IN CONVERSATION

Samuel Wells and Stanley Hauerwas

Facilitated by Maureen Knudsen Langdoc

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Introduction

Stanley Hauerwas (SH): One of the things that Sam and I said to one another in preparation for this conversation is we need to try to go beyond our stump speeches. You know, speeches like my claim that "Modernity names the time when you produce people who believe they should have no story except the story they choose when they had no story." We should want this exercise to force us to say things we didn't know that we thought. You think you've heard any of that?

Maureen Knudsen Langdoc (MKL): I do. The conversation we had about people wishing you would have written more about race, that's something I've wondered about and didn't know your response to until today. And the exchange you and Sam had about human sexuality—I didn't even know we'd talk about that. But it was interesting for me to watch you two ask questions of each other, to push one another to consider the implications of following a particular logic. That seems like a natural conversation between you two, as friends and theologians.

Samuel Wells (SW): That feels some of the strongest stuff, in the sense that we're actually doing it, rather than looking back at it as wondrous things we did some twenty years ago.

MKL: And I think there's been a good bit of conversation about your personal lives, that isn't in print—

SH: I didn't know we would get this personal. It's okay. I just don't know if anyone will want to read about it.

SW: That's what I said to Maureen yesterday!

SH: I mean, why should they give a shit what our personal lives have been like?

MKL: I think the personal life stuff matters, at least to the extent that we've talked about the relationship between thought and action and the formation of character. When I was your student, I appreciated the classroom discussions about Christian ethics, but I also really wanted to know, where does Stanley Hauerwas buy his groceries?

SH: (*laughter*)

MKL: How does this all play out? I think readers will find it interesting to know more about your marriage, what you're afraid of, whose opinion matters to you, what you pray for your children.

Nancy Bryan (NB): It's very much what I want the series to be—that deeper, more personal conversation overlaid with theological topics.

SW: But what you need to know, Nancy, is that for Stanley, the words deeper and more personal don't end up on the same side of the divide. Stanley would regard personal as less deep. (*laughter*) I'm only joking. But trying to get back to twenty years ago before I was in this world, if you will, and if I think about what I'd want to know about Stanley, I think we've covered some of those things. In other words, you have all these convictions and are having these conversations with Aquinas and Aristotle, but how does that map out in the intractable relationships of your life?

SH: I think the order of the book will not necessarily be the order of the discussion.

MKL: Oh, I agree, and our conversation hasn't followed the proposed outline.

SH: I mean, the discussion we're having right now can be a part of it as far as I'm concerned.

MKL: I assumed there would need to be some rearranging.

SH: So where would you put the first discussion, when we talked about theology as conversation and all that?

SW: I think that belongs in the beginning, doesn't it?

MKL: I do.

Conversation One

Theology as Conversation / Constantinian-on-a-Stick /
Claiming the Everyday / The Role of a Theologian

MKL: As part of the *In Conversation* series, our time together is designed around the idea that two theologians who happen to be friends come together to talk about theology, the church, their interests and passions, and readers get the privilege of peering around the corner and listening into this conversation between the two of you. So it seems like a good way to begin is to start by talking about theology as conversation. Would you describe theology as conversation? If so, who are the conversation partners? What's being communicated? Or are there limitations or reasons to resist or qualify describing theology as conversation?

SH: Sam has written about conversation in a very intelligent way, locating conversation as the primary virtue of the university. And what that helps you see is conversations are not just between people who agree but are between people who bring diverse backgrounds and experiences, in which they test out what they think they know by listening to someone else. So listening becomes one of the more important aspects of having a conversation. Whether you have something to say is extremely important, because too often conversation happens between people who think they are already in such agreement that they don't locate how it is that their conversation is really an exercise in group narcissism. So

it's very important that conversation is understood as a mode of investigation. All that said, Sam and I have had a conversation for how many years, Sam?

SW: Well, it started in 1991, so twenty-eight years.

