

The Difference Christ Makes

Celebrating the
Life, Work, and Friendship
of Stanley Hauerwas

EDITED BY

Charles M. Collier

FOREWORD BY

Richard B. Hays



CASCADE Books • Eugene, Oregon

Response to Jennifer Herdt's "Truthfulness and Continual Discomfort"

Charlie Pinches

JENNIFER HERDT HAS PRESENTED us with a gracious response to Stanley Hauerwas's long and distinguished scholarly career, a response that centers on the church-world relation, and so on the way in which Stanley believes Christians should address the political worlds in which they find themselves. In what follows, I will try briefly to summarize how she handles this important topic, and then offer a few critical points with hopes for further engagement.

But first, notice that even though Jennifer tells us she was never a student of Stanley's, she cannot resist offering a personal story about her encounter with "the brash, foul-mouthed Texan" who often announced his pacifism in provocative ways, consonant with his self-description that he was "by disposition not much inclined to non-violence."¹ There is, after all, something irresistible about a Stanley story. Moreover, since I *was* a student of Stanley's, I have a much deeper (and juicier) fund to draw on in this regard. So let me also begin with a story about the foul-mouthed Texan and non-violence.

Early in my teaching career I invited Stanley to speak to a large group of soon-to-be college freshmen at Hendrix College in Arkansas. These students had been classified "gifted" by the Arkansas state government, which mainly meant they had become jaded before their time. In his morning lecture Stanley had been characteristically Hauerwas, full of potential offense. Many were enticed to return for the Q and A session in the afternoon. He

1. See chapter 2 above, 26.

began that session with a few comments about his topic, war, then announced to the students that as a Christian he believed faithful discipleship of Jesus required pacifism. After which he said: "I tell you this because, as you well know by now, I am a violent son-of-a-bitch and I need you to hold me to my confession." And then he opened the floor for questions.

I will return to this story, for I think it shows something important about how Stanley has taught those of us in the church to relate to the world. For her part, Herdt builds her response to Stanley's approach to church-world relations mainly around this statement: "even if it is indeed the case that the world cannot know it to be the world without the help of the church, it is also the case that the church cannot help us to speak truthfully unless it speaks not just to, but also with the world."² I think she thinks that Stanley generally agrees with this statement, although perhaps sometimes less enthusiastically and consistently than she might wish.

Jennifer moves to a consideration of Stanley's emphasis that church discipleship and polity should form Christians in the skills necessary to live truthfully—and so will assist any society they inhabit to know justice and truth. She notes that this is not necessarily a recipe for "withdrawal from social and political involvement," although it does press Christians to be, as Stanley himself says, "politically involved *as Christians*." This is especially true in America, where we are strongly tempted to make the subject of Christian ethics in America America rather than that church. Despite this, however, Herdt insists that "one of the driving motors of [Hauerwas's] theology has in fact been the worry that the American experiment is in deep trouble."³ (I think this is not quite accurate, but more on that in a minute.)

Herdt draws a parallel between what she takes to be Stanley's position and "various perfectionist liberalism" which turn away from liberal proceduralism toward virtue—acknowledging that we need good people to make a good society. Unlike these liberalism, though, Hauerwas accents not society's but rather the church's role as a school for virtue. A difficulty with this accent for Herdt is that the formation in virtue in the church could, by its own logic, go on indefinitely, "an infinite postponement of public engagement."⁴ This is where Jennifer rehearses a concern expressed by her own teacher, Jeffrey Stout, about the profoundly negative effect of Hauerwas's combination of "Yoder's church-world distinction with

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 27.

4. Ibid., 29.

Macintyre's antiliberalism."⁵ She calls Stout's point "*keen*." However, Herdt thinks Hauerwas has exonerated himself more recently, particularly in his collaboration with Rom Coles on democracy.⁶ To Herdt's credit, she does not take this recent dialogue with Coles' democracy as aberration; despite widespread belief to the contrary, Stanley has always cared about engaging the world. How to do this, though, is a delicate thing. "We are all feeling our way forward here," she says.⁷ I like that. Indeed, she puts the problem before us well: "[H]ow can a confessional interfaith politics of the common good be enacted in such a way that it does not work over time to erode the particularities of faith?"⁸

Jennifer goes on to entertain the possibility of Christians keeping their faith a secret in the current American environment where a residual Christendom yet rules the day. Here she appreciates the emphasis Stanley has placed on the dangers of self-deception, but wants to be sure this is extended to the self-deceptive "groupishness" we can fall prey to, perhaps especially in the church. She lauds Stanley's accent on regarding "the existence of others and their differences as a gift,"⁹ one that can help us test our own community's story and challenge us to give reasons for what we do and love as we interact with those outside of our group. Here she opens the possibility, which she thinks Stanley affirms, that in such interactions we will discover "goods in common." These might be as basic as "*food*" which we all share—even if Christians also proceed to speak, perhaps oddly to others, of the body of Christ as food.

