“If we are to be human, we are in the business of learning to die. That, in short, is what this book is all about. That is what Christianity is all about.”¹ For those who may not be familiar with Stanley Hauerwas’s writings, the title *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life* provides a tease—especially if the reader is expecting an eschatological perspective that would include reflections on the apocalypse or the hope that is expressed in the closing phrases of the 2nd and 3rd articles of the Apostles’ Creed.

For those who have lived with and celebrated Hauerwas’s academic career over the past four decades, the present volume will be a welcome addition to his ever expanding corpus as he continues his discourse on subjects that have become his signature—i.e., war and medicine. While the “eschatological” as defined by Hauerwas is certainly present, “the end” is nowhere in sight. There is no nihilistic attitude toward the church, politics, or life—as though there could be an “end” imminent to any of those areas. Rather, engaging in deep conversation with these subjects, Hauerwas suggests that there are more arguments and a future to come for the church, politics, and life—however different from the present they may be.

In his typical, self-effacing way, Stanley Hauerwas suggests that the essays collected in this volume are haphazard in organization, and he encourages the reader to begin anywhere. In this way, the sections of the book provide the reader with an opportunity to engage in multiple conversations with Hauerwas. These conversations range from the theological (“Theological Matters”), to the ethical (“Church and Politics”), and, finally, to the ecclesial and the personal (“Life and Death”). All of these hold together under the rubric of “eschatological reflections.”

If a reader comes to Hauerwas’s *Approaching the End* expecting the Hauerwas of *Hannah’s Child*, then the book will disappoint. These essays are more akin to his previous work; they are extremely focused conversations that he invites into his circle of discourse, exhibiting again the super vigilance of the bricklayer against the accusation that, upon close inspection, one would find a “hog in the wall.”² In his own words, the present volume confirms this departure from *Hannah’s Child*: “What I now know for sure is this: I so enjoyed the kind of writing I was able to do in *Hannah’s Child* that I have found it quite difficult to return to the turgid style so cherished by the academy.”³

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¹ Hauerwas, *Approaching the End*, xvii.

² Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 40. In his moving sermon at his father’s funeral, Hauerwas references this colloquialism from the mason’s trade which refers to an extra course of bricks on one wall of a building to cover up a lack of skill.

The three chapters in Part One, entitled “Theological Matters,” are strikingly Christological. Prominent conversationalists surface quickly in each chapter: Robert Wilken, Karl Barth, and Jean Porter in “The End is the Beginning;” Louis Martyn, John Howard Yoder, Peter Leithart, and Paul Kahn in “The End of Sacrifice;” Fergus Kerr, St. Anselm, and Kavin Rowe in “Witness.” Given these voices, it seems strange that the language of Scripture on the end times—the “resurrection of the body,” and “the life eternal”—is either muted or not considered in these chapters. Somewhat of an exception to this rule is the prominent role played by the Book of Acts in the chapter entitled “Witness.” However, Acts is not incorporated to illustrate its eschatological themes, but rather to illustrate how the three narratives of Paul’s conversion have been shaped by both Luke and Paul to “witness” to Christ in a manner appropriate for their respective audiences. While one might expect the significance of the eschatological account of creation to include reflections on the new heaven and the new earth, or “the many rooms in my Father’s house,” Hauerwas fails to address that side of eschatological hope. Instead, he draws this conclusion:

An eschatological account of creation does not necessarily commit one to nonviolence, but it at least puts one in that ballpark. It does so because creation was, after all, God’s determinative act of peace. If therefore, the end is the beginning, at the very least Christians who justify the Christian participation in war bear the burden of proof.

The second chapter provides a gut-wrenching encounter with the developmental history of war. He begins with a teasing introduction to Paul’s apocalyptic gospel, which leads to his bemoaning Constantinianism in relation to the problem of sacrifice. Not surprisingly, the end of the chapter becomes a challenge to the church to take seriously its pacifist convictions. From such a perspective, the question of Christian participation in war turns out to be a question not restricted to the ethics of war; instead, it is a question of how Christians can at once say that “Jesus is Lord” and the end of all sacrifice, yet continue to participate in “the sacrifice of war.”

