

1-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

McGill, Jenny (2012) "Stanley Hauerwas, Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian," *Leaven*: Vol. 20: Iss. 4, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol20/iss4/11>

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Book Review

JENNY MCGILL

Stanley Hauerwas, *Working With Words: On Learning to Speak Christian*
(Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011)

Stanley Hauerwas, Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke Divinity School, is a prolific author and a prominent American theologian. This book, a series of sermons and essays, discusses the nature of “speaking Christian,” the language of love, and those who speak it well. By his own admission, this is a “kitchen-sink” book written primarily for Christians (p. x). In that, the book is loosely connected along the theme of how we (should) speak the Christian language.

The first section considers learning to speak Christian as something that one does only with training, through the worship of a particular “God,” offered by the vessel that God has ordained: the church. Hauerwas begins with the example of Israel, whose survival depended on their practiced faith in God, but whose connection with God did not exempt them from danger. Next is an evocative rendering of Augustine’s account of evil that Hauerwas ties to Augustine’s *Confessions*. Chapter three discusses a new way of seeing, indeed of being, as illustrated in an account of Luke’s Acts. Hauerwas then explores the words of love, death and goodness, in consideration of Raimond Gaita, an Australian moral philosopher and professor. Hauerwas questions our use of the word “God,” and stresses the importance of seminary and reading for ministers. Difficulties of the nature of language, hermeneutics, method and interpretation (the latter two terms of which he is not favorable) are discussed in response to Richard Hays’ critique of Hauerwas.

Section two discusses “the language of love.” A naive concept of love is not what Christianity entails, as Hauerwas describes the necessity of Christ’s death. Hauerwas’ reflection on greed and lust—that greed disinherits love—is remarkable. Two other homilies consider love in marriage, and, secondly, love and knowledge for addressing divisions within the church. John Stuart Mill’s “principle of liberty” is relayed in how Christians have swallowed illicit cultural slogans to the diminution of holiness. This section closes with a discussion of Paul Ramsey in medical care and the church as mission.

Hauerwas invites other voices in section three. Romand Coles and Hauerwas discuss Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, particularly the latter’s use of “immanence” and “transcendence.” In a biographical sketch of H. Richard Niebuhr, Hauerwas evaluates Niebuhr’s “ethics” (which is to say, his theology), commenting on his (mis)wording of the Trinity. Next, Hauerwas salutes the philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre followed by a summary of Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* and a survey of the Catholic encyclicals as intensely theological, not merely social teachings. That theology and ethics cannot be divided is demonstrated in a discussion of Wesley’s Methodist tradition. Hauerwas ends with an account of friendship and freedom in the pair of friends, Bonhoeffer and Bethge. In the appendix, Hauerwas offers perhaps his briefest and best summary of his views on vision, relativism and foundationalism.

This book considers the grammar of the Christian language that illuminate Hauerwas’s view of the nature of Christian life, its risky faith and practices. Not unexpectedly, this book includes a critique of modernity, an emphasis on nonviolence, and the clear influence of Wittgenstein, Barth and Yoder on Hauerwas. Also not

unexpectedly, given Hauerwas' disinterest in fitting tidily in any one camp, conservatives and liberals alike may have misgivings in how Hauerwas works out some of the great words of the Christian faith. However, this book is valuable for the reader to carefully evaluate the issues raised. Working with the words of scripture and others (e.g., Aristotle, Aquinas, Troelsch, Socrates, etc.), Hauerwas helps most question more thoroughly the words they speak. Hauerwas often poses either the question or his response in a new way for fruitful engagement (for example, p. 77–78). Laced throughout the work is this point: words coincide with acts. Hauerwas stresses that practices must accompany words if they are words of life.

The sections of this book are not as interrelated as some may desire. Still, Hauerwas offers a seasoned and provoking account. I recommend this as an introduction to Hauerwasian thought, not as a comprehensive overview of his philosophical theology. This resource is best employed by ministers, theologians, professors and students. Lay readers may struggle at points if they lack an intermediate theological understanding. However, it is well worth working through his words. He heralds the cruciality of language because words witness Christ. Hauerwas's hope and attempt in this work is that each would witness faithfully.

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