SH: And when Sam was Dean of the Chapel, we had many, many, many conversations in which we tested our own perceptions of what was going on, as well as exploring theological issues that we hadn't perhaps known quite how to think through. Sam leaving Duke was one of the most dramatic exits for me. I mean, we still talk constantly, but it's not quite the same in terms of having a face-to-face kind of conversation. The conversation between Sam and myself has been a conversation between friends. And friendship is absolutely constitutive of the conversation, and the conversation is constitutive of friendship.

SW: I guess the way I think about these things is eschatological. The university portrays to the church something that eschatologically the church hopes, expects, and prays to discover in heaven. If you imagine heaven as a place where there's nothing to fix, and there's no deficit to be made up, then whereas popularly people think the biggest issue about heaven is whether you get there, once that issue is taken off the table the real issue is what on earth are you going to do when you're there? And so, part of the work of theology is to describe the gifts that God gives us in such ways that we can begin to imagine how those gifts are inexhaustible. Otherwise heaven is dull, and you don't want to see Stanley when he's bored. So even though I would like to spend a lot of eternity with Stanley, I hope he's not bored because it won't always be a pleasure.

SH: Bernard Shaw said that he preferred hell because at least there would be interesting people there.

SW: In John Milbank and Adrienne Pabst's *The Politics of Virtue*, the most interesting line in the whole book is—I'm sure it came

from Milbank—is that liberalism's understanding of the past is that people must have been perpetually bored. That's my favorite line in the whole book.

So conversation is a description of how I engage everything in my experience, from the skills developed in the past, and failures and insights from my own shortcomings, and bring those face-to-face, literally, with another person, or more than one other person, in ways that are like a Van de Graaff generator: they spark and they create problems and they go down side alleyways and so on.

Even the etymology of the word, if you think about the word converse, not understood as a verb, but as *con*-verse as we pronounce it in England, then you're talking about turning something over and over in your hand, and you don't have to read Julian of Norwich and talk about hazelnuts, but the idea of turning something over and over in your hand to reflect on its multi-significance and its multivalence, is obviously a devotional and spiritual activity. To do that as a group together—to turn something over and over in your hand together is a wonderful thing. And the only thing that really stops you from doing it is time. And that's why it's so important to call this an eschatological practice, because it depicts what human interaction would be like if time were not a problem.

SH: I think that one of the things that's part of conversation is a historization of where you are at the time you are engaged in conversation. Sam has this lovely account of developments within Christianity in relationship to the university. The prologue being when Christianity was in complete control and you didn't know there was an outside. Then chapter one. How do you put that in chapter one?

SW: Well, that was round about the beginning of the twentieth century when the denominations—the judicatories—got the

governing bodies and the faculties got the curriculum and they both thought they'd won. And then chapter two as I call it is what we think of as the 1960s, which is now nostalgically looked back to, paradoxically in a way, because that was when universities and the church really mattered. Kent State was at the center of the national attention, Martin Luther King Jr. was a pastor, and in some ways what was being debated was the American constitution. But it was being debated in these kind of places, when academic discourse actually mattered to the whole. Of course, it was really about Vietnam. It was about middle-class kids getting the draft. But people forget that, and they assume it was a sort of heightened awareness in the 1960s.

So basically, what I was saying when I was on campus here was that we were in chapter three. Chapter three is largely characterized by different understandings of the story but is mostly a fight between those who are trying to get back to chapter one and those who are trying to get back to chapter two. But it was really a call to inhabit chapter three. And chapter three, as it might come as no surprise to anyone reading this book, looked surprisingly like Stanley's idea of a university.

And it was very much about the fact that the church only really got to be interesting if it renounced the right to chair the meeting all the time. So the most dramatic example of that I think during my time at Duke was in my final year. It was the tenth anniversary of 9/11, and this is the kind of thing I used to talk to Stanley in the gym about—how shall I handle this situation?

