Hannah’s Child: A Theologian’s Memoir

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By Stanley Hauerwas


How would a theologian who has spent a lifetime reminding Christians of the need to live virtuously narrate the story of his own life? In such influential works as Character and the Christian Life (1975) and its sequel, A Community of Character (1981), Stanley Hauerwas, Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke Divinity School, has argued that a life lived well is a life shaped by the virtues that are nurtured in the Christian tradition, that is, by the gospel that the church seeks to live out. One cannot help but wonder: how would a man with such deep convictions about virtuous behavior stemming from participation in the Christian community look back upon the many years he spent in church pews, pulpits, and seminary rooms?

Clearly, this is not the same as to ask whether the life described in Hannah’s Child meets the ‘standards’ outlined in Hauerwas’s previous work. Like all theological discourse, Hauerwas’s account of the virtues does not describe how Christians actually think and behave, but how they are called to think and behave as members of the body of Christ that is the church. Hauerwas does not hesitate to admit that his own life, like that of the rest of us, fails to live up to that calling. For instance, referring to the pacifist thread that runs through his work, he readily confesses that this pacifism is, among other things, a sermon preached to himself. Granted, then, that Christian practice usually lags behind its calling, the question is how to read Hauerwas’s autobiography: as an account of his struggle to ‘realize’ the unrealizable or as yet another sermon, as yet another normative model, presented in the form of a life-story?

Hauerwas would say: this empiricist dilemma is falsely stated. Being Christian is not a matter of reaching an almost unattainable ideal – that would only be true in a world without grace – but a matter of perceiving the world and understanding our lives through the prism of the gospel. Accordingly, I read Hannah’s Child, not as the confessions of a less than virtuous man, but as Hauerwas’s attempt to understand his life – his upbringing in Texas, his theological career, his passage through various church denominations, his two subsequent marriages – in thoroughly Christian terms. I read his autobiography...
as an experiment in the art of finding out how a human life with its hope and
dread, glory and misery, can be narrated in a Christian voice.

Basically, the author employs two strategies. First, as the title indicates,
Hauerwas compares his life to that of Samuel, the child of Hannah whose birth is
described in 1 Samuel 1. Just as Hannah received her son as a divine gift, so
Hauerwas wants to see his life as a God-given gift. As a matter of fact, Hauerwas
tells us, his mother had once prayed a prayer like Hannah’s and dedicated the life
of her future child to God. ‘I am quite sure, strange servant of God though I may
be, that whatever it means to be Stanley Hauerwas is the result of that prayer,’
writes the author at age 70. ‘Moreover, given the way I have learned to think, that
is the way it should be’ (3). Clearly, this Samuel-Stanley comparison is indebted
to the figurative practices of ancient Christian hermeneutics in illustrating Hans
Frei’s hermeneutical rule of thumb that ‘Scripture is to absorb the world.’

Second, in an attempt not to describe his academic career in terms of a well-
muscled curriculum vitae, Hauerwas chooses to focus on his friends, that is, on
the people God has sent in his life. Friends are not ‘made,’ as we say in English,
but rather ‘received.’ ‘I have had a wonderful live,’ writes Hauerwas, ‘because I
have had wonderful friends. So this attempt to understand myself is not just
about “me” but about the friends who have made me who I am’ (xi). Indeed, the
account following these introductory words is a story about relationships. I
understand Hauerwas as trying, not to write himself out of the story, but to
prevent his ‘I’ from occupying center stage by prioritizing the ‘we’ constituted by
friends and Christian communities.

Finally, I should not forget to mention that Hauerwas’s book overflows with
lurid tales about those friends and communities. First-hand memories of Yale
faculty in the late 1960s, inside stories about John Howard Yoder, juicy anecdotes
about colleagues at Duke – it can all be found in Hannah’s Child. Yet, as the
foregoing should make clear, far more important than this, I believe, is the
question the book poses to us: how would we write the story of our lives? As a
career? As a struggle for recognition or fulfillment? Or, perhaps, as a gift received
in gratitude?