of which is to locate and truthfully name what is in conflict. A Christian must recognize the tragic reality, however, that not all conflicts are peacefully resolvable, which is why Christians must forswear the use of coercion to enforce the truth.

Everyone who has seen Hauerwas in action has a favorite story. He confronts a medical researcher who is defending experiments on fetal tissue with the following question: “What if it were discovered that fetal tissue were a delicacy; could you eat it?” He is asked to speak at a rally against the death penalty and declares, “I’m *for* the death penalty. I think they should build a guillotine on Wall Street and execute people for stock fraud.”

In the first case, Hauerwas’s point was that no amount of benefit to medicine could justify experimenting on fetal issue: either it is human and deserves respect, or the door is open to all kinds of uses. (The medical researcher was forced to admit that, given the researcher’s own logic, there is no reason to forbid Hauerwas’s ghastly suggestion.) In the second case, Hauerwas’s point was that the death penalty is not justified by claiming it prevents crime. If such were the case, the death penalty would be much more profitably used against dispassionate white-collar crime than against murder, which is usually too entangled in personal vindication to be prevented by a detached calculation. The real reason the death penalty is used is a desire for revenge, a temptation to which Christians must not succumb.

My tedious explanations of his points tend to dull the impact of Hauerwas’s statements. He will commonly eschew such explanations and let his audience figure it out. This omission often leads to more confusion and misunderstanding than is necessary; most of the crowd at the rally, for example, were left unaware that Hauerwas is opposed to the death penalty under any circumstances. Nevertheless, a deliberate part of his pedagogy is to force people to think by jolting them out of their customary positions.

Troubling the waters is certainly part of Hauerwas’s *modus operandi*, but he is not the Howard Stern of the theological world. His lessons are not easily forgotten because he makes his listener go through the process of making the logical

connections for himself or herself. This at least partially explains his advice to one of his students: "Your job as a theologian is to cause ulcers in others and not suffer them yourself in the process."