The final chapter in Part One, “Witness,” becomes the most powerful of the book in its implications for the church. To make his point of the imperative for a Christian witness that is strongly Christological and resurrection-driven, Hauerwas quotes from his own With the Grain of the Universe. He captures his conclusion in the extended argument he had with William James and Reinhold Niebuhr in that volume:

Niebuhr assumed that the truth of Christianity consisted in the confirmation of universal and timeless myths about the human condition that made Christianity available to anyone without witness. So conceived, Christianity became a ‘truth’ for the sustaining of social orders in the West. In an odd way, James and Niebuhr offer accounts of religion accidental to Christianity.’ Indeed for Niebuhr, James and their contemporaries,

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4 John 14.2.
5 Hauerwas, Approaching the End, 21.
6 Ibid., 36.
‘Christianity make sense only as a disguised humanism.’ So for instance, Christ’s resurrection is no longer the beginning point for Christian witness, but rather a sign or metaphor for a spiritual or moral meaning for life that is better understood when placed in other language than that of the church.⁷

Hauerwas concludes this chapter with a lengthy engagement with Craig Hovey’s reflections on martyrdom as witness. Hauerwas identifies the resurrection and the sacramental dimensions of baptism and the eucharist as vehicles for such a witness within the worshipping community. Hence this breathtaking conclusion:

Here Christians’ speech and action can unite in full witness to the God who created all that is and continues to reach out redemptively to re-create it. Rightly conceived and practiced, Christian witness is neither theoretical or formulaic but engages the world as it is, one person telling another. Eagerly awaiting, even expecting, its acceptance, witness also knows what to do in the face of its rejection, as discerned within the grammar of Christ’s cross and resurrection, which always remains it fundamental idiom.⁸

The four chapters of Part Two, “Church and Politics,” provide more of Hauerwas’s intense conversations with his selected circles of interlocutors. The exception is the chapter “The End of Protestantism.” While Hauerwas’s own voice certainly can be found and heard in his conversations in the other chapters, “The End of Protestantism” comes across as more of a personal reflection. After his critique of Protestantism (the title of the chapter is the spoiler for where he is going), he finds his vision for the church reflected in Broadway United Methodist Church, a small congregation where he was a member for several years. His perspective as a committed Methodist leads to a vision which embraces not merely the localism of Broadway United Methodist in its neighborhood, but also its membership in the broader church of Jesus Christ. This twist comes in the final paragraph: “We are also Americans. If we are to survive that fate, we are going to need all the help we can get from Christians around the world. God help us.”⁹ The reader, however, is not left hanging here. The footnote to the final sentence quotes at length Alasdair MacIntyre’s After Virtue, which confirms one of Hauerwas’s consistent claims about the importance of community for identity and personal responsibility. Hauerwas concludes, “By acknowledging that we are Americans, Christians rightly confess that we owe America much. That debt we hopefully rightly return with loving criticism made possible by our participation in the church.”¹⁰

We find more of Hauerwas’s intense engagement with a somewhat new set of discourses in the chapter “Which Church? What Unity? Or An Attempt to Say what I May Think about the Future of Christian Unity.” Hauerwas becomes somewhat defensive, reflecting on his record of

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⁷ Ibid., 58.
⁸ Ibid., 63.
⁹ Ibid., 97.
¹⁰ Ibid.
ecumenical efforts with a wry sense of humor. Citing his varied pedigree as a Methodist who taught at Augustana College (Lutheran), Notre Dame (Roman Catholic), and Duke Divinity School (Methodist), he writes, “I should like to think, however, that the promiscuous character of my ecclesial practice and theology reflects my Methodist commitments.”