Interestingly, Herdt thinks John Yoder actually showed us something about how the church might engage the world on the topic of democracy. Yoder, of course, taught Hauerwas much about Christian non-violence. Building on this, Herdt cites Stanley's own words about how a commitment to non-violence forces us to listen to others, and then adds: "To deny a priori the possibility of understanding, to insist a priori on unintelligibility, is itself a kind of violence. Over against this we are called to trust in the possibility of discovering goods in common, which itself is a trust that even a fallen and divided world is still the beloved world of God's creation."¹⁰

5. Ibid., 30.

6. Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy and the Radical Ordinary*.

7. See above, 30.

8. Ibid., 31.

9. Ibid., 38.

10. Ibid., 41.



Now, by way of critical response, it seems to me that Jennifer's criticism of Stanley's political engagement, muted and respectful as it is, falls within what is by far the most common criticism of his work: the specter of *sectarianism*. People are still worried that Stanley wants a church that somehow holds itself back from political engagement with the world. Of course Stanley has addressed this many times; its recurrence must indicate something. Either somebody isn't talking clearly enough, or else somebody else isn't listening . . . or maybe a little of both.

I think Herdt may not have been listening so well on a couple of points. First, she alleges that Stanley's theology is driven, at least in part, by his worry that the "American experiment" is in deep trouble. I do not believe Stanley has ever used the term "the American Experiment" in any way other than as parody. It implies American exceptionalism, which Stanley has always eschewed. In 1988 he criticized Max Stackhouse's suggestion that "America is the great experiment in 'constructive Protestantism,'" noting that, for Stackhouse, to "support democracy became a means of supporting Christianity, and vice versa."¹¹ When they proceed this way, American Christians, like Jeremiah's lusty stallions, throw themselves at democracy or America or liberalism as if it were the gospel. As Stanley says twelve years later, "The object of my criticism of liberalism has never been liberals, but rather to give Christians renewed confidence in the convictions that make our service intelligible. From my perspective the problem is not liberalism but the assumption on the part of many Christians that they must become liberals . . . to be of service in America."¹² As he implies, liberal presumptions have so thoroughly infused all of our lives, Christians included, that Christians have forgotten who they are and whom they serve. Here Christ makes the difference. Accenting this difference, Hauerwas has articulated a genuine alternative for American Christians, or other Christians who are tempted to mistake the nation-state for the church. To show the difference clearly, Hauerwas has needed to accent how his alternative is not just another recipe for cooking the same old liberal stew.

I suspect this had something to do with the flash of excitement Jennifer describes feeling when she first read Hauerwas. I don't know if this was before or after she went to study with Jeffrey Stout, but plainly his criticism

11. Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, 176.

12. Hauerwas, *Better Hope*, 24.

of Stanley's work continues to have purchase for her. To be sure, *Democracy and Tradition* (2004) was an interesting and important book. It also left a large pile of dung on Stanley's doorstep. While Stout attacks three so-called "traditionalists"—MacIntyre, Milbank, and Hauerwas—Stanley justifiably later claimed that "Stout's criticism of Milbank and MacIntyre serve to introduce his critique of my position."¹³ While I liked Stout's book, it also seemed wrong, even unfair to me, especially when criticizing Stanley and his students. I was therefore somewhat surprised to hear Stanley praise it. "Put bluntly," he says, "this is a position with which we Christians not only can, but should want to, do business with. Stout does try to give an account of democratic life that is not in the first place state theory. I am extremely sympathetic with that project."¹⁴

This comment is revealing. Stout did what Stanley wants people to do if they set about to interact with his theological writing: he declared clearly that he claims a particular tradition, the tradition of democracy, and engaged, even attacked, Stanley from within it. *This is interesting!* The same dynamic informs the book Jennifer likes so well with Rom Coles. As the authors say in the preface, "This book is about listening. We have had to learn to listen to one another. . . . Listening not only takes time, but it also requires a trained vulnerability that does not come easily. Vulnerability means that our life is not under our control, which means we must learn to trust others if we are not only to survive but flourish. Such a politics is in sharp contrast to the politics of fear that characterizes current American life."¹⁵

In these comments and others, it seems to me that Stanley shows Jennifer exactly what she seems to want when she speaks at the end of her paper about the need to discover goods in common. So, one might ask, what is the problem? Or, to return to an earlier question, why does the sectarian objection still persist (even a little bit) in Herdt?

I have meant to suggest that the persistence of this objection has partly to do with people not listening, but I think there is more. I don't think Stanley has yet fully articulated his vision of engagement with the world in such a way that it goes beyond his personally expressed sentiments about what he has learned from others or how he cherishes them as friends. When we hear stories of friendship between Stanley and the likes of Rom Coles and Jeff Stout and read their honest debates, or when we tell Stanley stories like

13. Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, 223.