And so, the chapel choir had performed Mozart's "Requiem"—a nice sort of forty-five-minute piece of commemoration, and then four people were going to speak. And so obviously I had a hand in who those four people were going to be, and the four people that spoke were the mayor of Durham, the president of Duke University, myself, and the Muslim chaplain. (People found it bizarre that as the Dean of the Chapel I advocated for hiring a Muslim

chaplain because they assumed that the Dean of the Chapel was in chapter one and was clinging onto the privileges of the role, as long as they could be held on to.)

Anyway, we each only had five or seven minutes to speak, but I made my remarks very Christological. I talked about the questions we had about God the Father, in terms of Providence: How could God let this happen? The way we quite clearly saw the work of the Spirit in terms of the firefighters and their work. But as Christians, we could only see it as a crucifying moment. So I got a letter shortly afterwards saying you're not allowed to do that. You broke the rules. And I wrote back with all integrity saying you may not have noticed the rules have changed. Once we've got a Muslim who can talk about it in the light of 9/11, then the Dean of the Chapel doesn't have to talk about all people of goodwill anymore, which in chapter one we thought was identical with Christianity but clearly is significantly different. I get to talk about Christianity for the first time. And actually, it ended up not in a hostile relationship with the correspondent. We became friends, we met up two or three times, and he invited me to speak at his synagogue.

SH: This is an example of what it means for Sam to be the Dean of Duke Chapel. I remember when he was offered the position, I said, I certainly hope you'll take it. It is a preeminent example of a Constantinian church that he would become Dean of Duke Chapel. The office is Constantinian-on-a-Stick. And I said, "Use it." Now that helps, I hope, allay some of the criticism that allegedly I represent a position about Christianity that requires a withdrawal from the world. I'll oftentimes say I wouldn't mind withdrawing but there's no place to withdraw to. You're surrounded.

I think we are now in a situation that makes it possible for Christians to be free for the first time in many years. Because we

lost. We're no longer in control. We don't control the conversation. We've got to pick it up wherever it seems to be going. And we can use some of the shards that have been left over from Christendom. And we don't know what the future will look like. But in the meantime, we can have a hell of a lot of fun that the gospel makes possible because we do the odd thing of worshipping Jesus. And that unleashed a conversation that has gone on now for two thousand years because it's such an extraordinary thing to believe that in this Palestinian Jew, God is fully present. And how to think through and live appropriate to that extraordinary set of claims is an ongoing challenge that makes life so unbelievably interesting.

And that is what I find in particular Sam is able to do better than I'm able to do. I mean, that he brought in heaven as part of the conversation is a move that I would find awkward. But he's a pastor, and his job is to do that. I admire it and wish I had the facility to do it. But even though I'm strongly identified with having strong theological convictions and working them out, I find the way that Sam is able to interject into his speech and into his writing, theological claims that do work—his ability to do that—that I find invigorating and humbling. Do you think that's right, Sam?

SW: All I'd add to that is I think I know who I learned that from. And so, I think you're too modest. I guess you could say theology is a conversation between humanity and God but that sounds rather grand. I'd say it starts with a conversation between the Old and the New Testament, and in that sense that conversation is already going on. We're privileged to, just as in worship we enter the worship of God by the angels that's going on all the time, so in theology, we enter a conversation between the Old and the New Testaments, which has been lively for quite a long time before we showed up. And then you've got a conversation that takes place between the scriptures and the early church.

The first book of Stanley's that I read—not the first writing of Stanley's, but the first full book of Stanley's I read years ago—was *The Peaceable Kingdom*, and I vividly remember what he says in *Peaceable Kingdom* that we only have the Jesus that the early church gives us. So that debate about what Jesus really said and that kind of thing that obviously when I was at seminary I got involved with, just as probably everyone at seminary gets involved with. What about the things that Jesus said that aren't recorded in the scriptures? What about the people that feel that Jesus only said two of the eight beatitudes? Are the parts of Paul that probably predated Paul or were written by followers of Paul more or less authoritative? You know, all that sort of debate. I felt that just a few paragraphs Stanley offers in *The Peaceable Kingdom* cut through a lot of that for me at a very significant stage in my own development.