The focus of the chapter sorts out the various confessional/creedal statements that provide a basis for agreement about the nature and function of the church, concluding that the church finds itself in an epistemological crisis. Acknowledging the end of the quest of the church to find its place through political and social power, Hauerwas describes his vocation:

> It is my conviction that the challenge of Christian Unity will depend on how Christians discover how they need one another if they are adequately to live in a world that Christians created but no longer control. If I have an ecumenical vocation it is to try to help the church think through this challenge.\(^\text{12}\)

“War and Peace,” the final chapter in the second section and one which could be paired with “The End of Sacrifice,” reviews familiar themes from Hauerwas’s career. Originally written for *The Oxford Handbook on Theology and Modern European History*, this tour de force begins with a brief arpeggio on the definition of war. It proceeds to develop the problem of war by examining the ecclesiastical defenses of war that began with Constantine/Christendom. Immanuel Kant and Jacques Rousseau are brought into the circle of discourse as a means of introducing an extensive consideration of William Cavanaugh’s challenge to the presumption that religions promote war.\(^\text{13}\) The chapter ends in the comfort and predictability of Yoder’s arguments for non-violence, but it offers a quirky conclusion—one which, at least in this instance, has deep eschatological implications: “That is why the Christian alternative to war is best thought of as not an ‘ethic’; rather, the Christian alternative to war is Eucharist. Christ is the end of all sacrifices not determined by his cross.”\(^\text{14}\)

Given my recent interest in end-of-life issues, it was the third part, “Life and Death,” that I approached with the most interest. I was greeted in the opening chapter, “Bearing Reality,” with a discussion of J. M. Coetzee’s novel entitled *Elizabeth Costello*. Similar to Hauerwas’s lengthy use of *Watership Down* as an analogy for his “Story-Formed Community” in the now classic *A Community of Character*,\(^\text{15}\) the life circumstances of Costello and her moral position with regard to animals becomes the focus of a conversation between Hauerwas and those who have engaged the novel at critical and interpretive levels. When the conversation moves to Cora Diamond’s and

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 99.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 119.


\(^{15}\) (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).
Stanley Cavell’s reflections on torture, the chill of our government’s complicity in what happened at Abu Ghraib and what continues to happen at Guantanamo brings home the “reality” that becomes difficult to bear. Yoder is called upon once again, but the surprise here is that Hauerwas relies on Yoder’s use of Revelation 5:9-10 to declare that “all ethics, Christian and non-Christian, is in service to some cosmic commitment and therefore, always embedded in larger life process. For Christians that cosmic commitment is expressed in praise of God, making it possible to see history doxologically.” The conversation in the chapter gets interesting as Hauerwas turns toward Alexander Sider’s and Gillan Rose’s use of the sentence: “Keep your mind in hell and despair not.” This sentence signals to Hauerwas how to maintain the existential perspective that life is difficult or, better, that reality remains difficult. Hauerwas’s own voice comes through when he writes, “Yet we should not despair [because] we are Christians.” This is an interesting and encouraging bromide, but it is still vacuous of any eschatological perspective.

The second chapter of Part Three, “Habit Matters: The Bodily Character of the Virtues,” assumes that the reader has developed a healthy, internalized Hauerwas library. Virtues are Hauerwas’s bread and butter, or, maybe more aptly, his bricks and mortar. The argument in this chapter conflates the history of Christian social ethics with a reading of Aristotle and Aquinas, and the more contemporary voices of Michael Spezio and Kwame Appiah are brought into the circle of discourse. The chicken and egg argument of whether virtuous behavior makes a virtuous person or the virtuous person demonstrates virtuous behavior is balanced with the reality of the moral inconsistencies of everyone. Again, as the reader has come to expect at this point in the book, there is an interesting turn at the very end:

For it may be that, as creatures who must acquire habits to be able to act, we are not thereby condemned to be determined by our past. We dare not forget that hope is also a habit. Hope is that which requires the development of habits that make hope pull us into life. We are hardwired by our bodies to be people of hope.

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17 Hauerwas, Approaching the End, 151.


19 Hauerwas, Approaching the End, 156.


21 Hauerwas, Approaching the End, 175.
For the reader looking for Hauerwas’s “not-yet” eschatological perspective, this last paragraph begs for more. What kind of hope? What are the indicators that we are hardwired for hope? Is this a conclusion from natural theology, or is there another source?