14. *Ibid.*, 224.

15. Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*, 5.

the one I told earlier of his engaging students in Arkansas, we can chalk these up to his extraordinary personality. Only Stanley would say and do such things! We talk this way partly to honor Stanley, marveling at how unique he is, but I think this can become dangerous if we do not also say more. If we are gathered here today only to honor a personality, what are we to do when it is gone? It should not be embarrassing to say in the presence of this man who has so consistently urged us to speak truthfully that a party for his retirement (particularly on All-Saints Day) cannot but remind us that he will someday leave not only the classroom, but this world. What then?

So we must return to the theological argument. Jennifer mentions Stout's observation that Stanley can't combine Yoder's church-world distinction with MacIntyre antiliberalism without adopting a troublesome dualism. She calls this observation *keen*—but I cannot agree. In fact, I think Stanley's life and work has shown us that we need both. In response to Stout on the Yoder-MacIntyre binary, Stanley makes a number of cogent points, but I think skips the most important. I think we should say, simply, that Yoder is largely right about how and why the church should avoid the temptation of Constantinianism, and MacIntyre is largely right about how and why the university and other intuitions that serve the common good should avoid the temptation of liberalism. Put differently, if we only had MacIntyre, we would not know very well how to speak about what goes on, or should go on, in the church; but if we only had Yoder, we would not know well how to speak about what goes on, or should go on, in places like the university that serve the common good. As I suspect, in Stanley's engagement socially and politically, and also within the university (for example in his exchanges with colleagues like Stout and Coles), he has depended on MacIntyre—and with MacIntyre the tradition from Aquinas of the virtues and the natural law—much more than he has depended on Yoder. However, he has not consistently articulated his dependence in this area, tending instead to repair to Yoderian moves.

Near the end of her paper Jennifer takes up John Yoder's engagement with democracy as a sort of model. Yet it seems to me that Yoder's position lacks the urgency she hopes for. Yoder is quite specific in the article she quotes that he believes the question "What is the best form of government?" is a Constantinian question.¹⁶ Tyrants everywhere offer claims of benevolence to their subjects, and so too the elites who run democratic

16. Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 154.

societies like ours. In any regime Christians should hold governments to their promises. In "democracies" it is somewhat more likely that Christians will find the skills they have acquired in the church to help out in the business of governance, for example in conflict resolution; if so, they might legitimately serve it in some limited way.

Yoder's point is well and good, but again, it lacks the urgency or intimacy of Coles and Hauerwas's pledge, just quoted, about how we must learn to trust one another if we are not only to survive but to flourish. While Yoder tells us from within the church why it is okay to serve in governance if it suits us, he cannot tell us why we *need* to reach out in friendship to those in our universities or towns or neighborhoods who are not also members of the church in any form other than witness. Put bluntly, Hauerwas cannot get from Yoder an account of the service to the common good that he has tirelessly offered throughout his long career, a service, essentially, of *political friendship*. And this is why he needs MacIntyre, and the long tradition that comes with him.

Let me truncate my point by simply quoting from Fr. Herbert McCabe: "beneath the notion of the natural law [is] the idea that there are things becoming and unbecoming to human beings as such just in virtue of their nature, just in virtue of the kind of animals they are. The idea of natural law depends, as I see it, on being somehow able to see humanity itself on the analogy of a society bound together in friendship."¹⁷

Early in his career Stanley was given strong reason by misrepresentations of the day to distrust and avoid natural law talk, and his discovery of Yoder only added to this. But I do not think he (or those of us who follow) can fully appropriate the insights of the likes of Aquinas and MacIntyre without some articulation along the lines of what McCabe sketches here. Moreover, such an articulation will help us better understand the deep importance of what Stanley has personally modeled for us so well, a friendship that extends beyond church, but also informs life in the church—where it reaches its true supernatural end in friendship with God.

When Stanley confessed his pacifism and his Christian discipleship to my students in Arkansas he offered a witness to them about what the gospel might do and mean as it captures the heart and soul of a man. But he also did something else. When he challenged them to hold him to his non-violent confession he extended to them the hand of friendship and,

17. Herbert McCabe, *The Good Life: Ethics and the Pursuit of Happiness* (London: Continuum, 2005) 13.

THE DIFFERENCE CHRIST MAKES

indeed, modeled for them, foul-mouthed Texan style, how that friendship might work in the universities to which they were headed. The friendship included this: all of us, Christian or otherwise, need one another to hold us accountable to the truths we claim and the traditions and histories we represent. As Coles and Hauerwas suggest, minus this friendship we will be overrun with fear and suspicion, and the political darkness will deepen.

Stanley Hauerwas has worked his whole life long to make friends with us all—and look how many of us have come to honor him. We will honor him more if we keep our friendships—the very ones he has taught us to form and cherish—with us after this gathering, even after his service is ended at this university or on this earth.