But there is still obviously a debate between the scripture and the early church that goes beyond the period when the scriptures were actually written and brought together as a canon. And then I suppose there is a question which Stanley has raised in a very lively way, which is, does the early church, which one assumes as a coherent, historical entity, constitute a place of authority? Clearly not to the same degree that scripture does, but something to which the church of our age or any age must regard as a touchstone?

And so, when Stanley says the word Constantinian, as he did a few moments ago, the claim of that is that there was a pristine early church before the beginning of the fourth century that had a coherent social ethic and perhaps theology more broadly. I mean this is Pre-Nicaea. It's before the creeds were written down as we know them. But the claim of the Constantinian argument is saying there was a time before that when, I don't think anyone is saying the church got it right, but that around significant things like pacifism most obviously, the church had a more authoritative, authentic, united voice than it has done, in the sense that its compromises are most obviously dated from the fourth century

onwards. So that becomes another conversation partner and then there's no end to them.

And of course, we also include a vast range of contemporary ones of which the most obvious today would be other faiths, among whom I don't count Judaism because I don't regard Judaism as another faith. They're our parent. But getting the right range of conversation partners—including people in conversation—is crucial.

SH: I think that Sam's exactly right, that the most decisive decision of the early church was that the canon included what we call the Old Testament. And that meant that Christians cannot avoid trying to respond to the question of how is the God of Israel to be found in Jesus Christ? And that meant that Jews would always make Christians nervous. That's the reason why we were so murderous about the continuing existence of the people of Israel.

And that crucial theological decision meant that Christians could never do without people raising that question, and they're called theologians. I think that one of the interesting things about Christianity is by necessity it produces people called theologians who have to respond to the critical questions raised by, what we regard, as authoritative texts. Not every religious tradition produces theologians. That is an office within the church that is necessarily ready to engage the critical questions that on the whole you'd prefer to avoid. I think that at least if my work has had any strong theme, it is that the commitment to Christ means that fear of raising questions you don't know the answer to must be engaged.

So the truthfulness of Christian speech is not a given. It is an ongoing performance that makes possible ways of life and thought that testify to the joy of what it means to be part of a people who worship this savior. That way of putting it raises then the first question: what does it mean to need a savior? I mean, it's those kind of fundamental questions we oftentimes

don't get to because we think it's just a given. What is it about our lives that need saving? Those are the kinds of questions that I think Sam is so good at making present in a way that stops people in their everydayness. Because it's exactly those kinds of questions that show that we've got nothing to fear. And that's hard going for a number of people.

People often think that the position I've tried to develop over the years theologically is such a radical position. But I'm just trying to help us claim the everyday. What does it mean to go through a day in which you don't lie? Now I think Christianity creates such an extraordinary framework for understanding our existence that it makes the everyday possible. And that's what I've tried to do in terms of the kind of writing I've done and the kind of preaching I've done. It's to show how these extraordinary claims about Jesus of Nazareth as Savior make it possible for us to live truthfully with one another. That's a project that has only begun (*laughter*). At least it's the way I see it.

SW: The role of theologian is in a sense a kind of ordained role. What I mean by that is, if you understand that God has given the church everything it needs primarily through baptism and eucharist and prayer and scripture and preaching—the practices of the church—then you need to set people aside to do those very well, if you actually believe those are the things through which God renews the church. You can't just have people showing up saying, "Oh it doesn't really matter what scripture we read," or "I don't know what those long words mean or who all those names are but let's forget about it. Let's get on with evangelism or whatever." You're cutting yourself off from your life source if you don't have people set aside to do those things well and in good order. That's what ordination is as I understand it.

Well, I feel the same way about theology. You need some people set aside and we have a process of doing PhDs and things to fit people for that ministry. And unless you have those people,

you're going to run into all the same kinds of dead ends. But that presupposes something that I think is from time to time in question, which is the symbiotic relationship between theologians and the church. And for different reasons and at different times that comes into question. And it's no exaggeration to say that there have been times and places where theologians and the church have despised one another.