The remainder of the book comprises four chapters, which are incidental pieces and two of them co-authored. The first of the four, “Suffering Presence: Twenty-five Years Later,” might be read as a commentary on the original book, Suffering Presence. The second, authored with Joel Shuman, is entitled “Cloning the Human Body” and should be read as a sermon with a strong moral conclusion: we are part of Christ’s body and therefore should not do what we can do [clone] to our bodies. The point that Hauerwas seeks to push in these final chapters concerns how the relationship between patient and physician has become increasingly bifurcated with no parity. Hauerwas’s perspective on the issue leads him to focus on the importance of the “storied bodies” of the sick, as well as the importance of communication in the context of a community where both patient and physician are bound by a common narrative. The framework for “Doing Nothing Gallantly” is provided by a prayer from “Prayers for Use by a Sick Person” in the Book of Common Prayer; and the title of the chapter is one of the petitions in the prayer. The chapter becomes both useful and challenging in claiming the necessity of joy in the face of life with all its limitations and afflictions: “But at its best…medicine is a great help to us in fulfilling that requirement [of joy]. And when it does play this role, medicine speaks, in its own idiom, the language of the prayer we began with.”

The final chapter is a compassionate and realistic essay about the chasm between those who suffer and those who do not; Hauerwas makes great efforts to bridge that chasm. This chapter represents Hauerwas’s thinking at its best. Using the writings of Eleonore Stump, Wandering in Darkness, and Samuel Wells and Marcia Owen, Living Without Enemies: Being Present in the Midst of Violence, he writes:

Put in terms identified by Stump, what Wells’s account of being with and for helps us see is that we have the time to discover that through Christ we share a common story with those we mistakenly assume do not have the ability to narrate their own lives. For in truth, none of us have the ability to know what stories we are living out until our lives are connected with other lives, our bodies are touched by other bodies, making possible a common story rightly called a love story. The presence of those identified as the disabled is but a prismatic exemplification of how we learn to be human beings by learning one another’s name.

As a self-identified teacher and as an acclaimed academic, Hauerwas models exquisitely what it means to be a lifelong learner. He listens, reads, argues, and debates—all in the service of distilling points for further conversation. The challenge in reading this book concerns the assumptions that he makes about his readers’ knowledge of those that he invites into his circle of discourse. In the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” as captured by C. H. Dodd and

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22 Ibid., 221.

23 Ibid., 235.
his descendents’ realized eschatology, Hauerwas’s “eschatological perspective” clearly focuses on the “already” and leaves out the question of the “not yet.” The absence is curious for two reasons. First, it is clear that Hauerwas sees baptism and the Eucharist as sacramental; he worships in a tradition in which the liturgy is defined by an unmistakable “not yet” eschatology. He is unabashed in claiming the resurrection of Christ, but he remains silent about the affirmation found in the Apostle’s Creed concerning the “resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” While he cites and parses different accounts of the apocalyptic, it never moves beyond the present. What about the future?

The second reason relates to the eloquent closing of his sermon on the occasion of his father’s funeral. The texts, Revelation 7:9-17 and Matthew 5:1-2, provide the “blessed hope” that is integral to the Christian faith and which is reflected in this ending:

> But the good news is that he [Hauerwas’ father] has joined the other saints of God’s kingdom gathered around the throne. He is among those who now worship God, continually sheltered as they are by the one who alone is worthy of worship. He has joined the great communion of saints, the same communion that we enjoy through God’s great gift of this meal of gentleness. For in this meal we are made part of God’s life and thus share our lives with one another. So we come filled with sadness yet rejoicing that God, through lives like my father’s, continues to make present Christ’s gentle kingdom.24

The “already” and the “not yet” are both celebrated. Why not more of the “not yet” in his “eschatological perspectives”? If the local manifestation/congregation of the body of Christ is deemed to be eschatological by its very existence, however, then the “eschatological perspective” becomes present in most of the chapters of the book. The entire book can be seen as a celebration of this:

> If the Christian witness is a dull person, something is wrong—since there is no greater adventure than the Christian life. This is not a throw away point, Christian witness is about nothing more or less than how we were made to live, or, expressed more classically, what is our true end.25

So, what is our true end?

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24 Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child*, 43.