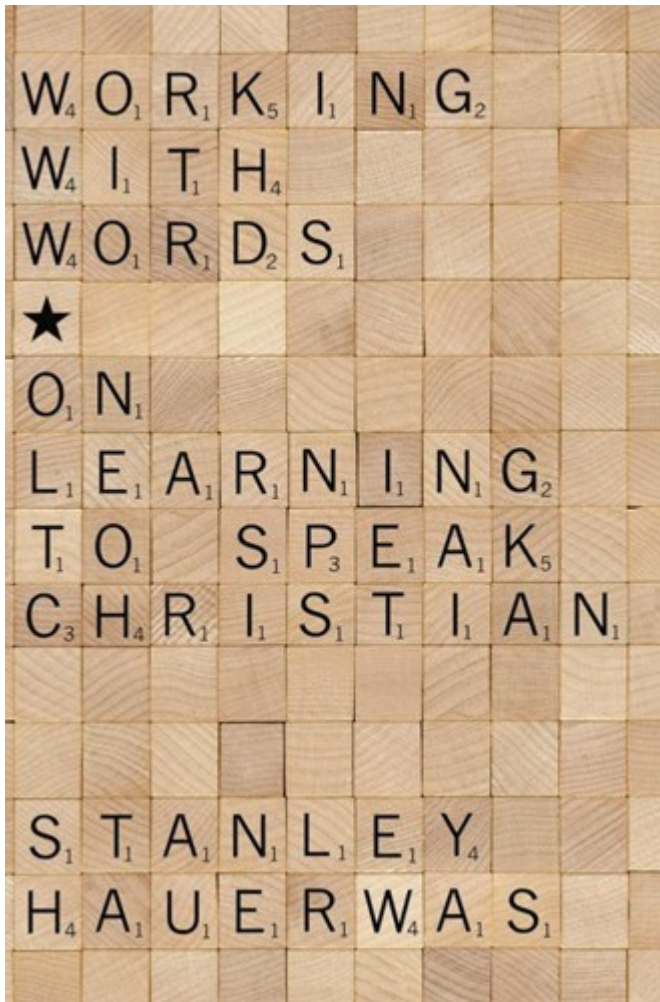


Speak Christian

by [Marilyn McEntyre](#) in the [July 26, 2011](#) issue

In Review



Working with Words

By Stanley Hauerwas

Cascade

In scriptoria and libraries, in liturgy and hymns, in sermons and table talk and retranslations of the Bible, Christian discourse has evolved to suit the needs of a

church in endless conversation with itself and with God. Though it might not occur to most of us to think of Christian as a language, Stanley Hauerwas reminds us that as we live and move in Christian communities, we also learn from them ways of speaking about matters of the spirit that enable us to read together, address the world together, and enter into God's presence singing and into God's courts with praise.

Language is an instrument of power, impressed on our tongues and brains in ways that neurologists can describe, linguists can map and developmental psychologists can trace, but also in ways that are mysterious, unpredictable and regenerative. To speak is to act—creatively and consequentially—upon a world whose naming was the first authorization of humankind. "To converse" once had a broad range of meanings that included not just speaking but walking together, entering into community and communion with others.

Taking just such a high view of words, Hauerwas introduces his newest collection of essays and sermons with John Howard Yoder's observation that the task of theology is "working with words in the light of faith." Theology continues the essential mandate to name the creatures—ideas and concepts included—and to make elements into sacraments and sorrow into song. To speak in that context is to celebrate, a point Hauerwas illustrates by remarking that he enjoys Barth because "there is nothing desperate about his theology; rather it is a joyful celebration of the unending task of theology."

This book is also a celebration. Hauerwas calls it a "kitchen sink of a book," full of pieces written for various occasions that "were not meant to . . . add up to anything so grand as 'an argument.'" But by that very token, it offers an exuberant retrospective on a life and career in which conversation, argument, reflection and proclamation have shaped and disciplined a remarkable body of work, oral and written. "Christian," Hauerwas both declares and demonstrates, is a language of love.

The piece that lies at the geographical center of the three-part book is a wedding sermon simply called "Love." Characteristically, it starts with a wry reminder: "Christians are required to love one another—even if they are married." The remainder of the piece develops a core idea that recurs conspicuously throughout the book: Paul's description of love, like all of scripture, is meant to be read in the living context of the living church. When passages like 1 Corinthians 13 are

"abstracted from their ecclesial home and turned into general recommendations," they dwindle into legalism. Love that "rejoices in the truth" remains good news only as a feature of shared life, engaged conversation and common worship.

The three sections of the book, "Learning Christian," "The Language of Love" and "Habits of Speech Exemplified," explore the nature of that ongoing conversation, returning in the course of their wide peregrinations to the exuberant proclamation that there is good news to be shared, shaped, plumbed, articulated and reconsidered. To inhabit a community that lives by that news is to be fundamentally set apart from a culture driven by competition, acquisition and greed. Such a culture, Hauerwas insists, tends toward the trivial: "I am suggesting," he unabashedly explains, "that a social order bent on producing wealth as an end in itself cannot avoid producing people whose souls are superficial and whose daily lives are captured by sentimentalities. They ask questions like, 'Why does a good god let bad things happen to good people?' Such a people cannot imagine what kind of people would write and sing the Psalms."

The contrast that Hauerwas posits is startling because the question he dismisses seems perfectly reasonable to many believers. But our faith, he reminds us, leads us far beyond the reasonable into a form of life and communion that is extravagant and mysterious and that keeps us at a healthy critical distance from the seductions of self-serving ideologies. Common sense is always to be tested by the uncommon sense that begins with a life-giving death.

One of the more memorable pieces in the collection drives right to the heart of a different question that is eminently worth asking: "Why did Jesus have to die?" Written as a talk for teens who attended the Youth Academy at Duke Divinity School, the essay begins with an unapologetic acknowledgment of the generational distance that separates him from a folk whose music, movies and reading habits he has neither knowledge of nor inclination to explore. Having declared himself thus, he proceeds to address the gathered youth with the deep respect due to brothers and sisters in faith. He pulls no punches: "The presumption that Christianity is a family-friendly faith is a small-change perversion of the gospel when compared to the use of faith in God to underwrite American pretensions that we are a Christian nation possessing righteousness other nations lack." The popular idols of nuclear family and nationalism fall with one stroke, as does the Pledge of Allegiance, exposed as a poor substitute for the Apostles' Creed. In this essay as in others, Hauerwas reframes

politics and popular culture in terms of a faith that is "reformed and always reforming."

Reformation relies on the pliability, power and nuance of language. When we change the questions we ask, when we retell our own stories in light of the salvation story we inhabit, when we reclaim words like *love* or *growth* or *need* or *care* or *hope* from the diminishing discourse of the marketplace and ground them in that story, we participate in the "word work" that Hauerwas defines as theology.

This book is an invitation to all readers to come to the table, participate in that work and stay in the conversation. The pieces it contains address a wide range of audiences; their variety of focus, purpose and occasion is a reminder of how various are the voices and situations of the scattered faithful who are held together only—and sufficiently—by the one Word in whom all stories begin.