

Hauerwas: Christian universities exist to serve the Christian community

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WACO—Universities need to ask why they exist and who they serve, ethicist and theologian Stanley Hauerwas told a gathering at Baylor University. Christian higher education should recognize it exists to serve the Christian community and the common good, he said.



Stanley Hauerwas (center) participates in a Baylor University panel discussion on Christian higher education with moderator Gregory Jones (left), professor at Duke University, and Thomas Hibbs, dean of the Honors College at Baylor. (Photo / Ken Camp) “Who they serve is absolutely crucial,” Hauerwas said. “One of the most important exchanges that occurs at a university is how parents let their children come to an institution that is going to change the student’s life, if it does it well, in ways that the parents may not have the ability to understand. And yet, they see this as something good that is happening to their sons and daughters.”

‘Absolute ugliness of public speech’

Churches have a vital role in developing a “learning culture” that recognizes education as producing change that is good for the community across generations, such as developing the ability to appreciate eloquence, he observed.

“I think one of the great tragedies of the modern world in which we live is the absolute ugliness of public speech,” he said. “This is one of the most educated societies that has ever been produced. How is it that we, as a society, have failed to have people who can, in public, eloquently name the good we should have in common?”

Hauerwas, a prolific author and professor emeritus at Duke University, participated in a panel discussion on “The Possibility of Christian Higher Education,” sponsored by Baylor’s Honors College, its religion department and the Institute for Faith and Learning.

Other participants were moderator Gregory Jones, professor of theology and Christian ministry at Duke, and Thomas Hibbs, dean of the Honors College at Baylor and distinguished professor of ethics and culture.

‘Reflect what makes your community your community’

Churches should be involved in influencing the character of the education offered to students at the universities they support, Hauerwas said.

“If you are a serious Christian community, you certainly want to have ... some say in the kind of knowledge that is produced and carried on to future generations, and you want it to reflect what makes your community your community,” he said.

For example, churches should not focus only on the humanities while ignoring science, he said, and the way in which a Christian university

conducts scientific research should be informed by Christian values and virtues.

Universities should embrace the distinctive Christian traditions that launched them and supported them, Hauerwas observed. But a historically Baptist school such as Baylor benefits from interaction with—rather than isolation from—the broader Christian community, he insisted.

“You need people from other traditions to tell the complexity of the story of what it means to be Baptist,” he said.