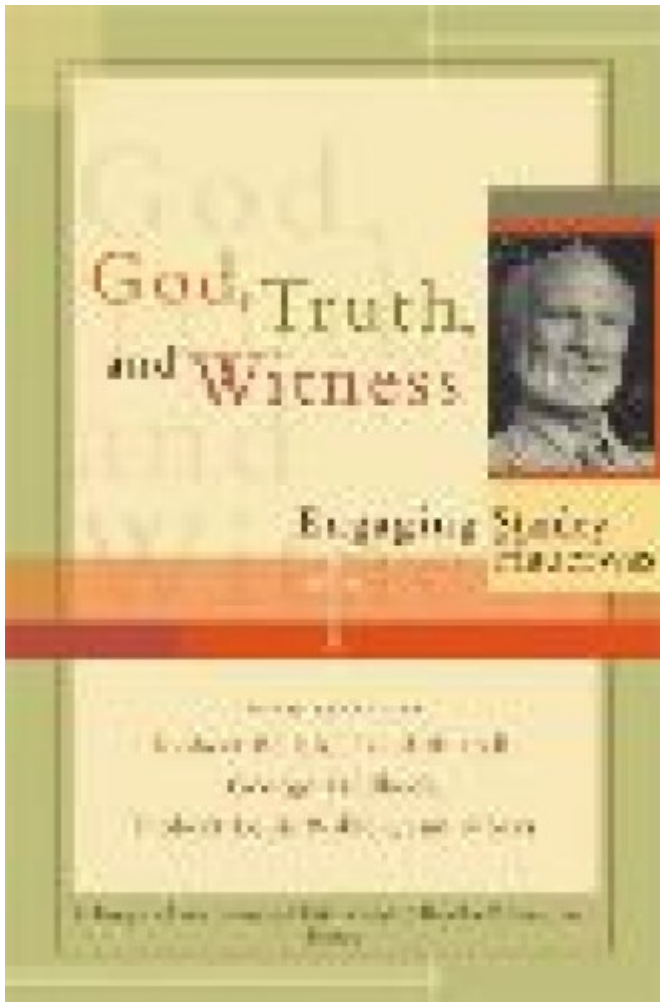


God, Truth, and Witness

reviewed by [Mark Thiessen Nation](#) in the [January 15, 2008](#) issue

In Review



God, Truth, and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas

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In June 1933, less than six months after Hitler assumed power in Germany, Karl Barth argued that it was important to do “theology and only theology—as though

nothing had happened" (*Theological Existence Today*). Doing theology in this manner, Barth denounced idolatry in the face of Hitler's rise to power, pronounced the German Christian movement heretical, formulated much of the Barmen Confession (May 1934) and was fired from his teaching post in Germany. Additionally he refused to join the nationalistic cold war and helped to formulate a statement against nuclear weapons in the 1950s. Barth later reflected:

I did not have anything new to say in that first issue of *Theological Existence Today* apart from what I had always endeavored to say: that we could have no other gods than God, that holy scripture was enough to guide the church into all truth, that the grace of Jesus Christ was enough to forgive our sins and to order our life.

I use Barth's simple theological formulation as the rubric for examining these 15 essays that celebrate the theological legacy of Stanley Hauerwas. The simplicity of the convictions explains the unity among the contributors. The profundity of the theological claims generates diversity. The particularity of what it means to "order our life" in Christ within the American empire threatens to turn the diversity into separation and potential division.

"*No other gods than God.*" Hauerwas would certainly agree with contributor Nicholas Lash's claim that "to learn to worship only God, only the holy and unmasterable mystery that is not the world nor any part of it, is an unending task." It is in this difficult task that Hauerwas knows he needs the assistance of a diversity of friends. As contributor Harry Huebner notes, this task requires patience and humility, a willingness to learn from one's students and even from one's enemies.

Other contributors remind the pacifist Hauerwas that he needs to continue to learn about truth from Augustine (Rowan Greer) and that the "Constantinian" Bishop Ambrose was not above challenging the emperor when he believed important issues were at stake (Robert Louis Wilken). And Robert Jenson, in a theological vein not totally foreign to Hauerwas, points out that an argument can be made for Christian civilization.

Lash, like Barth and Hauerwas, knows that it is not enough to affirm God: "Insofar as what we worship is some fact or feature of the world, some object or ideal, commodity or dream or theory, nation, place or thing (and most of us include ourselves among the things we worship), then we are idolaters." David Burrell adds

that freedom unconstrained by the glorious Creator of us all is no more than selfish autonomy that easily morphs into idolatry. Even Robert Bellah admits that in recent years he has come much closer to Hauerwas's critique of the idolatry involved in the marriage of God and country.

"Holy scripture was enough to guide the church into all truth." These essays engage and enrich Hauerwas's understanding of scripture and of the Christian tradition rooted in scripture. Some of Hauerwas's friends prod him to be more biblical, more radical. In this collection Orthodox theologian H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr. accuses Hauerwas of a "near reduction of being holy to being charitable, hospitable, just, and pacifist." He continues: "Hauerwas's pacifism is not integrated into an account of how in holiness and purity Christians are called to approach God." This accusation from one who frequently attacks the liberal zeitgeist is hard to ignore.

"The grace of Jesus Christ was enough to forgive our sins and to order our life." For Barth, as for Hauerwas, this is where the theological rubber meets the road. Though God is the "unmasterable mystery" (Lash), he has decisively revealed himself in Jesus Christ, the One who reminds us of our need for forgiveness and of our need to forgive. Jesus is the norm and teacher (Huebner), the one who orders our life together as Christians. It is this ordering that leads a Dutch (Hans Reinders), a Swedish (Arne Rasmusson) and a German (Bernd Wannewetsch) theologian to see the relevance of Hauerwas for post-Christian contexts that require a politics of diaspora. Moreover, it is to Hauerwas that a Ugandan (Emmanuel Katongole) and a South African (Neville Richardson) turn for help in understanding what it means to be faithful in their African contexts. These friends all resonate with Bellah's view that "now more than ever we need the politics of Jesus." Yet it is precisely this ordering, this politics of Jesus, that separates Hauerwas from some of his friends. An emphasis on Ambrose, Augustine and a Christian civilization sometimes leads to substantial disagreements about, for instance, the current war on terrorism.

Many of the contributors testify that Hauerwas is a generous friend. George Lindbeck notes that Hauerwas should more honestly admit his indebtedness to ecumenism and the formal ecumenical movement. It seems to me that he is, in some ways, his own ecumenical movement. Precisely because he is a generous friend he embodies what his former professor Hans Frei once called a "generous orthodoxy." With friends like the ones in this collection, it is understandable why Hauerwas generates theology that is not narrow, rigid or lacking in self-criticism, but richly textured and fruitful for further theological reflection.

A question has to be asked, however: Is there something at the root of Hauerwas's project that is incoherent? Is it really possible for the politics of Jesus to be connected to "some kind of linkage between the Mennonite and the Catholic traditions" (Bellah)? How does Hauerwas's tenaciously christological focus connect to Peter Ochs's articulation of a theological rationale for dialogue among the Abrahamic traditions?

It is extraordinary that there has been coherence to Hauerwas's theology over the course of more than 30 years, that the man whose theology is being celebrated in this volume does not hesitate to name his own convictions and his own positions on controversial issues. But in the end we are taken back to Barth: positions, however contextually crucial, are never substitutes for the central confession—Jesus is Lord. "Doing theology and only theology—as though nothing had happened" is never simple, but it is certainly intriguing and always necessary.