SH: Sam, say a bit about why it is that you've been determined not to be an academic, and that your ordination to the priesthood has meant that you stay in a congregation as the pastor. That combination is extremely significant, it seems to me, because it says something about what might be called the academic captivity of theology to the university and that somehow you sensed that that was not your calling.

SW: I want to do this in a way that doesn't suggest that everybody should be like me. I've got tremendous respect for people who are theologians in the way that you have been, but I think I've known for quite a long time that that wasn't the best fit for me and I think it comes from an impatience to see the practical out-workings. I mean, it's not language Stanley or I would ever be comfortable using, words like "applied," but I'm struggling for better language. "Incarnate," I guess would be a more theological word—the incarnations of these insights and convictions about how they address exactly the questions that Stanley just articulated. I mean, it made me very happy to hear Stanley say a moment ago that all of his work has been about how to work out how to spend the day as a Christian.

I chose to pursue conversations around virtue ethics and postliberal theology because they were the ones that most explicitly addressed the question I had as a newly ordained pastor, which was what does a holy life look like for a layperson? I'm still trying to find the answer to that question, but I'm very glad that Stanley

became the first principal line of inquiry through which I pursued that question because Stanley, more than anybody else that I'd read at that point and more than anyone else I've read since that point, offered such a thrilling notion of what it meant to be church in a way that transcended and out-narrated any idea that you could have a fulfilled life within your own terms of reference.

And so then the question of why I've never successfully become an academic theologian in a narrow sense of, without needing to do all the other things well two things happened: one is, I never expected my theological training to lead to such extensive opportunities for research, writing, and teaching as they did. I had already been in ordained ministry for ten years, not expecting to do much beyond that in terms of parish ministry, by the time the opportunity to do quite a lot of things beyond that came along. Someone like Tom Wright, for example, it seems to me, is someone who's fundamentally formed by the academy and is also a priest. Whereas I've always thought of myself as the other way around—as someone who is fundamentally formed by priesthood, but is also a theologian, or whatever particular term one wants to use to call that other part. So for me, the noun has been priesthood and the adjective has been theologian.

And then the part beyond that is rather like Stanley, and so Stanley in some way has not been a contrasting companion in this, but a similar companion, and the thing about a similar companion is that they can't critique, so Stanley's not been able to critique the fact that I've also become quite prolific. I've become prolific, I think, because the day-to-day experience of the challenges that ministry has turned up for me have been ones that I have been very eager to unravel. And then the unravelings have developed this twofold character, which is what people seem to enjoy about what I write, which is that it has a very ordinary frame of reference but it has clearly a very vertical engagement with the great theological questions and the tradition and the answers the tradition has brought

to those questions. I've really tried to think hard and theologically about the pastoral issues that have raised themselves, whether those are the welfare state or abortion or whatever the question might be. And there aren't a lot of people, rightly or wrongly, doing that. People tend to stay in the silos, and I think the church is the more impoverished for that. But I'm learning all the time from people in both camps, and there are obviously more than two camps, but usually it's thought of as church and academy. I'm trying to remain in close conversation with people in those two areas.

SH: Something that I think is crucial to conversation that we haven't yet talked about is language. Where do you get the language to have a conversation? Language has been so much at the heart of what I've been about, namely Christianity is ongoing training in knowing how to say. We think we already know how to say what needs to be said, but theologically the kind of work that I've tried to do, and I think Sam's trying to do, is to show how the statement that Jesus is Lord is going to transform everything that you have to say. And it sounds simple, but it's damn difficult to get it right. Because Sam's reflection earlier about why a word like "applied" is not a good word for us sounds simple, but it's very important because if you have to ask how your belief is to be applied, then you've got an indication that what you believe is an ideology not a language that's doing work.

And conversations are a constant testing of how we say what we say because the interlocutor always has the right to say, "I didn't get that," or "I don't understand what you're saying." And then you discover that you're not sure you understand what you're saying, in terms of the kind of language that you're using. Because language goes dead. It goes dead when we get so used to it, it doesn't make us think any longer what it is we're saying. And so theology understood as conversation is theology that can never shut down the next question. And I think one of the books that

Sam has done that I just think is extraordinary is a collection of his eucharistic prayers. What's the name of that book, Sam?

SW: In America, it's called *Eucharistic Prayers*. [The UK title is *Joining the Angels' Song.*]

SH: (*laughter*) Well, there you are. I think that they are extraordinary and moving and that it's where Sam does some of his very best work with language. It's good work because he's not afraid of saying extraordinary things about who we are before God. Do you agree with that, Sam?

SW: Well, I'm glad you like the book. That's certainly exactly what I'm trying to do with the book, recognizing how the language of prayer helpfully shapes and expresses theological insight and inquiry. At Duke Chapel, I realized that people commented almost as much about the prayers that I led on the Sundays when I wasn't preaching as they did about the sermon that I preached on the Sunday that I was. And that wasn't just people with a shorter concentration span. It was also recognizing that a lot of people come to church to pray, not necessarily to hear the sermon, even at Duke Chapel.

And the way that I was leading prayers was what Stanley and others like Lindbeck would call a grammar, which ties very much into this conversation about language. And it quickly dawned on me that this wasn't something that enough people were writing about so I ended up doing a book called *Shaping the Prayers of the People* with Abby Kocher, and then she also worked with me on the eucharistic prayers, which was a much bigger project. Nancy Ferree-Clark was the first person that persuaded me to start writing eucharistic prayers for the chapel, which I had strong resistance to doing because Anglicans don't do that.

SH: That was my first reaction. I thought, you can't do that.

SW: Well, I thought you can't but that was the joy of being at an interdenominational place where actually the only person that told me what to do was the president of the university, who actually wasn't troubled by me writing eucharistic prayers, strangely. He had other things on his mind like raising vast amounts of money for the Duke campaign, and so on.

And so we created a book that engaged with the readings of the day in the Revised Common Lectionary, but again a lot of that is grammar in the sense of working out quite basic things that Christians don't talk enough about—like, can we talk directly to God the Father or is it only because of Christ? And is Christ present here with us, or is it the Holy Spirit that makes Christ present and therefore is it always through the Spirit that we appeal to Christ to make our petition to the Father? And if that's the case, that has to shape the way we speak and obviously the way we speak becomes the way we think.

I've also been involved with the Liturgical Commission in the Church of England the last few years and one of the issues that I've raised because I find it so significant is if Christians believe that the Lord's Prayer, for example, shows us almost everything we need about prayer—most obviously that "give us" is about the present and "forgive us" is about the past and "deliver us" is about the future—and if increasing numbers of Christians are finding it difficult to pray a prayer that begins "Our Father," for both sociological and theological reasons, do we have a serious problem? And if so, how do we theologically think about what presents as a liturgical problem but is really a huge theological problem?

SH: I want to call attention to that quick exegesis of the Lord's Prayer. Now that's the kind of thing that Sam can do that I envy. I mean that typology of how the Lord's Prayer is at once about the past, future, and present. I don't use the word very often, but that is just a brilliant quick account that you can easily miss how extraordinary it is that prayer offers that kind of theological

moves. When I wrote the commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, I wished I had known that typology. Though I did argue that the Lord's Prayer has within it the whole gospel. But how those categories help illumine how the prayer reaches out to everything else that we believe. I always worry about the word *believe* because it's so rationalistic but it's a placeholder I suppose in a statement like, the Lord's Prayer reaches out to everything we believe. I prefer to say reaches out to everything that we are or have been made.

SW: I think you're okay with *believe* until it becomes the word *belief*, and then it becomes quite problematic.

SH: Belief. Right.

SW: Because it seems arbitrary.

SH: Right. I mean that's an instance of the kind of rethinking theologically that I think some of us have represented, namely, it doesn't occur to most Christians to think that the word *belief* might be a problem exactly because they assume that Christianity represents twenty-six improbable things that you believe before breakfast. Therefore, to raise questions about belief is to direct attention to the significance of what we do when we pray the Lord's Prayer, or what it is we do when we receive the body and blood of Christ.